How parents' internet addiction can fuel their children's—and what to do about it

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Teenagers are often accused of being addicted to their mobile devices, but new research shows they're often just modeling their parents' behavior.

Of course, we all use digital devices for work, for fun, and for

socializing—but too much screen time can be harmful. There is such a thing as "digital addiction" and it's characterized by <u>excessive and obsessive attachment to technology</u>, associated with harm to users and people around them.

Parents are often considered part of the solution when it comes to their children's technology addiction. However, in <u>my team's recent study</u>, we found parents may be part of the problem. The study involved 168 parents of adolescents living in Qatar.

We explored whether there was any connection between the intensity of internet addiction in parents and their children. Parents answered a questionnaire about themselves and a second one about their <u>teenage children</u>.

The results showed a direct relation: the more addicted the parents, the stronger their children's compulsions were. Setting an example is a powerful form of parenting. The way parents use technology is no exception.

There are ways to tackle the problem. We <u>analyzed the first survey with parents</u>, and conducted further research involving a questionnaire with over 500 adolescents and interviews with 44 parents, 42 adolescents and 13 health and education practitioners in Qatar to understand the issue more and get best practice guidelines.

1. Focus on bonding

An effective approach to parenting digital addiction is to strengthen your connection with your child. Although it may sound simple, our findings showed that low levels of emotional engagement in both authoritarian (such as turning wi-fi off) and lenient parenting styles worsened digital addiction in their children.

Almost all (94%) of our study's parents followed either an aggressive, assertive or lenient digital parenting style. Yet most of their adolescents were either at-risk or already addicted to technology.

Internet addiction increased in adolescents who did not have a warm relationship with their parents. Instead, family cohesion and low levels of conflict were linked with low scores for internet addiction in children. Planning enjoyable activities as a family gives teenagers something rewarding to fill their time with and increase their feeling of social support.

2. Let's talk about it

Setting limits on when teenagers can use the internet, punishments for breaking rules and rewards for cutting technology use is not, by itself, a strategy that works. What was clear is the value of meaningful dialogue with your child about how to manage screen time and online activities.

You need to understand the issues underlying their addiction. Build on what you learned from listening to your child. Once you've agreed on a goal, be consistent. Target and limit setting, incentive schemes and regular review of technology did work in combination with constructive conversations.

3. Self-discipline

Our findings suggested that no matter the frequency of parental monitoring, there was no decrease in addiction levels. Change can only happen if the child is willing. Low levels of self-control are linked to internet addiction in children and adults alike.

A sense of ownership and commitment will empower teenagers to feel as

though they are in control and make them more willing to take action. Allow adolescents to decide on limits for their digital use (for instance, how much time they spend on a device and which mobile apps to delete).

4. Turn the tables

When children teach others about an issue, they are more likely to change their own behavior. Let adolescents guide you to put a plan together to address your own internet use. Work with your children to create trust and shared accountability.

For example, if you decide to create a weekly schedule to record your family's internet use, include a column for yourself. This approach shows a commitment from both sides to solve the issue. Being a role model is essential to teenagers' success.

5. Don't solely rely on parental control tools

The levels of digital addiction that we are seeing among adolescents indicate that parental software controls aren't working. A 2017 study found that 22% of its adolescent participants used the internet excessively.

The tools are limited in what they can do. They are missing important features, such as group limit setting.

The word "control" has negative connotations, especially in the mind of adolescents: something to get around rather than work with. People feel it is a threat to their freedom.

Digital addiction is associated with a wide range of negative life experiences such as lower grades in exams and job loss. But good, old-

fashioned family bonding could be the solution.

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