

Social risks of cyberspace

Report 2 : Cyberspace risks: a parent's guide

This is the golden age of organizing. If there's one thing the Internet's changed forever, it's the relative difficulty and cost of getting a bunch of people in the same place, working for the same goal. That's not always good (thugs, bullies, racists and loonies never had it so good), but it is fundamentally *game-changing*. (Cory Doctorow, *For the win*, 2010)

Premise

This report aims to present a set of good practices that parents should adopt to protecting their children from cyberspace dangers.

It has been underlined (Kowalsky et al., 2012) that parents, at least initially, tend to view the Internet as a helpful tool to aid their children with homework. In parents' eyes, cellular phones are very useful for children security representing a means for kids to call home in emergencies. Children and youth, on the other hand, perceive the Internet, cellular phones, and related technologies as critical tools for their social life. Many parents have difficulties in using the new technology and don't understand the risk hidden in them. For children and youth, on the contrary, new technologies have always existed, so they have a comfort level with technology that is foreign to many of their parents. Many parents candidly admit that their children are the ones who have taught them most of what they know about the Internet and related technologies.

Today, to protect their children, parents ought to learn how to master the new technologies and how to exercise a control on them if they want their children stay safe on line.

Staying safe on line

Software providers, like Microsoft and Google, give to their users tips and advice for staying more secure on the Web.

Google Web page of recommendations prompts:

There are so many fascinating things to do and explore online, but there are also times when the Internet can be a little bit scary. Just like in the offline world, it's important to keep yourself safe and secure. Whether you're a new Internet user or an old hand, it's good to stay updated on the best practices when it comes to sharing your data online and browsing safely. Here we give you advice for staying more secure on the web and an overview of some of the security tools that Google offers.¹

¹ <<http://www.google.com/intl/en/goodtoknow/online-safety/>>, retrieved: 5 February 2013.

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Google offers its advice about:

- Passwords
- Phishing
- Malware
- Safe networks
- Mobile security
- Ad scams
- Check your Gmail account
- Shopping safety
- Locking your screen
- Google's security tools

Microsoft offers many free applications for parental control which allow to manage children's computer activity: websites visited, programs used, and time spent on the computer. In particular, Microsoft parental control provides:

- Web restrictions. You can restrict the websites that children can visit, make sure children only visit age-appropriate websites, indicate whether you want to allow file downloads, and set up which content you want the content filters to block and allow. You can also block or allow specific websites. For more information, see Limit the content that children can view on the web.
- Time limits. You can set time limits to control when children are allowed to log on to the computer. Time limits prevent children from logging on during the specified hours and, if they are already logged on, they will be automatically logged off. You can set different logon hours for every day of the week. For more information, see Control when children can use the computer.
- Games. You can control access to games, choose an age rating level, choose the types of content you want to block, and decide whether you want to allow or block unrated or specific games. For more information, see Specify which games children can play.
- Allow or block specific programs. You can prevent children from running programs that you don't want them to run. For more information, see Prevent children from using specific programs.²

Microsoft suggest four main steps to help protect your children's privacy and safety when they're using the computer:³

- Step 1: Decide where your child can and can't go on the Internet
- Step 2: Increase your security and privacy
- Step 3: Monitor when the kids go online
- Step 4: Remind kids not to talk to stranger online

Other important cautions that Microsoft suggests for online safety home are

- Defend your computer

² < <http://windows.microsoft.com/en-US/windows-vista/Set-up-Parental-Controls>>, retrieved: 7 February 2013.

³ < <http://www.microsoft.com/security/family-safety/childsafety-steps.aspx>>, retrieved: 7 February 2013.

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- Protect sensitive personal information
- Create strong passwords and keep them secret
- Take charge of your online reputation
- Use social networks more safely
- Take extra steps to keep kids safer online

There are many commercial products which offer tools for managing Internet use and prevent exposure to inappropriate contents, social networking risks, strangers, and other threats. One of the most famous is McAfee Family Protection (price \$ 49,99, for up to three computer), produced by McAfee, the world's largest dedicated security technology company. It provides:⁴

- Protect your children from objectionable websites
- Allow your children to view appropriate YouTube videos
- Manage the amount of time your children spend online
- Let your children use instant messaging
- Enjoy the benefits of social networking
- Make sure your family's personal information remains safe
- Ensure that your children are having a safe experience online
- Know immediately if there is a problem so you can talk to your child
- Allow access to age appropriate TV shows and movies
- Prevent listening to music with explicit language

Another product is CyberPatrol parental control (price \$ 39,95, for up to three computer), which allow blocking pornographic and other inappropriate web sites, setting time limits on computers games and Internet use , controlling access to games and instant messaging, etc.⁵

PC Magazine provides up-to-date coverage and product reviews of Parental Control & Monitoring (see <<http://www.pcmag.com/category2/0,2806,1639158,00.asp>>, retrieved, 8 February 2013).

Computer addiction: practical preventive and protective measure

Margaret A. Shotton (1989) poses the question if it is more appropriate to speech of *computer addiction* or of *computer dependence*. She analyzes the use of the two terms and decides that the correct definition of the excessive use of computer should be *computer dependence*. Some researchers use the term such as *problematic usage* (Yee, 2006). However, the expression computer addiction continues to be the most diffuses. This is the definition one sees in Wikipedia:⁶

Computer addiction is a mental illness which causes the excessive use of computers to the extent that it interferes with daily life. Excessive use may explain problems in social interaction, mood, personality, work ethic, relationships, thought processes, or sleep deprivation.

Studies done in Stanford University showed that males are susceptible to becoming hooked on video games (Brandt, 2008). Shavaun Scott, a psychotherapist, observed that a video game addict has two lives, primary and secondary life. Primary life is reality, the world we live in. Secondary

⁴ <<http://home.mcafee.com/store/family-protection>>, retrieved: 8 February, 2013.

⁵ <http://www.cyberpatrol.com/home/>, retrieved: 8 February, 2013.

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_addiction>, retrieved: 8 of February.

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life is the virtual world in which they play in. Dr. Scott states that problems arise when the addicts are so engrossed in the secondary life that they neglect responsibilities in their primary life.⁷

What is the relationship between video games and computer addiction? Are video games users really prone to becoming serious computer use addiction?

Kourosch Dini, psychiatrist and author of a popular book about video game addiction, observes that “while the habitual playing of games may point out the lack of play in a society, too much gaming may also become or reveal an illness in an individual” (2008, 45).

Another big question is when one can be defined to be a computer addicted.

Basically, computer addiction doesn't differ from other kinds of addiction. Eating, shopping, and having sex are perfectly normal activities. Why some people take them to extremes or engage in them problematically? Usually, addicted people have some predisposition—biological, psychological, or often both—toward the type of addiction presented. For Kourosch Dini (2008, 46):

Gaming can be taken to extremes to make up for deficiencies elsewhere in an individual's life. Deficits in a person's social, educational, or vocational worlds can be poorly substituted by a virtual world. This method of compensating, in turn, can further damage these outside worlds. A cycle develops, reminiscent of any addiction, be it food, shopping, or sex.

An excessive use of computer can transform in computer addiction if it produces negative effects. Angres and Bettinardi (2008) have underlined that an *addiction* is the continued use of a mood altering substance or behavior despite adverse dependency consequences:

The common pathways in reward circuitry that affect memory and learning, motivation, control, and decision making are also involved in the addictive process (p. 696).

Use of computer and video games becomes an addiction if it is extreme, compulsive and interferes with daily life: not necessarily all people using computer and playing video games become computer or video game addicted.

There many measures that can be taken to avoid computer addiction. The simplest is to limit the time spent to computer, but very important is information about dangers caused by computer enslavement and knowledge of video game world.

Parents have the means to limit the use of computer but they also need to exercise a preventive action, e. g. controlling the video games that are used. A good protective measure is to play with children and regulate the time devoted to play.

Parents ought to be able to recognize the symptoms of compulsive video gaming to prevent the rising rates of video game addiction. They must educate children on risks of computer addiction, e. g. increasing in weight gain, decline in physical fitness and social isolation. There are many physical health problems associated with game addiction such as decline in personal hygiene, dry eyes carpal tunnel syndrome, back aches and migraines. Moreover, Internet abuse could contribute to cause depression and sleep disturbances.

⁷ < Interview with Shavaun Scott, Youtube, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=8U1T9ZumALk&feature=related>>, Retrieved: 9 of February 2013.

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The best thing we can do is to educate parents and prevent game addiction from happening in the first place. Parents need to be able to set limitations on gaming habits.

Reading and commenting together children the novel of Cory Doctorow *For the Win*,⁸ might be important. Doctorow novel tells about the rise of a virtual economy led by Massive Multiplayer

Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs). The main characters Mathew, Wei Dong, and Mala,

are worlds away from each other yet are connected by these video games and they are addicted gamers.

Protecting from cyberporn

Pramod K. Nayar observes that cyberporn is a digital formation constituted as much by social values (including obscenity norms and laws) as by technologies (webcasting, streaming video).

Cyberporn presents some new aspects (Cronin and Davenport, 2001):

- the commercialization and normalization of acts/behaviors that have been stigmatized in traditional markets (the latter led to porn thriving as an underground commodity);
- an emergent phenomenon that is linked with liberated self-expression and group validation (what can be termed the augmentation of expressive sexuality);
- a new relationship between producer and consumer where feedback loops (coded as "what consumers want") inform future techniques and content;
- the redefinition of pornography itself as entertainment, education, and lifestyle

Another point to be considered is the difference between cybersex and cyberporn. Lelia Green (2010) claims that definitions of cybersex and cyberporn differ, but cyberporn consumption might be constructed as a subset of cybersex activities. Moreover, cybersex, would also include consensual erotic interactions between sexual partners using texting: webcam, and other digital technologies.

Pornography on the Internet represents a particularly sticky problem very difficult to regulate since traditional concepts of public/private spaces don't automatically fit in cyberspace. Indeed, computer consumption of porn is intensely private, occurring not only in the privacy of one's home (or cubicle/office at work) but also in the isolated, ephemeral interaction of user and screen. On the other hand, the consumption is intensely public, in that information proliferates and spreads to numerous sites, transgressing the physical boundaries that make other kinds of porn outlets, such as bookstores and theatres, much more easily identifiable and regularized (Westheimer, 2011).

About cyberporn and children protection an important reference is the publication of the United States Congress Research *Cyberporn, Protecting Our Children From the Back Alleys of the Internet* (2010, First Session, July 26, 1995).

⁸ Cory Doctorow, *For the Win*, <http://craphound.com/ftw/Cory_Doctorow_-_For_the_Win.htm>; retrieved: 9 of February 2013.

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Parental control software is the technological mean to protect children from cyberporn. Nevertheless, it is crucial that parents educate their selves about Internet. It is necessary they learn about Internet and how it works. Then, parents ought to share information with children about how to safely search for information, how to avoid searches that may lead to cyberporn websites, and specially what children should do if they encounter a cyberporn website.

Recommendations

WHO@ (Working to Halt Online Abuse)⁹ gives the following principal recommendation for a secure and smart use of Web:

- Use a **gender-neutral** username/e-mail address
- Use a **free e-mail** account such as Hotmail (www.hotmail.com) or YAHOO! (www.yahoo.com) for newsgroups/ mailing lists, chat rooms, IMs, e-mails from strangers, message boards, filling out forms and other online activities
- **Don't give** your primary e-mail address to anyone you do not know or trust (see above)
- **Don't** put too much information in your profile, especially on social networking sites. Be careful what you post!
- **Change** your preferences/options so that only the people/friends you approve can view your profiles, IM, etc
- **Lurk** on newsgroups, message boards/forums and chat rooms before “speaking” or posting messages
- When you do participate, **be careful** -- only type what you would say to someone's face
- **Don't be too trusting** online - don't reveal personal things about yourself until you really and truly know the other person
- **Your first instinct** may be to defend yourself - DON'T - this is how most online harassment situations begin
- Don't fall for **phishing e-mails** that claim your account has been suspended or needs to be updated - it's a scam!

Additional recommendation are:

Do not forward e-mails without fist asking the person who wrote the e-mail.

- Only open messages from people you know and never reply to harassing or suspicious messages.
- Do not post picture of yourself online before checking with an adult.
- Never post picture of your friends without asking them.
- Educate your friend about cyberspace risks.

If you receive harassments:

- **KEEP EVERYTHING!** Don't delete messages, chat logs, etc. Place them in a separate folder on your hard drive or diskette/zip disk, CD, DVD etc. and print out a hard copy
- Call police and ask for the Computer Crimes Unit or someone who handles online incidents

Some tips are very important to protect children:

- Advocate them, providing positive, active and predictable support. encourage them to report bullying to you or another trusted adult.

⁹ WHO@ (<http://www.haltabuse.org/>) is the oldest online safety organization dedicated to helping adult victims of cyberstalking and online harassment. Founded in February of 1997

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- Reassure them that computer, phone or other privileges won't be curtailed.
- Act immediately. Don't wait to see if the abuse will stop and report the incident to the school or to the online.
- Look for signs of online bullying (e. g. if they get upset when they are online).
- Not to answer to unpleasant phone calls/text-messages and online harassments: cyberbullies are looking for a reaction.
- Keep the family computer in a central location. It important especially with adolescents.

Other tips are available in the excellent pamphlet, *Child Safety on the Information Highway*, produced by The National Center for Missing and Exploited,¹⁰ which lists some good guidelines:

- Set guidelines for how your child uses the computer and discuss those guidelines with your child.
- Don't let your child give out personal information, such as address, phone number, or school name, online.
- Don't let your child arrange for online meetings with a stranger or send his or her photograph.
- Tell your children to come to you immediately if someone sends them messages that they don't like.

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¹⁰ <http://safekids.com/pdfs/childsafety_info_highway.pdf>, Retrieved: 9 February 2013.

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Appendix – Latvian experiences

Here following the questionnaire used for a research about computer addiction among students.¹¹

1. Mark all the places where you use your computer (you can tick more than one answer)
 - at home
 - at school
 - at friends' places
 - other _____
2. How often do you use a computer?
 - Every day, nearly every day
 - 2-3 times a week
 - once a week
 - 2-3 times a month
 - Less than once a month
3. Why do you usually use a computer? (you can tick more than one answer)
 - for searching of information
 - for studies
 - for the contacts (chat; Skype)
 - for visiting social websites (draugiem.lv, etc.)
 - for games
 - for checking an e-mail
 - for downloading music, movies, etc.
 - other _____
4. Do you have a passion, a hobby? What? _____
5. What kind of responsibilities do you have at home? (you can tick more than one answer)
 - Cooking
 - Dishwashing
 - Looking after your brother / sister
 - Cleaning your room
 - Taking out trash
 - There are no responsibilities
 - other _____
6. What have you had to face on the Internet? (you can tick more than one answer)
 - Pictures or games where someone hits or attacks another object
 - Get troubling letters (threat)
 - Your back, eyes, etc. hurt if you sit at a computer for a long time
 - Sometimes your assignments are not done, because you have used the Internet for a long time
 - It sometimes happens that you only want to surf the Internet and do anything else
 - You have revealed an information to strangers about yourself, your family (phone number, address, etc.)
 - It sometimes happens that you miss classes at school, because you surfed the Internet in the evening for a long time
 - other _____
7. Do you know that excessive use of a compute can lead to addiction?

¹¹ The research has been performed by Julija Drebeinika, a student of the 4th study year at the faculty of Education and design of Rezeknes Augstskola.

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- Yes
 - No
 - I have not thought about it
8. What problems can be caused by excessive use of a computer? (you can tick more than one answer)
- Conflicts with parents
 - School absenteeism
 - Poor relationship with friends
 - Communication problems
 - Health problems
 - Lack of time
 - other _____

Thanks for Your response!

Organization of the Research

The research was carried out in 2010, at Rezekne secondary schools using a questionnaire and interviews. Questionnaire's compilation has been made in cooperation with schools' teachers.

Methods: questionnaire, interview

Valid questionnaires : 107 (pupils 6-8 years and adolescents)

Interviews: 5 (teachers)

Objective: to verify teenage risk for computer addiction and hypothesize allowable countermeasures

Summary and Analysis of Results of Adolescents' Questionnaire

Accessibility of a computer (Multiple answers)

The majority of pupils (89%) uses computer at home,, while the 56% uses computer at friends' home. To be noted that the 35 % uses computer at schools and that the 19% of adolescents ticked "Other", indicating, for example, that uses computer at parents' working place.

Pupils have an easy access to a computer but they use computer without a parental control. Many of them use computer at friend's home and to communicate with their friends.

Intensity of computer usage

The 70% uses computer every day, while the 26% uses computers 2 - 3 times a week, and the 3% uses computer once a week. Only the 1% uses computer 2-3 times a month. Considering that half of surveyed pupils admitted a daily use of computer, cases of computer addiction are possible.

Time spent at computer

The amount of time spent at computer is summarized in Figure 1.

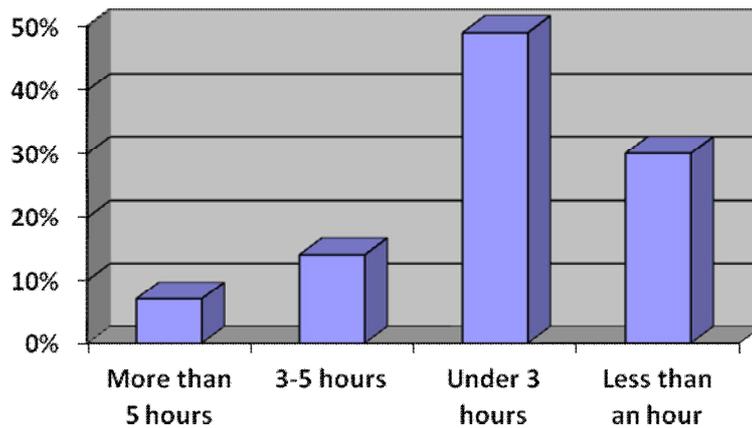


Fig. 1 Time spent at a computer

Aggregating data, it results that the 30% spends less an hour at computer, the 49 % 3 hours, the 14% 3-5 hours and the 7% more than 5 hours. Thus, the risk of computer addiction appears more evident.

Aim of computer usage

The 65% uses computer for studying and searching information, the 33%, for e-mailing, the 24% for chatting, the 69% for visiting social websites.

The 61% uses computer for playing computer games and the 71% uses computer for downloading music and movies.

To be noted that computer games, chatting and other forms of entertainment could cause dependence.

Adolescents' passions/hobby

How pupils spend their leisure time is shown in Figure 2.

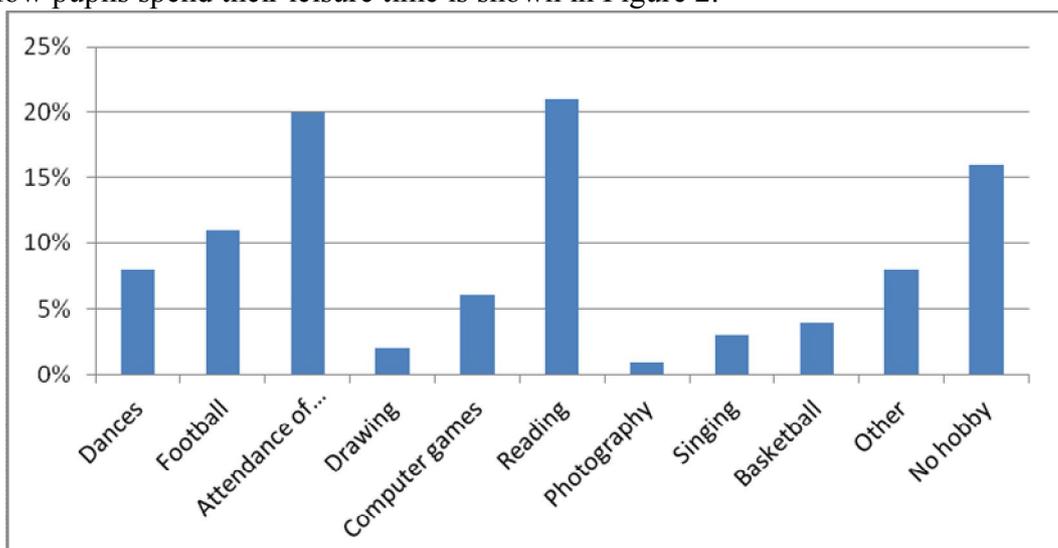


Fig. 2 Adolescents' hobbies

In synthesis, the 84% of pupils has a hobby, e.g. dancing, reading books, basketball and so on, while 16% has no hobby. The 6% claims that their hobby is computer games. But they are a minority, as the majority of pupils prefers different hobbies.

Adolescents' responsibilities, employment at home

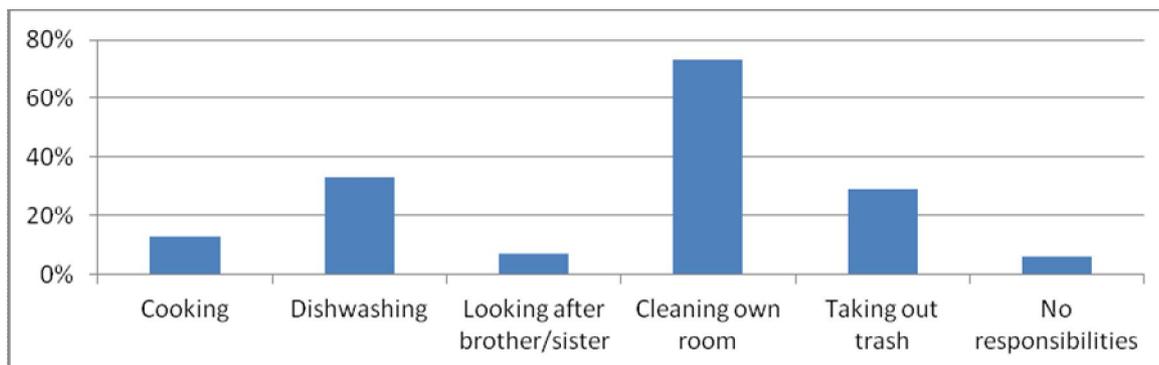


Fig. 3 Involvement with housework

The majority of adolescents lend a hand with the housework, such as dishwashing (33%), cleaning own room (75%), looking after sister or brother (7%). Figure 3, shows that adolescents are not very involved with housework.

What adolescents have faced on the Internet

The 56% of adolescents admits that they often are bystanders of online harassments. The 39% received unpleasant messages or advertisements, while the 27% says that they have back and eyes problems, if they spend at a computer a long amount of time. The 29% of pupils neglects their homework spending a lot of time on Internet, the 34% use computer only to navigate on Internet, the 20% give personal information to unknowns, such as their family name, phone number, address, etc.. It happens that pupils (7%) miss school, because they navigate on Internet all the evening, and the 1% completely neglects their duties.

Adolescents' awareness of computer addiction

The research verified the pupils' understanding about the risk of computer addiction caused by an excessive use of computer. The results are summarized in Figure 4.

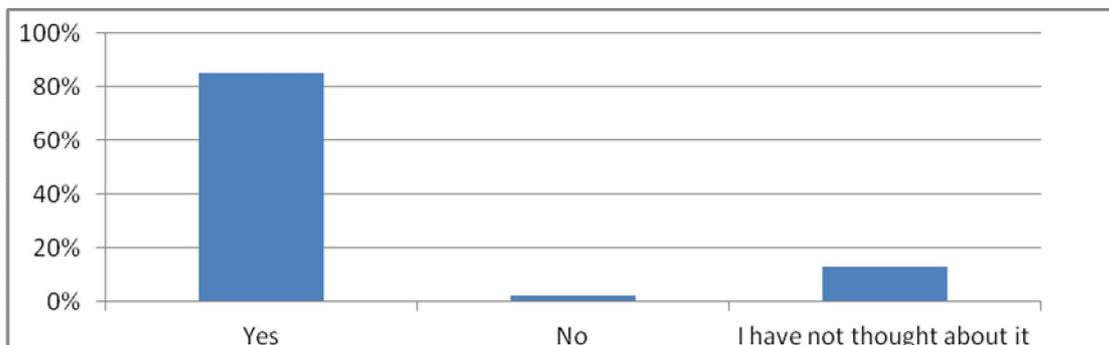


Fig. 4 Adolescents' awareness of computer addiction

Answers showed that the 85% of adolescents knows and agrees that an excessive use of a computer may cause problems at school and affect relationships with their peers and family, the 2% believes that an excessive use of computer cause addiction. Some respondents (13%) haven't an opinion about it.

Problems that may be caused by an excessive use of computer

Many pupils think that an excessive use of computer (see Figure 5) can cause health problems (41%), loss of time (52%), and disagreements with parents (65%), absences at school (21%), poor relationships with friends (20%), communication problems (35%).

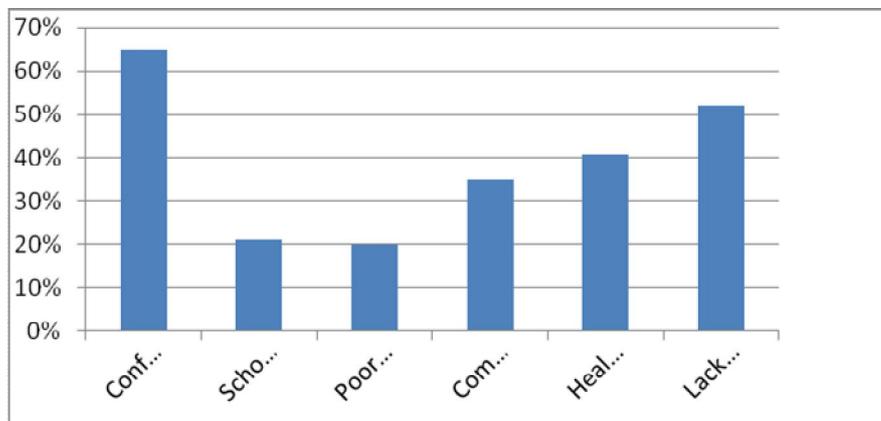


Fig. 5 Problems that may be caused by ab excessive use of computer

Interpretation of Teachers' Interview

The 5 interviews with teachers produced the following results.

It was found that teachers had a good knowledge about computer addiction-related problems.

In general they agreed that the excessive use of computer caused absence at school, lack of motivation in studying, passivity at lessons, deviant behaviour and communication problems.

Teachers emphasize that an excessive use of computer negatively affects adolescents' attitudes towards their duties, decreasing learning ability and damaging educational processes.

Some teachers are well informed about computer addiction, but there are also those who have only a superficial knowledge of the issue and are unable to provide the necessary assistance and prevent the problem.

Two teachers suggested initiatives to draw the attention of students about the risks of computer addiction. One of them proposed to increase the computer science lessons. A teacher of computer science offered to keep lessons about computer risks.

Teachers underlined the need of brochures, informative materials, visual aids, videos explaining the danger of excessive use of computer. They also suggested the development of radio-television programs about this topic.

A teacher suggested:

- ✓ Lectures about the different forms of computer addiction, their characteristics, causes and effects;
- ✓ To add this issue in health education lessons;
- ✓ To discuss with adolescents and their parents;
- ✓ To keep lessons about risks of excessive computer use.

The research suggested some initiatives to limiting the risks of computer addiction:

1. To produce recommendations for teachers, social workers, and psychologists;
2. To develop education of adolescents, parents and teachers about computer addiction prevention and facing;
3. To create support groups;
4. To indicate books and other materials useful to the understanding problems caused by an excessive use of computer;

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5. To propose alternative options for spending leisure time;
6. Seminars for adolescents' parents;
7. Sports games and physical activities;
8. To play role games at school.

Conclusions:

- Majority of pupils is conscious that excessive use of computer can cause addiction;
- Most of the adolescents believe to use computer wisely, without any risk to become addicted, but it is very likely that at least the 1 % of them is to be considered as computer addicted; Adolescents use a computer for different purposes but mostly for entertainment, enabling excessive fascination with a computer;
- Majority of pupils uses computer every day;
- Teachers believe that excessive use of computer affects negatively the students' activities.
- Difficulties to realize initiatives at school about risks of computer addiction;
- Need to give to adolescents tips and advice about a correct and useful use of computer.
- Necessity to support teachers with recommendations and practical advices to prevent adolescents' risk of computer addiction.