

The dangers of the Internet for teenagers, and the role of parents.

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We live in an era of fast information. Long gone are the days of exchanging information via the pen, letters or faxes. Today we have the internet connecting us all with each other through the electronic media. With access to a mobile phone or computer, it is possible for you to be connected with millions of others through the World Wide Web. According to *The World Fact book* there is today more than 2.9 billion users of the Internet – that represents 40% of the world's population (World Fact book, 2014). Not only are we connected with each via the Internet, we also have the capability to send information across the globe with no hindrances at all. With our finger tips, from the comfort and privacy of our homes, we have unreserved access to worldwide information.

This free access to information naturally led to a new revolution in communication from which all levels of society can benefit. The advantages of it can benefit a country's economy and trade. Information and communication is freely available, fast and for cheap. This is a phenomenon that's not going to disappear. On the contrary, it's going to develop and expand even further. The Internet is wonderful. Today's younger generation cannot imagine their lives without the Internet. It has become an integrated part of our lives which is here to stay.

Unfortunately, this freedom and free trade of information and communication comes at a price. It will be naive to think that the Internet does not influence people's lives. It stands without a doubt that the Internet has a lasting effect on all levels of society, but especially on young people. Teenagers are highly influenced by the Internet, and the level to which it has been used in education today make teenagers more dependent on the Internet for research with assignments, homework and school projects. Even the school's schedules and other relevant information for the teenagers are available on the Internet. The PEW Research Centre published a report in 2013, which showed that the percentage of teenagers that owns a slim phone increased from 23% in 2011 to 37% by 2013. The reports also showed that the percentage of teenagers that use their phone to get access to the Internet increased from 15% in 2011 to 25% by 2013. One thing these numbers show us is that teenagers are more and more dependent on their mobile phones to get access to the Internet. It has

also been found that today 95% of all teenagers in the USA between the ages of 12-17 are connected to the Internet. Of these, 75% send texts messages every day and 81% make use of one or the other social media platform like *Facebook* or *Twitter*(Teen fact sheet, 2014).

The use of the Internet by teenagers is a growing tendency in our society which we will have to manage correctly, otherwise it will become a monster that can destroy the lives of our teenagers.

2. What are the dangers?

It will be unrealistic and irresponsible to think that the Internet comes without its challenges and dangers. The Internet has a tremendous impact on the lives of billions of people, including teenagers.

In his online column *Covenant Eyes*, Gilgerson identifies 7 dangers of the Internet(Gilgerson,2014), namely:

1.1 Pornography

In the past, a teenager could maybe come across his dad's *Playboy* or *Hustler* magazine hidden in a secret hiding place and indulge himself in the pictures of scantily clothed women. He might even discover a pornographic DVD bought secretly and look at it. Today with the free access to the Internet, the teenager has access to an unrestricted amount of pornographic material. This material range from scantily clothed figures in perfect bodies to hard-core porn with violent sexual scenes. It includes photos and images of people from all ages and shapes. This unrestricted access to pornography can influence teenagers negatively so that they develop a distorted understanding of sexuality. It can lead to a total addiction to pornography and dependency on the Internet. It influences the teenager's development and performance in school, his interpersonal development and of course his conduct with the opposite sex.

1.2 Sexting

This activity has to do with the sending or receiving of nude or partially nude photos or videos through the Internet. It's seen as innocent and safe sex. Gilgerson(2014) recons that 1 in 5 teenagers that receive these types of photos or videos pass them on again, while it was found that 20% of all teenagers have send or posted a nude or semi-nude image of themselves. This practice opens the door to many other problems for the teenager involved.

1.3 Cyber bullying

The free access to the Internet via cell phones and laptops opened the way for teenagers to bully each other electronically. When one party decides to bully another, threatening and hurtful messages are sent to that person to intimidate him or her. Through the Internet, the bully may mobilise an unrestricted number of friends and acquaintances to help bully the target person. This leads to extreme intimidation.

1.4 Thieves

Along with all of these activities, there are also those individuals who are out to prey on teenagers with the intention of robbing them or even doing them physical sexual harm. The Internet is interspersed with online thieves trying to exploit the weaknesses of Internet users by stealing information from their personal computers or mobile phones, making sexual comments or using other forms of intimidation.

1.5 Gaming

It is a well-known fact that the gaming industry has developed into a massive online business. Gone are the days where we played *Packman* at the local café for a couple of cents. Today we can play high definition 3D games in the comfort and privacy of our homes or rooms. The games range from normal chess to complicated strategic war games. There's an almost unlimited variety of options available. An unfortunate reality though is that many games contain violent as well as sexual explicit material. It is a well-known fact that teenagers today spend many hours in front of the computer. Furthermore, it is possible to play online games with anyone, anywhere in the world, even though you do not know the person on the other side of the computer. This obviously opens the door for exploitation of teenagers. A recent survey showed that 97% of teenagers in the USA between the ages of 12 and 17 play online games(Lenhart,2008).

1.6 Social networks

Social networks have become so common now days that networks like *Facebook* and *Twitter* have become household names. There is of course advantages to these networks, but it also contains the danger of teenagers sharing all their private information and activities on their social networks, which then can spread like a virus across the globe. Unfortunately, photos and videos that are detrimental for the teenager's image can find its way into the cyber world. Teenagers spend a lot of time on these networks and lose the capability to develop healthy, interpersonal relationships. Even when teenagers visit each other, it's a common site seeing

them also spending time with various contacts outside the group through their mobile phones.

1.7 You Tube

The Internet platform is the largest distributor of online videos. The tendency today is to immediately publish your personal experiences to the whole world. With *You Tube* that stores a huge amount of video material, it means that an Internet user can get unlimited access to the material. Though there are limits to the type of material that can be put on *You Tube*, undesirable material still find its way in, becoming accessible for teenagers.

2. The challenge for the pastoral counsellor

There are various challenges that face the pastoral counsellor when he has to do counselling on this subject. The single most important factor in effective counselling is the person of the counsellor himself, despite his education, training, theoretical orientation and counselling techniques (Parrott & Parrott 2005:570).

The following are elements that stand as challenges to counsellors

2.1 Is he in touch with the problem involves, does he have an understanding of the situation, is he aware of the huge amount of challenges that the Internet holds for teenagers?

2.2 The counsellor must win the trust of the teenager. The teenager must know he is in a safe environment where he can be himself and share openly about his challenges and problems.

2.3 Does the teenagers accept the authority of God's word? Does he understand what is expected of him? If the counsellor wants to help the teenager from God's Word, it is of little value if the teenager does not accept and acknowledge the authority of God's Word over his life. It is important for the counsellor to determine where the teenager stands in his relationship with God. Does God have the authority in the teenager's life?

1 Peter 5:6-11 Humble yourselves, then, under God's mighty hand, so that He will lift you up in his own good time. Leave all your worries with Him, because He cares for you. Be alert, be on the watch! Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Be firm in your faith and resist him, because you know that other believers in all the world are going through the same kind of sufferings. But after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who calls you to share his eternal glory in union with Christ, will Himself perfect you and give you firmness, strength, and a sure foundation. To Him be the power forever! Amen. (Good News Bible)

2.4 What does the word of God say about the dangers of the Internet? The counsellor will find no literal word on it in the Bible. It is therefore essential for the counsellor to identify the relevant principles and approach the teenager from there.

3. Approach and motivation

The teenager must be approached in a positive way. It is important to release hope and let the teenager know that there is hope no matter what the problem. The field of positive psychology is of great value when the teenager or any other person is counselled.

Manitim(2009) used the material of Dr Paul Alexander⁽¹⁾ from Hope International University as reference and gives the following guidelines in counselling teenagers.

3.1 Listen and reflect: The teenager must believe he is being listened to and the counsellor must make certain he understands what the teenager wants to share with him.

3.2 Do not judge: It speaks for itself that the teenager will experience it when he is not being judged.

3.3 Do not over-identify: It helps if the counsellor can share a similar experience, but he must guard against over-identifying with the teenager.

3.4 Discern between danger and drama: Determine whether the teenager's life is in danger or whether what he is sharing is merely a dramatised version of what he's experiencing.

3.5 Teenagers approach problems in black and white, therefore what he's experiencing now is for him the worst thing that could possibly happen. The counsellor must help the teenager to distinguish between the problems by maybe asking, "Is it really that bad" or "Do you think it will always be this bad"

1. Paul H. Alexander, PhD, is Vice-President of academics and Professor in the college of psychology and counselling at the *Hope International University - Southern California Christian College* in the USA.

3.6 Ask the teenager what he would like to see happen. This relieves the pressure of the situation and help the teenager understand that there is hope.

3.7. Ask the teenager what he has learned from the situation. It is important for the teenager to process the situation and learn from it.

3.8 Activate the family network. The family plays an integral part in the Biblical counsellor's approach. The family structure is a safe area in which the teenager can receive help and love, if the family is healthy.

3.9 Short and frequent appointments: Teenagers have the habit of telling things over and over again. This is their way of processing the situation. However, long discussions and appointments does not

help with the process and it is therefore recommended to rather have short and frequent meetings of about 45 minutes each.

3.10 Talk about general things: It is important to find out what the general challenges are that the teenager experience daily. A way of determining that is to talk about general things before getting into discussions of deeper, more challenging issues.

3.11 Referring: The counsellor must not hesitate to refer a patient. As soon a counsellor realises that a situation is above his capabilities, he must refer the patient to a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, or another counsellor specialising in teenagers.

4. Plan for counselling and preventative steps.

In his article "*A Biblical approach to addiction*" (Williams, 2013), Dr Sam Williams suggests the following step to counsel someone that battles with addictive habits. For the purposes of this article, these elements can also be used to help someone who's experiencing habitual problems with the Internet.

4.1 Evaluate the lifestyle: Determine along with the parents and the teenagers what the teenager's daily program looks like. How much free time does the teenager have? What kind of outdoor activities does he have and what does the structure and routine of the household look like?

4.2 Get a commitment to change: The teenager and the parents must be in agreement that there is a problem and that help is needed. Once a commitment has been found to address the problem and to change, it is now possible to constructively work on a plan to make a lifestyle change.

4.3 Form a support base of prayer and accountability: The Bible is very clear about the value of mutual confession of sin. It has the result that sin cannot remain a dark, hidden secret. Mistakes are confessed and through God's grace and love, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the path of restoration is taken.

James 5:16 So then, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed. The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect.
(Good News Bible)

4.4 Prevent setbacks: It is normal that a person struggling with addictions will experience setbacks from time to time. The elements that activate these setbacks need to be identified and addressed early in the counselling process. The teenager must also have the courage to acknowledge these activating elements and pray through them with his support group.

4.5 Give education in spiritual values and discipline. The teenager needs to strengthen himself with the Word of God. It is therefore important to follow a disciplined program along with the parents

where the truths of God's word for a holy life are discussed. A study of Galatians 5 around the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit can be of value in this case.

4.6 Replace idol worship with God worship: William(2009) is of the opinion that the person receiving counselling must learn to worship God to strengthen his spirit so he may be able to resist temptations.

James 1:12-15 How blessed is the man who endures temptation! When he has passed the test, he will receive the victor's crown of life that God has promised to those who keep on loving him. When someone is tempted, he should not say, "I am being tempted by God," because God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone. Instead, each person is tempted by his own desire, being lured and trapped by it. When that desire becomes pregnant, it gives birth to sin; and when that sin grows up, it gives birth to death. (Good News Bible)

4.7 Mutual love for fellow man: Through Bible teaching the teenager must learn that God loves all people, including the teenager, and that from a Biblical standpoint he must also love his fellow man.

4.8 Learn to be honest: This point cannot be stressed enough. The teenager must be encouraged to be honest at all times. By walking in the light, the works of darkness will be defeated.

4.9 Get other fellow believers involved: The Lord Jesus loves His church very much and we are His church and His body. It was never God's purpose to leave man alone. We stand in communion with one another and need each other for mutual support and encouragement.

Galatians 6:2 Practice carrying each other's burdens. In this way you will fulfil the law of the Messiah.(Good News Bible)

The influence of the powers of darkness in the spiritual dimensions must not be underestimated. As we read in Ephesians 6 (Good News Bible), we as children of God are involved in a real spiritual battle where the forces of evil are actively busy with a strategy to drive us away from God. This truth must not be hidden when we work with our teenagers. We know that God has a plan for the life of each person, including the teenager, as we read in Jeremiah 29:11 (Good News Bible). The reality is that we read in 1 Peter 5:8 (Good News Bible) that the devil is walking around like a roaring lion looking for whoever he might devour. It is therefore essential that we protect our teenagers and help them live out God's dream for their lives.

In closing, the following preventative points can assist the parent in his walk with his teenager:

1. Open and frequent communication with your teenager, especially around his everyday experiences at school, on the sports field and in his social life.
2. The parent can install programs on the computers and electronic devices at home that will monitor the computer and block access to damaging Internet sites.

3. Set limits for access to the Internet. The parent might determine that after a certain time at night the Internet is switched off and no further access allowed.
4. Remove computers and mobile phones from the teenager's bedroom when it is time to sleep.
5. Create room in the general family area where the Internet and video games may be enjoyed. This prevents the teenager from visiting the Internet unmonitored and in secret.
6. The parents must know which websites are being visited. Go have a look at the history of computers or the relevant Internet programs to find out where the teenager has visited.
7. The parent must at all times have unlimited access to the teenagers electronic devices. This must not be a negotiated settlement.
8. Frequent family time with open conversations and free communication must take place. The family must often gather around the Word of God and pray together. The parent must maintain open communication with the teenager and remain in a healthy stand with the teenager in his home.

Our teenagers are precious jewels that we've received from God so we can bring them up in the ways of the Lord. As parents, it is our responsibility to remain pro-active in the lives of our teenagers. The Internet is part of our lives. We must teach our teenagers how to use this wonderful tool in a save manner, otherwise it might become a monster that will destroy lives.

5. Helpful texts from Scripture for counselling on this subject. These texts are all taken from the Good News Bible.

Ps 37:35-1, Prov 23:29-35, Mark 10:21-22, John 8:31-36, Acts 5:1-5, Rom 1:17, Rom 12:1-2, 1 Cor 10:13-14, Eph 4, Col 3, 1 Thes 5:22, Heb 11:6, Jam 1:14-15, 1 Pet 5:6-11, 2 Pet 2:19, 1 John 1:9, 1 John 4:4

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