

Tips for Service Providers: Child & Youth Problematic Use of Digital Technology

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

What Is Problematic Use of Digital Technology?

Problematic use of digital technology refers to any digital activity that causes significant distress and negatively impacts physical, social, or mental well-being. This type of use can lead to a range of adverse outcomes, including strained family and social relationships, academic and occupational challenges, financial difficulties, and even legal issues.

Research has identified associations between problematic digital technology use and a range of mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, personality disorders, substance use problems (most notably cannabis and alcohol), and neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Neurodivergent youth, particularly those with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and learning disorders, may be especially vulnerable to problematic technology use due to challenges with emotional regulation, impulsivity, and executive functioning. These characteristics can make it more difficult to set boundaries around screen time and may increase reliance on digital platforms for stimulation, routine, or social interaction [1,2].

Examples of Digital Technology Use

Problematic use spans a variety of digital activities, including:

- **Gaming:** excessive video gaming or mobile gaming.
- **Social networking sites:** overuse of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook.
- **Chatting/texting/sexting:** persistent engagement in digital communication.
- **Online gambling:** compulsive betting on virtual platforms.
- **Browsing internet sites:** uncontrolled web surfing.
- **Cybersex/Pornography:** compulsive viewing of explicit content.
- **Online shopping:** over-purchasing on e-commerce platforms.
- **Streaming videos:** excessive binge-watching of shows or videos.

What Approach May Be Helpful?

- Digital technology is embedded in modern lives making abstinence-based approaches less practical. Instead, a balanced and empathetic strategy is recommended.
- Understand the perceived benefits: find out what gains the client may feel they are getting from their digital technology use, such as social connection or stress relief [3].
- Adopt a non-judgmental stance: try to remain curious, and empathetic to build trust and create a collaborative space for discussing the issue.

For more information, contact

informationandcystandards@recoveryalberta.ca

Updated: June 2025

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page17564.aspx>

Tips for Service Providers: Child and Youth Problematic Use of Digital Technology | 2

- Reflect on use: consider focusing on what the person misses or wishes to regain, such as hobbies, relationships, or routines, from before their technology use became problematic.
- Rebalance priorities: help the client and their family establish new priorities incorporating daily exercise, improving self-care, spending time with loved ones, eating a family meal together, initiating and completing a task, and meeting an important deadline; these are all examples of ways in which a person can improve their functioning in major life areas.
- Although more research is needed, some formal interventions have been helpful and include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), motivational interviewing (MI), narrative therapy (NT), dialectical-behavioural (DBT), emotion-focused therapy (EFT), relational-process-experiential therapy (RPET), narrative therapy (NT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness practices, and psychotropic medications.
- Consider arranging a referral for counselling: The Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 (toll-free within Alberta). [Access services in your area](#)

What Questions Might be Helpful to My Client or Their Family?

- Are major life areas (e.g., family relationships, peer connections, school, work, finances, health-sleep/exercise/diet) out of balance due to digital technology use?
- Have you experienced increased conflict in relationships because of problematic digital technology use?
- Have you ever felt you or your family member needed to cut down on digital technology use?
- What steps have you taken in the past to support a healthier family dynamic?

Tips for Service Providers: Child and Youth Problematic Use of Digital Technology | 3

References

1. Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A large-scale test of the Goldilocks hypothesis: Quantifying the relations between digital-screen use and the mental well-being of adolescents. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204–215. doi: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797616678438>
2. Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 12, 271–283. doi: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30406005/>
3. Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2017). How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships, and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review. UNICEF Office of Research – *Innocenti Discussion Paper*. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/documents/how-does-time-children-spend-using-digital-technology-impact-their-mental-well-being>

© 2025 Recovery Alberta – Clinical Business Initiatives



This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative 4.0 International licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). You are free to copy and distribute the work (including in other media and formats) for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the work to Recovery Alberta, do not adapt the work, and abide by the other licence terms. To view a copy of this licence, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. The licence does not apply to Recovery Alberta trademarks, logos or content for Recovery Alberta is not the copyright owner.

This material is intended for general information only and is provided on an "as is", "where is" basis. Although reasonable efforts were made to confirm the accuracy of the information, Recovery Alberta does not make any representation or warranty, express, implied or statutory, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, applicability or fitness for a particular purpose of such information. This material is not a substitute for the advice of a qualified health professional. Recovery Alberta expressly disclaims all liability for the use of these materials, and for any claims, actions, demands or suits arising from such use.)

For more information, contact
informationandcyfistandards@recoveryalberta.ca

Updated: June 2025

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page17564.aspx>

