

The loneliness of the long distance computer geek

Social isolation and computer use in children

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On 25th December thousands of children will be happily opening gifts of computer games, CDs or videogame consoles. Parents everywhere will let out a collective sigh of relief as the kids disappear upstairs to play with the new presents while the parents settle down to the mother of all post-prandial sleeps.

But as they relax into that armchair a sneaking doubt will linger in many adults' minds about the wisdom of letting their offspring spend so much time in front of the screen.

Confusingly, the evidence for and against children's use of computer games and the Internet is complex and emotionally weighted.

Each new wave of media technology throughout the past century has induced fears and concerns in society (film in the early 1900s, radio in the 1920s, TV in the 1940s) and research into each has uncovered recurrent themes and patterns concerning each new innovation.¹

So what is the size of the problem? In 1998, a study in the USA showed that 75% of students have access to computers at school. In the home, 91% of families with high incomes had access to a home compu-

ter compared with 22% of low-income families (low-income students use the computer less because they have less internet access).²

Furthermore, low-income students use computers more often for repetitive practice, whereas higher-income students use computers more often for more sophisticated, intellectually complex applications.

In a Hong Kong study, boys who used computers to do homework, surf the net and communicate with others were more socially and physically active than boys who did not use computers at all.³

Boys who used computers to play games tended to exercise less and have less social support than their peers.

Between the sexes, girls were more likely to use them for homework and communication, boys were more likely to use them for games.

The increased level of interactivity in computer games and the communication features of the Internet have heightened both the

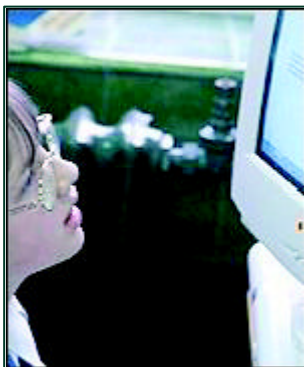
promise of greatly enriched learning

and the concerns related to increased risk of harm. Many of the harms have been well documented. Firstly, access to computers increases the total amount of time children spend in front of a television or computer screen at the expense of other activities thereby putting them at risk for obesity.⁴ Secondly, use of computers may blur a child's ability to distinguish real life from simulation. Playing violent computer games may increase aggressiveness and desensitise a child to suffering. Thirdly, teenagers' access to the Internet may

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also encourage law-breaking activities including computer virus development, bomb-making and access to pornography. A child's risk from harmful relationships developed in chat rooms has also been recognised.

On the other hand, there is limited evidence that home computer use is linked to slightly better academic performance. Cognitive research also suggests that playing



computer games can be an important building block to computer literacy. Games can improve children's reading skills as well as enhance their ability to visualise images in three-dimensional space and track multiple images simultaneously.⁴

The findings on the effect on children's social development are more mixed. Researchers and social critics are debating whether the Internet is improving or harming participation in community life and social relationships.⁵ Recent survey data suggest that increased use of the Internet may be linked to increases in loneliness and depression.⁴ Greater use of the Internet has also been associated with declines in communication with family members in the household and declines in the size of the social circle.⁵ Some research has linked heavy computer use with social withdrawal and poor self esteem.

In preadolescence, friendships have a special significance as a means of validating self-worth and buffering against loneliness and anxiety – a sense of belonging is closely related to indicators of social and psychological functioning. Observed shyness correlates significantly with perceptions of social acceptance and classmate support,

friendship quality and a named best friend. Social withdrawal in early childhood may be predictive of risk for internalising difficulties in later childhood and adolescence (social competence, overall self-worth, loneliness and depression, shy anxious behaviour).

Computer use may therefore make no difference to a child who is confident with good self worth but may allow a shy and reserved child to retreat into the world of the Internet or games and become even more isolated. Thus they may not improve their communication skills and may even lose those that they have.

The role of the GP

Concerned parents will often turn to the GP as the only source of help with this type of problem. So what is our role? Our major function, especially with teenagers, could be as neutral party or negotiator. Parents who wisely want to limit computer time may face resistance and rebellion. A savvy GP can extract small concessions on both sides thereby reinforcing his/her neutral stance while at the same time supporting the need to limit access.

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Bargaining on the type of computer use may also be helpful. E-mailing friends and surfing the net may be less harmful than just repetitively playing games. Group interaction may directly and immediately reduce the amount of loneliness that individuals feel, so limiting computer use to time when friends are around may help, as well as joining computer clubs. Allowed computer access may also be used as a pay-off for encouraging participation in sports or group activities.

Many doctors may have already faced these problems as parents and developed their own strategies for dealing with the issues. Software that denies access to undesirable websites is selling well but parents are under increasing pressure to upgrade machines to provide faster Internet access and larger disk space for bigger and better games. Negotiating with teenagers is a complex task at the best of times but the computer minefield is an example of a strategy game that requires parents to have enhanced arbitration skills and transactional dexterity. Game on!

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