Helping Kids and Families with Internet and Gaming Behavior

Issue

From fun YouTube videos at an early age, to social media, to online gaming, today's youth spend an increasing amount of time interacting with online content. While attractive at first to users, at times this interaction can become an escape from the real world and can become a poor substitute for real life relationships and experiences. Providers can help parents take proactive steps to maintain a healthy relationship with screen time and protect their children from developing an online or gaming addiction.

Strategies for Managing Internet and Gaming Behaviors

Talking with parents about helping their children and adolescents manage a healthy relationship with screen time and online interactions (internet, social media, gaming, etc.) can focus on four main areas as indicated in research:

- Management and skill development of the actual usage of the behavior (self-control and self-awareness of the impact, etc.),
- Coping skills for stress and other emotions, such that the internet/gaming does not become the only coping mechanism,
- Skills around face-to-face, in-person relationships, and
- Life skills are associated with daily self-care/maintenance and free time (Vondrackova & Gabrhelik, 2016).

Warning signs for parents to watch out for include having trouble getting off the screen when asked to, sneaking in playing/screen time, becoming defensive or irritated when asked to stop playing/watching, and being preoccupied about when they can get back online.

While some youth may turn to screens to cope with feelings of anxiety, depression, or social difficulties, without the presence of a trusted and caring adult, the screen time can worsen these mental health issues and create a cycle where the child turns back to the screens to cope, increasing a sense of isolation. Remind parents that research shows that among adolescents, moderate use of screen time is best, with too little or too much having a negative impact (Belanger et al., 2011).

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Talking to Parents

- Parents can worry excessively about their child or adolescent's online usage – which is not good for the parent and potentially can be an unnecessary source of conflict for the parent and child. Help parents recognize that one of the biggest concerns is the replacement of real-life interactions with online interactions. When a child or teenager's online life begins to take over their responsibilities or in-person activities that they used to find fun, this is a major indicator of excessive use.

- Talk with parents during annual wellness visits about the physiological impact of screen time and how it can look like a "real" addiction. Hormones like oxytocin, cortisol, and dopamine all have a role to play in why youth (and adults) are driven to pick up their screens.

- Setting time limits can be difficult, but encourage parents to be firm, consistent and in agreement with other caregivers about time limits for screen time. However, those on screens can easily lose track of their time and so setting timers or physically logging time may be necessary.

- Internet, gaming, and social media usage can be a great opportunity to talk with parents about teaching children about ensuring balance in their lives and taking care of their whole health. For example, talk with parents about encouraging physical activity and face-to-face in-person connection with other people to help balance out the time spent on screens.

- If parents are concerned about their children's online or internet usage, make sure to talk with them about what their children observe in the home around adult usage of the internet. It may be that caregivers and their children can all make positive changes in their screen usage.

- Encourage parents to set physical boundaries around any screen use to monitor the amount of time spent online and to promote safety while online. For example, keeping screens in the common areas of the home (living rooms, kitchens, etc.) and if this is not possible requiring that doors stay open when screens are in use.

Resources and References

Belanger, R., Akre, C., Berchtold, A., & Michaud, P. (2011). A U-shaped association between intensity of internet use and adolescent health. *Pediatrics*, 127(2), e330-e335. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-1235

Vondrackova, P. & Gabrhelik, R. (2016). Prevention of internet addiction: A systematic review. *Journal of Behavioral Addiction, 5*(4), 568-579. https://dx.doi.org/10.1556%2F2006.5.2016.085

Link to American Academy of Pediatrics Family Media Use Plan

Handouts on Screen Time from AAP Available for Purchase

Common Sense Media - A Resource for Parents