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**Kanika**  
Nursing Tutor, Government  
Nursing College, Safidon,  
District Jind, Haryana, India

## Virtual autism

**Kanika**

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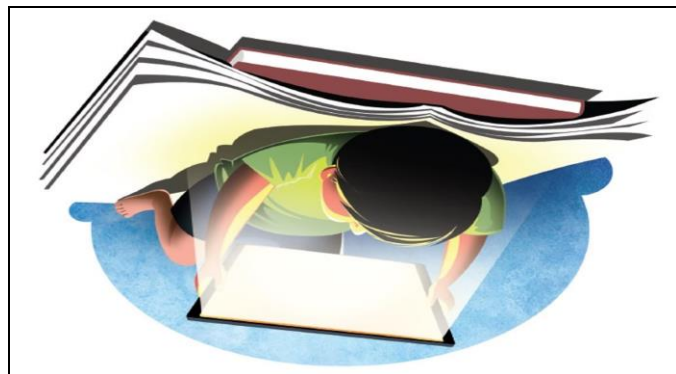
### Abstract

Currently children have more access to electronic media on the daily basis than those of previous generation. Some studies suggest that increased screen time in young children is associated to negative impact on health like less cognitive ability, short attention span and irritability. As screens have become an integral part of our life, we often use them as a means to calm children during various activities such as eating, travelling, or exercising which automatically invite the risk of virtual autism. Also, with the onset of the COVID pandemic, there has been a noticeable increase in cases where children exhibit symptoms of autism.

**Keywords:** Autism, electronic media, negative impacts

### Introduction

In 1877, British doctor John Down used the term developmental retardation to describe conditions including what would be considered autism today. The term autism was coined in 1911 by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, who used it to describe withdrawal into one's inner world. Autism the world's third most common developmental disability and neurological illness. In India, it is estimated that around 18 million people have autism. In the rapidly evolving digital age, the intersection of technology and various aspect of human life is becoming increasingly apparent. Virtual autism has become a growing concern now a days. Autism is a neuro developmental condition whereas virtual autism caused due to excessive screen exposure.



**Definition:** Virtual Autism is a phrase formulated in 2018 by Marius Teodor zamfir, a Romanian psychologist. Also called autism spectrum disorder- includes a diverse group of condition related to development of brain. It is also characterized by some difficulty with communication and social dysfunction. This disorder begins in early childhood and causes many problems like in school, work places and so on. While there is no cure for autism spectrum disorder, intensive, early treatment can make a big difference in the lives of many children.

### Causes

1. Acc.to a report by lokmat times, toddlers exposed to excessive screen time, including smart phones, tablets, computers are at higher risk of developing virtual autism due to overwhelming virtual stimuli.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Kanika**  
Nursing Tutor, Government  
Nursing College, Safidon,  
District Jind, Haryana, India

2. Insufficient opportunities for toddler to engage in real world, face to face interaction with parents, caregivers and peers hinder their development of essential social skills and emotional understanding further lead to virtual autism.
3. Reduced time spent engaging in physical play and outdoor activities.
4. Excessive use of digital devices by you or caregiver in front of your toddler models unhealthy technology habits.
5. According to research, increased screen time is linked to melanopsin-expressing neurons and a decline in the neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid, which leads to abnormal behavior, language development and other problems in kids.

### Sign and symptoms

1. **Hyperactivity:** Hyperactivity is the most common symptom of virtual autism in children. In a stage in which children are unusually active, they experience attention problems.
2. **Inability to pay attention on task or activities:** For this, they are unable to concentrate on tasks or activities and they have lack of interest in play activities
3. **Speech delay:** A toddler with virtual autism feeling difficulty while speaking as they don't want to speak. The child who is speaking in the beginning suddenly stops speaking after the virtual autism.
4. **Lack of social interactions:** The main feature of autism is social disconnection. In this virtual autistic kids are not showing interest in responding to anyone as it will affect their social skills. Moreover, virtual autistic kids shows agitation and frustration in response to changes or transitions.
5. Irritability and mood swings like frequent tantrums and meltdowns.
6. Challenges with problem – solving and critical thinking.

### Diagnostic evaluation

1. **Clinical interviews:** Healthcare professionals conduct interviews with the individual and their caregivers to collect information about their medical history, developmental milestones and behavioural patterns.
2. **Observation and assessment:** Direct observation and assessment tools are used to evaluate the individual's social interactions, communication skills and repetitive behaviours.
3. **Diagnostic criteria:** The diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders provides a set of criteria that help professionals to determine whether an individual meets the criteria for virtual autism.
4. **Collaboration and information gathering** Collaboration between health care professionals, educators, and caregivers is necessary to gather comprehensive information about the individual's functioning across various settings.

### Treatment

- a) **Limits the screen time:** Establish appropriate screen time standards, ensuring a balanced mix of digital and non – digital activities for children.

- b) **Educational content:** Promote educational materials to fostering the cognitive growth and critical thinking.
- c) **Engaging in others activities:** Actively exploring the world with our toddlers around through several activities like going to the park, interacting with others, encouraging group play etc.
- d) **Digital literacy:** Teach technology and internet safety for informed decision making.
- e) **Parental supervision:** Actively engage in monitoring and discussing internet activities with children.
- f) **Professional guidance:** Seek help from experts when signs of virtual autism appear.
- g) **Parental and educational roles:** Encourage parental involvement, open communication, and healthy technology use.
- h) Give importance to face to face interaction with others.
- i) Quality time with parents and adults such as bedtime stories, playing together, cooking together etc.
- j) Makes eye contact while interacting with kids.

**Therapeutic approaches and interventions:** Therapeutic approaches play a vital role in supporting individuals with virtual autism. These may include:

1. **Applied behaviour analysis:** ABA focuses on shaping and modifying behaviours using evidence based techniques. It helps individuals develop new skills and reduce challenging behaviours.
2. **Speech and language therapy:** Speech and language therapy aims to improve communication skills, including expressive and receptive language, social communication and pragmatics.
3. **Occupational therapy:** Occupational therapy addresses sensory integration, fine motor skills, self-care routines, and functional independence to enhance an individual's overall daily functioning.
4. **Social skills training:** Social skills training helps individuals develop meaningful relationships, navigate social situations, and improve their understanding of non- verbal cues.
5. **Educational support:** Collaborating with educators to implement individualized education plans and providing classroom accommodations can enhance learning experiences for individuals with virtual autism.
6. **Create a nurturing environment:** Providing a safe and stimulating environment is essential for the overall well-being of children with virtual autism. Ensure their surroundings support cognitive, emotional and physical growth through age-appropriate toys, books and activities. Remember, every child is unique and it is essential to tailor strategies to their individual needs. By implementing these approaches and seeking professional support, the impact of virtual autism can be effectively managed for improved overall well-being.

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**How to Cite This Article**

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