Background note

Session II: Challenges related to the digital addiction of children and adolescents

Introduction

Due to the global development of technology, virtual reality has become a part of daily lives of adults, children, and adolescents alike. For the latter, the Internet has become a "real digital world", which enables not only communication but also facilitates learning process ,the adoption of new norms and values and the building of one's own identity. Researchers and practitioners analysing how digital technologies affect young people have noted that cyberspace has a significant and multifaceted impact on the psychological well-being of children and youth. Its presence in a young person's life can have both a positive and a negative impact on existing mental health problems and contribute to the emergence of new ones. Digital addiction, which constitutes one of such problems, is very often linked to other disorders observed among children and adolescents, such as depression, anxiety disorders, sleep problems and ADHD.

The compulsive use of digital technologies, including the Internet and smartphones, remains a hot topic in public debates on the risks of the 21st century. The debate is made more difficult by the fact that the phenomenon has not been clearly recognised and defined yet, and that there is no scientific agreement on the nomenclature concerning this issue. At the same time, the majority of experts agree that children and adolescents use new digital technologies excessively. What is more, in the case of those young people who have difficulty with controlling their involvement in cyberspace activities, the so-called problematic internet use adversely affects activities in other, non-internet spheres of life.

Current context

Recently, several important studies have been conducted, including 'EU Kids Online 2020' and 'Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) in 2021–2022', carried out in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, whose findings indicate the need to take a closer look at digital addictions of children and adolescents on a global scale. The key insights stemming from these and other similar studies include the notable spike in children's and young people's activity in cyberspace, including a small percentage of young people (from a few to a dozen or so percent) who use the Internet (in particular social media) in a problematic manner. The examples of problematic use of digital technologies include not taking care of one's basic

needs (such as sleep), neglecting education, and experiencing the deterioration of relationships with family and friends.

The observed increase in online activity among children and adolescents can only partly be explained by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in opportunities offered by the contemporary Internet. The growing usability and attractiveness of online platforms and websites, including social media in the broadest sense of the term, which are used by young people with higher than average frequency, also plays an important role in this increase. The fact that the business model of social media platforms relies on stimulating the users' reward systems exposes children and adolescents to a range of psychological problems, including an increased risk of digital addictions.

Both the increased participation and visibility of young people in digital life and the business models employed by owners and managers of digital businesses have urged the European Union to take a number of measures to protect children and adolescents from the threats associated with the use of digital technologies and to tackle various types of addictions. The measures adopted to date include introducing relevant legislation (such as the Digital Services Act), revising the 'Better Internet for Kids' strategy and promoting the development of digital competences among children and adolescents.

The issue of digital addictions was included in the *'Digital Transformation of Education Policy'* (PCTE) adopted by the Polish government in September 2024. The PCTE lists key measures to be undertaken in order to prepare the young generation for the challenges of a digital society. The Policy highlights the need to support and promote media education, digital hygiene and cybersecurity. It also notes that the measures taken should be systemic and involve a range of actors and institutions, including schools and universities as well as research and educational institutions. At the same time, since 2021 the Polish National Health Fund has been running a pilot programme in cooperation with the Ministry of Health dedicated to technology-addicted children. As part of the programme, the selected organisations organise therapeutic activities aimed at students who use new technologies in a problematic way and their families. The recovery therapy for digital addictions comprises diagnostic and therapeutic counselling, psychological counselling and individual, family and psycho-educational psychotherapy sessions.

Challenges

A key challenge pertaining to children's and adolescents' digital addictions concerns protecting young people from developing inappropriate patterns for use of digital technologies. The ubiquitous nature of these technologies means that it is no longer enough for us to focus solely on restricting young people's access to the Internet, which - as research shows - is very often ineffective. For the time being, it is necessary to develop measures which could prevent addiction. In particular, widespread psychological education on digital hygiene and the inclusion of children and youth, together with their parents and teachers, in systemic

preventive measures are extremely important. Preventive measures against the compulsive use of digital technologies should focus not only on risk factors such as certain personality traits, the feeling of loneliness, low levels of educational competences or lack of digital hygiene, but also on the so-called protective factors. Studies reveal that factors that can protect children and adolescents from digital addiction include a safe family and peer environment and appropriate leisure activities.

Given that excessive use of digital technologies exposes children and adolescents not only to addiction but also to various threats and inappropriate content, providing young people with a safe digital environment remains a major challenge to overcome. In this context, it is particularly important to pursue a policy concerning the digital sector, whose representatives should be obliged to take care of children and adolescents' rights in the digital environment in a more responsible manner. This mainly concerns the need to realistically uphold existing age restrictions for the use of social media.

Since digital addictions are a global issue, cooperation at the EU level plays a key role in addressing the identified challenges. Within its framework, Member States can exchange experiences, share best practices and key problems encountered in the fight against digital addictions. They also have the opportunity to develop a common position on the strategy that should be followed to encourage digital companies to pay more attention to the safety and well-being of children and adolescents.

Measures aimed at protecting mental health of children and adolescents in the era of digital technologies' development, including counteracting digital addiction, constitute a key element of the Polish Presidency's priority concerning health security. The Polish Presidency aims to establish an appropriate platform for the exchange of experience and discussions on the development of common actions that the European Union can take to effectively care for the mental well-being of children and adolescents in the digital world. Poland expects to conclude the debate it coordinates with the development of relevant conclusions of the Council of the European Union.

Points for discussion

1. How to counteract digital addiction without diminishing the benefits of digital technologies for young people?
2. What can be done to ensure that age restrictions on the use of social media are respected?
3. How to encourage people to observe digital hygiene rules?
4. How to involve schools and families in digital addiction prevention measures?