

Abstract

Online social networking along with computer mediated communication (CMC) has become a crucial part of teenagers' everyday life. Today it is vital to be a member of online peer community in order to stay in touch and maintain friendships. For teenagers with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) social networks are undoubtedly a way to create and maintain friendships without the difficulties that come along with the diagnosis. Autism spectrum disorders affect mainly social competencies, communication skills and imagination.

The thesis is focusing on how social networking could help to improve social competencies of teenagers with ASD. In order to examine this topic it is important to focus on the connection between offline and online relationships that teenagers with ASD maintain in their peer group. Therefore a quantitative measurement of loneliness and social dissatisfaction was used in combination with semi-structured interviews covering the topics of relationship with peers, using social networks and internet in general. Results of an ASD group were then compared with a group of a neurotypical control group.

The comparison between the groups showed that ASD group does not have a great interest in participating in social networking sites, except for online messengers. That could be due to a smaller offline social network and the fact that their peers may not be active there either. Some of the participants however are using online messengers to stay in touch with their friends. Both groups prefer meeting their peers in person, despite the control group's greater activity on social networks. ASD participants however have reached higher scores than the control group in the loneliness measurement. It appears that social networks may lower the level of loneliness, because all users of social networks have reached lower scores in comparison with those who do not use them. Both groups are also very interested in the online gaming world. For ASD participants it could be a new channel where they can reach their peers by sharing the same area of interest. Also, being in an environment that is close to teenagers with ASD could make the opportunities to improve their social competencies much more accessible.