

Factors influencing Excessive Internet Use among adolescents in Ireland ^{1, 2}

Gretta Mohan*

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

The growing use of the internet as a tool in modern daily living has led to concerns regarding potential negative consequences for people's wellbeing from 'excessive internet use' (EIU). Adolescence is an especially important life stage in the context of EIU, as the interaction between internet use and the developmental vulnerability of this age is particularly acute. The internet may be especially attractive to adolescents because of the opportunities it provides to satisfy crucial developmental and psychological needs. At the same time, parental influence on child development is estimated to peak in early adolescence and parents are also well-placed to play a role in preventing and resolving severe cases of EIU. This study aims to provide a greater understanding as to how parenting factors during a young person's early adolescence may contribute to EIU in later adolescence.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data on over 5,000 young people from the *Growing Up in Ireland '98 Cohort* to investigate the effect of parental influences, measured when children were 13 years old, on symptoms of EIU in young adults at 17 or 18 years. EIU is measured using the internet addiction measure where six statements are presented to the adolescents about different behaviours associated with their internet use. The EIU variable counted the number of 'Very or fairly often' statements of experience of the following:

1. *Felt bothered when I cannot be on the internet*
2. *Caught myself surfing when I am not really interested*
3. *Spent less time than I should with family, friends or doing coursework because of the internet*

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from: O'Reilly, C. and Mohan, G. "Parental influences on excessive internet use among adolescents", *Internet Research*. Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/INTR-12-2021-0904/full/html>

* Correspondence: Gretta.Mohan@esri.ie

² This research was supported by the Electronic Communications Research Programme at the ESRI, funded as joint research programme by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) and the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg).

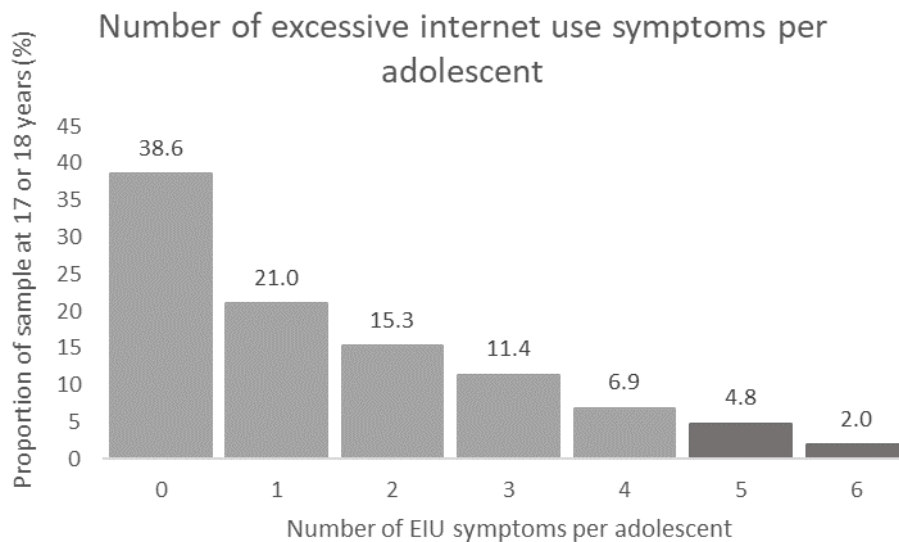
4. *Tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on the internet*
5. *I have been annoyed or reluctant when a parent or other adult has asked me to stop using the internet or playing a digital game*
6. *Gone without eating or sleeping because of the internet*

The parenting factors examined to influence EIU include the use of internet-specific parenting interventions (e.g., supervising internet use, employing an internet filter system), parent-child time together and apart, disciplinary techniques employed by parents, indicators of the parent-child relationship, parenting style, parental knowledge of the child’s activities, as well as household and parent characteristics. Multiple regression models control for other child and family factors, and separate models for males and females examine sex differentials.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows that almost two-thirds of the 17/18 years olds sampled reported at least one symptom of EIU, while 6.8% reported five or six symptoms of EIU. Modelling revealed that females were significantly more likely to report more symptoms of EIU than males. In terms of parenting influences, the estimation did not find a statistically significant association between internet-specific mediation practices (e.g., supervising internet use, employing an internet filter system) in early adolescence and EIU in later adolescence. How parents deal with misbehaviour is revealed to be a strong predictor of EIU, where more frequent power assertive discipline (including corporal punishment, deprivation of privileges, psychological aggression, and penalty tasks (e.g., chores)) is positively associated with EIU symptoms. For females, regularly playing games or sports together with parents is a protective factor for EIU, while parent-adolescent conflict and spending time home alone are estimated as risk factors.

FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF SAMPLE WITH SYMPTOMS OF EXCESSIVE INTERNET USE AT 17/18 YEARS



CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study identify several parental risk and protective factors of EIU, among which the type and frequency of parental discipline, and the degree to which the parent-child relationship is characterised by conflict with females are most notable. Parents can be made conscious of the various channels through which their interactions with their children in early adolescence may lead to the development of EIU through awareness campaigns, parenting support groups etc. Most pertinently, our study suggests that general parenting patterns and behaviours are more predictive of EIU than directed internet-specific interventions. These findings are particularly instructive for strategies designed to prevent EIU but may also help inform the resolution of EIU cases.