Optimising the Healthy Digital Diet:
A Guide for Parents and Families

In recent years, the phenomenon of *problematic internet use*, or 'PIU' (commonly referred to as internet or video game 'addiction') has emerged as a real concern for teachers, counsellors and parents. This resource aims to assist parents and families in addressing what can become a complex and challenging problem.

From as early an age as possible, we strongly recommend all school children follow a 'Healthy Digital Diet'. Ideally, a healthy digital diet should be encouraged from Primary School onwards, with sensible, moderate use being a key consideration for parents to aim for. It is not about 'getting rid' of computer games or social networking - which are usually enjoyable and empowering activities - but about not letting these habits become excessive and potentially interfering in other daily activities, such as social interaction, sport, hobbies and home chores. Global research indicates that between 5% and 10% of young people who use information and communication technologies (ICT) regularly develop a problem or addiction around this use.

What is 'internet addiction'?

the pervasive, long-term usage by a person of ICT and related technologies, which results in a clinically significant impact in that persons daily functioning or role/expectation, and which persists despite efforts in the client, or in the social circle, to reduce that usage.

What are the core common features of a schoolchild with possible PIU? Note that individual cases will differ slightly.

- Playing games, or going online, for longer and longer periods each day.

- Seeking to go online or to game, as soon as the child wakes up.

- Neglecting, or avoiding, daily chores or general duties, such as attending the family dinner, homework tasks, tidying bedroom, bathing and washing.

- Sleeping patterns being disturbed – e.g. going to sleep at a later time, and/or getting up in the night to go online.

- Lying about, or minimising, the amount of time spent online when asked by an adult.

- Getting angry or even aggressive when not able to go online – e.g. when computer crashes, when no WiFi is available outside, or when computer use is restricted by an adult.

- A decline in school performance — e.g. Grades or results lower than expected, or reports from teacher or school counsellor that ICT overuse is distracting them in class.

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The 'Health Triangle'
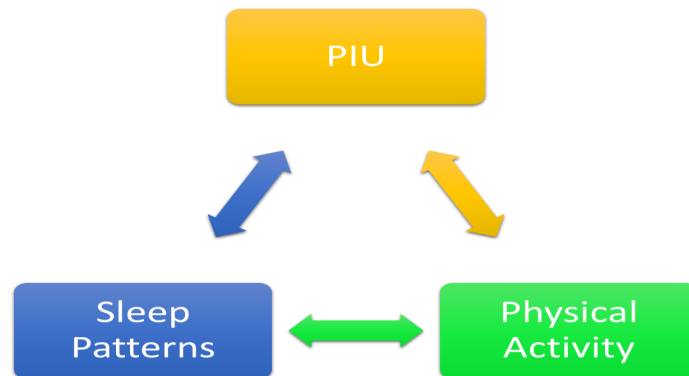
The 'health triangle' is a useful way of showing that the key domains of sleep patterns, physical activity and internet use are all interlinked. Thus, problems in one area can cause problems in another (e.g. Increasing time spent on computer gaming can cause a lack of exercise and weight gain, then sleep problems). Tackling an established case of advanced PIU will require that the domains of sleep optimisation and the encouragement of exercise be addressed — not just the PIU alone. Thus, a holistic and individualised approach is recommended to achieve positive and lasting change.

Consider using our **'IMPROVE'** tool at home, to gain for yourself a picture of how severe the PIU might be and what its characteristics are: visit our website, **www.niira.org.au**, for more details.

Some Tips for Parents

DOs

- Inform yourself of what capabilities the device or computer you are purchasing has e.g. Can it utilise Wi-Fi; can it play online multi-user games; how much memory does it have?
- If you are not 'digitally literate', book yourself into one of the computer and internet use courses that your local library or community centre will run.
- Speak with your child after any purchase about what the rules and time limits are over its usage at home and at school.
- Consider preparing an 'Internet Use Contract' with your child (see related document).
- Be consistent with any other children and adults about computer usage—children are very good at 'splitting' adults over rules and claiming 'unfairness'.
- Where possible, encourage computer use to be done in a shared social space, e.g. The living room.
- Consider having a 'recharge station' in the home where all devices, including adults' ones, are placed during family activities such as meals to promote positive interaction.

DO NOTs

- Allow unrestricted, unsupervised use of the computer, especially late at night especially at bedtime and late at night. Experts suggest all devices be turned off at least one hour before bedtime to improve sleep quality.
- Monitor your child's internet use without her/his permission, such as by finding out your child's password, or by secretly installing web-monitoring software
- Allow your child to regularly play games that are rated beyond her/his age-group.
- Assume or hope that the issue will go away – it is safer that any problem be openly discussed or addressed at an early stage, as entrenched habits can be harder to break
- Feel that there is no-one professionally qualified to assist with any problems: an increasing number of school counsellors , clinical psychologists and child psychiatrists will be able to intervene and assist.
- Hesitate to speak to your child's teacher or counsellor if concerned, and if problems persist consider a specialist referral. Intervening early is preferable to a delay in action.