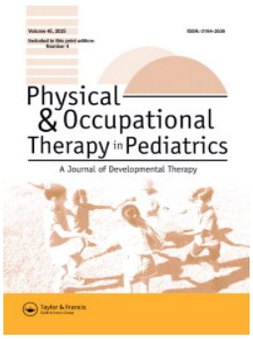

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Virtual Reality Rehabilitation Helps to Improve Postural Balance in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Randomized Control Trial

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can have difficulty adapting to environmental changes and motor-tasks demands.

Objective: to investigate the effectiveness of non-immersive virtual reality (VR) combined with traditional physiotherapy versus traditional physiotherapy alone on static and functional balance in children with ASD, aged from 7 to 12 years.

Methods: Fifty-three children with ASD were randomly assigned to either the VR group, received virtual reality training combined with traditional physical therapy, or the control group, received traditional physical therapy alone. The Biodex balance system and the pediatric balance scale were used to evaluate the balance control before and after the 12-week treatment program.

Results: MANOVA results showed significant improvements in the pediatric balance scale scores for both the VR and control groups compared to the pre-intervention, and that the post-intervention results were significantly lower than the pre-intervention in terms of the overall sway index and all Biodex tested conditions ($p < 0.05$). However, post-intervention between-group comparisons showed that these significant improvements in all outcome measures were in the favor of the VR group ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: This study suggests that virtual reality training could be an effective adjunct to traditional physical therapy for improving postural control in children with ASD.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Autism; biodex; Pediatric Balance Scale; postural balance; virtual rehabilitation

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Introduction

A common developmental disorder known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by limited and repetitive play as well as issues with social interaction and communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Worldwide, the prevalence of ASD has increased dramatically over the past 10 years to approximately 1 in every 100 children (Zeidan et al., 2022). Research on gross motor skills has revealed that children diagnosed with ASD exhibited motor abilities at a performance level lower than their peers who were developing typically, more in line with the abilities of children who have developmental delays (Liu & Breslin, 2013).

It has also been reported that, in comparison to people with typical development, lower postural stability is seen in children and adults with ASD when one or more sensory inputs are eliminated or altered (Doumas et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2017; Ghafar et al., 2022). In children with ASD, developmental hypoplasia has been found in the cerebellum, the critical region influencing sensory integration. Impairment of motor function can be caused directly or indirectly through its connections with the thalamus, hypothalamus and brain stem. The theory that deficits in postural control may be related to disintegration in sensory information processing occurring in the cerebellum has been developed as a result of postural control and gait studies in ASD (Nayate et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2007). Limited postural control and inadequate visual cues in children with ASD may be associated with a reduced interest in social cognition. Caldani et al., (2020) suggest that delays in the development of cortical regions responsible for sensory integration exacerbate difficulties in postural stabilization, as evidenced by greater postural sway. ASD has also been linked to impairments in motor control mechanisms, including sensory feedback, motor coordination, and feed-forward processes, all of which are essential for maintaining balance and initiating movement. These challenges underscore the need for interventions aimed at improving motor function and balance in children with ASD.

Recent research has explored the potential of virtual reality rehabilitation as an innovative approach to addressing children with limited posture and motor deficits (Hickman et al., 2017). Virtual reality (VR) refers to the usage of interactive simulations made with computer gadgets and applications that allow users to interact with environments that seem and feel like things that happen in the real world (Lee et al., 2019). To create a sense of "presence" in the virtual world, users engage with presented images, move and manipulate virtual objects, and take other actions that aim to "immerse" them in the simulated environment and because VR is relatively inexpensive, it has significant applications in the field of balance rehabilitation and training. (Weiss et al., 2004).

Several recent studies have focused on using VR-based training to improve communication, vocational, emotional, and social skills in children with ASD (Ketcheson et al., 2017; McCleery et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Dixon et al., 2020), with less attention paid to balance control and reactions. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the effects of virtual reality rehabilitation on postural control in children with ASD. The study hypothesis was that, when compared to traditional physical therapy alone, non-immersive VR training combined with traditional physical therapy, conducted three

times a week for a total of 12 wk, would result in significant improvements of static and functional balance in children with ASD.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

This is a single-blinded, randomized controlled trial that was conducted at local physical therapy rehabilitation centers from September 2022 to November 2023. The clinical trial registration number for the current investigation is NCT06094335. The Helsinki guidelines on human subject research were followed in this study as it was reviewed and approved by the ethics and research committee of Batterjee Medical College (RES-2023-0011). Throughout the study, no safety concerns or unfavorable side effects were reported in the VR group that would have compromised the integrity of the data collected or necessitated changes to the initially authorized trial intervention protocol. Children's participation in the study was secured by obtaining written consent from their legal guardians prior to data collection.

Participants

Fifty-four children with ASD of both sex with age between 7 and 12 years were recruited from the Jeddah autism day care center to participate in the current study. Internal announcements and recommendations were used to facilitate the recruitment process. Eligible children were randomly assigned to VR and control groups. The inclusion criteria were an age range of 6 to 12 years, an IQ greater than 70 according to the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales, Fifth Edition (SB5) (Janzen et al., 2004), and a mild (level one) ASD according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) completed by an autism-specialized psychiatrist. Children with a history of head injuries, genetic disorders or congenital abnormalities, blindness, hearing loss, use of assistive devices, psychiatric or neurological disorders, or recent fractures or musculoskeletal disorders were excluded from the study (Lim et al., 2020).

Sample Size

G*POWER statistical software (version 3.1.9.2; Franz Faul, Universitat Kiel, Germany) *F* tests - MANOVA: repetitive interaction measures with two-tailed comparisons were used to calculate the sample size prior to the experiment. The mean of the Biodex balance system parameters was calculated using information from a preliminary pilot study with ten children with ASD. Assuming an alpha of 0.05, a power of 80%, and an effect size of 0.50, the study's acceptable total sample size was 42 children. Figure 1 represents the participants' flow chart.

Randomization

The participants were initially stratified according to the following factors: sex, age, height, weight, and IQ level in order to create homogeneous subpopulations (strata) and prevent

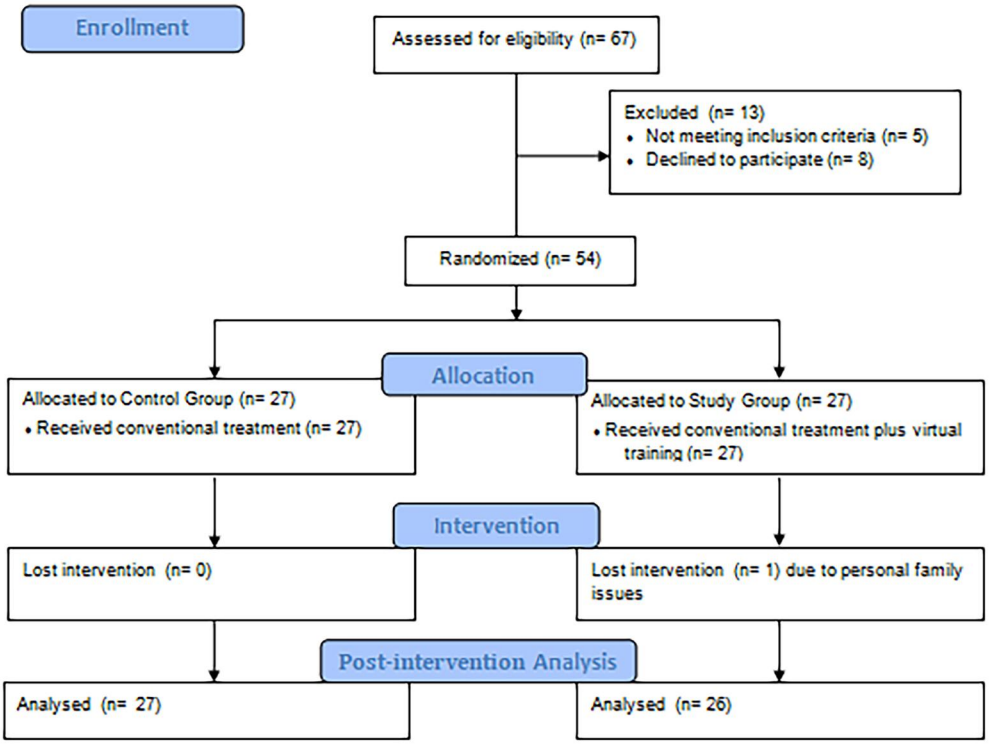

Figure 1. The flow chart of the participants throughout the study.

randomization error. The final groups' allocation were then formed using simple randomization from each stratum using the online Graph Pad software. Two groups were allocated; the VR group, which received both virtual training and traditional physical therapy, or the control group, which received traditional physical therapy alone. Allocation was concealed in sealed, nontransparent envelopes with sequential numbers. Randomization was carried out by a researcher who was blind to the study protocol.

Outcome Measures

Biodex Balance System

In this study, static balance was assessed using the Biodex balance system (BBS) (Biodex Medical Systems, Inc. 20 Ramsey Road, Shirley, NY, USA). BBS has been shown to be a reliable and valid tool for assessing postural stability objectively (Dawson et al., 2018). Modified Clinical Test of Sensory Integration and Balance (m-CTSIB) was used. The m-CTSIB has strong validity and reliability for assessing balance in children. Pandian et al. (2015) confirmed the concurrent validity of the mCTSIB in children aged 7–12 years, with a good correlation with force plate values ($r = 0.681–0.799$). In this test, participants stood shoulder-width apart in the middle of the balance system platform, and four conditions were taken into consideration: eyes open/firm surface, eyes closed/firm surface, eyes open/foam surface, and eyes closed/foam surface. In the final two conditions, the platform was covered with a foam pad bearing identical markings on

the firm surface. For each of the four testing scenarios, each participant was instructed to stand for a maximum of 20 s, with a 10-s break in between. A short test duration was used because it was difficult for children with ASD to remain focused for long periods of time (Matos et al., 2010). To prevent the effects of learning or fatigue, the order of testing was randomized. The average of three trials for each testing condition was used to determine the sway index. A higher sway index during the test indicated the unsteadiness of the child.

Pediatric Balance Scale

The Pediatric Balance Scale (PBS), a modified version of the Berg Balance Scale, is widely used to evaluate functional balance in children with mild to moderate disabilities. PBS's absolute and relative reliability have already been reported (Franjoine et al., 2003). PBS collection scores for the 14 tasks tested range from 0 to 56, with higher scores denoting improved postural balance. Each item is given a score between 0 and 4, where 0 denotes complete dependence and 4 denotes incapacity to complete the task without assistance (Cordeiro et al., 2021).

Three certified physiotherapists with more than 10 years of experience in pediatric assessment and rehabilitation conducted the evaluation processes; they were unaware of the participant's allocation. The authors provided a thorough explanation and oversight of a unified evaluation protocol.

Intervention Procedures. A specific physiotherapy program was administered to all children in both groups. The FITT (frequency, intensity, time, and type of intervention) principle is used to describe the program to standardize the training dose. Sessions were scheduled for three sessions/week for 12 wk with moderate intensity based on the Rating of Perceived Exertion-Pediatric (RPE-P) Scale (Liabraaten et al., 2023). Each session started with a 5-min warm-up, lasted for 30-minutes, and then ended with a 5-min cooling-down. The program included stretches for the calf muscle, hip flexors and adductors, and knee flexors and extensors (15-s hold for 5 repetitions). Strengthening exercises included curl-ups, prone extension, hip abduction from side lying with a weight around the ankle, hip extension from prone with knees flexed and then extended, and high sitting knee extension. Postural stability exercises comprise kneeling, half-kneeling, standing on both soft and rough surfaces, standing in tandem, standing on one limb (with eyes closed or open), stepping down and up, walking on a balance beam, and walking in all directions. These exercises were performed on both stable and unstable surfaces (Abd-Elfattah et al., 2022). After the traditional physical therapy ended, the VR group rested for twenty minutes before participating in a VR training session on the same day. The sequence in which the VR group received treatments was designed to make sure that VR training complemented the traditional physical therapy program without producing fatigue or overlapping advantages that might skew the results of the traditional therapy if it comes first.

Non-immersive VR was introduced through the Nintendo Wii Balance Board and Wii Fit Plus (Nintendo Co. Ltd., Kyoto, Japan). The Wii Fit plus comes with more than 40 games that focus on balance, strength training, and aerobics. The Wii Balance Board (WBB) is an accessory designed to measure balance. The user's position coordinates are

transmitted as the center of pressure (COP) by load cells on the board. The board's pressure sensors detected weight redistribution based on the demands of the game, and this causes the board to tilt in multiple directions (Tripette et al., 2017). Based on the FITT principle, VR training was provided three sessions a week for a total of 12 weeks, with moderate training intensity and a duration of 30 min. The following study-related games were practiced for 5 min each: Snowboard, Penguin Slide, Super Hula Hoop, Heading Soccer, Ski Jumping, and Table Tilt (Figure 2). Before beginning any session of simulated exercises, the child's position was adjusted to be between 1.5 and 2 meters away from the Wii screen, and the game was explained to them. Exercises would have been stopped if fatigue, pain, or dyspnea had occurred, even though none of these symptoms were reported during the study. Throughout the entire game, the researcher gave the participants encouragement. It is noteworthy that safety mats were used to ensure children's safety (Ghafar & Abdelraouf, 2017). To ensure the study interventions were implemented as designed, an intervention fidelity checklist was used (Appendix A Supplementary Material). This checklist confirmed that all elements of the intervention, such as session frequency, duration, intensity, and the specific games, were consistently administered to all participants. It also recorded adherence to safety protocols and researcher encouragement. The use of checklists aligns with established guidelines and best practices in health behavior change studies (Bellg et al., 2004; Belinda Borrelli, 2012).

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows, version 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA), was utilized by the authors. The Shapiro–Wilk test results, which verified that the data collected had a normal distribution, guided the selection of parametric statistical methods in this investigation. The significance difference between the means of the two groups with respect to age, weight, BMI, height, and IQ was examined using an unpaired *t*-test, and the differences between the groups with respect to sex were examined using a chi square test. Lastly, the means of the study and control groups were compared for each of the study's outcome measures using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). If the results were significant, a post hoc test with

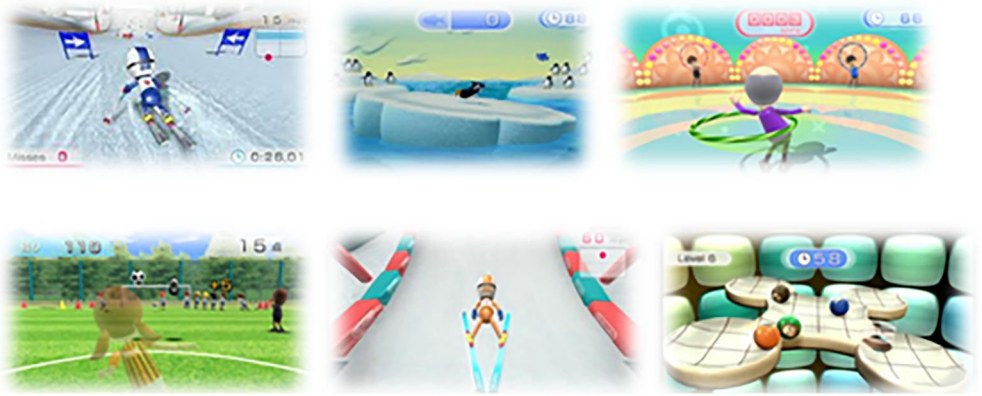

Figure 2. The selected Wii games.

Bonferroni corrections was applied. The probability of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant, with 95% confidence intervals. The effect size was calculated for the pre and post intervention mean comparisons of both groups. The intention-to-treat analysis (ITT) was not used in this study. Instead, the statistical analysis was performed on the participants who completed the study as per protocol.

Results

In the beginning, this study included 54 children with ASD of both sexes, ages 7 to 12. One VR group child was missed during the conduct of the intervention due to personal circumstances in the participant's family, and as a result, only 53 children being included in the post-intervention statistical analysis.

The children's clinical characteristics and basic demographic information from both groups, presented in Table 1, showed no significant differences between the two groups in terms of age, height, weight, BMI, IQ level, and sex distribution ($p > 0.05$).

When it came to within-group comparisons, MANOVA showed that pre-intervention means were significantly higher than post-intervention means of the overall sway index, and all the tested conditions: eyes open/firm surface, eyes closed/firm surface, eyes open/foam surface, and eyes closed/foam surface for the VR group (p-values <0.001, 0.012, 0.013, <0.001, <0.001 respectively), and also for the control group ($p = 0.004$, 0.037, 0.032, 0.029, 0.025, respectively). However, the post-intervention pediatric balance scale score was significantly higher than that of the pre-intervention assessment for both the VR group ($p < 0.001$) and the control group ($p = 0.025$) as shown in Table 2.

On the other hand, between group comparisons showed no-significant difference between the two groups' pre-intervention means for all measured Biodex balance scores and pediatric balance score ($p > 0.05$). Meanwhile, the VR group's post-intervention means showed a significant improvement over that of the control group ($p = 0.001$, 0.029, 0.026, 0.001, 0.001, 0.032) for overall sway index, eyes open/firm surface, eyes closed/firm surface, eyes open/foam surface, eyes closed/foam surface, and pediatric balance scale score respectively as shown in Table 2.

Discussion

Non-immersive VR rehabilitation in the form of Wii games has become an increasingly common method of rehabilitation for children with disabilities, with a growing amount

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of both groups.

Groups	VR group, ($n = 26$) Mean ± SD	Control group, ($n = 27$) Mean ± SD	p-value
Age (years)	9.71 ± 1.68	9.08 ± 1.92	0.210[a]
Height (cm)	133.23 ± 26.64	134.62 ± 24.92	0.845[a]
Weight (kg)	35.17 ± 7.54	34.85 ± 5.82	0.863[a]
BMI (kg/m^2)	19.15 ± 3.31	18.66 ± 3.08	0.579[a]
IQ	99 ± 11	103 ± 7	0.219[a]
Sex %			
Girls	11(42.30%)	10 (38.46%)	0.827[b]
Boys	15 (57.69%)	17(65.38%)	

Data are illustrated as mean ± SD standard deviation, IQ (intelligence quotient), [a]refers to independent t-test, [b]refers to Chi-square test, p-value > 0.05 means non-significant.

Table 2. Comparison of postural stability testing conditions of study and control groups.

Variables BBS		VR group $n = 26$	Control group $n = 27$	p-value	*MD (CI)*
Eyes open/firm surface	Pre	4.93 ± 1.25	4.68 ± 0.93	0.621	0.15 (−0.75–0.45)
	Post	3.35 ± 0.67	4.06 ± 0.83	0.001*	0.71 (0.28–1.13)
	p-value	<0.001 *	0.004*		
Eyes closed/firm surface	Pre	5.63 ± 2.34	6.19 ± 1.68	0.326	0.56 (−0.57–1.69)
	Post	4.80 ± 0.74	5.19 ± 1.1	0.029*	0.49 (0.07–1.10)
	p-value	0.012*	0.037*		
Eyes open/foam surface	Pre	5.57 ± 2.31	5.29 ± 1.65	0.613	0.28 (−1.38–0.82)
	Post	4.65 ± 0.79	5.02 ± 0.8	0.026*	0.36 (0.03–0.90)
	p-value	0.013*	0.032*		
Eyes closed/foam surface	Pre	7.03 ± 1.92	6.84 ± 1.47	0.848	0.09 (−1.03–0.85)
	Post	5.11 ± 0.86	6.39 ± 1.31	0.001*	0.87 (0.46–1.69)
	p-value	<0.001 *	0.029*		
Overall sway index score	Pre	6.26 ± 1.37	6.57 ± 1.82	0.488	0.31 (−0.58–1.20)
	Post	4.72 ± 0.94	5.65 ± 1.01	0.001*	0.73 (0.39–1.46)
	p-value	<0.001 *	0.025*		
Pediatric balance scale	Pre	47.35 ± 7.13	45.91 ± 8.26	0.600	1.44 (−5.70–2.82)
	Post	56.82 ± 11.36	52.07 ± 10.93	0.032*	6.75 (−12.89–−0.60)
	p-value	<0.001 *	0.025*		

Data are illustrated as mean ± standard deviation. BBS: Biodex Balance System; MD: mean difference; CI: confidence interval; *significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

of evidence confirming its value. Non-immersive VR applications are deemed safe for users in this age group in contrast to immersive VR that heavily relies on a head-mounted display to achieve an immersive experience. This may not be applicable to children with ASD as their training and performance may be impacted by side effects like claustrophobia and motion sickness (Irfan et al., 2021). To our knowledge, this is the first study that investigated the adding effects of virtual reality training to conventional physical therapy by using Wii games on balance in the autistic pediatric population.

The study's findings demonstrated that the balance reactions of children with ASD in the VR group, who received 12 weeks of virtual reality training along with traditional physical therapy, improved significantly more than those of the control group, who only received traditional physical therapy. This might be explained by the fact that engaging in virtual reality (VR) training encourages children to repeat their therapeutic activities more often while enabling them to interact with a virtual world. Virtual environments have the potential to provide users with an even greater level of enjoyment than traditional exercise, and children's enjoyment of physical activity is a crucial factor in influencing their likelihood of sticking with it (Stanmore et al., 2017).

Another reason why the balance of the VR group improved is because of the VR environment's unique multisensory experience, which includes all the sensory stimulations that are almost impossible to replicate in the real world (Lecuyer A, 2017). Feldman et al., (2018) found a strong correlation between multisensory integration (MSI) and autism and its related symptoms, as well as significant differences in MSI measures between children with ASD and their typically developing peers. Therefore, it is thought that the development of higher level skills in children with autism is based on the capacity to integrate information from multiple senses.

The variation in training dose between the two groups is a significant variable to consider when interpreting the results of the study. The study group received training for

70 min total per session, while the control group received training for only 40 min. It has been proposed that training dose is a crucial factor in the efficacy of rehabilitation exercises (Kazuki et al., 2024). This implies that exercise sustainability over a longer time frame may have a significant impact on the results. Previous studies have linked better rehabilitation outcomes to higher doses of exercise, whether longer duration or more repetitions (Peurala et al., 2012; Han et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, most of the earlier research using virtual reality as an intervention for children with ASD has concentrated on enhancing social and emotional competencies, communication skills, and, to a lesser degree, attention and reducing a particular phobia or fear. Studies that investigated the effects of VR on motor skills, to which we can compare our results, are lacking. However, the findings of the current study are consistent with previous research examining the impact of virtual reality on balance in individuals with various developmental disabilities.

Brien and Sveistrup (2011), Ghafar and Abdelraouf (2017), and Kurt-Aydin et al. (2024) reported comparable improvement in functional balance after VR training in adolescents with cerebral palsy and in children with Down syndrome and Duchenne and Becker muscular dystrophies, respectively. Moreover, the improvement of balance reactions in our study supported by the work of Ghobadi et al. (2019), which demonstrated that active video games by using Xbox Kinect improved static and dynamic balance in children with ASD.

On the other hand, the findings of the present study revealed significantly improved mean values in all assessed variables when comparing measurements taken before treatment to those taken after treatment in the control group. These findings may be explained by the well-structured physical treatment program that comprised various types of static and dynamic balancing exercises led by a trained physiotherapist who specializes in pediatric rehabilitation. The children's complex exercise environment decreased weight shifts, promoted positive behavioral and strategic choices, and continuously stimulated their senses (Golubović et al., 2012). The interventions provided targeted exercises for the ankle and knee joints, which are crucial for enhancing both static and dynamic postural control. These exercises help improve the integration of linked efferent neuromuscular and sensory impulses (Fotiadou et al., 2017).

Our results align with those of Najafabadi et al. (2018), who found that children with ASD experienced improvement in bilateral coordination, static and dynamic balance, after 36 sessions of a specific set of exercises called SPARK (Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids). Similar findings were validated by Roșca et al. (2022) and Djordjević et al. (2022), who indicated that providing a physical exercise-based program improved the balance of children with ASD.

The current study's strength lies in its investigation of the beneficial effects of virtual reality (VR), a therapeutic tool that to our knowledge, has not been specifically studied before for improving both static and functional balance in children with ASD, a condition that is quite prevalent. This contributes important information to an expanding body of evidence examining the impact of virtual reality on the balance of children with various disabilities. Additionally, the study has used standardized intervention procedures and assessment of the outcome measures, which contribute to the reliability of the findings. However, there are some limitations applied to the study. First, the long-

term effects of VR were not evaluated as compared to short-term effects. Second, only level one (mild) children with ASD were included in the study, which may limit the applicability of the findings to those with differing levels of ASD severity and limit the generalization, so further research is needed to determine how VR affects more severe cases. Finally, the efficacy of VR was not compared with other balance training modalities. Additionally, although the Wii console is often perceived as discontinued, it remains in use in various clinical settings. For replication, other gaming consoles with similar interactive features can be used.

Even though non immersive VR is recommended to be an integral component of children with ASD rehabilitation programs, more research should be done in the future to standardize and customize VR training protocols. For better generalization of VR study results, variables including participant selection and age ranges, training type and duration, tool selection for assessments, and most importantly the long-term impact of VR after intervention termination need to be established.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, adding rehabilitation training based on virtual reality to conventional physical therapy can significantly enhance postural balance in children with ASD. These findings provide a valuable rehabilitation technique for the ongoing clinical rehabilitation of children with ASD. Using a low-cost commercially accessible VR gaming system would help therapists build a high-intensity program with a variety of games and a regulated level of difficulty for children with autism.

Institutional review board

The study was carried out in line with the Helsinki Declaration, and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Batterjee Medical College (RES2023-0011).

Informed consent

The parents of all subjects participated in the study provided informed consent. The participants and their carers provided written informed consent to publish this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Mohamed A. Abdel Ghafar, PT, Ph.D., is a professor and consultant in pediatric physical therapy, specializing in children with special needs, autism, postural deformities, and neurological disorders. He has authored numerous research papers and serves as a reviewer for international journals. Actively engaged in clinical training, scientific research, and community health

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Data availability statement

The resources that support this work are accessible upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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