

Facilitating Social Connections with Neurodivergent Adolescents: An Exploratory Study of Youth Experiences in a Social Group Based on Dungeons and Dragons

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Abstract : Autism, also referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is commonly associated with difficulties in social and communication skills. Other characteristics common to autistic individuals include repetitive behaviours, difficulties adhering to routine, as well as paying attention. Recent findings indicate that autism is the fastest-growing neurodevelopmental disorder in North America, yet programming aimed at improving the quality of autistic individual's real-world social interactions is limited. Although there are social skills programs for autistic youth, participation appears to improve social knowledge, but that knowledge does not improve social competence or transfer to the participant's daily social interactions. Peers are less likely to interact with autistic people based thin slice judgements, meaning that even when an autistic youth has successfully completed a social skills program, they most likely will still be rejected by peers and not have a social group to participate in. Recently, many researchers are exploring therapeutic interventions using Dungeon and Dragons (D&D) for conditions such as social anxiety, loneliness, and identity exploration. D&D is a table-top role-playing game (TTRPG) based on social play experience where the players must communicate, plan, negotiate, and compromise with other players to achieve a shared goal. The game encourages players to assume the role of their character and act out their play within the rules of the game with the guidance of the games dungeon master. The popularity Dungeons and Dragons has increased at a rapid rate, and many suggest that there social-emotional benefits of joining and participating in these types of gaming experiences, however this is an under researched topic and studies examining the benefits of such games is lacking in the field. The main purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the autistic youth's experiences of participating in a D&D club. Participants of this study were four high functioning autistic youth between the ages of 14-18 (average age - 16) enrolled in a D&D Club that was specifically designed for neurodiverse youth. The youth participation with the club ranged from 4 months to 8 months. All participants completed a 30-40-minute semi-structured interview where they were able to express their perceptions as participants of the D&D club. Preliminary findings suggest that the game provided a place for the youth to engage in authentic social interactions. Additionally, preliminary results suggest that the youth report being in a positive space with other neurodivergent youth created an atmosphere where they felt confident and could connect with others. The findings from this study will aid clinicians, researchers, and educators in developing programming aimed at improving social interactions and connections for autistic youth.

Keywords : autism, social connection, dungeons and dragons, neurodivergent affirming space

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