

Study shows Dungeons and Dragons can help autistic people gain confidence and find their inner hero

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Dungeons and Dragons is a hugely popular role-playing game enjoyed by millions of people all over the world, both in person and online, every day.

However, new research has found it could be particularly beneficial for people with [autism](#), giving them a safe space to engage in social interactions away from some of the challenges they face in their daily lives.

The study, [published](#) in the journal *Autism*, was led by researchers from the University of Plymouth's School of Psychology along with colleagues at Edge Hill University and Dalarna University in Sweden.

It saw researchers working with a group of autistic adults and aimed to explore whether finding a social situation where people felt comfortable could help them to excel.

After some initial familiarization with Dungeons and Dragons, the participants—under the guidance of a games master—played out scenarios within [small groups](#) over the space of six weeks.

They were then interviewed individually by the researchers about the ways they felt their autism might have interacted with their experiences and, in turn, whether taking part in the game impacted their lives.

In those interviews, the participants spoke at length about their social desires and motivations, but how this came with challenges such as a lack of confidence in their communication with others, and insecurities about how other people would perceive them. This, they said, often resulted in them masking, or hiding, autistic traits.

Playing Dungeons and Dragons, they said, provided them with a friendly environment in which they very quickly felt a sense of innate kinship

with others taking part.

Understanding common issues linked to activities inside and outside of the game allowed them to relax without feeling pressure to act in a certain way, and as a result, they felt included in—and able to better contribute to—the group's interactions.

The participants also felt able to take some of the traits from their new character outside of the game, where it enabled them to feel differently about themselves.

Dr. Gray Atherton, Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Plymouth and the study's lead author, said, "There are many myths and misconceptions about autism, with some of the biggest suggesting that those with it aren't socially motivated, or don't have any imagination. Dungeons and Dragons goes against all that, centering around working together in a team, all of which takes place in a completely imaginary environment.

"Those taking part in our study saw the game as a breath of fresh air, a chance to take on a different persona and share experiences outside of an often-challenging reality. That sense of escapism made them feel incredibly comfortable, and many of them said they were now trying to apply aspects of it in their daily lives."

Dr. Atherton and Dr. Liam Cross, also a Lecturer in Psychology in Plymouth and the current study's senior author, have been working for many years to understand the impact of gaming on people with autism and other similar conditions.

Another recently published study showed that those with autism enjoy [board games](#) because they took the pressure off the uncertainty around meeting and interacting with people, removing the need for small talk.

Dr. Cross added, "Autism comes with several stigmas, and that can lead to people being met with judgment or disdain. We also hear from lots of families who have concerns about whether teenagers with autism are spending too much time playing things like video games. A lot of the time, that is because people have a picture in their minds of how a person with autism should behave, but that is based on neurotypical experiences.

"Our studies have shown that there are everyday games and hobbies that autistic people do not simply enjoy but also gain confidence and other skills from. It might not be the case for everyone with autism, but our work suggests it can enable people to have positive experiences that are worth celebrating."

More information: Gray Atherton et al, A critical hit: Dungeons and Dragons as a buff for autistic people, *Autism* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/13623613241275260](https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241275260)

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