

Excessive screen use linked to autism risk in toddlers: Experts

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New Delhi: Children with higher screen exposure when they are around one year are associated with a greater likelihood of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism-like traits by three, experts have warned, raising concern over early and prolonged screen use.

ASD is a complex condition shaped by genetic, epigenetic and environmental factors, with early screen exposure emerging as an environmental factor behind it.

The condition begins early in brain development, with symptoms appearing between 12 and 36 months, making early identification critical. It may reduce face-to-face interaction, eye contact and communication — key inputs for neural development — and has been linked to behavioural issues, sensory sensitivities, sleep disruption and altered brain connectivity.

“Studies show that children with higher screen exposure at around one year are more likely to show autism-related traits by age three, particularly among boys,” said prof Sheffali Gulati, faculty in-charge, paediatric neurology division at AIIMS.

A large JAMA Pediatrics study of over 84,000 children reported similar findings, though as an association, not causation.

An AIIMS Delhi study, published as an abstract in Journal of International Child Neurology Association, analysing 250 children aged 3-18 years, found earlier and heavier screen use among children with autism. Over 80% used screens for more than 20 minutes per session, compared to 66% among others, along with lower physical activity and higher sleep disturbances. Gulati said the

findings indicated a pattern but didn't establish causation.

The link needs to be interpreted cautiously as multiple developmental processes are at play in early childhood, said Dr Praveen Gupta, chairman of Marengo Asia International Institute of Neuro and Spine, Gurgaon. He noted that excessive screen use during this critical phase might limit social interaction and was increasingly being seen alongside rising speech and behavioural delays, though long-term stu-

PROF SHEFFALI GULATI

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dies are needed to establish a clear relationship.

Similar trends are being seen in clinical practice. Excessive screen exposure can affect attention, language and social skills, said Dr Vinit Banga, director of neurology at Fortis Hospital, Faridabad, noting increasing cases of speech delay, reduced eye contact and behavioural issues among toddlers with high screen use.

Dr Jitendra Jain, senior consultant-paediatrics at Cocoon Hospital, said excessive screen could amplify underlying developmental vulnerabilities. He noted that early reduction in screen time, along with increased caregiver interaction, often led to improvement.

Prof Gulati advised no screens below 18 months, up to one hour a day with supervision for children aged 18 months to 6 years.

Expert: Screen addiction sees teens hospitalised for months

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Security personnel, typically associated with celebrity protection and crowd control, are now being hired by families dealing with teenagers whose addictions have triggered anger, violence and risky behaviour.

In Surat, a family brought in a bouncer after their 17-year-old son began beating the family's pet Labrador to vent his anger at his father, who often scolded him over excessive gaming. Nikhil Pandey, head of bouncers at Force11 Security Company, said eight bouncers were deployed in two shifts for nine months to protect the dog.

Yasin Malik, who runs a security agency in the city, said guarding teenagers struggling with addiction has emerged as a new category of demand. In one recent case, his agency was hired by the family of a real estate developer after their son underwent rehabilitation for chemical drug use. The bouncers were tasked with ensuring the teenager was never left alone long enough to access substances again.

"For an eight-hour shift,

families pay Rs 1,500 per bouncer per day," Malik said.

He added that agencies are now training staff to remain discreet and handle children with care.

Mental health experts say such cases reflect a sharp rise in severe behavioural problems linked to addiction, especially after the Covid pandemic. Vaishnav said teenagers who receive smartphones early, often for



studies, can become dependent on them for distraction or validation.

"We are seeing severe addiction where teens have to be hospitalised for one to four months to overcome screen dependency," he said. "Like drugs and alcohol, this has become a new category of extreme de-addiction cases where conventional methods often do not work."

Helpline data also points to the trend. Satish Kadia, co-

ordinator for the Abhayam helpline in Ahmedabad, said calls involving children's screen addiction and violent behaviour have risen sharply since the pandemic.

In Vadodara, Ashfaq Kapadia, owner of the Gujarat branch of Tiger Security Guard Services, said his team was hired by a family whose son was addicted to drugs and frequently became abusive and aggressive when denied money.

"We deployed the team for some time before the youth assured the family of reasonable behaviour," Kapadia said. Such services, he added, cost between Rs 1,000 and Rs 5,000 per day.

In Rajkot, security agencies say parents are also hiring bouncers to keep tabs on teenagers involved in rash driving, street fights and risky social situations, including honeytraps. Keyur Unadkat, owner of Ram Security Agency, said many of these clients are politicians and businessmen keen to avoid controversy involving their children. According to agencies, families can spend upwards of Rs 50,000 a month on such monitoring.