'Finding yourself' on Facebook: Internet can be crucial to teens' psychological development

September 27 2011

American teenagers are spending an ever-increasing amount of time online, much to the chagrin of parents who can't seem to tear their children away from Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. But despite the dangers that lurk on the web, the time that teens spend on the Internet can actually be beneficial to their healthy development, says a Tel Aviv University researcher.

Prof. Moshe Israelashvili of TAU's Jaime and Joan Constantiner School of Education, with his M.A. student Taejin Kim and colleague Dr. Gabriel Bukobza, studied 278 teens, male and female, from schools throughout Israel. They found that many teens were using the Internet as a tool for exploring questions of [personal identity](#), successfully building their own future lives using what they discover on the Web.

Prof. Israelashvili's research, which was published in the [Journal of Adolescence](#), encourages parents and educators to look at engagement with the online world as beneficial for teens. Social networking, he says, is a positive example of Internet use: "[Facebook](#) use is not in the same category as gambling or gaming." As a result, Prof. Israelashvili says, researchers should redefine the characteristics of the disorder called "[Internet addiction](#)" in adolescents.

Redefining internet addiction

The TAU researchers asked the teens to rate themselves in terms of Internet use, ego clarification, and self-understanding, and how well they related to their peer group. The researchers discovered that there was a negative correlation between Internet overuse and the teens' levels of ego development and clarity of self-perception. Prof. Israelashvili refers to it as an indication that some Internet use is destructive and isolating while some is informative and serves a socializing function.

These results show that the current understanding of adolescent Internet addiction demands redefinition. Psychiatrists now classify an "Internet addict" as a person who spends more than 38 hours on the Internet every week. But it's the quality, not the quantity that matters, argues Prof. Israelashvili. The researchers determined that many teens who participated in the study met the psychiatric standard of "Internet addiction," but were actually using the Internet as a tool to aid in their journey of self-discovery.

Prof. Israelashvili says that there are two different kinds of teenage "Internet addicts." The first group is composed of adolescents who really are addicted, misusing the Internet with things like online gaming and gambling or pornographic websites, isolating themselves from the world around them. The other group of teens can be defined as "self clarification seekers," whose use of the Internet helps them to comprehensively define their own identities and place in the world. These teens tend to use the Internet for social networking and information gathering, such as on news sites or Twitter.

Adding in family time

Parents and educators should change the conversations they have with teens about Internet use, the researchers urge. The Internet is a big part of our modern lifestyle, and both adults and children are spending more time there. As a result, what is important is how that time is used.

Students must learn to use the Internet in a healthy way — as a source of knowledge about themselves in relation to their peers around the world, recommends Prof. Israelashvili.

If parents still don't like the amount of time their teens are spending in front of the computer, they should consider becoming an information resource for their adolescent children, encouraging a healthy flow of conversation in the household itself. "Too many parents are too preoccupied," says Prof. Israelashvili. "They demand high academic achievements, and place less importance on teaching their children how to face the world." Teens won't give up the Internet, but they may spend less time online if family interactions meet some of the same needs.

By the time teens reach the age of 18 or 19, they enter a new phase of life called "emerging adulthood," in which they take the lessons of their adolescence and implement them to build a more independent life. If they have spent their teenage years worrying only about their academic performance or gaming, they won't be able to manage well during their emerging adulthood and might have difficulties in making personal decisions and relate well to the world around them, Prof. Israelashvili concludes.

Provided by Tel Aviv University