

LCQ22: Capability of children and youths to exercise self-control in using mobile phones and browsing social media

Following is a question by the Hon Charles Peter Mok and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (March 20):

Question:

The findings of some surveys indicate that children and youths generally have lower self-control over the use of mobile phones, and they are prone to developing depression and anxiety once they have become addicted to browsing the Internet. Some concern groups have pointed out that prolonged use of mobile phones and browsing social media by children and youths may affect their work and rest routines, physical and mental health as well as interpersonal relationships, and they also have a higher chance of encountering cyber frauds and bullying as well as being exposed to harmful and false information. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of requests for assistance received in the past three years by the Education Bureau and subvented social welfare organisations concerning the addiction of children and youths to browsing the Internet or social media, with a breakdown by the age group to which they belonged;

(2) whether, in the past three years, it (i) conducted statistical surveys on the habits of children and youths on using mobile phones and browsing social media as well as the impacts of such habits on their physical and mental well-being, and (ii) formulated, in collaboration with the various stakeholders, guidelines to assist parents in strengthening their children's capability to exercise self-control in using mobile phones and browsing social media; and

(3) whether it will allocate additional resources to (i) offer counselling to children and youths and (ii) provide support to teachers, parents and community organisations in order to help children and youths strengthen their capability to exercise self-control in using mobile phones and browsing social media; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the relevant bureaux, our consolidated reply to the

Member's question is as follows:

(1) The Education Bureau (EDB) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) do not have the relevant statistics and information.

(2) The Department of Health (DH) conducted a survey on "Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products" in 2017 targeting pre-school children, primary and secondary school students with the aim to understand their practice in using Internet and the electronic screen products as well as the effects exerted on their daily lives. Similar survey was also conducted in 2014.

The Government set up an Advisory Group on Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products (Advisory Group) in 2013 comprising of members from the EDB, the SWD, the DH, representatives from the social welfare sector and relevant Colleges of medical specialties, etc. The Advisory Group published the Report of Advisory Group on Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products (the Report) in 2014 with recommendations for children, adolescents, parents and teachers on healthy use of the Internet and electronic screen products. The Report has been uploaded to the DH's website. The DH also produced a set of four modules of health tips for parents, teachers, primary and secondary students respectively and set up a designated web page www.studenthealth.gov.hk/english/internet/health_effects.html for the public to search, browse and download related health information and resources.

Separately, the EDB attaches importance to helping students exercise self-discipline and prudence so that they can use information technology and social media properly and lead a healthy lifestyle. Relevant learning elements, including ethical use of the Internet as well as prevention of Internet addiction and cyberbullying, have been incorporated into the related subjects at the primary and secondary levels as well as the curriculum framework of moral and civic education. Schools also plan their school-based curricula and activities accordingly.

The EDB continuously provides support for schools such as producing various learning and teaching resources based on life events to help teachers raise students' awareness of cyber security and the proper attitude and cultivate in them a proper habit of using smart phones safely. Besides, professional training programmes are organised for principals and teachers to better equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills.

(3) The SWD has been subventing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide young people with a range of preventive, developmental and remedial services to help them deal with their academic, social and emotional difficulties, as well as educate them on the proper use of mobile phones and social media on a needs basis. The services concerned include those provided through integrated children and youth services centres, school social work, youth outreach service and the Community Support Service Scheme to offer appropriate support to young people in need. Besides, starting from December 1, 2018, the SWD has subvented NGOs to set up five Cyber Youth Support Teams (the Teams), which reach out to at-risk and hidden youth on the online

platforms commonly used by young people. The Teams provide advisory and counselling services with regard to their problems in social, emotion, personal growth and development areas as well as deviant behaviours relating to the use of the Internet. Where necessary, with the consent of the young people, the social workers will meet with them for in-depth discussions and provide suitable follow-up services, including referring them and their family members to relevant mainstream services.

Besides, to assist schools in preventing and handling the problem of Internet addiction among students, a set of teaching materials entitled Prevention of Internet Addiction for Personal Growth Education lessons and other relevant information are provided for schools by the EDB. Relevant training is also offered for teachers and social workers on a need basis so that they can help and refer students with the problem of Internet addiction to receive necessary professional services. The EDB has co-organised school recognition scheme with professional bodies to encourage schools to promote healthy use of the Internet among students. For parent education, the Committee on Home-School Co-operation and schools organise various activities such as seminars, to foster parents' understanding of healthy use of the Internet and ways to prevent the problem of Internet addiction among their children, and remind them of the need to care more about and pay heed to their children's habit of using the Internet, while seeking help from school social workers and guidance personnel whenever necessary. Furthermore, videos and articles on how to help children use electronic products properly and handle the problem of Internet addiction among children are also available on Smart Parent Net, the parent education website launched by the EDB, for parents' reference. Besides, a telephone hotline has been set up through a NGO to provide individual support for parents, teachers and students in need.