



# Life online is fun if it's not overdone

A PARENT'S GUIDE  
TO MANAGING DIGITAL MEDIA

## DEAR PARENTS,

Digitalisation has dramatically changed some areas of our society in recent years. For young people in particular, the Internet has become a constant companion of daily life, usually via smartphone. They especially like using the various forms of communication in social networks and playing online games. However, the use of Internet media, combined with its constant accessibility via smartphone, can lead to problematic, addictive behaviour. It is important for this reason to introduce programmes for media education and addiction prevention aimed at promoting self-awareness in using computers and the Internet, and encouraging a change in usage behaviour where necessary. This revised brochure, published by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA - Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung) as part of the youth campaign “Ins Netz gehen” (“Going online”), addresses parents and other trusted adults involved in the lives of children between the ages of 12 and 18. It is intended to support you as parents and provide tips on how to talk with your adolescent children about using computer and media in moderation and how to put effective solutions into practice. Information on the various forms of media and the consequences of overuse is also provided to educate parents, raise their awareness of the issue and strengthen

them in their parenting role, particularly when it comes to communicating with their adolescent children. One of the two main objectives of this brochure is to eliminate any feelings of uncertainty you may have as parents in educating your children about media use. The second is to prevent addictive behaviour, such as (video) gaming or Internet-related disorders.

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Young people encounter numerous problematic issues on the Internet for which they need to be prepared. These range from scams, privacy violations and sharing private information and images, all the way to cyberbullying, identity theft and other criminal activities. Individual topics like these are explored, for instance, on the website [www.klicksafe.de](http://www.klicksafe.de), which also offers numerous tips for parents. This BZgA brochure is designed specifically for preventing gaming and Internet-related disorders in adolescents, and therefore primarily addresses addiction prevention strategies for digital media use.

Terms *printed in italics* are explained in a glossary at the back of the brochure.

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# 1 OUR LIFE WITH MEDIA

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Our world is changing rapidly. Wherever we go, we encounter people with their eyes glued to the screens of their smartphones. Both kids and adults are fascinated and thrilled by the countless opportunities for communicating, gaming and entertainment on the Internet. Media can be used in increasingly sophisticated ways, and there's no end in sight to this trend. So what's the best way to handle the situation?

General media use, especially on smartphones, is on the rise across all age groups. Fewer and fewer people can or want to imagine life without a mobile device. Most people today have access to the Internet no matter where they are, usually via smartphone. Much is said in praise of technical progress and its capacity to significantly lighten workloads, especially in the working world.

However, the influence of modern media, for example on rising stress levels, is a subject of growing concern. One of our most important skills as human beings is our ability to adapt to new situations. But what exactly do we want to achieve in this case? The **digitalisation** of daily life in our society gives us greater access to information and education, more opportunities to get involved and options for networking with other people. By the same token, however, it also means being reachable “around the clock.” People today increasingly feel compelled to respond as fast as possible to e-mails or missed calls. In other words, the pressure society puts on individuals to perform is further intensified by smartphones.

Patterns of media usage are changing constantly. There is no consensus on what is considered “normal media usage behaviour”; when media use can be called “healthy”; or even when it has exceeded all limits and can be termed a “gaming or Internet-related disorder”; “excessive media use”; or the like.

In the text below, you will come across the term “**gaming or Internet-related disorders**” whenever the excessive use of video games or Internet content, e.g. via smartphone, can be described as addictive behaviour. With regard to video games, “**gaming disorder**” (addiction to digital games) was officially given the status of a diagnosis in mid-2018.



## 1.1 PARENTS

Many adults also enjoy using media. But beware: You set an example for your children with your own media habits.

Today's extensive **digitalisation** has also changed media use among the "parent generation": According to current studies, 90 percent of the general public in Germany is online. The age group of 30 to 49 year-olds who make up the parent generation spends over three hours a day on the Internet for private use. And this figure has so far increased every year. Adults enjoy spending time on their smartphones just as much as kids do, because it's fun. And this is where the challenge comes in of wanting to teach your children how to use media in moderation, while realising that your own media use may be too excessive and uncontrolled. In other words, parents may need to examine their own personal media habits.

Parents are often unsure how to deal with the issue of media use because they lack examples from their own childhood to guide them, i.e. how they were taught to use media. Parents are responsible for raising their children to be responsible and independent in the way they use media, but have absolutely no experience with the issue from their own childhood. What is more, numerous demands are imposed on parents by their jobs and society. Raising a teenager usually is hard enough, and the subject of screen time frequently brings added stress. For this reason, it often seems easier for parents to hand over the task of media education to the schools. But it is important for media use to be addressed within the family and for parents to set a good example. Parents are important role models for their children and teenagers.



## 1.2 ADOLESCENTS

Young people today rarely distinguish anymore between online and offline activities. The idea of spending their free time without a smartphone or other media is unthinkable.

Being online is a major part of what adolescent do in their spare time. Recording and receiving voice messages, watching music videos and clips of their idols and favourite stars on video portals, watching movies or sporting events: all of these are popular ways for young people not only to have fun, but also to feel like they belong. Belonging to a community and having their place in the digital world is a central aspect of personality development for adolescents.

Digital media seem tailor-made for young people: The possibilities for self-expression, identity development, entertainment and unlimited communication with both online and real friends fulfil all of a young person's typical needs, helping them to build self-confidence and experience acceptance. Most of all, using the Internet and its many offerings gives young people a sense of achievement and social participation. Kids who don't participate in their class's group chat on **WhatsApp**

are quickly left behind and justifiably feel excluded. **Messenger** platforms like WhatsApp therefore serve as tools for social belonging: Parents and educators need to teach young people not only how to use these tools, but how to use them well. The world of media can have such a strong influence, particularly on children and teenagers in search of new experiences and challenges, that it draws them in and becomes a central aspect of their lives.

A growing body of evidence collected over several years suggests that using new media can lead to problematic developments especially in children and adolescents. During puberty, young people are in search of fun. They want to explore the meaning and purpose of their lives. They vacillate daily, often multiple times, between states of uncertainty, self-confidence, doubt and searching. New media, with their countless possibilities, are a perfect outlet, giving kids thousands of ways to while away their time, colourful and fast, and just as changeable as their own mood.

Against this backdrop, it's important to introduce early intervention measures that promote a critical attitude towards digital media and help young people not to lose, but to find themselves. For example, the BZgA's campaign for kids "Ins Netz gehen" ("Going online") helps them to start forming an opinion of their own media use. This process of shaping personal attitudes on digital media is the basis for potential behavioural changes.

## 2 INFORMATION ON MEDIA

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We all like to be entertained nonstop and find it hard to take short breaks without filling the gap with digital media. It's no different for young people.

Adolescents are massive consumers of media in their free time: Nearly all use the Internet and a smartphone at least several times a week. On the other hand, about 70 percent of kids meet with friends at least several times a week and about the same percentage play a sport at least several times a week. One-third of adolescents even do things with their family at least several times a week. But a general trend seems to be emerging, promoted in part by the constant availability of the Internet on smartphones: All of us – not only young people – are less and less willing or able to cope with boredom or moments of inactivity. Every single spare minute, be it on a bus or while taking a break from exercising, is spent on a smartphone. The urge to be entertained is tremendous and mobile entertainment appears to satisfy a high demand. Virtually all young people

aged 12 or over have a smartphone, and the devices increasingly are a symbol of the young lifestyle. A smartphone guarantees a direct connection to friends. Communication is one of the most important smartphone functions. Young people usually respond immediately to incoming messages. They view being constantly reachable not as a stress factor, but as an important means of maintaining contact with their friends. What they like most about smartphones is being able to cultivate relationships with close friends much more effectively than they would without a phone. They share their daily lives directly with their friends and therefore have strong ties with one another. Nevertheless, kids still talk about important private concerns in person.

The most popular digital content used by young people, and the risks they pose for developing a gaming or Internet-related disorder, are described in the sections below.



## 2.1 VIDEO GAMES

Video games have the greatest appeal when the players are downright “hooked” on them. Often the games are specifically designed to have this effect: Specific retention factors are incorporated to create emotional attachment between the player and the game. Unfortunately, these factors are especially compelling and fascinating for young people, and this is precisely what makes video games a risk: The addictive factors make young people increasingly unable and disinclined to maintain an interest in other things; their minds are constantly on the game. At this stage, they are at risk of ***gaming disorder***.

Video games are very diverse in terms of access: They can be played on computers and game consoles, as well as online, on tablets and mobile phones or smartphones. Games are distinguished by genre, for example strategy games, shooting games (known as “shooters”; such as ***Call of Duty***), online role-playing games (e.g. ***League of Legends***) and mixed-genre games (e.g. ***Fortnite***). More information on individual genres or content, as well as educational assessments of individual games, are provided at [www.spielbar.de](http://www.spielbar.de).

Digital games are especially popular among boys: Over 80 percent play computer, console, online, tablet or mobile games at least several times a week, compared to about 40 percent of girls. Overall, playing digital games is firmly established in the daily routines of young people; only 18 percent of girls and three percent of boys never play. However, in terms of the individual game types, mobile phone and smartphone games are a popular form of recreation among both genders: One-third of all girls and half of all boys play regularly. In other words, games played on a mobile phone or smartphone account for a significant share of the daily media activities of young people.

## RISKS

The more appealing video games are and the more emotional attachment factors they incorporate, the greater the risk of them being used excessively, i.e. over-used. Attachment factors include, for instance, infinite duration of play with no game-over point, or the importance of networking players. So-called **loot boxes** are another risk to which young players are especially vulnerable. These are virtual receptacles containing a random collection of specific objects, such as weapons or special, useful items, which can be unlocked, found or purchased within a game, and which help players progress through the game. Loot boxes are also considered a retention factor, except that in this case there is an additional risk of losing money.

Mobile phone or smartphone games are used more to while away the time. They frequently involve short rounds of play that require players to order, sort or solve things. However, if they involve building parallel worlds and experiencing virtual adventures, for example in online role-playing games, they have been observed to have a significant addictive effect. First, players become overly preoccupied with the progression of play, and second they spend too much time playing

the game. But the time factor alone is not sufficient to classify gaming as a disorder. For most beginners, their fascination with a new game world leads them to play more than they intended, especially at first. They feel “sucked in” to the world of play and are thoroughly entertained by the novelty of the game world. In most cases, however, the real demands imposed on young people, e.g. by friends and school, usually regulate the duration of play over time down to an appropriate level.

However, gaming behaviour sometimes does not self-regulate, even after six months, and players find it hard to disengage from the game. The boundary between real and virtual spaces becomes blurred. The player’s identity within the game and attachment to both the game and the gaming community become more important than their real life. Kids are highly motivated to keep on playing by the rewards they receive for their achievements or their avatar’s “cool” equipment.

Another incentive to continue playing is triggered by the player’s own brain: Gaming activates areas of the brain responsible for motivation, control and memory. With every successful move in a game,

the brain secretes dopamine, a messenger substance that makes people feel happy. It plays the main role in our reward system. A player feels better and their sense of self-worth rises. The problem is that the brain gets used to the pleasure hormone and the stimulation it triggers, and needs ever-higher doses, i.e. more gaming action, to experience the same reward and satisfaction. The gamer has to play more to experience the same level of happiness. According to current findings, online role-players constitute one of the main problem groups in terms of ***gaming disorder***. For more on ***gaming disorder***, see the section on “Getting help.”





## 2.2 SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks are the number one form of entertainment among young people. They like, follow and change their status as frequently as their daily moods (often several times a day). And the best thing about social networks is that they respond and react. Adolescents are constantly getting feedback on their actions. Many need this kind of affirmation for their self-confidence.

**Social networks** like *WhatsApp* or *Instagram* are based on an adolescent's favourite activity: communicating. What count most for young people are the entertainment and friendship aspects.

Exchanging photos and video clips is their favourite part and makes them feel closer to the **community**. Social media pose a risk when digital communication gets the upper hand, to the point where it has a negative impact on a young person's daily routine.

Online communication is the most popular Internet activity among adolescents. It facilitates making and maintaining friendships, as well as exchanging everyday information in real time. Young people include "real-life" friends in their contact lists as well as people they've met through the Internet. Together they form a commu-



nity. This type of communication enables young people to openly discuss the topics that interest them most. Social networks fulfil young people's desire for recognition from their peers by allowing them to express themselves, cast themselves in certain roles and feel understood and connected. The adolescent years are full of insecurities and anxieties. It's easier to talk openly online about problems that would be embarrassing in person. There is a great difference between communicating online and in person. The possibility of getting immediate feedback from the online community on the impression they make or their personal opinion is very appealing for young people. Nearly one-fourth of young girls frequently post videos or pictures of themselves (boys: 18%). Many put a lot of effort into making their profile as attractive as possible, because it expresses who they are or at least who they would like to be.

Communication on the Internet functions via various platforms which serve as a central hub for exchanging text and/or picture messages. Depending on the interests of young people and their friends, these communication platforms or social networks can be as much a part of their day as eating and sleeping. Within the platforms, users can make friend requests

and then follow these friends and *like* or share their posts. Most young people communicate with friends and acquaintances in their own social circles; only 18 percent frequently follow people they don't know personally. Also important to them is the possibility of following specific subjects in social networks: One-third of all young people subscribe to and follow the accounts of movie or sports stars. Their need to be seen and accepted makes young people occasionally forget or play down the potential consequences of using social networks too freely, or not carefully enough. In this case, parents should advise their children about how to create a good profile while protecting their privacy.

## RISKS

The longer and more frequently young people use *social networks*, the greater the risk of addiction. Parents need to establish clear rules of social media use to prevent their children from slipping unnoticed into addiction. Take a look at the website [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de), which provides parents with useful tips and, if necessary, counselling. Of particular note here is the apparent relationship between depression and addictive usage behaviour. These two factors mutually reinforce one another. What is not clear in this context is

whether children and young people with depression often retreat into the world of social media and then develop addictive behaviour or vice versa. But social media activate the reward system, meaning that adolescents experience a positive effect from using them, at least for a short time: One in three adolescents use social media to avoid thinking about unpleasant things. Among girls, this behaviour is observed even more frequently. Social contacts among excessive users are also anything but “normal”: Although these young people have numerous micro-contacts, they neglect friendships that are really relevant. Adolescents who believe that using social media relieves their daily stress levels and conflicts appear to have a greater tendency towards excessive use. Other correlations have been observed between the problematic use of social media, a young age and poor functionality of the family. According to recent studies, social media overuse in young people between the ages of 12 and 17 can have the following negative effects:

- About one-fourth do not get enough sleep due to social media use.
- About one in ten cannot stop using social media although they say they urgently need to.
- Also about one in ten uses social media secretly.
- One in ten adolescents is unhappy if they cannot use social media.
- Eight percent are in contact with all their friends exclusively via social media.
- Five percent of these young people no longer show interest in their hobbies or other activities because they would rather use social media.

## 2.3 VIDEO PORTALS

Video portals are very appealing and currently highly popular. Young people can get lost for hours in a wide variety of videos, available for instance on YouTube, and totally forget everything around them.

Video portals are a special category of Internet content. A **video portal** such as **YouTube** offers a wide selection of different topics and possibilities. Whether you are looking for music videos, complete movies, humorous clips, audio dramas, fitness workouts or instructions for all kinds of day-to-day things, video portals have them all. Users can search for and

create content, or they can rate videos, i.e. **like** or **dislike** them. They can follow individuals, subscribe to their favourite channels and communicate in a **community**. Video portals go far beyond the possibilities of television by supporting user-selected content anytime, anywhere. Young people most frequently opt for music videos, comedy, clips, so-called Let's Play videos (in which users can watch computer or console gamers play and comment on a game) and tutorials (instructions on how to change a bike tyre, style their hair, etc.). Young people also follow their favourite stars and



watch video clips from sporting events. All of this has an impact on their television-watching behaviour: The traditional time for watching a movie on television in Germany, 8:15 p.m., has no longer been “set in stone” ever since Internet services began offering movies, television series and documentaries on demand. The newly won freedom of using conventional television programme formats according to user preferences is fully in line with other trends in today’s society.

#### RISKS

Considering this very broad range of options, it is advisable for parents to discuss the risks of video portals with their children. Despite all the advantages and fun things that video portals offer, they also have disadvantages: These include video content harmful to adolescents and hidden product placements that trigger an urge to purchase, as well as unrealistic role models or ideals of beauty. Another risk is the intentional distribution of false information or half-truths for personal ends, so-called fake news. These videos are spread by often dubious providers who use specific search words. Users are taken to a certain video when they enter the word in the video portal’s search bar. In this way, these providers are able to distribute their videos anonymously and

globally to reach their followers and influence other people interested in the same search words for their own purposes. Young people should be aware of this possibility so they can develop a critical attitude towards subjectively biased videos.

The risks associated with video portal content are similar to those of social networks. Parents therefore should discuss the use of such content with their children in depth and agree on clear rules.

## 3 HOW TO APPROACH THE ISSUE? TALKING ABOUT MEDIA USE

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Communication within the family changes during puberty, also on the subject of media use: The result is endless “just 5 more minutes” discussions. This section provides tips on how to get talking with kids in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect.

A lot of parents are concerned and uncertain about their kids’ screen time. Helping young people to independently manage media, while protecting them from excessive Internet and video game use is not easy. It’s a major challenge for parents in the already often problematic phase of puberty. Adolescents experience tremendous physical and emotional change during puberty. They expect their parents to suddenly see and treat them as adults. Young people want to be independent of their parents and they strive for self-determination and autonomy. The various demands placed on them by school and their parents, such as getting good grades and planning for the future, frequently clash with what is most important to

young people in this phase, e.g. social recognition from peers or their first romantic relationships. Kids start venturing beyond the family and are receptive to new influences not always acceptable to parents. Having different ideas of what matters in life can lead to conflicts. During this developmental phase, parents often have difficulty “getting through to” their teenage daughters and sons. Disagreements can become more emotional and vehement than when the children were small. They result in fights and conflicts that are exhausting and strenuous for both sides. Nevertheless, this period of conflict is an important phase for young people in which their freedoms and responsibilities are re-negotiated. It helps them to form their own identity and develop their personality.

Some parents try to circumvent conflicts and battles by avoiding difficult subjects. They want to make things as easy as possible on their children and themselves. By doing so, however, they unintentionally



end up distancing themselves from their pubescent child. Routine communication becomes superficial and non-committal to avoid conflict. But the fact is that these struggles help young people get their bearings and explore their own personality. On the other end of the spectrum are parents who get into conflict with their child about every single thing, resulting in a constant stream of fights, nagging, rules and restrictions. Although it's important to disagree, it's just as important to give adolescents praise and recognition.

For parents, digital education is a major challenge because the rapid development of media means they have virtually no

learning models to fall back on. Given the wide choice of media equipment available in most households with children and adolescents, learning to use the many different types of media content "correctly" is more important than ever. One example is agreeing on when and how young people are allowed to use which apps. Young people benefit from the diverse user options, but at the same time are particularly at risk of carelessly communicating too much about themselves or surfing the Internet without really understanding its risks. You as a parent can get support with how to discuss these subjects with your children through the online counselling provided for parents at [www.](http://www.)

multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de. Trained specialists experienced with young people and parent's concerns are there to answer your questions. This website is also part of the BZgA's "Ins Netz gehen" youth campaign.

Adolescents often find it hard to go without a smartphone. And as with all new technical gadgets, they have to learn how to use the devices and their functions properly. Young people tend to be naive about disclosing personal information and easily lose their way in the jungle of possibilities offered by smartphones. This can have an impact on how they perceive their real lives and how realistically they see themselves and others. The constant presence of a smartphone also influences, for instance, a young person's ability to concentrate: Concentrating on schoolwork, for example, activates specific areas of the brain, i.e. the nerves in the cerebral cortex. A more conducive learning environment improves their mood and therefore their ability to study. The brain's reward system also plays a role in this process. The more interesting or compelling the subject, the more the brain wants of it. If their smartphone beeps or vibrates in this situation, their concentration is immediately broken and a different part of the brain, the amygdala, takes over.

It controls the emotional response to events. Under its influence, concentration becomes difficult. When a young person then tries to concentrate again, their brain needs several minutes each time before it can return to the state required for good studying. In other words, kids need longer to finish their homework.

Considering the interaction between the factors "excessive use" and "poor functionality of the family," it is evident that parents need to set specific boundaries for media use in terms of duration, location and content: With unclear rules or none at all, children are more at risk of sliding into addiction.

Mothers and fathers should serve as role models for media use and as trusted advisers to their children for any questions and problems they may have. Because one thing is certain: The Internet is neither positive or negative; what kids have to practice and learn is an awareness of the risks and usage patterns.

Young people can grow into self-confident and healthy adults if their parents are aware of their activities and contacts, and give them some latitude at the same time. But for this to happen, young people and parents have to communicate with one

another. Since that isn't always easy, the Internet site [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de) provides you with advice and relevant suggestions for structuring a discussion with kids about new media.

Even if you yourself are not interested in new media or smartphones, you should be aware that the subject is important to your child. Showing interest in their enthusiasm for new media usually leads to good discussions, because your child senses that they are being taken seriously. At [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de), a website geared to young people, the subject of "fascination" is presented in an easily comprehensible way. You could visit this site together with your child to better understand each other's position. Ask your child what is most appealing about the games or Internet sites they visit, and what their friends think of them. Have your son or daughter explain why it's so important to them to use these media. Ask your child how they would feel if they had to leave the house without a smartphone and why. In this context, you are also entitled to express your concerns. Talk about whether your fears are justified and can be resolved.

To build a trusting relationship, it is important among other things for you to take time for each other. Shared routines, such as sitting down to a meal together without television or smartphones, give family members an opportunity to talk with one another. Incidentally, this media-free time also applies to parents.

If you have no interest in or knowledge of video games or online content, tell your child how you view computers and the Internet. Don't hesitate to state your thoughts in clear terms, for example any concerns you may have about Internet use, that you are afraid of doing something wrong, or what you think about being constantly reachable.

Admit to your child that they may know more than you about computer and Internet use. That will create a positive and appreciative atmosphere and help you to exchange your views.

If you are skilled in using computers and the Internet, make your standpoint clear to your son or daughter. This will give them the opportunity to be guided by your attitudes on computer and Internet use.



For instance, if you are of the opinion that parental control software should be used to block certain areas of the Internet for kids, or that young people have to be careful about sharing personal information, then you should talk about it together. It's also important sometimes for you to "agree to disagree". You could suggest taking the self-test on the youth website [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de). See if there is a difference in the result when your child answers the questions alone first and then with you. This approach will undoubtedly give you ideas for more in-depth discussion.



### 3.1 TIPS FOR MEDIA USE

Video games and online content pose risks, depending on how they are used. Some parents would like to flatly forbid their child from using the computer. But total restrictions of this kind usually are ineffective and likely to damage any mutual trust between parents and children. Much more promising are mutual agreements on what is allowed when it comes to using a computer or new media. Such agreements are important and make it easier for your child to use new media appropriately.

The first thing to talk about is how to make sure everyone sticks to the rules and agreements. Help your adolescent child find solutions and as a parent be open to

discussion. Young people don't want to be controlled, even if it's for their own protection. Experience has shown that kids will be more willing to accept an agreement if they themselves were involved in formulating it. Take time to calmly discuss the points below. This section suggests some central issues that should be covered in making agreements with young people:

## TIP 1: WHEN IS MEDIA TIME?

One of the main issues undoubtedly is screen time. For young people ages 14 and up, it has proven successful to agree on offline times. Discuss together how media use should not affect other areas of your child's life, such as meeting friends, doing homework, eating, sleeping or spending time with the family. Time spent on the computer and on a smartphone should be considered and discussed separately. A child can, for instance, keep their smartphone outside their room after a certain time in the evening to make sure they get a good night's sleep (incidentally, a child can wake up to a conventional alarm clock; no one needs their smartphone for this purpose). An agreement should be made on smartphone downtime and everyone should stick to it. During meals and discussions, all family members should get accustomed to giving each other their undivided attention. Young people have to learn to occasionally shut off their smartphones and engage in activities not involving mobile communication.

Together with your child, define what the consequences will be if they don't stick to the agreement. Also discuss whether any exceptions are allowed, for example on the weekend. Consider together beforehand whether and when exceptions are acceptable, e.g. if the next day is a school holiday or once all other chores are done. Rules like this will help you and your child to stay on track. Be strict about adhering to the agreement.

Screen time on the computer or smartphone should not be used as a reward or punishment. Rather, suggest that all homework or other tasks have to be finished first before the computer or WiFi can be switched on (see Section 2.1).

Depending on their mobile phone contract, some young people have access either to an Internet flat rate or a specific data volume. Parents of younger teenagers in particular should also discuss definite rules for Internet use and give them ideas for things to do offline.

## TIP 2: WHAT MEDIA ARE ALLOWED?

Further agreements should be made on the content young people are permitted to use, keeping youth protection laws in mind at all times. Germany's responsible authority for reviewing and age-rating computer and video games (**USK** – Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body) requires an age rating symbol to be placed on the packaging of computer and console games (also under [www.usk.de](http://www.usk.de)). Comply with these ratings when purchasing games. Further guidance is provided by media recommendations.

Incidentally, online sites have no age recommendation. In this case, have your son or daughter show you the game or Internet site and talk with them about the content. Check online for an educational evaluation of the game (e.g. on the Internet at [www.spielbar.de](http://www.spielbar.de)).

Furthermore, parents should not let kids select apps for their smartphone on their own, as these also frequently have age restrictions as required by youth protection laws. For younger teens in social networks, for example, no safety precautions are in place and kids are exposed to greater risks. Discuss with them in clear terms that they are not old enough yet for the app and have to wait until a certain age to use it. The video portal YouTube and search engine Google have appropriate parental control settings that protect your child against content that is considered harmful for their age group.

### TIP 3: WHERE ARE MEDIA USED?

Where a computer is placed or where web-enabled devices are used has a major influence on when and how children and adolescents use the corresponding content.

For example, placing the computer in a room shared by the entire family has proven effective, especially with younger teens. Keep in mind that if a computer is in your child's room, they are likely to use it more. Ask your child whether and for how long they play on the computer when visiting friends, or where they use a computer outside the home. Show interest in what your child gets up to with friends!

An agreement should also be reached on where web-enabled mobile devices can be used. For younger teenagers with a smartphone, you can agree that the Internet can only be used in the home network and that they should keep their smartphone somewhere outside their bedroom in the evening. This way, you can accurately keep track of how much time your child spends online.

However, in addition to these agreements on media use, young people also have to learn how to use a computer, smartphone and the Internet responsibly and in awareness of the risks. If your child does not comply with the agreements made, be consistent in your reaction. You can get support from the parent counselling services provided at [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de).

#### TIP 4: TAKING TIME OFFLINE.

How families spend their free time together has an impact on how young people structure their own free time. Parents are role models in this context, and that goes for media use, too. The more varied the activities in the family, the more open your child will be to other, non-media experiences. Counteracting boredom with video games or television is certainly acceptable once in a while. But in addition to digital media, kids should have an opportunity to get adequate attention, talk with others and engage in varied activities within the family and their group of friends. This allows them to expand their horizons in many different ways. You as a parent can support your child in the creative process of structuring their free time.

Motivate yourself and your child to do something together again.

The possibilities are virtually endless. Things you can do in your free time include playing games in the evening, taking hikes in the woods, spending time outdoors, exercising together or visiting cultural events that appeal to young people. Is your child interested in role-playing games or fantasy worlds? Many adolescents enjoy role-playing games with cards or dice. Agree on a "media-free day/

evening" for the entire family: no television, no smartphone, no computer. What can you do with the time you gain? Take time out for your child and show you like spending time with them. The [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de) portal for young people has useful and fun tips from kids, for kids.









## 4 GETTING HELP

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When digital media use becomes a problem, parents have serious concerns. Don't hesitate to get competent, professional support. But at what point does a situation become a problem? You can take an initial test right here in this brochure.

The boundary between normal and harmful media use is difficult to define. Playing a video game or using Internet content intensively for a time is no cause for worry. Similarly, it is impossible to say how many hours of smartphone use a day indicate problem behaviour. Children and young people can be prone to problematic use for various reasons. One of the main signs of overuse is the function that a video game or Internet site serves for your child. Unfortunately, however, it can be difficult for parents to identify this function, so they should closely observe how their children use media. A child's personality and friends can also play a part in the development of problematic usage behaviour. Some kids use computers and smartphones intensively, but still do very well when it comes to fulfilling school and family commitments. What is decisive is

whether they exhibit health, performance, social or emotional problems related to gaming or Internet use. Parents often want concrete indicators that tell them exactly when a problem begins. But there is no checklist that applies to all young people.

Generally speaking, kids exhibit gaming disorder when they can no longer control their gaming behaviour, for example when they want to play just a little longer but lose sight of time and miss an important appointment. Using digital media takes precedence over all their other, real-life activities. What is more, kids suffering from this emotional disorder continue playing despite negative consequences, such as a dramatic drop in their grades or losing friendships that used to be important to them. When gaming leads to significant problems in one or more areas of life – family, friends, education, free time – and this pattern of behaviour lasts at least one year, parents should have a specialist check whether the child might have a gaming disorder. This kind of assistance is available for example at addiction counselling centres (see also Section 5).

Overall, however, parents should try to stay calm. Phases of excessive gaming, for example when a game is new, are unquestionably legitimate, if the rest of a child's daily activities do not suffer from the effects in the long term.

But regardless of a diagnosis, parents should be aware of the warning signs in kids, talk with them and consider getting help if they observe any behavioural changes, such as a child isolating or becoming uncommunicative.

Be alert if you have the impression that,

- your child turns to the computer/smartphone as a form of comfort or to relieve or forget about stress,
- the computer/smartphone takes precedence over the real world,
- the computer/smartphone dictates how your child spends their free time.

Health and social problems (e.g. constant exhaustion, repetitive use injuries), neglecting school work or household chores, losing social contacts, and giving up other routine recreational activities (a sport, youth group, etc.) in favour of the computer or smartphone are serious signs of problematic media usage. Discuss your fears with a specialist, for example through the parent counselling services at [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de)

## 4.1 IS YOUR CHILD AT RISK?

There is no specific point in time that marks when your child has a problem with computer or media usage or can be called “addicted”. It is difficult for parents to determine the boundaries between normal and problematic media usage.

The main risk factors for developing a computer game or Internet-related disorder are: social anxieties, shyness and self-esteem problems characterised by a young person not feeling acknowledged or appreciated by the world around them. Take time to determine if there are any changes in your child’s behaviour which you think are related to their use of a computer or smartphone. Take the self-test on the BZgA’s [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de) site together. Your child can also visit the site alone to check if their behaviour is still ok. At the same time, your child will sense how you view their usage behaviour. This activity can provide an important basis for discussing mutual agreements on media use. The next page lists basic criteria for determining if your child is using video games and Internet content appropriately, or if there is reason for concern.

If you can confirm three of the statements in the questionnaire on the next page, we recommend you talk with a specialist and get some advice, for example at a child or addiction counselling centre. Specialists in the field can effectively determine the severity of your child’s problem and what kind of help would be most effective. Even if you are uncertain of your conclusions or think your child has a very serious problem with gaming or the Internet, don’t hesitate to get support. Various options for counselling are listed at the end of this brochure, such as the parent counselling services at [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de).

**The following questions can help you determine if your child is at risk of developing a gaming or Internet-related disorder.**

1. Does your child have a strong urge to play games on the computer or use the Internet (e.g. via smartphone)?
2. Does your child have no control over the start, end or extent of computer or Internet consumption (e.g. via smartphone)?
3. Has your child repeatedly failed in attempting to limit or quit using computer games or the Internet (e.g. via smartphone)?
4. Does your child want to use the computer or Internet (e.g. via smartphone) more and more frequently or intensively, for instance to relieve stress or aggression?
5. Does your child feel emotionally and/or physically unwell if unable to use a computer or smartphone?
6. Does your child neglect important school and social commitments in favour of spending time on the computer or smartphone (friends, sports, etc.)?
7. Does your child often continue gaming or using the Internet (e.g. via smartphone) even more intensively despite negative consequences?
8. Do you think the computer or Internet (e.g. via smartphone) dominates your child's feelings, thoughts and behaviour?

You should definitely talk with your child as soon as you suspect that Internet use or gaming are having a negative impact. Even if your child thinks they don't have a problem, it's your job to address the issue. Don't be surprised if your child denies the problem at first or is unwilling to talk about it. In this case, pulling the plug on the computer or taking away their smartphone is not the answer. What is important is taking your child seriously. Find the right moment to address the subject and avoid confrontations. Tell your daughter or son that you are concerned and feel that they have crossed a boundary. Try to be as understanding as possible. This kind of concern from close relatives sometimes motivates kids with a problem to really make a change.

For example, take a self-test together with your child and determine if there are any signs of high-risk behaviour ([www.ins-netz-gehen.de/check-dich-selbst/bin-ich-suechtig](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de/check-dich-selbst/bin-ich-suechtig)). If a specific number of addiction criteria are fulfilled, a message appears that your child can get help online, for example through the online programme "Das andere Leben" ("The Other Life") ([www.ins-netz-gehen.de/das\\_andere\\_leben/home](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de/das_andere_leben/home)). You can also go to a counselling centre for support. Incidentally, only trained therapists specialised in the field can make a reliable diagnosis.

Include your child in your deliberations on how they can start prioritising "real" life again. And don't hesitate to get support.

## 5 SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND HELP

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Often the most difficult thing for parents is that they believe their child has a problem with media usage, but their child does not agree. What can you do in this situation? Who can you turn to for help? This section gives an overview of the various sources of help. Help is available for both young people with a gaming or Internet-related disorder and their parents.

### ADDICTION COUNSELLING

Addiction counselling centres provide counselling for ***gaming and Internet-related disorders*** and their early forms. They offer personal help and information free of charge, also anonymously on request. Parents can obtain information materials on addiction risks and treatment at counselling centres. Finally, counselling centres can refer you to other help programmes, including outpatient addiction treatment and self-help groups. Addiction counselling centres also support the families of adolescents at risk of, or suffering

from, addiction and help them cope with problematic situations.

### INPATIENT FACILITIES

If necessary, addiction counselling centres can submit applications for inpatient treatment tailored to the specific needs of young people. These facilities specialise in treating gaming or Internet-related disorders. This is a viable option when counselling alone is not enough to change computer or smartphone habits. A comprehensive list of addiction counselling centres and facilities specialised in treating young people with gaming or Internet-related disorders and their family members is provided at [www.ins-netz-gehen.de/lass-dir-helfen/hilfs-und-beratungsangebote-vor-ort](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de/lass-dir-helfen/hilfs-und-beratungsangebote-vor-ort).

### COUNSELLING HELPLINE (02 21) 89 20 31

The BZgA helpline for addiction prevention provides personal and anonymous guidance for people affected by addiction, with the aim of referring them to suitable local support and counselling programmes. The helpline is available Monday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Fridays to Sundays from 10 a.m.

to 6 p.m. The cost of the call is based on your telephone service provider's rates for calls to Cologne.

### FAMILY AND CHILD COUNSELLING

Often the entire family suffers when kids overuse video games or the Internet (e.g. via smartphone). In this case, it can be helpful particularly for parents to seek help from a family and child counselling centre. Counselling is free and on request anonymous. A directory of family and child counselling centres in Germany, an online parent counselling service and an online counselling service for young people are available at [www.bke.de](http://www.bke.de) (Bundeskonferenz für Erziehungsberatung e.V.).

### SELF-HELP

Self-help groups offer mutual support and the opportunity to share experiences, which can be very helpful for young people and their families. In the case of ***gaming or Internet-related disorders***, parents can communicate with others especially online at [www.onlinesucht.de](http://www.onlinesucht.de).

### SPECIALISED ADDICTION PREVENTION CENTRES

State centres for addiction prevention that provide information on all issues relating to addiction can be found in every Federal State in Germany. You can research your local state centre at [www.dhs.de](http://www.dhs.de), under "Einrichtungssuche" ("Find a centre"). Ask what programmes are available in your area on media skills and Internet or ***gaming disorder***.

## INTERNET

You can find numerous sources of information and help on various topics on the Internet.

### [www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.multiplikatoren.ins-netz-gehen.de)

Via this Internet outlet, the BZgA provides online counselling and all kinds of relevant information for parents and multipliers on the right way to use media.

### [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de)

The BZgA has been conducting the “Ins Netz gehen” (“Going online”) campaign since 2011. The Internet portal [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de) is the main hub for the campaign’s online communication activities, offering among other things a self-test and an online programme for quitting called “Das andere Leben” (“The other life”). [www.ins-netz-gehen.de](http://www.ins-netz-gehen.de) is specially geared to young people.

### [www.onlinesucht-ambulanz.de](http://www.onlinesucht-ambulanz.de)

OASIS, a treatment programme for online addiction, is a project funded by the German Ministry of Health (BMG). It provides online outpatient services for diagnosing and counselling Internet addicts and their families across Germany.

### [www.klicksafe.de](http://www.klicksafe.de)

On behalf of the European Commission, this site explains basic terms and competently and critically addresses Internet and new media use. It also points out the problematic aspects of online content.

### [www.spielbar.de](http://www.spielbar.de)

This interactive platform, backed by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, provides information on computer games and evaluations of their content.

### [www.chatten-ohne-risiko.net](http://www.chatten-ohne-risiko.net)

This site provides information on chats that are popular among young people, including risk ratings and age recommendations, and gives tips on safe use.

### [www.mobbing.seitenstark.de](http://www.mobbing.seitenstark.de)

This site explains what cyberbullying is and how to protect yourself against it. It has separate areas for parents and kids.

### [www.internet-beschwerdestelle.de](http://www.internet-beschwerdestelle.de)

Illegal content encountered on Internet sites can be reported here. This Internet reporting unit collaborates with law enforcement authorities, Internet service providers and other partners to make the Internet safer and convict offenders.



[www.jugendschutz.net](http://www.jugendschutz.net)

This website monitors the Internet to ensure that content complies with all youth protection legislation. Complaints can be submitted by telephone or via the Internet.

[www.computersuchthilfe.info](http://www.computersuchthilfe.info)

Information for multipliers, parents and young people and help for gaming and Internet-related disorders.



## FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 14

“Gut hinsehen und zuhören! Tipps für Eltern zum Thema ‘Mediennutzung in der Familie’” (Look and Listen! Tips for parents on managing media use in the family”).

It’s not always easy for families today to find their way through the often confusing media landscape of television, computers, Internet, mobile communication and radio, while critically assessing the advantages and disadvantages of media use and reacting appropriately to its potential problems in their everyday lives. This brochure therefore offers tips for families on using media sensibly. Case examples involving typical family routines demonstrate how to handle difficult media situations. Order a free copy at [www.bzga.de/infomaterialien/?sid=-1&idx=1720](http://www.bzga.de/infomaterialien/?sid=-1&idx=1720).

Anregung statt Aufregung – Neue Wege zur Förderung von Medienkompetenz in Familien (Get creative, forget frantic – New ways of promoting media competence in families)

This booklet summarises information on urgent issues relating to media education. It addresses the current discussion surrounding media and explains how educators can promote media competence in families in various areas. Order a free copy at [www.bzga.de/infomaterialien/?sid=-1&idx=2110](http://www.bzga.de/infomaterialien/?sid=-1&idx=2110).

[www.schau-hin.info](http://www.schau-hin.info)

The SCHAU HIN! (Take a closer look!) initiative of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth gives parents of 3 to 13 year-olds practical tips on media use and education, and promotes communication between parents and children.

[www.surfen-ohne-risiko.net](http://www.surfen-ohne-risiko.net)

Parents can visit this site together with their kids to create a personal homepage with age-appropriate news, online games, etc. The site is suitable for kids between the ages of about 6 and 12.

## 6 GLOSSARY

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### CALL OF DUTY

Players assume the role of soldiers in a war setting, the object being to shoot to kill their opponents. USK age-rating: 18 years and older.

### COMMUNITY

The digital community

### DIGITALISATION

Exchanging data via the virtual world of the Internet. Especially in terms of the way we communicate with one another, data exchange, e.g. via text messages, image and video files, has undergone rapid and extensive change that also impacts how we interact in our society today.

### DISLIKE

The dislike function is only available on YouTube: Users can activate the “thumbs down” symbol to indicate they don’t like a post.

#### FOLLOWERS

Users who subscribe to another person's content and "follow" them. Everything this person posts is displayed to followers on their profile page on the social network's site.

#### FORTNITE: BATTLE ROYAL

Either alone or in teams of up to four participants, 100 players gather at a location. The object of the game is to survive as long as possible. Because this mode of play in Fortnite is only available online (free), it is not subject to USK approval and therefore is accessible to anyone regardless of age.

The original Fortnite: Save the World game can be purchased in stores and has a USK rating of 12 and over. From an educational standpoint, however, this USK rating cannot be supported.

#### FUNCTION

Critical for determining if usage behaviour is a problem: For what purpose is the Internet/a video game used? To control feelings? To relax? Can these things no longer be achieved without media? If so, you should be concerned.

#### GAMING ADDICTION: VIDEO GAME ADDICTION

Gaming disorder is an addiction to digital games. The World Health Organisation (WHO) lists gaming disorder as a mental health condition in its International Classification of Diseases document (ICD-11). The following behaviours are symptomatic:

- Loss of control over the length of time spent, and intensity of engagement with video games.
- Video games increasingly take precedence in the child's life over other daily activities and hobbies.
- Children cannot stop playing video games despite the occurrence of negative consequences.

When these symptoms lead to significant problems in one or more areas of life – family, friends, school, free time – and this pattern continues for at least one year, then a specialist should determine if the child possibly suffers from gaming disorder/addiction.

**GAMING OR INTERNET-RELATED DISORDER**

Addictive behaviours caused by overusing computer games (digital games) or Internet content.

**INSTAGRAM**

Instagram is a free online service for sharing photos and videos that is available as a smartphone app. Apart from sharing image media, users can also chat with one another.

**LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**

League of Legends (often abbreviated LoL) takes place in a medieval fantasy world called Valoran. Players assume the role of a conjurer, who can select one of many characters called “champions”: USK age-rating: 12 years and older. From an educational standpoint, however, this USK rating cannot be supported.

**LIKE**

Users of social networks can show their approval with the “like” function, i.e. by clicking on a “thumbs up” button or heart symbol. Everyone in a given community can then see what an individual likes, and numerous “likes” can eventually point to especially popular pictures, comments or posts.

**LOOT BOX**

Virtual receptacles in computer games containing a random collection of specific objects, such as weapons or special, useful items, which can be unlocked, found or purchased within a video game, and which help players progress through the game.

**MESSENGER, ALSO INSTANT MESSENGER**

Via an instant messenger (e.g. WhatsApp), two or more participants can communicate by sending text messages, voice messages, photos or videos.

### SOCIAL NETWORKS

A social network is an online service used to build a community. Users can communicate and to an extent interact virtually on social networks. A social network serves as a platform for sharing opinions, experiences and information generated primarily by the users themselves.

### USK: ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE SELF-REGULATION BODY

The USK is the responsible authority in Germany for reviewing and age-rating video games and video game trailers. It does not apply to games or game add-ons offered exclusively online.

### VIDEO PORTALS

A video portal is an online service that enables users to upload videos to the Internet.

### WHATSAPP

With this instant messenger, users can share text and voice messages, pictures and videos, as well as send attachments and make telephone calls.

## PUBLICATION DETAILS

<b>Published by</b>	Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA – Federal Centre for Health Education) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Health
	All rights reserved.
<b>Project management</b>	Christine Schoelen, BZgA, Cologne
<b>Editing</b>	Dr. Anne Pauly, Cologne
<b>Design</b>	LEAD Communications, Cologne
<b>Date</b>	May 2020

This brochure is available free of charge from the BZgA. It is not intended for resale by the recipient or third parties. Order number 33215000



Bundeszentrale  
für  
gesundheitliche  
Aufklärung