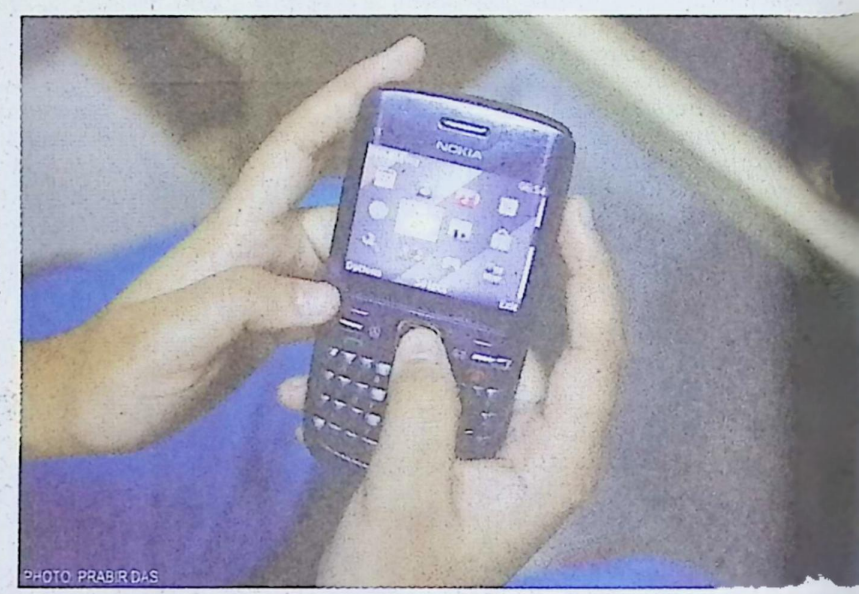
Digital Addiction



A local mobile operator recently launched what it says is the world's fastest wireless network. The new technology, named LTE-Advanced, has been touted as being able to download data at speeds twice as fast as existing LTE networks and 10 times faster than third-generation services.

The launch of the LTE-A network was the latest example of Korea showing off the high-tech prowess of its mobile industry. The sector has grown here on the back of an explosive increase in the number of Korean smartphone users, who may be the quickest in the world to adopt faster wireless technologies.

A government survey published last week, however, highlighted a darker aspect of the world's most-wired country, which should be kept in check. Among the 1.33 million fourth-grade elementary school students and first-graders at middle and high schools polled across the nation, about 240,000 were found to be addicted to smartphone use. If separated from their smartphones, they often felt anxiety and depression, which hampered their sleeping patterns, concentration and overall health. According to the survey by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, some 105,000 students suffered from Internet addiction.

The number of smartphone-addicted students in all grades at elementary and secondary schools is estimated to exceed 1 million, a figure more than high enough to prompt measures to tame teenagers' reckless use of mobile devices. Smartphone addiction grows more serious as students get older, raising the need for prompt action. The government survey showed the addiction rate rose with age, from 3.7 per cent of primary school pupils to 19.8 per cent of middle school students and further to 23.2 per cent of high school students.

According to separate data from a state commission, 64.5 per cent of teenagers owned smartphones last year, more than triple the 2011 figure. The proportion is close to that of the country's overall rate, which stands at around 70 per cent, the highest in the world. Nearly 4 in every 10 teenage students who have smartphones spent more than three hours a day chatting, tweeting or playing games.

It is natural that the Korean government has gone further than authorities in any other advanced nation in responding to the growing danger of online addiction. A policy package drawn up by relevant ministries requires schools to teach special classes on digital addiction and organise holiday programmes to help students overcome their dependency.

The more important thing, however, may be consistent and effective efforts by parents to guide children to use smartphones in a more intelligent way. It appears that parents buy children expensive mobile devices to stop them being left out of their peer groups and to keep in contact with them. With less control over their use of mobile devices than PCs at home, parents now see children spending more time using smartphones than interacting with their families.

It is dangerous for young mothers to have their babies play with smartphones for hours to get some rest at home, as it is easier to become dependent when younger. Purchasing devices for children should be delayed as long as possible.

Parents need to talk with children more often and seriously on the negative impact the excessive use of smartphones would have on their mental and physical health and look for ways to spend more time with them. The summer vacation that has just started can be a useful period for tightening smartphone discipline.

– Editorial Desk
ANN/The Korea Herald