Some Unit publications

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This report surveys all our drugs data back to 1987 and suggest that young people in contact with drugs may have peaked in 1995-96. £10.00

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Education and Health
Our journal is aimed at primary and secondary teachers, health-care professionals, and anyone else interested in the healthy development of young people. It contains articles on recent health education initiatives, relevant research findings, materials and resources for schools, health-related health education, and letters. It is now in its 15th year, during which time articles on a great range of health topics have been included. Education and Health is published four times per annum. The individual annual subscription is £30, but these willing to purchase large numbers for distribution are offered special terms.£25

Mark Griffiths
Excessive Internet and computer use: Implications for education

Three case studies show that excessive computer usage appears to have a detrimental effect on educational progress.

The popular stereotypes surrounding various types of lack and computing addiction suggest that “addicts” tend to be socially unskilled male teenagers who have little or no social life and/or self-confidence – is this really true?

Mark Griffiths, Reader in Psychology, University of Nottingham, is author of two recent books: Computer Addiction: Psychological and Social Dimensions (Pitman) and Computer Addiction: A Review of Research (Routledge).

Fool’s Gold: A critical look at computers and childhood

This report provides a fascinating insight into the work of a coalition of child experts in the United States - ‘The Alliance for Childhood’. The authors challenge the increasing emphasis on computers in early childhood and in the classroom. “Dozens of leading health, education, and child development experts” in the USA suggest that excessive computer usage poses a serious threat to the physical, emotional, and development of children.

The report suggests that healthy child development means time for active, physical play including hands-on lessons of all kinds (especially in the arts) and direct experience of the real world. The authors claim that many American schools have cut back in these areas and shifted time and money to computer education.

The authors question the impact that educational technology has made finding only one clear link between computers and child learning. After 33 years of research into educational technology, “there is no clear commanding body of evidence,” that children’s sustained use of ICT has any impact on academic achievement. The only connection that computers make to children is often to training games, inappropriate adult material and excessive networking.

The report is available free to US readers from the Alliance’s website, and is available for a nominal fee in other countries. The report can also be downloaded free from the Alliance for Childhood’s website: www.allianceforallchildren.org. For those interested in the Alliance’s work, it is available online at: www.allianceforallchildren.org
Today's teenagers live in a muti-media world and are more "screen-age" than teenager.

"Screen-age" generation

There is no doubt that children's day-to-day leisure habits have changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Today's modern teenager may well have a television, CD player and computer game console in their bedroom and an increasing number will have on-line access to the Internet at home. In essence, today's teenagers live their lives in a multi-media world and are more "screen-age" than teenager. What is the long-term effect of this change in children's leisure behaviour?

"Chat rooms"

Perhaps one of the major dangers for children are when they are in "Internet chat rooms". In the UK there are a number of cases where children have been lured to meet someone that they met in a chat room only to find it was an adult predator who used the children.

Alternatively, children who engage in playful and exploratory word searches can come across hardcore pornography quite accidentally. For instance, a recent case involving thousands of American children being exposed to very hardcore pornography after typing in the word "Bambi". Other less obvious dangers include being recipients of flaming (i.e., receiving a barrage of abusive e-mail messages) and invitations to join services related to financial gain ("spamming").

Technological addictions

Further to this, it has been alleged that social pathologies are beginning to surface in cyberspace, i.e., technological addictions (Griffiths, 1996a; 1997). Technological addictions are operationally defined as non-chemical (behavioural) addictions which involve human-machine interaction. They can either be passive (e.g., television) or active (e.g., computer games) and usually contain inducing and reinforcing features which may contribute to the promotion of addictive tendencies (Griffiths, 1995).

This author's view is that technological addictions are a subset of behavioural addictions (Markus, 1990) and that behavioural addictions feature the core components of addiction, i.e., salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse (Griffiths, 1996a).

Salience: This occurs when the particular activity becomes the most important activity in the person's life and dominates their thinking (pre-occupations and cognitive distortions), feelings (cravings) and behaviour (the individual's socialised behaviour). For instance, even if the person is not actually engaged in the behaviour they will be thinking about the next time they will be.

Mood modification: This refers to the subjective experiences that people report as a consequence of engaging in the particular activity and can be seen as a coping strategy (i.e., they experience an arousing "buzz" or a "high" or paradoxically tranquilising feel of "escape" or "numbing").

Tolerance: This is the process whereby increasing amounts of the particular activity are required to achieve the former effects. For instance, a gambler may have to gradually have to increase the size of the bet to experience an euphoric effect which was initially obtained by a much smaller bet.

Withdrawal symptoms: These are the unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects which occur when the particular activity is discontinued or suddenly reduced, e.g. the shakes, moodiness, irritability etc.

Conflict: This refers to the conflicts between the addict and those around them (interpersonal conflict) or from within themselves (intrapersonal conflict) which are concerned with the particular activity.

Relapse: This is the tendency for repeated reversions to the particular activity to recur and for even the most extreme patterns typical of the height of the addiction to be quickly restored after many years of abstinence or control.

The popular stereotypes (see Ringlebod, 1993) surrounding various types of hacking and computing addictions (e.g. Turkle, 1995) suggest that "addicts" tend to be socially unskilled male teenagers who hang about little or no social life and/or self-confidence.

Recent surveys have confirmed that a vast majority of Internet users are in fact male. A survey by Piotrowski and Kehoe (1996) indicated that 32% of Internet users access the Internet through education providers and that 28% of Internet users are college students. Two recent studies have examined excessive Internet use among a US 10th student population. Although unrepresentative of the general public, students are considered high-risk for Internet problems because of ready access and flexible time schedules (Moore, 1995).

Pathological Internet users

Menzies-Martin and Schutteaker (1997) examined what they termed "pathological Internet use" (PIU) in 277 students. Pathological Internet users accounted for 8.1% of the total sample and were more likely to be male (12.2% males; 3.2% females) and to use technologically sophisticated channels and online games etc.

Scheerer and Bost (1997) surveyed 551 students about their Internet use and developed a checklist of ten clinical symptoms to parallel the symptoms of substance abuse and dependency.

Results indicated that 49 respondents (13%) of weekly Internet users scored three or more on the dependency checklist and that the majority of these were male (71%). Thirteen percent of the sample reported Internet use had interfered with either their academic work, professional performance or their social lives.

Previous research (Griffiths, 1995; 1996a; Griffiths & Sparrow, 1997) has shown that the Internet may be an addiction. As mentioned previously, anecdotal evidence indicates that the typical "addict" is a teenager, usually male, with little or no social life and little or no self-confidence (Turkle, 1995). However, recent work suggests there are individuals who do not fit this stereotype (Young, 1996).

Case studies

Three case studies of excessive computer use have been collected by the author. Each of the outlined cases has been given a pseudonym and a one line demographic description (i.e. age, gender, rationality, status). Information is also given about the origin and source of the case study. Each case is also followed by a brief commentary. Implications for education will be discussed in the final sections of the paper.

"Gary"

Demographic profile

16 year old British male (at school)

Source of account:
Author contacted by subject's mother having heard about author's research on a national radio programme.

Origin of text:
Written correspondence

Gary is an only child and spends many hours on his home computer averaging at least 3-4 hours a day in school term, with up to 5 or 6 hours or more a day at weekends. During the school holidays he increases even more especially because he is on his own in the house whilst his parents are at work.

Gary's mother describes him as "extremely good technically, very bright and very good at computer programming". His mother claims "he is computer mad, but not for computer games, rather for serious computing - programming etc."

His GCSE homework has been increasingly suffering because of the time he spends on his computer. When he is not working on his computer, he watches television.

Gary suffers from cyberhypersomnia, a condition which can produce severe behavioral problems to varying degrees. According to his mother, Gary has always had problems socially. He has had difficulty in making friends, difficulty in coping with teasing and minor bullying (usually of a verbal nature). His parents feel he views his computer as a "friend" and therefore tends to spend a lot of his time on the machine.

Gary also suffers from an inferiority complex and lack of confidence when dealing with his peers and as a consequence gets very depressed. This condition worsened when he got his own computer. At the same time, his general behaviour worsened. He refused to do his normal household chores when requested, was generally awkward and difficult, and provoked confrontational situations between himself and other members of the family.

He spends as much time with the computer to the exclusion of family and friends. His parents had his GP refer him to a psychiatrist for counselling and help. While Gary viewed this as a possible "quick fix" for his problems it was very slow progress and is still getting the help of the local psychological service.

His mother thinks that a lot of his lack of confidence stems from the fact that he is content to spend his time in his room to the exclusion of others in his own world. She sees the problem as "a self-induced Casio-22 situation" that he will never make friends whilst he spends time alone; but the action of spending time alone reduces his ability to deal with other people.

Gary's own view is that he has not got a problem with his computer use and that he does not spend too much time on the computer. There is no doubt that this appears to be an unusual case and that Gary's excessive time spent on the computer appears to be symptomatic of other underlying problems.
Commentary
Gary appears to fit the stereotype of a computer "addict" in that he is a male teenager who appears to have little or no social life or little or no self confidence. He appears to use the machine as an "electronic friend" - a behaviour which has been reported with other technologically products like video games (Selman, 1984) and computers (Griffiths, 1995b). He appears to display all the core components of addiction and, like many "addicts", denies he has any kind of problem. His primary motivation for excessive computer use appears to be some form of escapism into his own world where he can counteract his depression and forget about his social isolation and his medical condition.

"Jamie"

Demographic profile:
16 year old British male (st college)
Source of account: Subject appeared on television programme (about Internet addiction) with author and continued correspondence.
Origin of data: Face-to-face interview and written correspondence via Internet.

Jamie is an only child and lives alone with his mother. There appears to be few problems in his daily life although his mother divorced his father when he was three years old. Jamie has no physical problems although he is very overweight. Jamie spends around 70 hours a week on his computer including 40 hours on the Internet. This includes two twelve hour sessions at the weekend.

Commentary
As far as government policy is concerned, the prime minister has declared that this is "a national priority". However, Jamie claims to have "obsessed" about this topic for several years. He feels that the Internet has improved his level of knowledge and intends to enter an Internet-related field of employment. He claims that he is addicted to playing games because he feels comfortable being in this world which he is on the Internet. He claims that playing Internet games helps him become part of everyday life as a university student. He spends an average 40-50 hours a week on the Internet but has no financial problems because he accesses the Internet for free from his university. Jamie's studies have suffered considerably as he spends so much time on the Internet leaving him little time to get his degree work done.

"I have read that I wouldn't dare to do this without computers...but this time it was not playing games...I discovered the huge world of Internet and its many uses and applications.

"Panos"

Demographic profile:
20 year old Greek male (at university)
Source of account: Subject contacted author via an Internet discussion group.

Commentary
Panos has played on computer games since he was a small child. As an only child he got almost anything he wanted when he was younger, including all forms of electronic technology. He recalls that as a child he had a small computer which he used to play games on but was sold on a bigger computer for nothing else. Panos claims that at that particular time in his life, he became "addicted" to the games he used to play. He played the games to the neglect of everything else. He always believed that people can become addicted to computers as well and that the escapism he felt as a young boy is now being recreated via his use of the Internet - particularly through the playing of fantasy role playing games (like Drangons and Dragons type games) and through the use of chat rooms. As Panos says:

"I am 100% sure that you could become addicted to a computer only by playing games. I thought that it was impossible to become addicted to a computer by using it for professional purposes. Many years later I came to England to study Chemistry and I never realized that I could not do without computers. But this time I was not playing games. Gradually, I discovered the huge world of Internet and its many uses and applications. I used to go to the university only to work, and now I am spending hundreds of hours every day exploring Internet, in addition to sending numerous e-mails and doing stuff that I found interesting and to my opinion can run without computers. Panos feels that his whole life revolves around computers and that he feels comfortable being in this country where he is on the Internet. He claims that using the Internet excessively helps him cope with everyday life as a university student. He spends an average 40-50 hours a week on the Internet but has no financial problems because he accesses the Internet for free from his university. His studies have suffered considerably as he spends so much time on the Internet leaving him little time to get his degree work done.
balance between computer-assisted learning (including the development of IT skills), traditional learning methods (paper and pen, the three "W's" etc.), physical sporting activities, and enhancement of play and peer development.

That is not to say that computers and the Internet do not have their positive side. Computers can:
- be fun and exciting providing an innovative way of learning
- provide elements of interactivity which can stimulate learning
- provide elements of curiosity and challenge which can be crucial to learning
- equip children with state-of-the-art technology
- overcome techno-phobia (a condition well-known among many adults)
- eliminate gender imbalance in IT use (males tend to be more avid IT users)
- help in the development of transferable IT skills

However, on the down side, computers (including, Internet use) can:
- be socially isolating (perhaps leading to increased shyness)
- be socially limiting (perhaps leading to physical inactivity and obesity)
- be time-consuming, engrossing and in extreme cases addictive
- provide easy access to exploitative material (e.g. Pornography)
- provide easy access to adult activity (e.g. Internet gambling)
- provide IT skills that quickly change or become obsolete
- cause repetitive strain injury (RSI)
- produce "sloppiness" (i.e. computers can correct spelling and grammar)

As can be seen by the list of "negatives", some of the problems are not from the IT medium itself but from what children can do in that medium (e.g. access pornography). Teachers need to be aware of it's limitations and need to put safeguards in place to protect children from unwanted exposure to adult material.

There is no doubt that Internet usage among the general population (as well as those involved at all levels of education) will start to increase over the next few years and that if social pathologies do exist then this should of interest and concern to all those involved in the education system.

To iterate and expand on above, there needs to be integration between lots of different activities (not just IT) and for there to be a balance between IT and traditional education so that they can combine to form a richer experience for the children of tomorrow. IT is set to have a large impact in the lives of our children.

What teachers need to concentrate on is not what to learn but how to learn. This in itself will have an impact on both the role of teachers and the contribution that parents can make. To some extent, this all sounds somewhat idealistic.

In general, schools at present have too few IT resources and it is highly improbable that the NCFE schemes will be workable (for instance, will the £100 million investment be wiped out with software costs alone?). However, we should not let such negative thoughts and problems stop us from at least trying.

"Netiquette"

Teachers need to know the potential dangers and children need to know how they should conduct their time spent online.

A recent guide produced by the National Children's Home has provided essential "netiquette" on such matters specifically aiming it at children (table 1 - from NCH Action for Children - Children on the Internet: Opportunities and Hazards, 1998).

Table 1: Guidelines for children on how to be safe on the Internet

| 1 | Never tell anyone that you meet on the Internet your home address, telephone number or school's name unless you are given permission by a parent or carer. |
| 2 | Never send anyone your picture, credit card or bank details (or anything else). |
| 3 | Never give your password to anyone - even your best friend. |
| 4 | Never arrange to meet anyone in person that you have met on the Internet without first agreeing it with your parent or carer. |
| 5 | Never stay in a chat room or in a conference if someone says or writes something which makes you feel uncomfortable or worried. Always report it to your parent or carer. |
| 6 | Never respond to scary, suggestive or rude e-mails or postings in chat rooms or on newsgroups. |
| 7 | If you see bad language or disturbing pictures while you are online, always tell your parent or carer. |
| 8 | When you are online, always be yourself and do not pretend to be anyone or anything you are not. |
| 9 | Always remember that if someone makes you an offer which seems too good to be true then it probably is. |

Parents and teachers should read the guide to be "cyberwise" as well as streetwise. The issues raised in this article are not meant to be alarmist but have been highlighted to raise awareness amongst educators of Internet issues particularly concerning excessive computer usage.

These issues need explicit stating as there may be a "technological generation gap" between parents and children (and maybe even a gap between children and some teachers). Everyone involved with the contemporary technological issues needs to be both educated about the Internet as well as being educational with the Internet.