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TEACHING ENHANCED LEARNING FOR ENGAGING
AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING

Edited by
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4. A PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL PROGRAM TO PREVENT INTERNET ABUSE IN YOUNG PEOPLE

by Antonella Gigantesco*, Debora Del Re**, Isabella Cascavilla***, Daniela Bonaldi****, Vindice Deplano*****

Introduction

Behaviours with characteristics considered clinically at risk related to Internet use have been differently called, such as Internet Addiction Disorder (Bai *et al.*, 2001) or Internet abuse (Shapira *et al.*, 2000).

Research conducted on the subject has shown that difficulties in regulating negative emotions play a fundamental role in the development of addictive behaviours (Fox *et al.*, 2007; Kun and Demetrovics, 2010), in Internet abuse (Caplan, 2010; Casale *et al.*, 2016) and in the pathological use of social networks (Hormes *et al.*, 2014).

However, there is no doubt that the Internet has such an important and relevant role in life that we cannot reasonably

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believe that we want and can live without it (Unicef, 2017). Researchers working in the psychoeducational field ask schools and educators to use such technology in ways that could be productive (Thompson, 2013). Learning digital activities such as online videos and serious games can be particularly useful, for example, to improve emotional, social, and decision-making skills (Campbell *et al.*, 2010; Albert and Steinberg, 2011).

The authors of this paper have developed a program for middle school students aimed at the prevention of Internet abuse. The program based on serious games has been developed within a multi-regional project funded by the Ministry of Health under the CCM Call (National Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) in 2018.

Here we will briefly describe the program and present the main results of its implementation that involved schools from different Regions and provinces of Italy, such as the Autonomous Province of Trento, Lombardy, Lazio, Marche and Molise.

1. *Methods*

The content of the program based on three components:

- 1) Knowledge of the signs of Internet abuse.
- 2) Recognition of signs of mental illness that require help and support.
- 3) Self-strengthening through acquiring or improving emotion regulation, coping and problem-solving, and self-discipline skills.

As for methods, the program was based on:

- informational booklet for parents;
- informational and educational handouts for teachers;

- interactive games for students (serious games) on topics related to emotional self-regulation skills.

At first, information and instructions were given to participate in the project activities to all the subjects involved: teachers, parents, and health professionals active in schools. To this purpose, a booklet, that is an information guide for parents has also been produced. Before developing interactive multimedia tools, four focus groups with students took place at school to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the interactive tools. Serious games have come up with short simulations in which students could bring into play some of their behaviours that they could act in a critical context, which could happen when they were alone or in a group.

Three serious games were developed. The first game, called Alessandro (from the protagonist's name), faces the theme of social exclusion. It aims to describe and test some communication skills and how to communicate one's beliefs and moods assertively, to stand up for oneself without offending or denying other people's reasons. The second game, Mirko, is all about bullying. It aims to face problems using problem solving, which has proven effective in tackling complicated and stressful situations and achieving challenging goals. The third game, Loredana, is about self-isolation related to Internet abuse. It aims to recognize dysfunctional personal and group behaviours, such as Internet abuse, to change behaviour. The three serious games were developed also in the kind of apps for smartphones, PCs, and tablets.

The program with the games above-mentioned was run in the second and third classes of middle school, in collaboration with teachers. To this purpose, a training course was organised for at least one teacher for each participating class of the schools involved in the project. In addition to the training course, as mentioned above, informational and educational handouts have

been given to the teachers, that is a technical-information handout on the topic of Internet addiction in childhood and adolescence and an information form on how to guide discussion with the students, while playing the serious game in groups. All program materials (serious games, downloadable information, and educational materials) have been made available on the website *I am playing or am I serious? Serious games for kids aware of the Internet*¹.

Both students and teachers evaluated the program. In particular, the self-compiled scales APEN/G and APEP/G (Caprara, 2001), which measure self-efficacy in regulating positive and negative emotions, were used to evaluate students' progress. They were administered before and after program implementation. The significance of differences in pre- and post-scores was analysed with Student's t-test for two dependent samples.

2. Results

A total of 20 classes of middle school, 12 second classes, and 8 third classes, from 10 schools in Trento, Milan, Ancona, Rome, and Campobasso participated in the program. Overall, the students involved in the program were 363 (52% male) with an average age of 12.6 years (median: 13).

Carrying out the games program required an average of 6 sessions/meetings for class with some difference between classes, so depending on the class it ranged from a minimum of 3 sessions to a maximum of 15. Each single session lasted from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 120 minutes.

¹ <https://trentinosalutedigitale.com/ragazzi-consapevoli-in-rete/>.

Access to each serious game was always via the browser; 11% of the students downloaded game apps on their smartphones too.

Table 1 shows the results of the measures used to evaluate the impact of the program concerning the emotional changes in students. Statements related to the first scale (the student must say how much he agrees with every single statement) concerned, for example, *Overcoming frustration if others do not appreciate you as you would like*, *Keeping calm in stressful situations*, *Overcoming anger at being rejected*, *Don't get discouraged after heavy criticism*.

Statements of the scale related to the expression of positive emotions concerned, for example, *Expressing one's happiness when something good happens to us*, *Rejoicing in one's successes*, and *Being happy with the achievements of a friend*.

Comparison among the averages before and after program implementation showed a significant improvement in self-efficacy related to the management of negative emotions, and this concerned especially female students and third classes.

Table 1: Self-efficacy in emotion regulation (N=363)

SCALE APEN/G E APEP/G Version for adolescents, in GV Caprara, *The evaluation of self-efficacy*, Centro Studi Erickson, Trento, 2004

	PRE	POST	Normative value (Corresponding to a medium score)
Self-efficacy in managing emotions NEGATIVE*	25.0+5.2	25.8+5.7	26-28
Males	25.9+5.1	26.5+5.9	26-27
Females*	24.0+5.1	25.0+5.4	26-28
II middle school classes	24.6+5,2	24.8+6.0	
III middle school classes**	25.6+5.0	27.1+4.8	
Self-efficacy in expressing emotions POSITIVE	29.1+4.2	29.2+4.3	28-31
Males	29.0+4.2	29.3+4.1	28-29
Females	29.3+4.3	29.2+4.6	29-31
II middle school classes	29.3+3.9	29.6+4.4	
III middle school classes	28.8+4.7	28.6+4.3	

*p<0.05; **p<0.01

Negative emotions: at baseline females had a low normative value (23-25)

3. Discussion

The program set out to use the evidence available on the psychoeducational model to solicit some psychosocial skills in

middle school students. Even in the context of Internet abuse, promoting these skills, considered protective factors, can be a prevention tool. Digital games with educational objectives have been used to obtain greater adherence from young people. The games simulated real-life situations, allowing young people to experiment with new problem-solving strategies without paying for the negative consequences that could occur in real life.

In evaluating the results, one must consider that:

- 1) scores for positive emotions were already at baseline in a range of standard values (therefore less likely to be improved) compared to negative emotions;
- 2) little time elapsed between pre- and post-program administrations.

For a better evaluation of the impact of a program, one should evaluate the post at a longer distance, after a period that also includes recall sessions. For this reason, we consider satisfactory the results obtained because the program has been able to solicit a significant change despite its brevity and simplicity of articulation. This program is part of a view to preventing the unfavourable outcomes of pre-adolescent's poor ability to manage psychosocial stress, which could lead to a reduction in the onset of mental disorders common in adolescence and Internet problems.

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