As smartphones proliferate, South Korea moves to stem digital addiction from age 3

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) -- Park Jung-in, an 11-year-old South Korean, sleeps with her Android smartphone instead of a teddy bear. When the screen beams with a morning alarm, she wakes up, picks up her glasses and scrolls through tens of unread messages from friends, shaking off drowsiness.

Throughout the day, the gadget is in her hands whether she is in school, in the restroom or in the street as she constantly types messages to her friends. Every hour or so, she taps open an application in her phone to feed her digital hamster.

"I get nervous when the battery falls below 20 percent," Park said as she fiddled with the palm-size gadget. "I find it stressful to stay out of the wireless hotspot zone for too long."

In South Korea, where the government provides counseling programs and psychological treatment for an estimated 2 million people who cannot wean themselves from playing online computer games, youngsters such as Park have previously not been considered as potential addicts.

Here and in other parts of Asia, online addiction has long been associated with hardcore gamers who play online games for days on end, isolated from their school, work or family life and blurring the line between the real and fantasy online worlds. In a shocking 2010 case in South Korea, a 3-month-old girl died after being fed just once a day by her parents who were consumed with marathon online game sessions.

Park does not play computer games and in class, she confidently raises her hand to answer a question. She also gets along well with her friends and likes to cook as a hobby. And yet, she set off more than eight red flags on an addiction test, enough to be considered unhealthily dependent on her smartphone. Park is not unique and the government is concerned enough to make it mandatory for children as young as 3 to be schooled in controlling their device and Internet use.

Her obsession with being online is a byproduct of being reared in one of the world's most digitally connected societies where 98 percent of households have broadband Internet and nearly two thirds of people have a smartphone. Being wired is an icon of South Korea's pride in its state-directed transformation from economic backwater to one of Asia's most advanced and wealthy nations. Always seeking an edge, the government plans to digitize all textbooks from 2015 and base all schooling around tablet computers.

But some now fret about the effects that South Korea's digital utopia is having on its

children, part of the first generation to play online games on smartphones, tablets and other devices even before they can read and write.

New mobile devices that instantly respond to a touch of a finger seem to make children more restless than before and lack empathy, said Kim Jun-hee, a kindergarten teacher who conducted an eight-month study on Internet safety and addiction education for pre-school children.

"Babies are in a stroller with a smartphone holder. Kids sit in the grocery shopping cart watching movies on the tablet computer," she said. "I've been teaching at kindergartens for more than 10 years now but compared to the past, kids these days are unable to control their impulses."

In Suwon city south of Seoul, students in teacher Han Jeoung-hee's classroom now turn in their smartphones when they arrive at school in the morning.

"Kids forgot to eat lunch, completely absorbed with smartphones and some stayed in the classroom during a PE class," said Han who teaches sixth grade students at Chilbo elementary school. Smartphones are put in a plastic basket and returned when kids leave for home after classes.

The National Information Society Agency, or NIA, estimates 160,000 South Korean children between age 5 and 9 are addicted to the Internet either through smartphones, tablet computers or personal computers. Such children appear animated when using gadgets but distracted and nervous when they are cut off from the devices and will forgo eating or going to the toilet so they can continue playing online, according to the agency.

Across the entire population, South Korea's government estimated 2.55 million people are addicted to smartphones, using the devices for 8 hours a day or more, in its first survey of smartphone addiction released earlier this year. Smartphone addicts find it difficult to live without their handsets and their constant use disrupts work and social life, according to NIA. Most of their personal interaction is carried out on the mobile handset. Overuse of smartphones may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as turtle neck syndrome caused by having the head in a constant forward position and a pain or numbness in fingers or wrists.

Though Internet addiction is not recognized as a mental illness, there is a growing call from medical practitioners and health officials worldwide to treat it as an illness rather than a social problem.

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders lists Internet Use Disorder as meriting further study. It is unclear whether it will be recognized as a mental illness in a major revision of the standard-setting manual due out next year. But as the Internet becomes more pervasive and mobile, more societies are grappling with its downside. In Asia, countries that have experienced explosive growth in the Internet such as Taiwan, China and South Korea are most active in carrying out research into whether Internet addiction should be recognized as a mental illness, according to Lee Hae-kook, a psychiatry

professor at Catholic University of Korea, College of Medicine.

South Korea already provides taxpayer-funded counselors for those who cannot control their online gaming or other Internet use. But the emergence of the smartphone as a mainstream, must-have device even for children is changing the government's focus to proactive measures from reactive.

South Korea's government is widening efforts to prevent Web and digital addiction in school-age children and preschoolers. Starting next year, South Korean children from the age 3 to 5 will be taught to protect themselves from overusing digital gadgets and the Internet.

Nearly 90 percent children from that age group will learn at kindergartens how to control their exposure to digital devices and the danger of staying online for long hours. The Ministry of Public Administration and Security is revising laws so that teaching the danger of Internet addiction becomes mandatory from pre-school institutions to high schools.

Kim, the kindergarten teacher, said educating children against digital and web addiction should start early because smartphones are their new toys.

From next year, her program for 3-year-olds will focus on introducing them to the positive activities they can do with the computers, such listening to music. Children aged 4 and 5, will learn the dangers of overuse and how to control their desire to use computers.

Programs also include making and learning the moves for "computer exercises" and singing songs with lyrics that instruct kids to close their eyes and stretch their bodies after playing computer games. They read fairy tales where a character falls prey to Internet addiction and learn alternative games they can play without computers or the Internet.

Kim said parents have to be involved in the education. One of the pledge cards written by a 5-year-old girl reads: "I promise to play Nintendo for 30 minutes only. Daddy promises to play less cellphone games and play more with me."

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