

ADHD Parenting

**TEENS WITH ADHD**

## Why Screens Mesmerize Our Teens — and How to Break the Trance

Their loot boxes and Snapstreaks are designed to hook us. For some, the draw of video games and social media is so strong it can fuel problematic, disordered behaviors. Here, understand digital addiction and how to help teens with ADHD develop healthy behaviors around screen use.



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About three-quarters of American teens have access to a smartphone, a computer, and a gaming console.<sup>1</sup> Four in ten teen boys say they spend too much time playing video games, while 36% of all teens say they spend too much time on social media.<sup>1,2</sup> It would be very or somewhat hard to give up social media, according to more than half of U.S. teens.<sup>1</sup>

From Fortnite to TikTok, video games and social media channels are carefully designed to encourage habitual use. It's certainly possible to engage in a healthy, recreational way, but technology use can and does become problematic. The factors that drive “[technology addiction](#)” are complex. That said, teens with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who struggle with self-control and self-regulation may be at elevated risk.

## How Video Games and Social Media Keep Us Hooked

### The Hook Model

The Hook Model is utilized by and social media developers to induce users to return and spend untold hours on their products. Here's how the model works:

- **Trigger:** A trigger is anything that lures someone to the product. In social media's case, it's often a notification.
- **Action:** Opening the app is the intended action after receiving a notification.
- **Variable Reward:** Whether it's viewing a comment or scrolling a feed for updates, users receive a reward immediately upon opening the app. The key here is that these rewards are variable; even if users open a social media app because of a notification, they'll likely engage with other parts of the app as they seek additional rewards. (Think of the endless video content available on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.)
- **Investment:** As users like, save, and share content, they're investing time in the app and giving it valuable information about their interests. In essence, they're teaching the app how to get them to return, and the cycle continues.

### Gamified Experiences

The Hook Model is all about building habits, and gamifying the experience is part of the process. Consider Snapstreaks, a popular feature on Snapchat that tracks the length of time users have consecutively “snapped” each other. Maintaining streaks becomes hugely important for some users, who may feel anxiety and peer pressure to keep them going.<sup>3</sup> Teens tell me that maintaining a Snapstreak with a friend often becomes more important than the quality of the interaction.

*[Take This Self-Test: Could My Child Be Addicted to Social Media?]*

## Variable Reward

The promise of a variable reward is potent and addicting, as the popularity of real-world slot machines and video-game loot boxes prove true. A staple in video games, loot boxes contain valuable and sometimes rare items for use in the game — from “skins” (the cosmetic look of an item or character) to equipment. Loot boxes are often unlocked with frequent game play, though some players purchase access with real money. Studies have found connections between loot-box engagement and problematic gaming.<sup>4</sup> Bills to regulate loot boxes, especially for minors, have been introduced in the U.S. and other countries.<sup>5 6</sup>

## More Ways to Understand Video Game Intrigue

All gamers can fall into one of three big profiles.

- **The Escaper:** Motivated by escapism, this type of player loves the immersive experience a video game’s world, characters, and storylines can offer. World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XIV, Hogwarts Legacy, and Skyrim are a few examples of video games/franchises an Escaper would enjoy. Escapers are typically impulsive and usually have low self-esteem.
- **The Achiever:** This gamer is competitive and driven to win. They find climbing the ranks more enjoyable than exploring a video game’s world. Achievers typically play competitive, fast-paced, rank-based games (from franchises and series) like League of Legends, Fortnite, Overwatch 2, Valorant, and Call of Duty. Achievers tend to be impulsive, but unlike Escapers, they usually have high self-esteem. (High-caliber competitive play is bound to do that.)
- **The Hardcore Gamer:** This gamer is motivated by both escapism and achievement. They enjoy the immersive and competitive parts of play. Gaming is also a huge aspect of their identity. This type of gamer is most at risk for problematic or disordered gaming.

## Is My Teen Addicted to Tech? What Are the Signs?

As with most things in life, what we engage with and how will impact our health and wellbeing. Just as we can have a healthy relationship with food, for example, we can have a healthy relationship with technology. As avenues for socialization, connection, learning, healthy competition, and skill-building, gaming and social media use do have redeeming qualities. (Some gamers have even made successful careers out of [professional gaming](#) and content creation.) Billions of gamers and social media users worldwide play and engage recreationally; for them, gaming and social media use don’t cause any problems.

But just as eating behaviors can become unhealthy and disordered, so too can technology use. Like other behavioral addictions, disordered gaming or social media use is characterized by persistent and excess engagement in the activity to the point of significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, and other areas of functioning. The following are some warning signs of technology addiction:

*[Read: [Is Your Teen's Social Media Use Dangerous?](#)]*

- problems stopping the activity and/or controlling behavior and engagement around it
- prioritizing engaging in the activity over other obligations, interests, and activities
- cravings for the activity
- negative emotional responses when not able to engage in the activity (e.g., irritability, anger, anxiety)
- an inability to recognize the problems caused by excess engagement in the activity, or an inability to stop despite knowing that it causes problems

Disordered gaming and/or social media use is associated with problems like [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [loneliness](#).<sup>7 8 9</sup> (Both tend to be physically isolating activities, which could fuel these issues.) Particularly in teens, cognitive distortions accompany problems with controlling behavior around tech use. A teen might repeatedly skirt screen-use limits set by their parents, thinking that it's "not a big deal." They might delay working on important school assignments in favor of playing, thinking, "I'll figure it out later." It doesn't help that online content is easily accessed and instantly reinforcing, making it easy to ignore long-term consequences, like getting a bad grade on a test. Disordered gaming and/or social media use, like other addictions, can also strain relationships and finances.

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) voted to recognize "Gaming Disorder" in its official list of conditions in 2019. Meanwhile, "Internet Gaming Disorder" is a proposed condition under the *DSM-5*. The prevalence range of gaming disorder is 1% to 4%, though estimates vary.<sup>10 11 12</sup> [Social media addiction](#) and other forms of digital addiction are not recognized by either body, though research on various forms of disordered or problematic tech and screen use is ongoing.

There are differences between disordered/problematic use, and the more serious at-risk use. With problematic gaming, for example, an individual shows some but not all the signs of a legitimate disorder. They may frequently fall behind on schoolwork, stay up late, and fight with parents because of their gaming. About 5% of players display problematic gaming, while another 5% of players meet the criteria for at-risk or engaged gaming, meaning that they show a few behaviors that, if continued, could become problematic.<sup>7</sup>

## Is There a Connection Between ADHD and Tech Addiction?

[Screen use doesn't cause ADHD](#), though researchers have uncovered certain connections between ADHD symptoms, gaming, social media, and other forms of screen use and digital tech, like the following:

- Gamers who have greater ADHD symptom severity may be at greater risk for developing video game addiction.<sup>13</sup> Researchers theorize that symptoms of ADHD make gaming attractive, and that gaming itself exacerbates or reinforces [ADHD symptoms](#).<sup>14</sup>
- Among teens, high-frequency use of multiple forms of modern digital media (texting, visiting social media platforms, streaming videos, etc.) is associated with increased odds of ADHD symptom occurrence.<sup>15</sup>
- Compared to youth without [ADHD](#), youth with ADHD spend more time on digital media and have more severe symptoms of problematic internet use.<sup>16</sup>

## Technology Addiction: How to Escape the Hook

### Seek Addiction Treatment

If your teen is showing signs of disordered tech/screen use, talk to their doctor or to a mental health professional. Help for technology addiction is available and ranges from psychotherapy and inpatient treatment clinics (like [reSTART](#), a center in Seattle, Washington, dedicated to gaming/screen use disorder) to recovery programs, support groups, and even medication. Seek professional counseling from providers who specialize in gaming and/or problematic screen use. (That is our focus at [Escapingthe.com](#), a Dallas, Texas-based professional counseling service I founded.)

### Help Your Teen Develop Healthy Screen Habits

1. **Be a role model.** Even if you don't use TikTok or play Roblox, you probably interact with screens in some way. Question your own screen use and give your child a lens into your intentions and reasoning when engaging in screen time.
2. **Approach your teen's screen use without judgment.** Don't assume that your teen's gaming or social media use is inherently bad or harmful. That will only push them away. Instead, be curious and ask open-ended questions like, "What do you like about this video game/this app/this content creator?"
3. **Talk through the meaning of healthy screen use with your teen.** Empower them to think about how to use their preferred screen activity to enhance and add more value to their life. Ask, "What do you need to be healthy and safe while gaming, using social media, and being online?"
4. **Set clear boundaries and consequences.** Understanding what your teen does while gaming or browsing through social media will help you set appropriate, informed limits that they'll be inclined to follow. You may allow your child to play a video game, for example, but not to curse at other players or give out personal information as they play.
  - **How much recreational screen time is appropriate for teens?** One to two hours of daily recreational screen time is a good baseline, but it's ultimately difficult to give a concrete recommendation because every teen is different. Think of a typical 24 hours for your child and how screen time fits in with their other activities, from sleep and school to family time.

**5. Engage in screen time with intention.** Encourage your teen to do the following:

- **Understand and manage screen use triggers.** Turn off or limit notifications for problematic apps. Get notifications for people rather than products or platforms. When the urge comes up to check an app, count to 10 before opening the app (to build intentionality and impulse control). Consider downloading [Freedom](#), an app for all devices that allows users to block certain websites, apps, and other online distractions.
- **Before and during screen use, self-monitor feelings,** like anger while gaming and negative comparisons while on social media (especially on image-based platforms). Sadness and other negative feelings could worsen after scrolling through social media, so it's best for your teen to do a mental check-in and opt for other mood-boosting activities.
- **Actively engage; don't mindlessly scroll.** Engagement, like reaching out to a friend on an app or making a post, is better for mental health than is being a passive observer online.<sup>17</sup>
- **Recognize time spent gaming or on social media.** Hard numbers can help open your child's eyes to their screen use and whether it requires adjusting.
- **Keep physically separate from tech** when possible. Keeping devices at a distance undermines the trigger-action-reward feedback loop. Instill a device-free bedtime routine for the family.

**6. Think “transferable motivations” when looking for off-screen activities.** If your teen is reluctant to take up other hobbies, bring the appeal of screen activities to real life. If your child likes [Minecraft](#) because they get to build and create, sign them up for a robotics club. If your child likes the challenge of a fast-paced and competitive video game like Valorant, an activity like rock climbing could suit them. The more you learn about your child's screen use motivations, the more likely you'll find great matches in the real world.

**7. Reward time spent away from devices or apps.** Flip variable reward on its head! Apps and programs like PocketPoints and Forest gamify being away from distracting websites, apps, and even your phone altogether.

**8. Focus on maintaining a good relationship with your child.** Too many of parents' interactions with teens focus on setting limits — on screen time, video game time, time spent with friends, and other privileges. It's unrealistic to think you'll be able to control every single thing your child does; you'll drive a wedge between you and your teen by trying. For the sake of your relationship with your child, engage in some intentional ignoring here and there, and focus instead on positive interactions. Show your child that you're on their side.

**9. If your teen is exhibiting problematic gaming or social media use,** stop the specific activity for 60 to 90 days and help your child navigate the following steps:

- attend a 12-step support group, like that offered by [Internet and Technology Addicts Anonymous](#) (ITAA)
- redirect motivations (i.e., use transferable motivations to find a suitable, fun activity)
- improve connections with friends and family
- address underlying issues that could be driving problematic screen use, like depression or anxiety

- set up protective factors (i.e., understand what your child needs to be healthy and balanced across all aspects of life — from peer relationships to sleep and hygiene — and what unhealthy, disordered behaviors look like)

## Technology Addiction and ADHD: Next Steps

- [Take This Self-Test: Is My Child Showing Signs of Gaming Addiction?](#)
- [Read: “Did I Really Just Post That?!” The Social Media Guide for Teens](#)
- [Read: My Son Wants to Play Video Games for a Living](#)

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