

## Digital Addiction in Children: A Psychosocial Perspective

PAVANI TYAGI

Department of Psychology, Zakir Husain Delhi College  
University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

### ABSTRACT

In Contemporary tech savvy world , it is not an unusual sight to see children being hooked on various electronic gadgets and digital platforms for hours. They can be seen spending most of their time being engaged on phones, playing video games, watching cartoons, surfing internet instead of going out with peers having real play time on the ground. Digital addiction in children is on a high rise and the issue has caught a lot of attention in recent times owing to the adverse impact that have been noted due to excessive digital dependence so much so that it has started interfering in adaptive functioning of the children of all age groups. The aim of the present research paper is to define digital addiction, describe its manifestation in children and review various psychological and social factors contributing to this increasing dependence on digital media.

**Key Words :** Children, Digital Addiction, Media Dependence, Psycho-social

### INTRODUCTION

Rapid media technological advancements have proliferated in every aspect of one's life. The pervasiveness of these digital advancements cannot be underestimated. Children , adolescents, adults and elderly, all have been smitten by the digital bug in some way or the other. Children have access to multiple electronic gadgets at much younger age than ever before and most of their time is consumed in exploration and engagement with the digital media. The range of devices that children are exposed to at very young ages is vast, smartphones, gaming consoles, media toys, I pads, laptops, video games, television and internet a few to name. This wide range of options available makes it really difficult if not impossible for a child not to over indulge in their usage. Indigenous games, make believe plays, real time physical games with peers, all seem to be a thing of the past as the number of children engaging in them seems to be really less. It would not have been a matter of concern if such heavy usage of digital media was developmentally appropriate and productive in nature, but reality seems to be *vice versa*.

### Decoding digital addiction:

In this era of 'tech dependent' lives, it would be a rather unrealistic expectation to have children refrain from engaging in the vast range of media options available. But this also brings us to an important question, how do we define digital addiction? Based on prior researches done on the topic, Digital addiction could be defined as compulsive engagement with digital technology which interferes in adaptive functioning of an individual and when deprived of screen time, the individual manifests strong withdrawal symptoms. There are three important elements to this definition, first being compulsive engagement children can often be seen having a strong uncontrollable urge to resort to excessive usage of smartphones, watching television, internet surfing, gaming, etc. hence making it extremely difficult to be pulled away from screen media. Second, interference in adaptive functioning, excessive digital dependence leads to children avoiding engagement in age appropriate adaptive behaviours. Third, children who suffer from digital addiction, strongly revolt to any attempts to keep them away from the glowing screens by being restless, fidgety,

irritable and in some cases even violent making it look very similar to withdrawal symptoms that people dependent on substances showcase.

### **Manifestation of digital addiction in children:**

The more time that children spend on their devices, the more it can have an impact on their physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development. A lot of behavioural issues are reported in children engaging in excessive media engagement. From increased frequency on the gadgets, to preferring virtual activities than real time, to avoiding important tasks so as to sneak out some extra time to invest on screen, to delaying basic adaptive activities such as eating and sleeping in time and throwing tantrums and even violent outbursts when interrupted in between their preferred activities, the range of behavioural and developmental issues reported in children having heavy dependence on media. It has become a common trend that children do not eat their meals without watching their favourite cartoon show or having their favourite rhyme being played. The shapes and forms of manifestation of digital addiction in children depending upon their age can be wide ranged but this state of relying upon external media sources for carrying out basic activities is not just saddening but also alarming and requires active intervention as the implications are serious.

### **Psychological factors:**

#### ***Excessive stimulation:***

A new show, gadget, digital device, game or a toy has an element of excitement, mirth and capability to entertain and bind a child's attention for hours. Children prefer vivid stimuli which is capable of producing strong emotional responses, and are very concrete and image provoking. This happens to be one of the most captivating feature of all digital media as well, strong and well defined graphics are so realistic and stimulating that they can glue a child's interest in it for hours. Most of the video games have vivid graphics and sound effects that the child's play experience becomes stimulating in a very multisensory way. According to Dr. Kardaras (2016), if children are hyper stimulated in between the age range 2-6 by being on screen, they become dependent on extremely stimulating experiences to be able to focus their attention on to something. This acts like a vicious cycle, each time to hold on the child's attention something even more stimulating is required or else the focus and

interest is lost too easily.

#### ***Imitation:***

According to social learning theory, during early childhood children learn the most through imitation. Studies have shown that children observe and imitate behaviour of significant others in order to have an understanding of their immediate social environment, it is also their primary way of deciphering norms regarding desirable/ undesirable social behaviour. Parents are a child's primary role models and children tend to imitate their ways of being, behaviour and hence gain an understanding of appropriate/ inappropriate behaviour through observational learning. Adults, today are themselves heavily dependent upon various forms of digital media and spend enormous time on gadgets often preoccupied with virtual lives. This preoccupation on parent's part not only deprives children of the quality interactions but also portrays digital dependence as a positive behaviour and hence children imitate the same. However such heavy digital dependence is a sad state of reality as children depend upon face to face real time interactions for learning language, understanding their social environment, expression and ways of acting out.

#### ***Emotional issues:***

Children experiencing emotional difficulties may seek escape from their reality by immersing themselves in an alternate virtual experience. Children with negative life experiences such as absence of rewarding reciprocal relationships, poor social skills, poor academic performance, bullying, sexual abuse tend to experience high levels of stress and anxiety and are at a greater risk of engaging in compulsive usage of gadgets. Lack of support systems creates a void in life and to fill in this vacuum children turn to internet and various other forms of digital media. Literature on digital addiction suggests that children with unresolved emotional issues tend to be addicted to online gaming and social media as these platforms provide them a stage to act out their inner motives virtually with a virtual identity. Many children specially boys become addicted to online gaming, video games and other gaming consoles. According to Dr. Kardaras (2016), it is not merely a game but a imaginary world wherein the players invest their emotions by starting to relate with their character, bond with fellow players. It can therefore be concluded that emotional disturbance can lead a child to.

***Developmental disorders:***

Childhood or developmental disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorders can also act as contributory factors in digital addiction. Researches have suggested that children with ADHD tend to spend significant amount of time on video games, online gaming and video streaming. While focusing on tasks, being easily distracted and sitting at a place is a struggle for children with ADHD, they can be seen hyper focused while playing games. One of the reasons for this is as mentioned above, the hyper stimulation that these games provide in the form of vivid graphics and sound system tends to bind child's attention for hours. Another reason can be the sense of achievement that the child experiences while being competent at playing and winning these games. Children with ADHD often have trouble maintaining good academic records and interpersonal relationships and hence this sense of fulfilment that they gain is reinforcing. A similar pattern of addiction to digital media can be seen in children with ASD. In addition to the reasons stated above, children with ASD tend to lack age appropriate social and communication skills making it difficult for them to maintain friendships, have play peers, difficulty in playing team sports and it is here where the video games come to rescue as they are entertaining and do not demand a great level of social or pragmatic skills.

**Social factors:*****Family structure:***

In India the concept of family as an institution has changed both structurally and functionally over the past twenty years. As a result of urbanisation families have disintegrated from a joint family to nuclear family to single parent family. While nuclear family setup allows for more personalised attention to the child. Traditional joint family setup encouraged children to engage in real time play with cousins or siblings, have story-telling sessions by grandparents. This not just strengthened children's relationships with others apart from parents but also fostered their social skills and aided in cognitive development. Single parent family poses even more challenge on the parent to give child personalised attention, spend quality time with them, channelize child's energy productively. With more and more women entering the workforce, parents tend to have a fast paced, technology dependent lives as a result of which despite of wanting to spend quality time with their children they

face many challenges in doing so. To keep the child occupied parents can many a times be seen handing over the smart phones, tablets, playing child's favourite videos. As a result a children become habituated of depending on various forms of media.

***The home environment and technology ownership:***

As a result of urbanization, it is very less likely to find a house without television, cell phones, smart phones. Researches indicate that most families spend 3-4 hours on television per day. Televisions are placed in bedrooms, making screen time even greater for adults and children through co-viewing. Easy accessibility of internet and vast content available online, adds to this screen time. Another important aspect is the status symbol attached with technology ownership, more number of gadgets implicate better socio-economic status. Parents take pride in their children possessing gaming consoles, smart phones, laptops, x-box, i-pad and their ability to competently use these.

***Education and technology:***

Technological advancements have changed education system in multiple ways. While it has made learning easier and has proven to be an aid for the students in multiple ways. Using educational toys, audio visual, smart boards have proven to significantly increase student's engagement in the learning process. These aids provide multi sensory experience which helps in consolidating the learning. While it may seem that technological advancements have benefitted both teachers and students significantly, there are adverse impact of the excessive reliance on technology to promote learning. Since everything is readily available online, children resort to internet for basic tasks, heavy use of smart boards and electronic educational tools makes students habituated to these forms. Regular exposure to e-education not only makes students dependent on various forms of media but also impacts critical thinking, analytical thinking and has an impact on overall motor and cognitive development.

**Conclusion:**

Usage of digital interfaces would not have been a matter of concern if such heavy usage was developmentally appropriate and productive in nature. An insight into the roots of the causal factors can help in designing better intervention programs which works in a

multi- faceted manner that is, by working on both psychological as well as social dimensions.

## REFERENCES

- Bozoglan, B. (2019). *Multifaceted approach to digital addiction and its treatment*. Hershey, USA : IGI Global.
- Halder,D. (2017,March 29). Internet addiction in children. Retrieved from <https://www.parentcircle.com/article/internet-addiction-in-children/>
- Is your child addicted to video games? (2018,May 1). Retrieved from <https://www.additudemag.com/is-your-child-addicted-to-video-game/>
- Kardaras, N. (2016). *Glow kids, How screen addiction is hijacking our kids and how to break the trance*. New York, NY :St Martin's Press.
- Pradhan, M. (2011). Changing family structure of India. *Research journal of humanities and social sciences*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://rjhsonline.com/HTMLPaper.aspx?Journal=Research+Journal+of+Humanities+and+Social+Sciences%3BPID%3D2011-2-2-2>
- Sandy and Richards. (2015). *Passages, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Ney York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlin,R,C. Factors affecting socialization in children. Retrieved from [http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article\\_view.aspx?ArticleID=553](http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=553).
- Wartella, E., Rideout, V., Laueicella, R, A., and Connell, L, S. (2014). *Parenting in the age of digital technology, A national survey* (PDF file). Retrieved from [https://cmhd.northwestern.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ParentingAgeDigitalTechnology.REVISED.FINAL\\_.2014.pdf](https://cmhd.northwestern.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ParentingAgeDigitalTechnology.REVISED.FINAL_.2014.pdf).

\*\*\*\*\*