

SMARTPHONE USE AND ASD-LIKE SYMPTOMS: CASE REPORT OF „VIRTUAL AUTISM”

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DOI: 10.5937/BatutPHCO24192M

Background: „Virtual autism” is a condition that occurs when young children below the age of two are excessively exposed to screens which leads to ASD-like symptoms. They face communication problems, decrease cognition and often show behaviour oddities. When screen exposure is stopped and associated with daily moments of dyadic interaction, we need couple of months to distinguish classical from „virtual autism”.

Methods and Objectives: There is a report of a 23-month old male toddler who had ASD-like symptoms due to early-life intensive screen exposure, which was later replaced with parent-child social time and interaction.

Results: Used tools for early child development assessment were: M-CHAT-R/F (Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers) and IGMCD (International Guide for Monitoring Child Development). At first assessment when he was 23 months old, M-CHAT-R/F was 9/20. IGMCD: expressive/receptive language at the level of 11-13 months, play 11-13 months, gross motor 24-36 months, fine motor 17-19 months, relating 20-24 months, self-help 17-19 months. This child had marked improvements in developmental milestones when screen time was replaced with parent-child social time, adequate interaction and joint attention. After 7 months, at his age of 30 months, M-CHAT-R/F was 0/20. On IGMCD he reached all the goals for 24-36 months, except fine motor skills. Parents got new instructions for fine motor skill activities, advice for additional speech therapist assessment and enrollment in kindergarten.

Conclusions: Modern devices such as smartphone, tablet and computer, can't communicate with children. Parent-child social time, adequate interaction, joint attention and age-appropriate stimulation are necessary for speech development, social interactions and communication. A minimum of three months screen-free regimen for overexposed younger children with ASD symptoms is needed, accompanied by daily playful interaction with the parents, to differentiate between classical and „virtual autism”.

Keywords: screens, ASD-like, speech delay, development delay, early intervention