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Teenagers delay sleep to spend time on social media, University of Adelaide study finds

- MILES KEMP
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Maddi Thompson, 15, in her room using her phone. She set herself restrictions at night. Picture: Roy Van Der Vegt.

MORE than two in 10 Adelaide high school students delay sleep every night because of their use of electronic devices, an Adelaide University study has found.

The study, co-authored by psychologist Dr Daniel King, recorded the electronic media habits of 1287 Adelaide students aged 12 to 18 and also found that one in 10 suffered from not being able to get to sleep and one in 20 was affected by interrupted sleep.

"Electronic media use was significantly negatively correlated with weekday and weekend sleep duration, as well as bedtime delay," Dr King said.

He said the study showed there was a need for greater public education about the problem - which at worst could become pathological.

"In view of the potential negative impacts of excessive media use, there is a need for the continuing development and dissemination of public health guidelines to educate young people, parents, and teachers about responsible electronic media use during adolescence," he said.

"Up-to-date data are critical for the development of an informed understanding, given that the types, availability, and functional uses of electronic media technologies are constantly evolving."

Twenty-two per cent of the adolescents reported that bedtime delay occurred every night, 29 per cent said it occurred often, 37 per cent said sometimes, and 12 per cent never. Only a small minority of the adolescents studied were getting optimal sleep, which is more than nine hours a night according to the National Sleep Foundation.

Also on a nightly basis, 8 per cent recorded difficulty getting to sleep and 6 per cent reported sleep interruption.

YOUR SAY - DO ELECTRONIC DEVICES AFFECT THE WAY YOU SLEEP?

On weekdays, less than one in three had optimal sleep, one in three had borderline sleep - which is 8-9 hours - and more than one in three had insufficient sleep of less than eight hours.

On weekend nights, 47.4 per cent got optimal sleep, 27.8 per cent were borderline and 24.5 per cent had insufficient sleep.

Dr King said most at risk were adolescents who fell into the category of "pathological media use", defined as those who could not limit their use or showed "persistent and maladaptive use of electronic media, resulting in psychological and/or physical problems".

"Sleep interference effects due to electronic media use were significantly more prevalent among adolescents who met clinical criteria for pathological media use," he said.

"These children went to bed 35-40 minutes later because of their use."

Maddi Thompson, 15, of Northgate, said she was connected to the internet via an iPhone, an iPad and laptop computer, often to connect with friends on Facebook just before going to bed, but did so in moderation.

"I would be connected probably a bit more than one hour a day, but not more because I really need my sleep," she said.

"I do know a lot of girls who spend a lot of time on Facebook and they stay up all night. A couple of girls come to school the next day tired because they have been up all night, but not a lot."

The study, published in the International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction this month, recorded 91 per cent of the students had mobile or smart phones, 89 per cent portable music players, 86 per cent laptops, 78 per cent video-gaming consoles, 71 per cent personal computers, and 37 per cent tablet devices.

It also measured frequency of use of each device, function and social context of media use, and age at which devices were first used.

Participants reported that they had first used the internet at the age of 8.2 years, video-games at 9.2 years, and a mobile phone at 10.9 years.