Institut für Didaktik der Demokratie

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STEPin – Supporting parents to deal with the excessive online time and habits of their children: a prevention and intervention programme for all

National Monitoring Report

IO1–A2-1

Developed by:

Emphasys CENTRE

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1. General Introduction

In an ever-changing society, the impact of digital technologies and the internet is massive. During the past years, using the internet has become the new lifestyle for youth around Europe, and the age that children start using the internet is decreasing year by year whilst the time they spent online is increasing rapidly (EU Kids Online, 2020). Despite the many benefits, in terms of education and learning opportunities the internet can offer to children, it can also present some great risks and challenges such as the addictive nature of the internet. In addition to the above, parents themselves as adults face similar problems, considering that 42% of adults in the EU have insufficient digital skills (DESI, 2019).

This report is part of the European project STEPIN, and aims to provide an overview of the current scene in Cyprus in dealing with Internet Addictive Behaviour (IAB) and to present any needs and gaps in dealing with this issue.

2. State of the Art in the field of IAB – Case of Cyprus

Related Scientific Research in the field of IAB

In Cyprus, the topic of internet addiction has only received attention relatively recently and more research around this topic was conducted as part of the creation of the national strategy in dealing with this issue. In a research conducted by Efstathiou et.al (2017) with the aim to investigate the extent of this phenomenon among high school students in Cyprus, found that 9.6% of the students who took part, presented problematic internet use and highlighted the need to address the problem and to take preventative measures through more research activity on this issue. In the same year, a more comprehensive and a large scale research was conducted by the government among educators, parents and children in order to learn more about their needs, gaps and experiences in relation to internet addiction. The research was conducted firstly through online questionnaires and then using different focus groups. According to the educators and parents who took part in this research, most children use the internet for leisure, to use social media and to play games. Regarding internet addiction, 44.7% of the educators and 32% of parents stated that children are becoming more isolated due to their internet use, whilst 22% of educators and 28% of parents also stated that children spent too much time on social media. Both parents and educators who participated in this research expressed their concern regarding children's ability to deal effectively with any issue/

danger related to the internet by themselves (Cardet and Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, 2016).

A more recent research among young people (15-35) explored the relationship between young people in Cyprus with Social Networking and the Internet, and suggests that 1 in 4 young Cypriots are addicted to the internet (Alexander College, 2020). Specifically, according to the research, 8% of young people are addicted to social media, while 24% are addicted to the internet in general. However, it is important to note that according to the latest statistics presented by the CYberSafety Helpline for the year 2020, the cases of people referring for help in terms of internet or online gaming addictive behaviour is less than 1% (CYberSafety, 2021).

Policies/ Legislations dealing with IAB

Related guidelines and policies in dealing with Internet Addictive Behaviour in Cyprus can be found under the National Strategy for Safer Internet 2018-2023. The strategy has been developed following the recommendations set by the European Strategy 'Better Internet for Children' and also in collaboration with other countries in both European and international level. The implementation of the strategy involves different sectors and requires a collaboration between different organisations (public, private, academic and NGOs).

The four pillars set out by the national strategy are:

-the development critical thinking skills and competences in dealing with the internet

-development of related learning material and resources

-ensure a safe online environment

-tackle incidents of harassment or manipulation online

Along with the National Strategy, additional guidelines are provided under the European funded programme CYberSafety, which is in action since 2016 and contribute further in the fields of research, education and implementation of different initiatives.

Key Stakeholders dealing with IAB

Below you can find a list with some of the key stakeholders in Cyprus who are dealing with IAB:

Pedagogical Institute (PI) of Cyprus: The Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus is under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport and Youth, and it is responsible for the support and the professional development of all educators in Cyprus. The PI is active in the promotion of safer use of the internet through co-ordinating the CYberSafety Programme and also being part of the National Strategy implementation team.

Digital Security Authority: The Digital Security Authority (DSA) consists the public authority in relation to e-safety and the regulating body in terms of exchanging information. DSA is also a member of the CYberSafety Programme and part of the National Strategy implementation team.

Alexander College Research Centre: Alexander College Research Centre aims to promote research and innovation in various fields of studies, including topics such as internet addictive behaviour and problematic use of the internet.

Pancyprian School of Parents: The Pancyprian School of Parents (PSP) is responsible for the support and development of parents, in order to become role models for their children. PSP is also a member of the CYberSafety Programme and part of the National Strategy implementation team.

Youth Board of Cyprus: Youth Board of Cyprus is a public legal entity, which aims to offer young people multiple opportunities for active participation in the society and to ensure the welfare of all young people in Cyprus. Youth Board of Cyprus is also part of the National Strategy implementation team.

Best practices/ Training Programmes/ Initiatives

Here you can find a few good practices in the field of IAB in Cyprus:

Title	**CYberSafety Helpline/ Hotline 1480**
Location	Cyprus – National Level
Organisation/Institution	CYberSafety Partnership
Contact Data	https://www.cybersafety.cy/contact-us
Target Group/Context	-Adults/ Parents -Young People -Professionals/ Educators
Content/Learning Outcomes	N/A
Description of the Process	A helpline which operates under the programme CYberSafety, and provides guidance and support regarding issues and dangers in the internet such as cyberbullying, internet addiction, hate speech etc.
Resources needed	N/A
Evaluation of the Methodology	N/A

Title	**'Internet Safety' e-gateway**
Location	Online
Organisation/Institution	Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus
Contact Data	https://internetsafety.pi.ac.cy/
Target Group/Context	-Adults/ Parents -Young People/ Children -Professionals/ Educators
Content/Learning Outcomes	Learning Resources on how to use the internet safely.
Description of the Process	An online site providing resources, information and educational games regarding internet safety and online addiction.
Resources needed	N/A
Evaluation of the Methodology	N/A

Title	**Campaign against Internet Addiction**
Location	Online
Organisation/Institution	Technological University of Cyprus
Contact Data	https://www.behance.net/gallery/79115235/_
Target Group/Context	-Adults/ Parents -Young People/ Children
Content/Learning Outcomes	Short Videos to raise awareness about internet addicition
Description of the Process	Social Media Campaign as part of a research of the Technological University of Cyprus regarding internet addiction.
Resources needed	N/A
Evaluation of the Methodology	N/A

Title	**CYberSafety Youth Panel**
Location	Cyprus – National Level
Organisation/Institution	CYberSafety Partnership
Contact Data	https://www.cybersafety.cy/youth-panel
Target Group/Context	-Young People -Students -Children
Content/Learning Outcomes	Internet Safety and Online Addiciton
Description of the Process	A youth panel with representatives of the target group in order to provide feedback and also to act as ambassadors in transmitting the knowledge regarding a safer internet.
Resources needed	N/A
Evaluation of the Methodology	N/A

Needs and Gaps of Parents and Children and Adult Educators - Cyprus

This part of the report will provide an overview of the results collected through online questionnaires, targeting adult educators and parents/ children in order to identify their needs and gaps in terms of IAB.

The Needs of Adult Educators

A total of 15 adult educators took part in this research, with experience in the field of adult education from 8 months – 12 years. Almost all of the participants are working with parents as part of their target group in adult education, but not specifically under courses provided for parents.

In terms of their knowledge regarding IAB, the majority of the participants (60%) had some experience in the form of a seminar to learn more about IAB. However, the majority stated that they do not know enough about the topic (53%), some of them stated that they have some basic knowledge (33%) and only a 13% of them stated that they have sufficient knowledge.

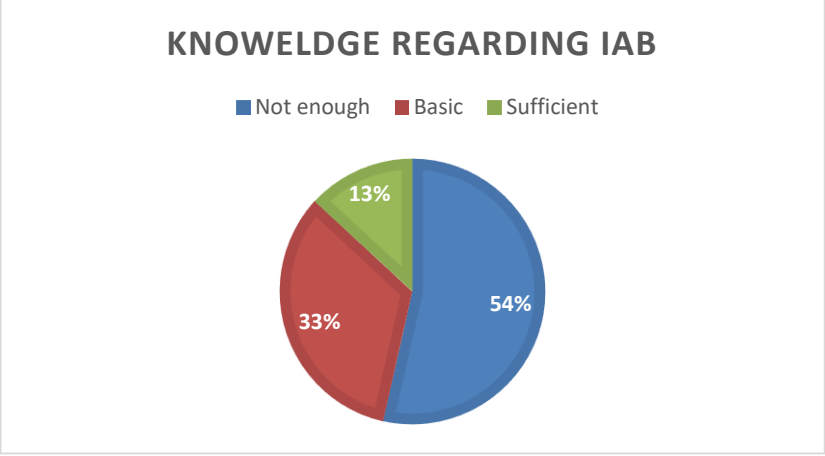

Figure 1: Adult Educators Knowledge regarding IAB

All of the participants expressed their willingness to learn more about the issue of IAB through seminars, and specifically on topics such as:

- Balance between online and offline time;
- Tools that can support in dealing with IAB;
- Ways of supporting others to deal with IAB;
- Different forms of IAB.

Moreover, adult educators raised the difficulties that according to them educators encounter when dealing with this subject. For example:

- Staying up to date with new research and trends as the topic of technology is evolving constantly;
- Lack of information provided to them – educators need more information, resources and professional development to approach such topics.
- Supporting others to set limits – especially on an activity that they enjoy doing.
- Supporting parents with less developed media literacy skills to understand terms such as problematic use and to identify such behaviours.

Lastly, in regards to whether they have some personal experience dealing with IAB – 40% of the participants stated none. 63% answered that they encounter cases of overusing the internet but not an addiction. However, 7% of the participants stated that they encountered a case of internet addiction – a student who used to play games online for 2-3 hours per day, but due to the COVID-19 lockdown this amount went up to 15 hours per day, and the parents needed to take the device away.

The Needs of Parents/ Children

To identify the needs of parents and those of their children, 15 parents took part in this research and share their experiences regarding IAB. The number of children of the participants vary from 1-5, with the most common category to be 2 children (40%). The average age of the children of the participants was 14 years old.

To start with, 67% of the parents participated in this research believe that their children are overusing and/or abusing their time online, whereas only a 33% of the participants stated that the time their children spend on the internet is normal or moderate.

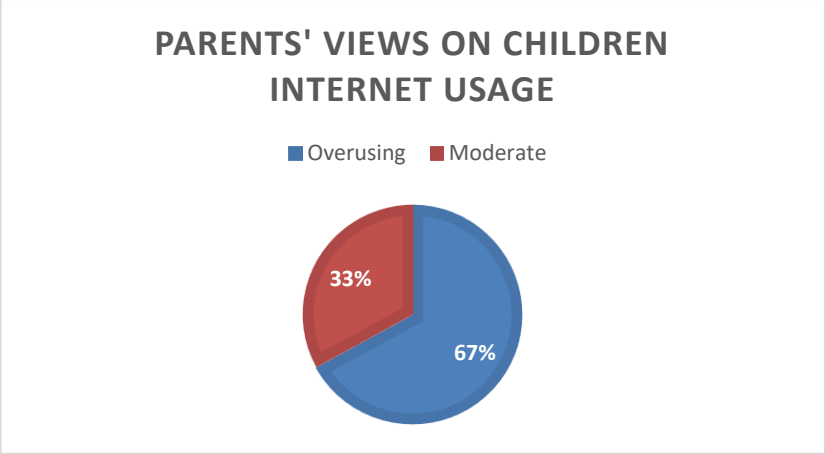

Figure 2: Parents' Views on their Children Internet Usage

Specifically, 47% of the participants stated that their children spent 3-5 hours on the internet daily; 20% less than 3 hours; 13% more than 5 hours, whereas 20% stated that they are not sure how much time their children spent on the internet. In contrary, when it comes to spending time on activities outside the internet, 40% stated that the time spent is 1-2 hours a day and 40% 3-4 hours a day. The remaining 20% did not specify a spending time but share the following comments:

'He plays while at school, but in general watches tv when at home as he gets bored with a lot of toys'

'Before the pandemic we had football clubs and afterschool activities, but the past year we have not done many activities.'

'He is not online only when he is sleeping'

Parents identified the following activities as the most common that their children spent their time online:

- Online Gaming (73%)

- Watching Videos/ Movies (67%)
- Social Media (53%)
- Reading and Studying (20%)

In regards to the devices they are using to connect to the internet, the most common devices identified are:

- Mobile Phones (73%);
- Tablets (60%);
- Gaming Consoles and Smart TVs (60%);
- Laptops (33%).

However, 53% of the participants stated that their children do not have their own devices with access to the internet, but they are using the ones belong to their parents.

Participants also have been asked whether they have set some limitations/ rules with their children to monitor their usage of the internet. 67% of the participants said that they set some limitations/ rules in terms of using the internet to their children, especially to the younger ones. Some examples mentioned are setting time limits (no more than 2 hours a day) and keeping them active through the day with outside activities. Some of the participants also mentioned that as the kids getting older setting limits to their use is becoming more challenging. Additionally, to deal with excessive internet use some parents mentioned that they had to take away the devices or to set passwords to the devices so they won't be able to access them without the supervision of an adult. In rarer occasions, some of the participants mentioned that they had to cut off the internet connection of the entire house, but this was a difficult measure for them too as they could not work, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown.

In terms of the success of those measures, the responses received vary – 46% stated that setting limitations is working, especially for younger children (under 6 years old). However, the other 46% reported that setting limitations is not an effective strategy for them. The remaining 8% has not provided any answer to this question.

Moreover, parents have been asked whether they notice any changes in the behaviour of their children when they cannot use the internet. 71% of those who answer the question stated that they have not notice any behavioural changes, however, the remaining 29% mentioned

lack of communication and socialisation and lack of concentration as the main changes they observe.

Additionally, the following difficulties/ challenges have been identified by parents in their try to deal or prevent internet abusive behaviours:

- Lack of knowledge in terms of appropriate amount of time online;
- Lack of knowledge on how to approach the topic and whether the measures I am taking are effective;
- Changes in the hobbies and routines of the children due to the expansion of technology and the restrictions imposed by the pandemic;
- Not spending enough time with children due to work and household commitments.

Finally, all the participants expressed their willingness to learn more about topics related to internet abusive behaviour. Specifically, on topics such as:

- Ways of dealing with such behaviours – approaches for different age groups
- Signs of Internet Abusive Behaviour
- Preventing Measures of IAB

Conclusion

To sum up, this report as part of the STEPIN project, provided an overview of the current situation in Cyprus regarding the issue of Internet Addictive Behaviour (IAB), presenting needs and gaps in dealing with this issue through conducting both a desk research and collecting data directly from the target groups of adult educators and parents/ children. The data collected as part of this report will support the development of the material and resources to support both parents and adult educators to be able to deal with IAB issues and support their children effectively.

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