

WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON?

5. Spectrum of Digital Media Use

Just because an adolescent does not meet the criteria for addiction, does not mean they won't have any problems with digital media use. Instead, it is important to consider your teen's use of digital media on a spectrum ranging from *recreational/non-problematic use* to *addictive behavior/pathological use*.



In the middle of the spectrum, we find varying degrees of problematic use (the use does not meet criteria for a behavioral addiction, but it causes problems in the adolescent's life). Let's consider characteristics of each area along the spectrum of use:

Recreational/Non-Problematic Use

- Digital media use is controlled (child/adolescent can follow rules/limits)
- Digital media use is planned and intentional
- Child/adolescent experiences no negative consequences from their digital media use (e.g., poor academic performance, losing money, eye problems)
- There are no withdrawal symptoms when child/adolescent is not using digital media (e.g., irritability, anxiety, restlessness)

- Child/adolescent does not crave digital media or is mentally preoccupied with it when not using
- Along with digital media, child/adolescent engages in a variety of diverse, enriching experiences without screens throughout their day (e.g., outside activities, creative activities, academic experiences, socializing with peers, contributing to household maintenance, spiritual practices, leisure/hobby activities, in-person conversations with adults and peers, physical activity)
- Child/adolescent has multiple ways to cope with distress and

can successfully regulate their emotional experiences (e.g., can effectively self-soothe, tolerate distress, change their emotional states adaptively)

Problematic Use

- May display some loss of control over digital media use, but child/adolescent can regain control with assistance or a period of abstinence
- May demonstrate some compulsivity in digital media use, but child/adolescent can return to intentional use with assistance or a period of abstinence
- May experience negative consequences from digital media use, but those consequences serve to reduce problematic behavior
- May experience minor withdrawal symptoms (e.g., irritability) after cessation of digital media use, but can cope/self-soothe appropriately
- May experience cravings for digital media use, but can resist or redirect attention to other activities
- May have reduced or neglected diverse, enriching experiences due to increased salience of digital media use, but can resume involvement in activities with assistance or a period of abstinence
- Child/adolescent's primary coping or emotion regulation strategy may be digital media, but when digital media is unavailable, child/adolescent can employ other adaptive strategies

Addictive Behavior/Pathological Use

- Loss of control over digital media use (child/adolescent cannot follow rules/limits, breaks own rules about use, hides/lies about use, engages in digital media use for longer than intended, more frequently than intended, or with higher intensity than intended)

- Digital media use is compulsive (not planned or intentional, result of a strong urge to use, may use digital media in inappropriate or risky situations such as driving or at work/school)

- Child/adolescent experiences negative consequences from digital media use (e.g., physical, legal, financial, psychological, spiritual, relational, occupational/educational negative consequences)
- Child/adolescent likely experiences withdrawal symptoms when digital media use ends or is inaccessible (e.g., irritability, sadness, emotional volatility, anxiety, lack of pleasure, cravings)
- Child/adolescent craves digital media when not using and is mentally preoccupied with it (may have difficulty concentrating or being in the present moment)
- Digital media use becomes the most salient activity in the child/adolescent's life to the detriment of other diverse, enriching experiences or previously held interests
- Child/adolescent relies on digital media use as their primary means of coping with life's difficulties and modifying their emotional experiences (e.g., digital media is used to escape life's problems, to feel good/pleasure, and to alleviate pain/distress)

When parents/caregivers consider their teen's digital media use, it can be helpful to think about it on this continuum. Based on the characteristics, where does your teen fall on the spectrum between *recreational/non-problematic use* and *addictive behavior/pathological use*? Wherever they land, there are ways to guide them toward safer, healthier, and more goal-aligned digital media using behaviors.

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References

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