

Aussie kids 'can kick excessive internet use'

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Australian children use the internet more excessively than their European counterparts, but the behaviour tails off as they grow older, researchers say.

The latest report "Excessive internet use among Australian children" builds upon the findings of the EU [Kids Online](#)'s study into excessive internet use and compares the online habits of kids in 26 countries.

It shows that Australian kids' internet use builds to a peak at age 13, when around 7 per cent are excessive users, then declines quite sharply over the next three years.

"Excessive use is more than simply the amount of time spent online," say Prof. Lelia Green and Dr Danielle Brady from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation at Edith Cowan University. "So as well as asking children how many hours they're logged on, we asked if they have experienced five [behaviours](#) that may indicate they're online too much."

The five behaviours include not eating or sleeping because of using the internet; feeling bothered when they can't get online; surfing the web when they're not really interested; spending less time than they should with family, friends or doing less schoolwork because of the time spent online and trying unsuccessfully to decrease their internet use.

The survey of 300 Australian kids aged 11-16 reveals that only two per cent of the participants say they have experienced all five behaviours,

compared to an average of one per cent across 25 [European countries](#).

"A comparison with individual nations shows four countries in Europe that match our numbers – the UK, Ireland, Portugal and Turkey. Cyprus is at the highest with five per cent," the researchers say.

"Seven per cent of 13 year old [Australians](#) ticked all five boxes, dropping to five per cent of 14 year olds and zero per cent for 16 year olds. This contrasts with the European case where it is older children who are more likely to have experienced all five behaviours.

"A possible cause for the children's 'peak' use at age 13 is their transition to high school – they might use social networks more often to make new friends and keep in touch with old ones, or do more homework online. Other data from the study indicates that Australian children are more likely to use the internet for [schoolwork](#) than many of their European counterparts.

"Most of the children who say they use the internet too much 'grow out' of this feeling as they get older, which is good news."

Parents who are worried about their children's excessive [internet use](#) should consider their child's overall behaviour, Prof. Green says.

"The EU Kids Online research reveals that children who are online too much may have a range of other problems in their lives," she says.

"What is unclear, however, is whether the child uses the internet to cope with these problems, or if logging on excessively leads to the issues.

"So if the child's excessive use is coupled with emotional and social troubles, such as being bullied or not speaking to their family, it is important to seek professional help. However, if the only problem is being online too much, it's unlikely to be a big concern."

In this case, the teenagers may not be addicted to the internet, but merely pushing the boundaries and seeking more freedom and independence, Prof. Green explains.

"Also, the study is based on what the kids feel about their own behaviour – one child might spend 40 hours online per week and not think that it's a problem, but another child who's online 20 hours a week might be told to log off by their family," the researchers say.

"The research shows that parents need to talk to their [children](#) very early on about the internet, show an interest in what they do online and help them develop basic internet safety skills, like how to block unwanted contacts. You can set boundaries like keeping the PC out of the bedroom, or establishing online/offline times, but these rules stop working once they have a mobile device.

"Simply restricting their use is unlikely to make a difference – kids will look for ways to get around parents' rules, and if they're using the internet to cope with other problems, policing their online habits only addresses the symptoms, not the cause, and may cut off an important source of support."

More information: The study "Excessive internet use among Australian children" can be found at: bit.ly/SJLtFj

Provided by ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation

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