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## **Problematic technology use – A focus on parents and the family**

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Problematic technology use is a problem that impacts not only the user, but their immediate social environment. For adolescent users, their parents are the first port of call – parents guide the adolescent, support them in their developmental stages towards maturation, and provide a safe space for identity exploration. As a consequence, when there is a problem with the adolescent engaging in excessive technology use, getting parents, and the family system (including aunts and uncles, the grandparents, and of course siblings, and others), involved is crucial for success of any external support that may be available and offered. It is often the parents, many times the mother, who may be the first person to recognise that there might be a problem with technology use. Accordingly, parents can serve as a first contact point when considering ways to deal with problematic technology use in adolescence.

In the present day and age, young parents are often avid technology users themselves, using their smartphones, smartwatches, and various technological devices in between regularly. Technology use has become the status quo, whereby it may be considered by some to be the ‘culture of the household’. Drawing the line between a behaviour that can be considered ‘normal’ and a behaviour classed as problematic is difficult, even for trained psychotherapists. However, once impairment in everyday life domains occurs and persists for extended periods of time, support may be required in order not to let the behaviours manifest into possible addictive patterns. Therefore, parents need to be supported to protect and aid their children in



promoting healthy and mindful technology use and acting as role models, whilst at the same time developing strategies as to how to spot problematic use and how to deal with it.

The Erasmus+ cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices project STEPIN aims to support parents to deal with excessive technology use and the online habits of their children. A key goal is to prevent the problems from occurring in the first place, whilst the collaborative partners are in the process of designing an intervention programme which will benefit both children and adolescents and their parents and families in terms of adolescent technology use. Parents will be provided with targeted upskilling programmes based on an evidence-based competence framework developed by the international collaboration team.

At the same time, individuation is a key developmental task for adolescents. This implies that although parents are supportive and needed as a social sounding board for adolescents, having sufficient time off from parental monitoring and interactions allows to build autonomy and self-sufficiency. The developed STEPin project will support parents in guiding their children in questions related to technology in the context of potentially challenging developmental stages by developing and developing a number of modules within the developed framework. In the context of essential knowledge and awareness, the benefits of Internet use will be addressed, including social connection, identity exploration, and the Internet functioning as a creative outlet opportunity. Risks of Internet use will be dealt with by focusing on mental health and related issues, such as anxiety, depression, stress, addiction and body image issues, as well as cybersecurity. Risk factors for problematic internet use will be targeted by looking at personality, external stressors and peer pressure. In addition to this, skills and competencies will be included, such as fostering open and healthy communication via active listening, as well as conflict resolution and anger management. Finally, coping mechanisms will be outlined, including the differentiation between functional and dysfunctional coping mechanisms (of which excessive technology use is one), and behavioural alternatives will be considered. Altogether, the STEPin project aims to support parents and families in supporting their children to foster healthy and mindful technology use and prevent problems from developing as a consequence of problematic technology use.



## References

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## PARTNERS



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