

# Parenting in a Digital Age: Part 2

## *Making intentional choices about your children's use of computer technology*

***“Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.” Neil Postman***

In the first of two parts on Parenting in a Digital Age, I laid out the challenges associated with parenting the cyberkid generation. This generation of preteens and teens is increasingly connected to technology such as texting, updating Facebook profiles, surfing the Internet, and gaming. The emergence of portable, wireless, Internet devices (e.g., iPhone, DSi) poses new challenges for parents.

In part 2, I want to address further how a parent can navigate these uncharted technological waters. As with anything that may profoundly affect our kids, for better or worse, we need to be intentional in our parenting – intentional with our choices about what we let our children engage in, intentional about providing them with tools to be safe online, and to safeguard their reputations for future employment. Being intentional about how we parent our children in the digital age is a process and brings with it a weighing of the pros and cons, asking hard questions, and making choices that will be right for your child's age, temperament, strengths and vulnerabilities.

### **A. Understand the Problem of Unhealthy Digital Dependence or Addiction**

**There's a lot of talk in the media about video game or Internet addiction. I know people who spend a lot of time gaming or updating their Facebook status. Does this necessarily make them addicts?**

There is a debate among psychiatrists and psychologists about the use of the term “addiction” when it comes to diagnosing obsessive video gaming or Internet use. So far, the term Internet Addiction has not been included as a formal mental health disorder in the DSM-V, the diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association. However, Internet Addiction is being considered as a mental disorder for the 2013 edition of the DSM-V.

Many psychologists acknowledge that there are video game and Internet users who display addictive behaviours – much like gambling addiction, sex addiction, or other compulsive behaviours. A growing body of research is showing that Internet and gaming addiction exists – and that it is particularly harmful to children.

- **A 2007 Harris Poll reported that almost one of our every ten (8.5%) youth gamers (between the ages of 8 – 18) in the U.S. could be clinically classified as video game addicts.** The survey, led by psychologist Dr. Douglas Gentile, distinguished between heavy video gaming and pathological video gaming. Video gaming that is addictive damages one’s life emotionally, physically, socially and academically. Dr. Gentile based his definition of video game addiction on the diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling.
- **A 2008 study by the Stanford University School of Medicine found that males are two to three times more likely than females to become addicted to video games.** The reason? The part of the brain that creates feelings of reward and addiction is much more active in men than in women during gaming.

### What are some of the effects of video gaming addiction, especially in children?

The American Medical Association published a report in 2007 on the “Emotional and Behavioral Effects of Video Game and Internet Overuse.” The report noted the following effects of heavy or addictive video gaming:

- Epileptic seizures, especially among those who are 7 – 19 years of age, even in those without a history of seizures
- Impulsivity (ADHD)
- Musculoskeletal disorders (carpal tunnel, shoulder and joint pain especially when using Wii games)
- Increased short-term aggression
- Academic underachievement
- Weight gain

Research has also shown that pathological or addictive gaming behavior shares the same criteria that are applied to pathological gambling:

- **Escape:** the gamer has a need to escape problems or desire to improve one’s mood
- **Lying:** the gamer tries to hide the extent of his/her gaming by lying to family and friends
- **Risk-taking:** the gamer may risk losing a relationship, job, or significant opportunity in order to play video games

### What can I do to help my child enjoy video games while minimizing any negative risks?

- Ensure that you know the **rating and content of the game** your child is playing. Ideally, you will do this before any game is purchased. There are a number of resources that can help you in this area:

- Know the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating for your child’s game (<http://www.esrb.org/index-js.jsp>). The ESRB is a voluntary rating program that has most major retailers in the U.S. and Canada on board to help parents make informed choices about the age appropriateness of video games.
- The ESRB is only a starting point. You should also double check the ratings of each game by looking up reviews by other organizations such as **Parents’ Choice**: [http://www.parents-choice.org/award.cfm?thePage=videogame&p\\_code=p\\_vga](http://www.parents-choice.org/award.cfm?thePage=videogame&p_code=p_vga) and **Family Friendly Video Games**: <http://www.familyfriendlyvideogames.com/AboutUs/>.
- Consider not purchasing any **MMORPG type games**. These are “Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games” during which a vast number of players interact with each other during an online game through chatting or webcam. The most popular example of this type of game is World of Warcraft. Some experts advise that this genre of games should be avoided entirely by parents because the risks of addiction are higher with this type of game.
- The ESRB website ([http://www.esrb.org/about/parents\\_tips.jsp](http://www.esrb.org/about/parents_tips.jsp)) has additional excellent resources for parents, including how to set parental controls on video games (to limit time played, etc.) and set ground rules for what kinds of games can be played.

**My son or daughter doesn’t play a lot of video games, but I am concerned about his/her total time spent on Facebook and web surfing. What are some signs of unhealthy digital dependency that I should look out for?**

The American Academy of Pediatrics lists some indicators that children may be overusing the Internet:

- Look at how your son or daughter reacts when he/she is away from the computer. Does he/she seem preoccupied by a strong desire to be online again?
- Does your son or daughter prefer being online rather than spending face-to-face time with friends, family or enjoying sports or other activities?
- Has your son or daughter’s academic performance suffered? Is he/she missing assignment deadlines or not completing schoolwork?
- Does your son or daughter seem unusually tired (perhaps from staying up late to be online)?
- Have you noticed mood swings or agitation in your son or daughter?

## My son or daughter is showing signs of digital addiction or dependency. Where can I go for counseling?

### **ProblemGambling.ca**

<http://www.problemgambling.ca/EN/GettingHelp/Pages/AdolescentClinicalEducationalServices.aspx> Because unhealthy Internet use looks a lot like behavior associated with compulsive gambling, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), on its ProblemGambling.ca website, offers its *Advanced Clinical and Educational Services (A.C.E.S.)* for Problem Gambling, Gaming and Internet Use for youth.

**reSTART Internet and Technology Addiction Recovery** <http://www.netaddictionrecovery.com> Headquartered in the state of Washington, reSTART Internet Addiction Recovery Program is a 45-day abstinence recovery program that helps youth and adults break the cycle of tech dependency. Other underlying mental health conditions (depressions, anxiety, ADHD) that may contribute to Internet dependency are also addressed. One of the Executive Directors of reSTART, Dr. Hilarie Cash, is a nationally-recognized speaker, counselor and author in the field of Internet addiction.

## **B. Keep Current on Digital Developments and How They May Affect Your Children**

For starters, if you are not familiar with text messaging shorthand (symbols used in texting, online chatting and instant messaging), it would be helpful to know how teens are communicating with each other in the online world. Try deciphering the following shorthand:

**P911**

**PAL**

**PAW**

**PIR**

**POS**

**KPC**

(Answers: ParentAlert; Parents Are Listening; Parents Are Watching; Parent In Room; Parent Over Shoulder – or – Piece Of S\*\*\*; Keeping Parents Clueless)

A website that keeps track of online acronyms, NetLingo (<http://www.netlingo.com/>), has a list specifically tailored for parents: “Top 50 Acronyms That Parents Need to Know.” Not surprisingly, a lot of the terms are sexual in nature. Many of them may be used by sexual predators (disguised as teens) who are lurking in online games or chat rooms.

With things changing so quickly, how can you equip yourself and your children with practical and effective media and digital literacy skills?

There are dozens of sites that are aimed at building awareness and media literacy in parents and youth. Here are just a few examples of ones that I have reviewed or used:

**A. Media Awareness Network** – <http://www.media-awareness.ca/eparent/english/>

The Media Awareness Network is a Canadian non-profit organization whose goal is to help parents promote digital and media literacy in youth. The organization has created an interactive *e-Parenting Tutorial* made up of five modules: Online Research and Homework (finding and authenticating information online); Online Relationships (From virtual friends to cyberbullying); Inappropriate Content What are kids encountering online?); Online Marketing (Our children through the eyes of online advertisers); Too Much Time Online (When is too much, too much?). Each module consists of a video presentation and opportunities to learn more at one’s own pace. At the end of the modules, parents are given an opportunity to create and download a **Family Online Agreement** – this is a fantastic resource that involves kids in helping set appropriate rules and boundaries for online activities. As part of the agreement, parents are also asked to respect certain boundaries of their own digital consumption (e.g., not emailing during family activities).

**B. SafeSurf** – Created by YouthLink Calgary, part of The Calgary Police Interpretive Centre <http://www.youthlinkcalgary.com/safesurf/>

This is a comprehensive resource that provides safety training to children ages 10 – 12 on how to safely use chat rooms, instant messaging, online gaming, email, file sharing, social networks and deal with online bullying. There are 7 learning pages that both parents and children are encouraged to work through together.

**C. Web Wise Kids** - <http://www.webwisekids.org/>

This is a U.S.-based organization that offers a series of engaging multimedia educational tools for parents of school-aged children. They have both school and family editions of their different media safety series. As an example, their Internet safety tool for middle school children

(“Missing”) is based on a true story. The storyline is as follows: “**MISSING** tells the story of Zack, a kid in Vancouver, Canada who forms an online friendship with an online friend named Fantasma. This guy is so cool - he has an online magazine about beach life in California and he sends Zack great stuff to help him design his own computerized animations. Little does Zack know that Fantasma is a predator. After Zach leaves home for San Diego, California to be with Fantasma, players work with a detective to find and rescue Zack and arrest Fantasma.”

The interactive role play of this tool allows children to participate in a simulation of what could happen to them online without experiencing the real, potentially devastating effects. At the end of their session, children are led through an exercise to create their own Internet Safety Plan that is shared with parents.

- D. Digital Tattoo** – Created in partnership with the University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, and Thompson Rivers University <http://digitaltattoo.ubc.ca/>

This resource is geared towards older teens, postsecondary students, and parents. It helps users understand their role as “digital citizens” and how to make the best possible decisions about their online activities and reputation. The Self-Assessment Quiz that can be accessed on the home page directs users to topics that users can review to help protect themselves and their computers from online hackers, stalkers, and identity thieves. There is an excellent section in the *Work* menu that uses news articles and case studies to show how employers “dig for dirt” when it comes to hiring employees. This will be an eye-opener for teens who often unthinkingly post or share compromising pictures of themselves. For older teens and postsecondary students, there is a helpful section on academic honesty and avoiding plagiarism. The site uses real-life stories from YouTube and the media making the information relevant and interesting to digest.

- E. SafetyNet** – The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) <http://safetynet.aap.org/>

This site offers both resources from the AAP as well as numerous links to other organizations and coalitions that are dedicated to children’s Internet safety. There is a wealth of information on this site, including a resource on how parents can talk to their kids about “sexting” (sending or receiving sexual images or messages) before it becomes a problem (ideally when your kids first start using a cell phone).

## **C. Decide what your family limits are, and ensure that your children know and understand what they are**

Once you understand what your children are potentially exposed to in an online environment, and know both the benefits and risks of each type of technology, you will be in a better position to set effective ground rules for your family. Generally, the older the child (12 and above), the

more input he/she should have in helping to establish boundaries and limits. By the time teens reach 16 or 17, they should be quite self-regulating in their boundaries, provided they have been guided and trained in Internet safety and have good communication with their parents.

In addition to age considerations, think about your own child's strengths and vulnerabilities. If he/she is dealing with loneliness or has a hard time making friends, he/she may be at risk for excessive computer use. Boys are particularly vulnerable to addictive gaming habits. As you think about the ground rules in your family, consider the following suggestions:

- a) Limit your younger children's access to **portable, Internet-enabled wireless devices**. These may be iPhones, DSi's, or other portable gaming consoles that allow your child to chat with strangers or be exposed to hackers or identity thieves. Older children should be taught not to give personal information online and how to identify phishing or other scams.
- b) Set a **daily limit** on how much total gaming, texting and Facebook updating can be done. The Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) recommends that children under 2 years of age have no "screen time" at all. The Society recommends that parents limit screen time for their middle school age children between 1 to 2 hours maximum. Older children should be allowed a maximum of two hours a day of screen time.
- c) Use the recommended resources to **educate your children about the consequences of their "digital footprint."**
- d) Ensure that your child knows what to do when he/she experiences **cyberbullying** (online harassment or threats). The Kids Help Phone Line (<http://kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/InfoBooth/Bullying/Cyberbullying/Are-You-a-Target.aspx?gclid=CNGfubqvqwCFc7AKgodJHWFog>) provides an excellent protocol that parents can share with their children. As well, make sure your child understands the rules of good "Netiquette" such as: not participating in cruel online polls about others; not forwarding embarrassing or cruel photos to others.
- e) **Promote computer literacy** that will reap rewards for future employment. There are some skills that will be vital to your child's success that will give them an edge. These skills may be acquired in school, the local library or in computer gaming camps: using databases and search engines to find, analyze, document, and use credible information; using Office software (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Access) to make user-friendly reports, resumes, financial budgets, and to organize and analyze statistical data for graphs and charts); learning computer programming as a way to build and support math skills.

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