

Associations of online computer games and the social, emotional, behavioural outcomes for children with autism

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Background: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have mental health difficulties and relationship challenges and difficulties due to functional disturbance affecting social interaction, learning, and communication.

Objectives: This study examined the role of online computer games to facilitate learning relationships skills and to help improve mental health concerns of children with ASD.

Methods: This investigation recruited parents of children in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). It employed mixed methods data collection. It consisted of two parts: an exploratory questionnaire (n= 244) and some observations (n= 3) and interviews (n=7). Subjects for the questionnaire were parents of primary school children aged 8 and over from two groups: children with autism (n= 121) and children without a disability (n=123).

Results: Minecraft is a popular game among children with ASD. Positive associations were observed between children's Minecraft gameplay and the quality of those children's friendships and peer relationships. Adverse associations were observed between mental health difficulties and the ability to develop good relationships with others through Minecraft play.

Conclusions: Minecraft appears helpful in giving players new freedoms to explore, to experiment, to fail or succeed, and to progress toward desired and self-created imaginative goals. Concerns for possible adverse effects will be discussed, as well as current limits of research integrity. Altogether, these data suggest possible positive benefits for Minecraft gameplay for children with ASD that may be considered for incorporation into educational pedagogy or psychological support.

Keywords: online computer games; autism; learning relationship skills

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