

Bedroom TV, video games linked to less sleep in boys with autism

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But whether one causes the other isn't clear.

(HealthDay)—Exposure to television and video games could play a role in the sleep problems of children with autism, new research suggests.

Boys with the [neurodevelopmental disorder](#) who have TVs and [game consoles](#) in their bedrooms get less [sleep](#) than other boys with equal screen access, the study authors found.

"If parents of children with [autism](#) are noticing that their child struggles with sleep, they might consider monitoring—and perhaps limiting—pre-bedtime exposure" to video games and TV, said study lead author Christopher Engelhardt, a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Missouri Thompson Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Columbia, Mo.

It's not clear if the boys in the study get too little sleep, or if they're watching TV and playing video games because they have trouble sleeping. And the findings, reported online Nov. 18 in the journal *Pediatrics*, don't provide insight into whether the positive aspects of TV watching and video game playing might offset any effect on sleep.

It's estimated that 1 out of every 88 U.S. children has an autism spectrum disorder, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Symptoms include problems with communication and socialization, and can range from mild, as in Asperger's syndrome, to severe autism. Boys face a much higher risk of autism than girls.

Sleep problems appear to be a hallmark of autism.

"Some [sleep problems](#), such as taking longer to fall asleep and waking up at night, occur in 50 percent to 80 percent of children with autism," Engelhardt said. "The reasons for these problems are numerous, including trouble with sleep cycles and regulating hormones that are important and necessary for sleep."

Compared to typically developing children, children with autism also seem to be particularly drawn to TV and video games, Engelhardt pointed out.

"We suspect that this is the case, particularly with video games, because the environments, emotions and social interactions are much easier to control and interpret than in real life," he said.

For this study, the researchers wanted to explore the possible impact of TV-watching and gaming on the sleeping patterns of kids with autism. They surveyed parents of 49 boys with an [autism spectrum disorder](#), 38 with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and 41 who had neither disorder. The boys were between 8 and 17 years old.

When computers were in the bedroom, sleep differences were significant: about 7 hours for boys with autism compared to more than 8.5 hours for the others.

Boys with autism and a bedroom TV also got less sleep: fewer than 8 hours a night compared to about 8.5 hours for the other boys.

However, the parents weren't asked questions designed to determine if the kids weren't getting enough sleep. And the research doesn't prove that media use deprives these boys of sleep.

It's possible that [boys](#) with autism and easy access to TV and video games need less sleep, Engelhardt said. Or they might watch and play because they are awake more.

Still, it's known that sleep disturbances can worsen problematic behaviors of children with autism and interfere with learning and family functioning, the authors noted.

Sleep problems are "one of the top complaints in families who are dealing with autism," said Matthew Belmonte, a neuroscientist at Groden Center in Providence, R.I.

But parents, not professionals, are key to figuring out the proper role of TV and video games in a child's life, added Belmonte, who was not involved with the study. "You don't need an M.D. or Ph.D. to tell you when a child is just relaxing with a [video game](#) or when it's keeping that child awake unnecessarily."

Engelhardt said he enjoys playing video games himself and isn't on a crusade against them. Video games and TV can benefit [children](#) with autism, he noted.

"Researchers have known for a long time that video games are excellent teachers, so it's possible that these media can be used to develop and shape the types of behaviors generally valued by society, such as behaviors intended to help and assist others," Engelhardt said. It's even possible, he added, that relaxing video games and TV shows could help kids with autism sleep better.

More information: For more about [autism](#), visit the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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