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Examining Efficacy of "Technological Parental Monitoring” versus “Parental Vigilant Care” for Reducing Problematic Internet Usage among Adolescents Doctoral Dissertation, Tel-Aviv University, 2019, supervised by Haim Omer

This is the first study in the research literature in which an intervention to problematic internet use was assessed objectively, through data obtained from the child’s smartphone (with the consent of both child and parents). The effectiveness of our approach (Parental Vigilant Care) was compared with (a) a technological monitoring (filter), which defined hours of use and filtered out unwanted sites and (b) a control group, in which the parents underwent no specific intervention. We wanted to see whether Parental Vigilant Care had more long-lasting results, impinged differently on the parent-child relationship, and led to more internalization of the values of vigilant care, that is, helped in the development of self-care by the children. To this end 297 parents who reported problems with their children's internet use (aged 12-16) were recruited and randomly assigned to the different treatment groups.

The parents in the Vigilant Care Group received three group training sessions in the Parental Vigilant Care intervention for problematic internet use of their children (the intervention is described in my book "Parental Vigilant Care"). During the same time the group with Technological Monitoring had a filter inserted in the children's smartphone, which blocked usage in the hours the parents' stipulated and filtered out inappropriate content (e.g., pornography, gambling sites). The filter was maintained for three weeks. The control group underwent no specific intervention.

As mentioned, the child's actual use (daily hours, night hours, visits of problematic sites) was assessed by objective data from child’s smartphone provided by a dedicated software developed for this study by Rimon group. In addition, parents were given questionnaires to assess usage, conflicts with the child about the smartphone or computer, family cohesion, parental helplessness and child malfunctioning (relative to school, social life and family). Parents and children were also asked to report on the child's time online.

Results showed that: a) Parental Vigilant Care led to a sharp reduction in time online (from an average of 5.3 hours to 3.1 hours), night time online (from an average of 1.4 hours to 0.5 hours) and a clear reduction on visits to problematic sites. The Technological Monitoring group showed a sharp reduction in hours online during the duration of the filtering, but an immediate return to baseline (even a rebound) once the filters were withdrawn. In addition, Parental Vigilant Care reduced parental helplessness, conflicts between parents and child improved parent-child relationship regarding online behavior relative to Technological Monitoring or Control. Parents in Parental Vigilant Care and Technological Monitoring groups, both reported improvement in child’s functioning. The Control Group didn't show any improvements in any area. Only in the Vigilant Care group improvements were maintained at a two-month follow-up. We also assessed internalization, by measuring the gap between the child's and the parents' reports about the child's time online. We assumed that if the values of vigilant care were internalized, the gap between the child's and the parents' reports would be reduced after the intervention. That's precisely what we found. While the gaps were significantly reduced in the Parental Vigilant Care group, they stayed as they were in the Technological Blocking group. This is the first objective demonstration of the effectiveness of our model of Vigilant Care with the very widespread problem of problematic internet use.