

Young Minds in a Digital Age: A Path to Connection or Disconnection

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DESCRIPTION

In recent years, digital technology has permeated every corner of daily life especially among children and adolescents. From an early age, smartphones, video games, social media and interactive platforms are integrated into their routines, reshaping how they socialize, learn and play. While this shift presents unique opportunities, the invisible cost to physical and mental health demands a critical and preventive approach.

According to recent studies, Problematic Internet Use (PIU) is becoming a significant risk factor in the developmental stages of children and teens. Importantly, PIU is not measured solely by time spent online, but by the negative psychological, physical and social consequences it brings. It includes not just excessive browsing, but also compulsive gaming, online gambling, digital hoarding and unhealthy social media habits.

The concern is grounded in solid data. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis involving over 700,000 participants from 31 countries estimated the global prevalence of PIU at 7.02%. A national study of over 41,000 Spanish adolescents revealed that based on DSM-5 criteria, the prevalence of PIU reached 33% and 3.1% specifically for gaming disorder. When applying ICD-11 criteria, the rates were lower around 2.98% for PIU and 1.8% for problematic gaming. Regardless of the scale used, the evidence shows that millions of young people are struggling with unhealthy digital behaviors.

The digital generation: The silent risks of problematic internet use

Digital platforms are designed to hold and monetize user attention. Features like algorithm-driven content, infinite scrolling, auto-play and personalized feeds are engineered to encourage continuous use. This is not accidental it's part of a profit-driven design that fosters compulsive behavior.

The danger, however, extends beyond time online. Continuous exposure to digital media particularly social media has been linked to increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders and self-harming behaviors. These risks are amplified in vulnerable populations: children and teens with pre-existing

mental health issues are especially at risk of worsening symptoms due to PIU.

Moreover, cyberbullying, peer comparison and exposure to inappropriate content create a stressful digital environment. Many adolescents experience heightened emotional distress, a damaged self-image and social withdrawal all while being more connected than ever before.

This taxonomy allows researchers and clinicians to apply common terms and frameworks, which improves the comparability and strength of global evidence.

Adult role in supervision, prevention and regulation

Faced with this growing crisis, the leaders must act swiftly to sustain. The answer lies not only in only short solution but its long impact in limiting screen time, but in building a healthy digital environment guided by informed and involved adults.

Health professionals, particularly in child and adolescent psychiatry, must take a proactive stance. This includes asking about digital habits during medical evaluations, offering guidelines to families and collaborating with schools. Educators also need to be trained to understand the emotional impact of technology and identify early signs of distress. The goal isn't to demonize technology, but to ensure it aligns with healthy child development. Like any powerful tool, digital devices must be used consciously and responsibly.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of our digital age is not to remove technology from children's lives, but to help them integrate it in a balanced, mindful way. Screens should not replace real-world play, in-person relationships, or healthy rest. This requires a collective effort from families, educators, healthcare providers, policymakers and technology designers. The mental health of the next generation depends on our willingness to act. Prevention, education and regulation are not optional they are urgent. Let's ensure that children grow up not just connected to devices, but connected to themselves, their emotions and their real-life communities.

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