



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship  
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's  
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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*Bezenšek, J. (2004) The role of citizenship in the prevention of behavioral addictions in high school students, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 283 - 290*

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

# **The role of citizenship in the prevention of behavioral addictions in high school students**

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## **Introduction**

Addiction is an individual's chronic avoidance of internal conflicts and limitation of reality, denoted by their intense and permanent desire and need for a drug or a specific activity in order to avoid and provide an escape from consciousness. Regardless of the kind, cause and forms, addiction can be physical and/or mental. It is characterised by compulsion, loss of control and persistence behaviour, despite understanding the negative effects of addictive behaviour. Addictions are often classified as addiction to drugs or as addiction to an activity. Typical of both kinds of addiction are similar attitudes to the means of addiction, similar concentration on the object(s) of addiction and similar experience and behaviour of the addict. Addiction to an activity may be less intense and fast in its destructive consequences than additions to drugs, but the consequences - such as limited focus on satisfying needs, lack of sociability, alienation, financial, material and social self-destruction, and in the final stages, physical collapse of the individual – are very similar.

## **Some sociological aspects of addiction to activity**

The transition from 'normal' to addictive behaviour is important in a global analysis of the forms and kinds of addiction. The process of change is experienced by the individual at the subconscious level, because it is too fast and fluent, and the activity itself conditions the process, feeding the frequency and purpose of the addictive behaviour. Addiction to an activity is not immediate: typically there is

- an introductory period (with a constructive use of the activity for personal, social and physical development, which is difficult to distinguish from normal behaviour);
- a critical period (from abuse to the development of habits, in which the individual can still control the behaviour);
- the chronic period (habits start with the transition to addiction, and eventually the addiction - repeated negative behavioural patterns - becomes independent and strong, confronting the needs of the individual's life).

The individual focuses his/her life on only the addictive activity because of their increasing attachment to the addiction. They suffer from the compulsion to repeat and increase the quantity of the addictive activity. Gross (1999, pp 29-30) stresses the criteria that determine the individual's addiction to activity as the

- purpose of the behaviour (escape from reality, change of consciousness),
- deficiency substituted for by the behaviour (concentration, consideration, attention),
- object of avoidance (stress, burn-out syndrome, a feeling of life as aimless),
- frequency of the abuse,

- situation of addictive consumption (with pleasure, fast/slowly, un(controlled), excessively, ritually),
- effects of the activity on mood (hallucinogenic, stimulatives, relaxing),
- effects on physical and mental health (loss of control, compulsion of repetition, increase of dose),
- signs of abstinence (trying refrain from the addictive activity).

Taylor (2002, p 291) stresses the role of social situation among the factors that contribute to the beginning and development of addiction to activity. This conditions the addiction with attitude. The addict's behaviour reflects the implications of a society based on prosperity and consumption, which Beck (1986, p 17-48) describes as the 'risk society'; the causes for addictions lie deep in post-modern society. The power of technical and economic progress enables the 'production of risks'. The consequences of modernisation include the risk of upsetting the balance of social development and the role of the individual. An escape into 'personal well-being' is explicable for the addict, living in a contradictory society without a convincing vision of the future. S/he will interpret their addictive behaviour as a compensation for frustration and as a source of stability in the social system. With the realisation that s/he is cannot understand technologically developed objects in the physical environment, where it is difficult to maintain health and natural rhythms, the solution of addictive behaviour is an advance (Peele, 1976, p 6-9). In an alienated and sick society, a certain amount of individual pathology is normal and may even help sustain the existing social order. An individual can share his/her 'personal defect' with representatives of the wider society.

Lechler (1990, p 9-18) understands addiction to activity as 'part of a disturbed ecosystem', which tries to trigger self-cures and find a healthy balance despite the danger of self-destruction. For Illich (1971, p 52-65) even educational and social institutions are based on the uncertainty they produce. These institutions do not enable their participants to have real experience, but make them dependent on formal certificates of knowledge and talents. The primary goal of teaching the skills needed for life has become lost in curricular rigidity and the hierarchy of the educational system. The identity of a young person is developed by something external – the pattern of addiction. Therefore it is important that, besides the family and social relations, education offers and develops basic social experiences that determine the character of interactions with social and institutional environment.

### **The young, Slovene society and some forms of addiction to activity**

Slovenian youth is a very specific generation, and a social group with an intensive experience of the tempo of social, cultural and technological change. It is distinguished from other generations by taking part in mass education that defines a subculture, and its members are incorporated at a much later age into the sphere of work and social power. Even though they are physically mature, they use all their energy for education, which conceals the acknowledgement of maturity: there us a discrepancy between their psycho-physical abilities and their social state.

This is a result of complex historical and social events. Ule (2000, p 25-30) notes a decrease in permissiveness among young people, and a shift toward authoritative and anomic behaviour: this is demonstrated by a series of contrasts

- the increasing possibilities for the individual to direct and plan their life contrasted with the decreasing predictability and management of situations in life;
- the increasing possibilities for youth to make autonomous life decisions contrasted with the growth in constraints on decision making and with the negative consequences of avoiding decisions;
- the apparent ending of classical stratification and class for youth, who now apparently have equal chances for education, contrasted with increased pressure for productivity and competition, and for the highest possible social status;
- greater freedom and autonomy, contrasted with increased fear of this autonomy and freedom and the risky choices in determining one's individual way into adulthood;
- the return to pre-determined patterns of growing up contrasted with the legitimization of newer, looser and independent forms of behaviour;
- weakness and inability in dealing with conflicts, stress and frustrations;
- the loosening of norms and control over adolescence, contrasted with increased pressure for adolescents to 'produce' in central areas such as school and work), which interfere more with their everyday life.

Different addictions to activity can be created by a lack of communication within the family, impersonal relations in the educational process, difficulty in growing up, and experiencing emptiness of social values. The addiction itself represents a uniform problem, so the choice of the means of addiction is secondary. Addictions to activities shown by Slovenian youth are related to specific individual dispositions and to the social significance of individual means of addiction to activity. The most frequent addictions to activities are now described.

#### *Addiction to gambling*

Gambling attracts adolescents because of the high frequency of events. The possibility of a quick payment apparently enables the immediate reintegration of profit. A wide spectrum of roles encourages the addict's feeling that s/he can influence the game with his/her skills and knowledge. The consequences are increased delinquency and crime, poor family relationships, decreased school efficiency and problematical behaviour. The addict's characteristics are decreased self-respect and abilities at problem solving, an increased degree of depression and suicidal behaviour, a neglect of physical and mental needs, cardiovascular disturbances, under-nourishment, obesity and lower life expectancy (Derevensky, Gupta (2000, p 226-255). Those with depression choose gambling as a form of addiction, because the excitement gives them energy. Medical treatment is hard: imagination and denial of addiction function as strong resistance mechanisms.

#### *Addiction to the internet*

This has become more intensive with easier and increased access to internet technology: excessive use of the internet and spending time without a clear goal is typical. The

internet provides a virtual compensation for the absence of real social relationships, and is typical of youth who experience lack of appropriate family communication and parental and peer group attention. The nature of the addiction is based on different aspects of internet use (typing, communication, contents, social activities), so it is difficult for addicts to define the exact amount of use, because their perception of time is often disturbed (some spend up to 40 hours a week on line). Young and Rodgers (1989) warn that the number of hours of internet use increases as the period from first use lengthens. This addiction is often connected with depression, disturbed control of impulses and low self-respect. Because of school obligations and work needs, medical treatment is difficult.

#### *Addiction to work and study*

This is difficult to understand, as work and study are basic and reasonable activities. It becomes an addiction when work/study for an individual represents an escape from conflicts in the family and friends and from the self and leads to social anonymity. Work and study become less the means of self-realisation than a way of escape from confronting the self. There are four types of addiction to work and study:

- the single-track person who has no other interests except work and study
- the person who manages to integrate social contacts and travel into work and study
- the addict with an unclear number of interests, but who spends all his/her energy on them
- the addict whose main preoccupation is work and study.

#### *Addiction to food*

This includes reaching a narcotic state of consciousness through overeating or starvation. Addiction to food often attempts to reduce the pain, internal disharmony and unsolved conflicts of childhood in adolescence. The fear of being abandoned and lonely leads to eating. The food addict cannot stop abusing food and procedures connected with eating, even though s/he may want to do so. An addict does not eat when hungry, but when emotionally unsatisfied. Hirsch (1989, p 79) claims that addiction spoils natural feelings of hunger and that food becomes a surrogate for internal balance. Compulsive overeating and bulimia are the first phase of addiction, whereas anorexia is an extreme of the phase of holding back. Common characteristics of addicts include dissatisfaction with physical appearance, often based on a disturbed physical perception; aspiring to achieve an 'ideal' body weight through abuse of diet and/or physical activities; the abuse of different ways of excreting consumed food; rejecting feelings, isolation and hiding from others; and rejecting emotional and physical closeness and a fear of sex (Rozman, 1998, 112-115). The addict expresses disgust towards themselves and believes that s/he is to blame for his/her fatness, seeing it as a sign of weakness and lack of self-control. Food is only important when being swallowed: it is an object of love until it reaches the stomach. The need to eject it appears as a narcotic tiredness, understood as hunger.

Anorexia is more typical of girls, but not unknown in male adolescents. It appears because the individual cannot control the behaviour of parents, the collapse of

relationships, fears of the end of the idyll of childhood and the demands of adulthood: the only thing which is within individual control is the body (Habermas, 1990, p 293). The addict does not have a real image of what hurts and disturbs him/her, nor do they know how to react and behave so that the pain will disappear. Forms of addiction to food are often combined with addictions to relationships, and the regular abuse of medications, alcohol and drugs.

### *Addiction to physical activity and extreme situations*

Such addictions appear when too much physical activity becomes the main activity in the addict's life; sport is not undertaken in a controlled way and the persistence for excessive training becomes a central motive of life. The desire for increased physical activity causes pressure, physical injuries and may be life-threatening. Over a long period of time it can result in social disintegration, when physical exercises controls behaviour, rather than the opposite. A direct connection has been noted between addiction to physical activity and an adolescent's attempt to control a dominant mother who seeks to limit the child. In such situations of challenge, the young person wants to overcome themselves, to cross the line of 'normality' in testing and risking, most often in the field of sport. Schmider (1998, p 71-72) explains risk in behavioural patterns (such as subway boarding, parachuting from skyscrapers, extreme mountaineering) as something usual, symbolising belonging to society. Warning young people about the dangers of feeling the euphoria 'of perfect freedom, ecstasy, experiencing unity with the outer world', because the short-term effect of ecstasy leads to the need for increased risk-taking. These forms are understood as a way of confronting ontological insecurity in our consumer society.

### *Addiction to stealing*

An adolescent expresses similar contents and forms of behaviour in addition to theft, when the risk of 'getting caught' is a sought-after stressful situation. S/he does not steal because of financial need, but because of the risk it presents. For the addict, psychically motivated theft is a surrogate sexual activity, resulting in emotional relaxation and particularly a means of changing consciousness. Repeated behaviour fixes the effect of increased excitement, the change of consciousness, limitation of attention, and forgetting internal pain. A combination of elements of situation psychosis and symbolic self-completing was also confirmed by Gerlinghoff and Backmund (1988), who argue that kleptomania is linked to anorexic and bulimic behaviour.

### *Addiction to spirituality/ daydreaming*

After Independence in Slovenia a number of new religious movements, with a wide variety of content, techniques and procedures, appeared and sought followers in Slovenia. Addiction to spirituality absolves the adolescent from thinking independently, resulting in unconditional uncritical acceptance of everything demanded. The addict experiences a change of state of consciousness and unselfishness, mystic ecstasy or even trans-individually or in a group, with the stimulation of strong feelings, meditations, prayer, special techniques of breathing, repeating mantras, rhythmic moving etc.

Different spiritual teachers, gurus and people in temples often help them. The addict becomes stubborn and obsessed, his/her spirituality is negative and leads to depression as s/he drops out of school and cuts contacts with everybody from the past (family, friends, relatives) which in turn makes him/her even more addicted. The addiction develops gradually and reaches the point when it becomes irrational and compulsive. Addicts are often victims of sexual and other kinds of abuse.

The incidence of addiction to daydreaming is underestimated. Instead of reaching a set goal with creative work, addicted adolescents only daydream about it, seeking a changed reality that does not happen because they are inactive. The consequence is an increased disharmony between real experience and the wanted, imaginary world. Among the most common forms of such addictive daydreams are confronting fears, sexual desires, and wanted roles, etc. The role of television should not be neglected in the development of this addiction. Commercials encourage the need to conform to the stereotypes offered - sexual attractiveness, quick adulthood, desensitisation to crime: television socialises adolescents because of their lack of cognitive and social experience. Parents should plan television watching carefully with their adolescents, control it and talk about the programmes seen (Bezenšek, 1999).

### **The role of citizenship in recognising the danger of addiction**

Citizenship is a school subject which includes contents that link to the recognition of addiction. Through this subject the adolescent can experience activity of the subject, surroundings and the society that may help the recognition, prevention and control of addictive behaviour:

- becoming informed about addiction as a phenomenon (during the lesson by the teacher, school-mate, etc.),
- individual activity in learning about the problems of addiction through different forms of project work,
- connecting the problems of addiction to current events in the neighbourhood and surroundings,
- watching television about addiction and discussing this
- lectures given by cured addicts,
- lectures given by medical staff, etc.

Information can be given by teachers, medical staff or therapists and can be organised as a discussion after an introductory session - an article read, film watched or research into statistical data connected to the topic. An exhibition about the topic could be organised. Students can also work in groups, each group working on one form of addiction and presenting it to the others. The students can record a short conversation (on tape, video, film) with different participants (cured addict, a doctor, parents) as a preventive form of education. They can also organise debate about the topic, invite different participants and also their parents.

## Conclusion

The life-style of young people in contemporary society increasingly reflects the cumulation of their life experiences. Facing insecurities about the future, in attempting to preserve the feeling of meaning and personal integrity young people often react by escaping to the world of stupor and addiction. The role of the school and the family is to help the adolescent on his/her way to recognising and curing the addiction. Important changes towards better understanding the problems of the young have been made in education since Independence. A lack of harmony between the loosening of disciplinary standards and demands can be seen in the school. This challenges the school's authority, as it can no longer enable the adolescent to develop his/her abilities and prepare for life in complicated and complex circumstances. However, the school must give the adolescent the feeling of security and the creation of creative internal standards, with clear demands.

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