Chapter 8

The Role of Family Factors in Internet Addiction Among Children and Adolescents: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

As the Internet becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, there is a growing concern on the antecedents that contribute to some of the adverse effects such as Internet addiction. Parents are important and influential agents, and their parenting practices may promote or prevent the development of Internet-related problems. This chapter provides a review of family factors surrounding child and adolescent Internet addiction such as parental monitoring and parental guidance, parental mediation, Internet parenting styles, parental norms and behaviors, parent and child characteristics, family functioning and parent marital conflict, quality of the parent-child and peer relationship and culture as highlighted in previous research. Common limitations on past research on family factors and child and adolescent Internet addiction are noted and future research directions are suggested. Finally, family-based solutions and recommendations to prevent children and adolescents from developing Internet addiction are provided in the light of previous findings.

INTRODUCTION

Today, Internet has become a widely used tool for network communication with a huge impact on daily life. Internet is considered to be one of the most popular leisure time activities for children and adolescents all over the world. However, along with the widespread use of Internet, there is also a growing concern on the antecedents that leads to adverse effects such as Internet addiction. Internet addiction prevalence rate in the United States and Europe has been reported as between 1.5% and 8.2% (Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010). In Asia, 10% of the adolescents in Park et al’s (2008) study have been found to be...
at high risk for Internet addiction. Internet addiction prevalence rates all around the world have called
the researchers to better understand this new behavioral problem.

With an aim to shed light on Internet addiction, a plethora of studies have focused primarily on fac-
tors that may predispose individuals to Internet addiction. There is a consensus in literature that some
personality traits such as social withdrawal, introversion, aggression, narcissism, shyness, low self-esteem
and poor self-control are significant predictors of Internet addiction (Bozoglan, 2013; Griffith, 1995;
Kim, 2008). Although the role of individual factors and personality in predicting Internet addiction have
been widely investigated in literature, it is also important to look at the impact of environmental factors,
such as family factors.

Elements of family life, such as parenting behaviors have a profound effect on the development of
children and adolescents (Barker & Hunt, 2004). Family factors and parenting behaviors regarding child
Internet use is necessary to consider when attempting to understand children with Internet addiction due
to the central role of the family in the development of children and the important roles of family factors
and parental attitudes and behaviors in child behavior (Van den Eijnden, Spijkerman, Vermulst, Van
Rooij, & Engles, 2010; Yu, 2003). Studies conducted in developed countries reveal that Internet use is
mainly home-based. While only 66% of children use Internet at school, 91.2% of primary school children
surf on the Internet at home (Lee & Chae, 2007). The wide use of Internet at home also underlines the
critical role of parents in providing a controlled and safe Internet use.

Despite the existence of empirical studies on Internet addiction, past research have shown that a
complete understandings of how children and adolescents develop Internet addiction and effective
prevention and intervention techniques are limited (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Willoughby, 2008).
This chapter aims to provide an overview of the risk and protection factors for the occurrence of Internet
addiction during childhood and adolescence in relation to family context and parenting behaviors. In
this context, past research concerning the effect of family factors on Internet addiction among children
and adolescents have been reviewed and frequently occurring points are explained.

BACKGROUND

Internet Addiction

Though an exact terminology to designate the pathological use of the Internet does not still exist, authors
have used different terms to describe the harmful use of the Internet (Abreu, Karam, Góes & Spritzer,
2008) such as Internet addiction (Young, 1998), problematic Internet use (Shapira et al., 2003) or In-
ternet use disorder (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Since this chapter approaches the
pathological use of the Internet as a behavioral problem, the term “Internet addiction” has been chosen.

Within a medical framework, addiction is described as a psychological and physical dependency on
a certain matter (Leung & Lee, 2012). However, no conclusive definition of Internet addiction has been
adopted in literature yet. Young (2004) explains Internet addiction as compulsive behaviors associated
with online activities that leads to sorrow and functional impairment (Young, 1999) and brings about
stress on social relationships. Pathological Internet use is described as “a compulsive–impulsive spec-
trum disorder” that includes five main addiction types: information overload; computer addiction to
programming or game playing; compulsions to online auctions; gambling or trading; and cyber-sexual
relationship addictions (Young, 1998).