# Virtual World Shows Promise For Teaching Social Skills

by Shaun Heasley | September 27, 2016

Engaging in social situations in a virtual environment may significantly improve real-world interactions for young people with autism, new research suggests.

Kids and teens on the spectrum who participated in a series of computer-based training sessions showed improved social skills and reported that personal relationships changed for the better, according to findings published this month in the journal Computers in Human Behavior.

The study involved 30 individuals with high-functioning autism ages 7 to 16 who participated in 10 hour-long virtual reality training sessions over the course of five weeks.

Clinicians used avatars to interact with study participants while they practiced social situations like meeting a peer, dealing with a bully or inviting someone to a party, all presented in a format resembling a video game.

"Individuals with autism may become overwhelmed and anxious in social situations," said Nyaz Didehbani of the Center for BrainHealth at The University of Texas at Dallas who led the study. "The virtual reality training platform creates a safe place for participants to practice social situations without the intense fear of consequence."

Those who participated in the training showed measurable improvement in emotion recognition, problem solving and the ability to understand the perspectives of others, the study found.

"This research builds on past studies we conducted with adults on the autism spectrum and demonstrates that virtual reality may be a promising and motivating platform for both age groups," said Tandra Allen, head of virtual training programs at the Center for BrainHealth and a study author. "We observed relationships in life grow from virtual world conversations. We saw a lot of growth in their ability to initiate and maintain a conversation, interpret emotions and judge the quality of a friendship."

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