

Sex differences in restricted repetitive behaviors and interests in children with autism spectrum disorder: An Autism Treatment Network study

John Knutsen, Morgan Crossman, James Perrin, Amy Shui and Karen Kuhlthau

Current research suggests that boys and girls may display different characteristics of autism. Most of these studies have shown how boys and girls differ in communication and social interaction; much less is known about sex differences in the area of restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests and activities (RRBs). In this study, we looked at how young boys and girls with autism may differ on the RRB section of the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition (ADOS-2) – an assessment often used in the diagnosis of autism. Participants in this study were part of the Autism Treatment Network registry, which includes medical and behavioral information about children with autism seen across 17 clinical sites working together across North America. The boys and girls selected from the registry were matched on age and IQ. We found that females in two of the four groups of children matched on age/IQ had lower rates of some RRBs than similar males. These two groups were younger female children (2 to 5.9 years of age) without an intellectual disability, and older female children (6 to 11.9 years of age) with an intellectual disability. These findings identify key RRB similarities and differences among young boys and girls with autism. The results also emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of the similarities and the differences in autism between females and males.