Common Sense on Setting Computer Limits

How much is too much time online?

If your children spend a large amount of time at the computer, you may wonder, 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, start observing his computer habits and moods.

Some facts

77% of 8- to 15-year-olds said they'd rather give up TV than give up the Internet (*Pangea Media and YPulse, 2009*).

Most parents in the United States estimate that their children spend about two hours a month on the Internet, but in reality, kids and teens are spending upwards of 20 hours a month surfing the Web (*Center for Media Research, 2009*).

About 41 percent of U.S. teens claim their parents have no idea what they are looking at online (*Center for Media Research, 2009*).

76% of parents think the Internet helps their kids learn about other cultures and ideas (*Common Sense Media and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, 2008*).

What is computer addiction?

All kids have trouble turning off the computer. Instant Messaging with friends seems so important, and games like World of Warcraft capture players' attention and time — a lot of it. Virtual worlds like Club Penguin or Teen Second Life can be equally engrossing.

But some kids go beyond procrastinating — they just can't turn off the computer. Pay attention to how your child acts when the computer is taken away. If he becomes withdrawn, moody, and uncommunicative — and the mood goes away when he's back online — it might be time to enforce some time limits.

Why it matters

The "off switches" in kids' brains 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 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 ages 11 to 19 — who think their kids are addicted to computers. She finds that many of these kids aren't developing the coping mechanisms they will need to live life happily and successfully.

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Parent tips for all kids

» **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.

» **Stress homework before computer work.** Make sure your kids know that homework must be finished before they look at YouTube videos or instant message the latest gossip.

» **Limit multitasking.** Media multitasking is when kids are chatting online, watching TV, playing a game, checking out Facebook, or listening to music — and trying to do homework at the same time. It's not really known what affect this has on how kids learn, but experts do know that it takes longer to do tasks like homework when other activities are going on at the same time. And that increases daily screen time.

» **Determine if your child has an addiction or if he or she is simply spending too much time online.** What happens when your children are 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.** 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 child's doctor for advice. 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 that playing online games is the only thing that brings them any enjoyment. Removing the computer can make them depressed, and possibly even violent. It can also affect the level of your child's trust in you.

» **Don't hesitate to get professional help.** Addictions are hard to break, and dependencies can often be a child's only coping skill. You may need someone else to help you solve this problem.