

Video Game ‘Addiction’ More Likely With Autism, ADHD

Study cites poor peer relationships as one reason these kids embrace gaming

By Serena Gordon
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Boys with autism or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are more at risk of addictive video game use than typically developing boys, according to new research.

The study of nearly 150 boys found that those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) played video games for significantly longer periods each day than typically developing boys -- an average of 2.1 hours versus 1.2 hours. Boys with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) averaged 1.7 hours of video game use daily.

“Children with ASD and those with ADHD may be at particularly high risk for significant problems related to video game play, including excessive and problematic video game use,” according to the study, published online July 29 and in the August print issue of *Pediatrics*.

Experts said they aren’t surprised by the findings.

“Boys with ADHD and boys on the autism spectrum both have difficulties relating with peers,” said Dr. Andrew Adesman, chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Children’s Medical Center of New York in New Hyde Park. Video games provide a diversion that doesn’t require interaction with peers or siblings, he added.

Another professional said video games in and of themselves aren’t the problem. “There does have to be structure around video game use. Like anything else, it’s best in moderation,” said Dana Levy, an assistant professor in the department of child and adolescent psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center in New York City.

In the United States, about one in 88 children has an autism spectrum disorder, which can range from mild as in Asperger syndrome to full-blown autism with severely limited communication skills. It’s estimated that between 3 percent to 7 percent of school-age children have ADHD. Boys are far more likely than girls to have either diagnosis.

Common features of autism include impaired social and communication skills, and a repetitive interest in a restricted number of activities. These symptoms may be directly related to problematic video game use, according to the University of Missouri researchers.

The most common symptoms of ADHD -- inattention and hyperactivity -- may also relate to problematic game use, the researchers noted. A previous study showed that when youngsters with ADHD started medication for their condition, their video game use went down, the authors pointed out.

The current study included information from 56 boys with an autism spectrum disorder, 44 boys with ADHD and 41 typically developing boys. Their ages ranged from 8 to 18. Parents completed questionnaires about their children’s video game use.

Symptoms of inattention -- but not hyperactivity -- among boys with autism or ADHD were strongly linked to problematic video game use. A preference for role-playing video games among kids with an autism disorder was also more likely to lead to addictive video game play.

Levy said the consistency of video games appeals to kids with autism. "When you push a button, it does the same thing every time," she said. And for boys with ADHD, "video games are very visual, very engaging and exciting," she added.

The study found that more children with autism and ADHD had video game systems in their bedrooms than did typically developing boys. This is something Levy advises against.

"It's hard for parents to put something so engaging in the bedroom and limit its use," noted Levy. Adesman added that it's not necessarily a good idea for children with autism spectrum disorders to be isolating themselves by playing in their bedrooms, either.

But video game use may not be all bad, noted both experts. "Mastery of a video game by a boy with ASD may lead to improved self-esteem," said Adesman.

The study doesn't specify how much time spent gaming qualifies as "problematic." Overall, Levy said, "one to two hours a day of video games is fine, but it's best if they get other things done first."

Look at your child's overall day, Levy recommended. "If they're doing well in school and taking care of their other responsibilities, then video games are fine. But, if video games start to interfere in daily life, that's when they become a concern."

The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends no more than an hour or two of total screen time daily.

More information

Learn more about the American Academy of Pediatrics' media use recommendations for children.

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