

Common Sense on Setting Computer Limits

Some facts

- > According to Dr. Hecht Orzack, warning signs for computer addiction include missing meals, losing sleep, dropping activities, skipping showers, and missing homework assignments or school.
- > A psychologist who counsels for the Center for Online Addiction estimates that between 5 and 10% of Internet users have “compulsive bouts.”
- > On average, normal game play for kids 8 to 18 is over an hour a day on the computer, and 49 minutes a day playing games on a console or handheld system.

How much is too much time online?

Computer addiction is tough to define. When your child spends a large amount of time at the computer, are they addicted or do they simply enjoy being online? Perhaps it's easier to frame it like this: Can your child enjoy himself – and all those things that aren't online – when he's away from the computer? If you're not sure, just start observing his computer habits and moods.

What is it?

All kids have trouble turning off the computer. Instant Messaging with friends seems so important, games like Runescape and World of Warcraft capture players' attention and time, a lot of it. And virtual worlds like Club Penguin or Teen Second Life can be equally engrossing. But some kids go beyond procrastinating – they just can't turn the computer off. You can tell the difference in how a child acts when the computer is taken away – withdrawn, moody, and uncommunicative. (Not the usual teen sulk, but a condition that goes away when your child is back online.)

Why it matters

The part of kids' brains that contain mental off-switches aren't fully developed until kids reach their early 20s. That means they need rules and structure to help them turn off the computer. Developing children need to be able to have real lives independent of their cyber ones to fully develop socially, emotionally, and even physically. While some kids may blossom in the freedom and anonymity of online lives, they also need the interpersonal skills that online life can't provide.

Computer dependency can also mask problems kids are having in the real world. Dr. Maressa Hecht Orzack, director of the Computer Addiction Study Center at Boston's McLean Hospital, says she sees concerned parents – and their kids, mostly boys 11 to 19 – who think their kids are addicted. These kids aren't developing the coping mechanisms they will need to live life happily and successfully.

Common Sense says:

- > **Establish good habits early.** Kids need guidelines and rules about what is a good amount of time to spend on the computer. A good rule of thumb for elementary kids is no more than an hour a day during the week. Allotting computer time in 15- or 30-minute increments gives you a chance to check in and suggest that it's time for a break.
- > **Make sure middle school kids know that homework must be finished before** they look at YouTube videos or Instant Message the latest gossip.
- > **Determine if your child has an addiction or if he or she is simply spending too much time online.** What happens when your child is away from the computer? Are they argumentative, depressed? Is there a marked change when they are online?
- > **If you suspect a dependency, have a heart-to-heart.** You need to have a real discussion with your kids about your concerns. This, plus some serious guidelines, may normalize the behavior. If the problem continues, or you think the computer time is masking depression or anxiety, see your primary care physician right away. Also, check in with the school counselor and see if there is something going on at school.
- > **Don't take away the computer.** This may seem like the best solution, but it can be very damaging to addicted players, who may feel like playing games is the only thing that brings them any enjoyment. Removing the computer can make them depressed, and possibly even violent.
- > **Don't hesitate to get professional help.** Addictions are hard to break and dependencies can often be a child's only coping skill.

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