

More than just games

A report on the significance
of gaming culture for youths
with neurodevelopmental
disorders



Sverok

RIKSFÖRBUNDET
Attention

More than just games

ISBN: 978-91-639-1457-7

Authors: Johanna Hilding, Viktor Lindberg, Cecilia Brusewitz

Layout: Nicholas Ranégie-Ribbås

Photographs: Björn Adriansson, Mattias Andersson
stock.adobe.com: *Amolyus, KOTO, Javier, Lisa, Marc Elias, Marian Fil, Mikael Damkier, pressmaster, Rawpixel, Renato68, Southworks, Terove Salainen*

Contact: projekt@sverok.se

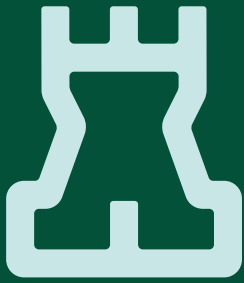


Thank you to all the young people, parents
and Sverok associations who contributed
valuable perspectives, experiences and
wise thoughts to the report.

Thanks to you, we can continue working
to make gaming culture even better for
everyone!

Contents

Introduction	6
About this report	6
About Sverok & Attention	8-9
Purpose and research question	10
Background	10
Method and sample	13
Results: Youths	15
“Gaming means everything”	15
Family support is critical	17
Results: Parents	17
Gaming as a social avenue	18
Societal attitudes and showing support	20
Gaming as a source of conflict	21
Results: Gaming associations	24
Making adjustments for NDDs	25
Associations as a "safe place"	26
Parents' thoughts on gaming associations	27
Analysis and discussion	28
Games are needed	28
Screen time vs. screen content	29
Gaming associations and democracy	31
Tips for parents	32
To decision-makers	34
Closing remarks	36



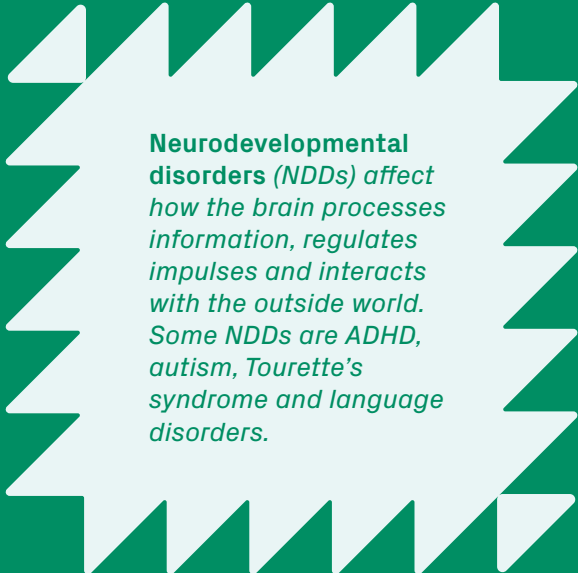
About this report

This report is part of the "Gaming on the Spectrum" project (May 2024 – April 2027), a collaboration between Sverok and Attention funded by The Swedish Inheritance Fund. The project aims to increase community participation and positive kinship for youths with NDDs. This version is a condensed and translated version of the original report in Swedish.

Introduction

Gaming and screen time are hot topics within media and politics, particularly regarding children and youths with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs). About 10% of youths between the ages of 7–25 are estimated to have a neurodevelopmental disorder (NDD). While the debate is often centered on the long-term effects of gaming and screen time, the youths themselves are rarely heard. This report allows them to share what gaming and gaming culture truly means to them.

Living with an NDD often brings challenges in different areas of life such as school,



Neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) affect how the brain processes information, regulates impulses and interacts with the outside world. Some NDDs are ADHD, autism, Tourette's syndrome and language disorders.

relationships, and even leisure time. Sweden has a long tradition of clubs and associations that serve not only as a social avenue but as a democratic foundation outside of school and family. But these spaces can be out of reach for NDD-youths due to social barriers or a lack of support. Sverok (The Swedish Gaming Federation) has seen how member associations can provide a safe space where youths with NDD flourish and find community.

By highlighting their personal stories and grounding them in meaningful statistics, Sverok

and Attention illustrate the vital role gaming plays for youths with NDDs. The report also explores how parents and policymakers can create better conditions for these individuals to participate in and thrive within both gaming culture and the wider community.

About Sverok

Sverok is a non-profit organization and one of Sweden's largest youth federations. Since 1988, Sverok has promoted gaming culture by helping young people start and run their own associations. These groups cover a wide range of interests, including digital and board games, roleplaying, cosplay, and East Asian popular culture.

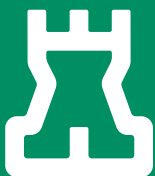
Through Sverok, youths not only pursue their hobbies but also learn democratic organization, leadership, and how to build social communities. With thousands of member associations across Sweden, Sverok works to ensure gaming culture remains accessible, inclusive, and fun for everyone.



About Attention

The Swedish National Association Attention is an advocacy organization dedicated to improving living conditions for people with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) such as ADHD, autism, Tourette's, and language disorders – as well as their families and professionals. The association works to increase societal understanding and advocates for better support, adjustments, and treatment within schools, healthcare, working life, and the community.

Through this, Attention contributes to creating a more inclusive and accessible society where people with NDDs have better opportunities to live independent and meaningful lives. The organization collaborates with authorities, researchers and other actors to drive development forward and strengthen the rights of people with NDDs.



Purpose and research questions

This report aims to explore how youths (ages 12–25) with NDDs experience gaming culture, focusing on their own perspectives and the function their interests serve in their lives. Additionally, it maps out the impact of community engagement on their personal development. The report also looks at how family and policymakers can better support this group's growth and participation in gaming circles. Based on these objectives, the report seeks to answer the following questions:

- What do games and gaming culture mean to children and adolescents with NDDs?
- What does community engagement within the gaming culture mean for children and adolescents with NDDs?
- How do parents of youths with NDDs perceive their children's interests within the gaming culture?

Background

Young people (ages 7–25) with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (NDDs) often feel excluded and describe a struggle to find their place in society, a survey by the organization Attention shows. These difficulties often start in school and continue into working life¹. Compared to their peers, NDD-youths report poorer mental health and a six times higher risk of self-harm or suicide². They also encounter a greater likelihood of problematic school absenteeism, which increases the risk of these individuals becoming NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). The gap in school attendance is significant. About **25%** of youths with NDDs are absent most or all of the time. In contrast, only **4%** of

¹ "Jag vill så gärna hitta min plats i samhället" [I so dearly want to find my place in society], Riksförbundet Attention [The Swedish National Association Attention], 6 december 2022

² Hanna Nordell, "Större risk att elever med NPF försöker begå självmord," [Greater risk that students with NDDs attempt suicide], Sveriges Radio, 29 april 2024.

the general student population is absent more than **30%** of the time³. Only 20% of NDD youths have no school absence related to their diagnosis⁴. NDD youths are also less satisfied with their leisure time as a group than their peers (**50% vs. 70%**)⁵. They also participate less in clubs and associations (**56% vs. 70%**), with many leaving these organizations between the ages of 10 and 12. Parents report that their children simply lack the energy for hobbies after meeting the heavy demands of the school day. Instead, these youths often find recovery and rest in front of screens⁶.

Some associations find difficulty in adapting their activities to NDD-youths due to the variation between every one person. Abilities such as impulse control, concentration, social interactions, keeping time and planning ahead are all aspects that may be impacted by an NDD. Digital activities are more popular among NDD youths than their peers (**71% vs. 64%**)⁷. The Public Health Agency of Sweden states that digital formats can improve wellbeing by making socializing easier for an NDD group. However, they also note a higher risk of "problematic screen time." This is defined as screen use that leads to the neglect of other important activities or a loss of control over time spent gaming. The Public Health Agency suggests this may be due to lower impulse con-

3 "Nationell kartläggning av elevfrånvaron 2023" [National mapping of school absenteeism 2023], Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education], 2024.

4 "Skolrapport 2023 – 'Skrämmande stor okunskap. Inte bara om NPF utan också om skolans skyldigheter'", [School Report 2023 – 'Appallingly great lack of knowledge. Not only about NDDs but also about the school's obligations'] Riksförbundet Attention.

5 "En fördjupad bild av ungas fritid" [An in-depth look at the leisure time of young people], Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor [Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society], March 16, 2023

6 "Färre krav och större tydlighet" [Fewer demands and greater clarity], Riksförbundet Attention [The Swedish National Association Attention], January 24, 2017.

7 MUCF (2023) [Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society].

trol and a more sensitive reward system in NDD-youths⁸. Their 2024 recommendations advise 1–2 hours of screen time per day for ages 6–12, and 2–3 hours for ages 13–18⁹. Björn Hofvander, Associate Professor (Docent) of Clinical Psychology, notes that these youths are more susceptible to being recruited for criminal activities online¹⁰. This is echoed by several parents expressing concern over what their youths may encounter online. On that subject, The Swedish Agency for Participation (MFD) emphasizes that society must provide meaningful leisure activities to reduce the risk of criminality¹¹.

Gaming-related online platforms are internet forums where users communicate through text/sound, image or video. Discord and Twitch are two such examples.



8 “Digitala medier och barns och ungas hälsa” [Digital media and the health of children and young people], Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden], June 17, 2024.

9 “Rekommendationer om skärmanvändning” [Recommendations on screen use], Folkhälsomyndigheten [Public Health Agency of Sweden], December 13, 2024.

10 “ADHD i kriminalvården” [ADHD in the prison and probation service], Kriminalvården, 2014; “Vi behöver bättre verktyg kring NPF” [We need better tools regarding NDD], Kriminalvården, August 29, 2022; Billstedt et al., “Neurodevelopmental disorders in young violent offenders”; 2017.

11 “Kriminalitet bland barn och unga” [Crime among children and young people], Myndigheten för delaktighet [Swedish Agency for Participation], March 27, 2025.

Method and sample

This report employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey to ensure both depth and breadth.

The qualitative research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 15 youths with NDDs aged 15–24, 9 parents of children with NDDs aged 13–22, and 5 representatives from different Sverok associations. The sample of interviewed youths strived for generalizability in regard to age, geographical location, gender and interests.

All youths had at least one interest within gaming culture: where popular interests were board games, roleplaying, attending conventions or organizing game-related events. Of the 5 Sverok association representatives interviewed, four were part of an association organizing activities in person and one was a member of an online-based association. The representatives of these associations were aged 19–25, some of whom have NDDs themselves.

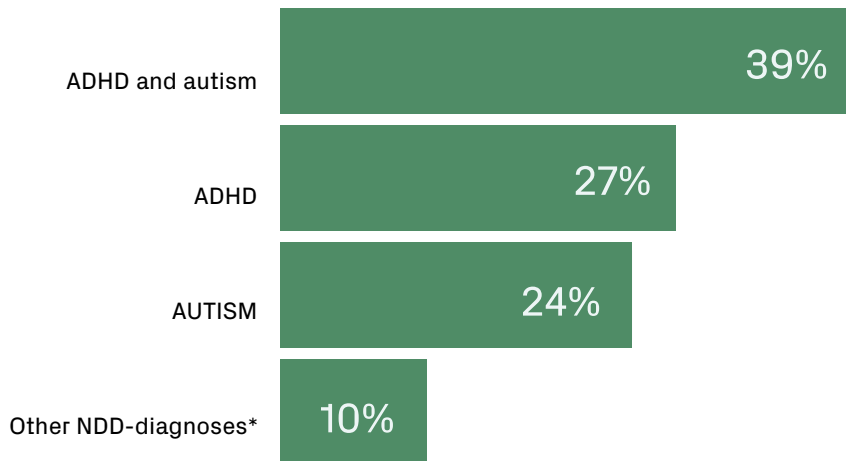
This method was chosen to provide a platform for youth voices and to address questions critical to the report's purpose. The interviews followed a set of questions refined through a pilot interview and were conducted individually or in some cases, in pairs. All material was recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis¹². To gain a broader perspective and strive for generalizability, a survey was conducted with 825 respondents. Participants were recruited through Sverok and Attention membership mailing, events, social media and lectures via self-enrollment.

*12 Braun, V., & Clarke, V., "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 2006. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>*

Of the respondents, **98.4%** were parents, primarily of teenagers, while the remainder were other relatives. Within this group, ADHD and autism (often in combined form as AuDHD) were overrepresented among their children. From a multiple choice query, **99%** of the children had an interest in digital games, followed by board games at **21%**.



Diagnoses of Children: Surveyed Group



** The chart "Other NDD-diagnoses" represent those who have reported other NDD-diagnoses or other combinations of diagnoses than ADHD and Autism.*

Results: Youths

This part of the report presents the results of the qualitative interviews and the questionnaire. It is divided into three chapters: young people's perspectives on gaming culture, parents' perspectives on gaming culture, and club activities within gaming culture.

"Gaming means everything"

When asked "What does gaming mean to you?" participants described it as a tool for recovery, social exchange, and gaining energy. The interviews suggest it helps them gather their thoughts and take breaks from the world, with different games chosen to match specific moods. Crucially, respondents feel that gaming helps manage negative emotions; one youth described it as a lifeline during a period of self-harm. Another youth remarked that it is essential to ask why a child is playing: is the gaming causing them to miss school, or are they playing because school is an environment they cannot handle?

"We often sit together and talk, and it has contributed greatly to our mental strength to have a network that we can lean on and make friends that way."

The social function is described as equally vital, providing a meeting place where many have found friends, in some cases their closest friends. While the youths note that both physical and digital spaces have pros and cons, they find that gaming culture provides a rule-based forum that simplifies social practice.

For those with autism, the participants feel that digital interaction can reduce overwhelming sensory input like eye contact, allowing them to be social on their own terms. One youth points out that conversation is not always necessary for social contact. Reading forums, watching fanart and other aspects of their interests may be gratifying in its own sense. Physical meetings are often described as feeling easier later in a relationship.

"At conventions, I know that people have a similar mindset and everyone has nerdy interests. I don't feel like I'm being judged. By mindset, I mean that people are open to the idea that others may have ADHD and autism, and understand that you might need a break."

While the interviewees acknowledge that social challenges exist even in gaming, they generally view the culture as more open. Many participants are open about their NDD, often gravitating toward others with similar diagnoses for mutual support. Associations and clubs are seen as helpful for maintaining these friendships over time.

"Role-playing means a lot to me; it's a way to... Well, partly just an excuse to meet up with my friends, but also a way to interact with them in a new way, like playing together. We're just having fun. I just think it means a lot to be able to be a bit silly together. Cosplay also means a lot to me because it's through it that I've met most of my close friends."

Conventions are events related to hobbies within gaming culture. N4rCon (games and cosplay) as well as ComicCon (tv-shows and popular culture) are two such examples.

Family support is critical

The interviews also highlight that family support is critical. While some parents are initially skeptical, many change their view once they understand the positive function gaming serves. When parents are supportive, youths feel more at ease sharing online experiences.

“Being supported means a lot. My parents are the people I am closest to. They will not abandon me. [...] I know that many people have parents who forbid them or say that their children must grow up. It feels great that they let me like whatever the hell I want. If they hadn't supported me, I probably would have done [my interest] anyway, but it wouldn't have felt as good. Like [having to] choose between having a family and being happy.”

Without this support, respondents describe feelings of shame and being forced to lead “double lives,” fearing they will be blamed if they talk about negative incidents online with their parents. According to the youths, better parental understanding leads to potentially stronger relationships and increased trust.

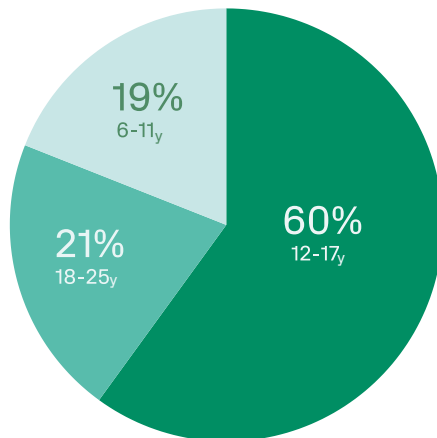


Results: Parents

This chapter explores the parental perspective on gaming and NDD, based on a survey of over 800 responses and nine qualitative interviews. The goal was to capture a holistic view of how gaming affects wellbeing, social life, and function, and what it is like to parent a child with an NDD and a gaming interest.

Both mothers and fathers participated, most with some form of gaming interest of their own. Nearly all of them expressed a desire to take even more interest in what their children are doing. **90%** of parents feel the gaming interest is a source of joy and fills various functions such as meaning, engagement, and social exchange for their child. A majority (**73%**) state that gaming helps their child manage their daily life. Parents observe that gaming offers recovery, a way to process sensory input, and a distraction from anxiety or poor mental health.

Ages of Children: Surveyed Group



Like the youths themselves, parents also experience gaming culture to have a vital social role – finding and keeping friends through role-playing, conventions, and board games. The parents who don't see a social benefit, believe it is because the child prefers solo play or lacks a local gaming community.

Gaming as a social avenue

Some parents note that gaming is their child's only social environment outside the family, being an avenue where they can develop their social skills. Without these avenues, their child would be more lonely.

“The best thing about his interest is that he has something he enjoys doing every day, something to look forward to, and that it contributes to social interaction and opportunities for socialising.”

The interviews showed that gaming culture provides a community of like-minded people, both in person and online. One parent described how the child was strengthened as a person through gaming, which had a positive effect on other parts of life.

“[Without this interest], her self-confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness would have been much lower. Today, she can be herself around people, which she wouldn't have been able to be without gaming culture and that aspect of her life. Being able to be yourself gives you the confidence to be self-assured in everyday life too. Knowing that there are thousands of others out there like you. In her earlier teenage years, she suffered from

panic attacks around people and found it difficult to be around lots of people, but she handles it completely differently today. This is precisely because she has been able to practice in safe environments such as NärCon, where there are lots of people and things happening, but everyone is kind and happy. Then you can practice being in larger contexts and see that it goes well, and then it will surely go well in town too.”

For children struggling with school or mental health, gaming is often a “life force” and a tool to cope with daily life. While gaming is often seen as asocial, parents note it is sometimes the reason a child “comes out of their room” to be social in digital contexts. Many parents feel there are prejudices that gaming equals “problematic school absenteeism” or being unwell. A majority feel that society misunderstands how the interest relates to wellbeing or school absence; instead, gaming can be what holds everything together.

While parents encourage other activities for their children, they admit it is sometimes difficult. All of the parents believe their children have felt supported in their interest, at the least hoping that to be the case. They show support by e.g. being curious, attending conventions, playing together, or buying equipment. However, NDDs can make navigating gaming culture difficult, and some parents describe the need to guide their children to fitting forums.

Societal attitudes and showing support

Showing support is also seen as vital in encouraging the youth to share if something happens online. Some parents who participate in gaming report fewer conflicts with their youth through compromises, by for example learning why certain games cannot be paused at all times. They also feel

that they have received positive responses from both their child and their friends in participating. Some parents are noticing educational benefits from gaming, like learning history and geography through *Assassin's Creed*. Conversely, parents who notice dismissive attitudes from other parents towards gaming and gaming culture fear such attitudes push children away. One mother exemplified how taking an interest in *Minecraft* brought her closer to her son. She discovered sides of him he otherwise didn't show, like when he built houses for her and his grandmother in the game, saying: "This is where Grandma is going to live!"



<i>Relatives who...</i>	<i>...share an interest in gaming culture with the child</i>	<i>...don't share an interest in gaming culture with the child</i>
<i>...experience a high degree of conflict with the child regarding the interest</i>	25%	75%
<i>...experience a medium degree of conflict with the child regarding the interest</i>	31%	69%
<i>...experience a low degree of conflict with the child regarding the interest</i>	40%	60%

Gaming as a source of conflict

Some parents experience conflicts regarding time limits, sleep routines, age limits, and in-game purchases. They worry about intrusive commercial messages reaching their children. Others have only minor conflicts about language or when to end a session to help at home. Several parents underscore the importance of understanding children and their interests.

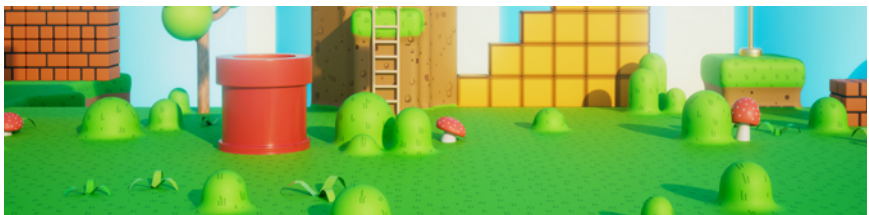
“It’s one less thing to feel different about. If your parents scold you about screen time or don’t share your interests or understand how it works, it makes you feel even less understood by others than you already do. You feel different, you realize that others don’t function like you do. But if you are supported in your interests, if people say things like ‘wow, your make-up looks great’ or ‘how fun that you went on that trip’, then you are validating someone for who they are.”



Several parents feel society lacks knowledge about NDDs and gaming culture. On that topic, **42%** of parents feel a high degree of judgment by relatives, colleagues, or family for their child's interest. Many believe the screen time discussion needs more nuance to find realistic solutions.

“I feel there is a lack of knowledge or support and advice regarding screen time and children with NDDs. It feels like we are mostly being fed the message that too much screen time is dangerous. But not so much about how to think about it, what is dangerous, and what you can do to prevent it from becoming dangerous, even though you still want a lot of screen time and so on. Especially when it comes to children with NDDs, all the advice that is given now about food and screens and so on may be suitable for neurotypical people, but for children with NDDs it becomes very difficult.”

Many adults have too little knowledge of what gaming and screen time constitute for children they feel, and while most parents see the benefits, some wrestle with worries about sedentary behavior, addiction risks, or gaming being the child's only source of joy. Over half of the parents (**52%**) feel their child plays too much and want more research and advice. Furthermore, of the **30%** who wish their child pursued another interest, a large majority of those would prefer it be something physical instead.



Results: Associations

This chapter explores youth perspectives on gaming culture and parental views on associations, based on interviews with five Sverok associations, youths, and parents. What knowledge, possibilities and challenges have associations and clubs provided for this group?

The Sverok associations, ranging from 20 to 500 members of mostly high school age, focus on interests like cosplay, digital games, and anime. All have members with NDDs. While most lack formal NDD adjustments, they have their own ideas for improvement and strive for inclusion.

Making adjustments for NDDs

One goal is to make members feel safe enough to suggest their own adjustments:

”You don’t know what needs to be fixed unless you see it, and maybe that’s the perspective we need to have a little bit, someone to tell us what isn’t working for them.”



Current practices include maintaining low noise levels, avoiding display of upsetting media material, and communicating clearly. At some events, tournament organizers are used to guide participants, which is particularly helpful for those with autism.

“When we arrange tournaments, we have a ‘tournament organizer’. They make sure everyone finds their place, talk to people so they are comfortable and understand what is going to happen. They walk around and make sure everything is working. Because sometimes it can be difficult, especially if you have autism like me, to just go and ask for help. So you get that help automatically. But otherwise, I think most people in the association already have NDD-diagnoses, and they already feel very comfortable.”

The largest group is online-based via Discord, where anyone can join the server without being a formal member.

Here, leaders lead by example, using respect and “kind interpretations” (the benefit of the doubt) to support rather than punish those who struggle with behavior.

Nine of the interviewed youths are active in Sverok associations, covering university clubs, LAN events, board games, miniatures, role-playing, and conventions.

Associations as a "safe place"

For many, these associations are vital meeting places where they feel accepted and for some constituting their entire social circle:

“The first time I was there [at the association], I quickly became part of the community that was there. The people were very inclusive and welcoming, and I quickly became part of the group. [...] It has been a great source of support for me, because we are always there for each other. So they have helped me a lot.”

This contrasts with the prejudice and misinformation they often face elsewhere. A majority of the interviewed youths hold associational responsibilities like board positions, managing finances, moderating, or recruiting members. For several of them, this has had positive effects on their self-esteem, underlining the importance of teamwork and communication. Some mention feeling pride in being trusted with “job-like” roles, especially when society otherwise treats them as incapable. One youth whose NDD significantly impacts his daily life describes succeeding in his role because the association adapted to his specific needs.

“My diagnosis affects me greatly in my everyday life. Right now, I don’t have [...] the ability to handle a regular job. I still live at home, I don’t have a driver’s license, and that’s largely because it’s difficult for me to deal with change, but also stress. [In the association, you can] be yourself. There are no specific requirements that you have to be able to do this or that; you just do what you can, and if you can’t do more, then you ask for help. I feel that in a normal 9-to-5 job, it wouldn’t have worked, but it feels very safe for me to be able to go there and also be able to handle it like a normal job. Because even though I’m there as a volunteer, it’s still like you’re doing a job and you’re accepted for who you are there.”

Parents' thoughts on gaming associations

Parents report that their children have often tried sports but faced challenges due to high social demands, lack of NDD knowledgeable leaders, or the need for parents to attend sessions themselves.

While they see gaming associations more positively, they still find it difficult to find local groups in small towns. Parents express frustration over the funding gap between sports and gaming, which they feel creates a status difference in society.

Parents also desire more guidance from authorities, like habilitation services, to help them navigate platforms like Discord and support their children's hobbies. Unlike sports, gaming culture lacks established structures for parents to meet and support each other, leaving many feeling they must navigate their child's interest without a network or adult guidance.



Analysis and discussion

This chapter analyzes the results in relation to the background, establishing that gaming, more than just an interest or a pastime, is essential for the well-being and social lives of NDD-youths while serving as a multifunctional tool to navigate daily life.

Games are needed

While survey data and interviews show a consensus between parents and youths on these positive aspects, some parents remain restrictive or dismissive, negatively impacting the youth. Survey data indicates that gaming is a source of recurring conflict for some more than others. Parents may worry that gaming leads to isolation, unemployment or school absence, possibly since NDD-youths are overrepresented in these groups. However, the youth interviewed reject this model – some having returned to work or school after being absent. They argue that unadapted school environments cause the problem, whereas gaming is a vital social avenue for establishing and deepening friendships both online and in person.

For NDD-youths, gaming facilitates easier social interaction through shared interests and provides necessary recovery for different moods and sensory processing needs. A consensus between the groups can be seen in that family support is vital. Data shows that when parents engage in the interest and learn more about it, conflicts decrease and relationships strengthen. Without this support, NDD-youths may feel forced into a taxing double life, already burdened by societal stigma and an increased prevalence of mental illness.

Screen time vs. screen content

The ever-present debate regarding screen time can not be discussed in its entirety in this report, but the topic which includes terms like 2024's internet phenomenon "brainrot" (a perceived loss of critical thinking skills attributed to over-consumption of meaningless material), can on one hand be viewed through a historical lens. Not overly dissimilar to concern over youths indulging in novels, video violence, or music genres. On the other hand, striking a balance remains central and the survey demonstrates that this is a subject many parents grapple with. Few can pursue their interests full time, and needs can vary from person to person – organization in regards to NDD. It is important to establish what type of balance is to be aspired to in the individual case. Societal norms are not applicable, and more importantly not helpful for all youths.



While The Public Health Agency of Sweden also highlights that content matters, their focus is on digital activities not pushing school, social life, recovery and other life aspects aside, this is often inapplicable to NDD-youths whose screen use may be their primary social life and recovery space rather than a replacement for it.

With the aforementioned insights into how gaming and related platforms provide a social avenue and recovery strategy for NDD-youths, is it fair to equate all screen time then?

Instead of rigid guidelines or one-size-fits-all norms, the focus should be on the function the screen serves and identifying specific unmet needs to achieve balance with studies or exercise without opposing the gaming interest itself.

Gaming associations as foundations for democracy

Furthermore, gaming is not separate from society; gaming associations function as schools for democracy and perso-



nal development, acting as a protective factor against isolation and criminal recruitment. Historically, Sweden has a strong tradition of associations and invests heavily in NDD-youths, yet fails to reach them. Instead, these young people create their own affordable solutions for safe and welcoming communities. There is much to be gained by learning from their engagement and moving away from enforcing societal norms that do not always apply to them. Through this we can give the youths agency to shape their leisure time according to their own needs and desires.





Tips for parents

Take an interest in gaming culture

Watch your child play, be curious and ask questions, play together, attend conventions or borrow books about what interests your child in gaming culture. Showing that you are genuinely interested builds a relationship and makes it easier for your child to talk about their interests – even if something uncomfortable happens in the gaming/online world where they might need your support. By learning about games, you will also gain knowledge about what purpose different games have for your child: such as recovery, knowledge acquisition and/or excitement. Focus on the content rather than screen time.

View gaming culture as valuable

Think of gaming and gaming culture as a ‘real’ interest. Some parents spend a lot of time and energy driving their children to various activities and getting involved in the local sports club. In your case, it may instead involve driving them to conventions and helping with cosplay costumes. Through your involvement, you signal to your child that they and their interests are important and legitimate.

Build bridges to social communities

Help your child find clubs, Discord groups or events where they can meet others with the same interests. Perhaps there are even other parents in your area you can collaborate with? This can make your involvement both easier and more enjoyable.

Respect and explore self-expression

The gaming world is often a place where children – especially those with NDDs – can express themselves, their identity or personality. If something feels strange to you, be curious rather than judgemental. Ask: ‘What does this mean to you?’

Be structured & tackle conflicts together

If, for example, gaming leads to recurring conflicts, try to have a calm conversation. Explore together what makes it difficult to stop and find common ground – for example, not starting new games late at night. Try to focus on adding a new desired behaviour rather than reducing another. When children are involved in setting the boundaries, it becomes easier for them to follow them.

To decision makers

Recognize gaming culture as youth-culture

Gaming culture is one of the most widespread cultural forms among young people today, but it is still often discussed in negative terms. Instead, highlight gaming as an opportunity for creative expression, social community and future careers – especially for young people with NDDs. As a decision maker, you have the power to influence the tone of the public discussion. Use it to normalise and validate gaming as a legitimate cultural form.

Build a knowledge base on the subject

To make wise decisions, you need to understand the reality of young people's lives. Visit gaming associations, talk to young gamers, meet people with NDDs, take part in research – and draw on the knowledge of civil society, for example from Sverok and Attention. With the right knowledge base, you can formulate targeted initiatives and support that actually work – and avoid creating rules that risk doing more harm than good.

Create conditions for organization

Ensure that young people have the opportunity to start, run and participate in associations – whether it's football, role-playing games or e-sports. This requires premises, funding models, support staff and easily accessible information. All young people need places where they can belong – even those who would never join a football team.

☑ **Make the support readily available**

Children and young people with NDDs often benefit from gaming culture, but they also need tailored support. Focus on producing informative material and recommendations that are accessible to children, parents and professionals alike. Don't forget the young people who need help finding their way into a safe and inclusive gaming world. Avoid abandoning them to passive screen time as their sole activity.

☑ **Invite young people**

Let young people's voices shape decisions. Create forums where young people, especially those who are part of gaming culture themselves, can have their say. Ensure that their experiences are taken seriously – not just as a 'user perspective', but as co-creators of solutions. Participation is not a bonus, rather a tool for making better decisions.



Closing remarks

You who have read this report have come across something often missing from public discourse: voices and stories from young people living with NDDs about what makes them feel better, find community and manage their often taxing day-to-day life. It is clear that for many NDD-youths gaming culture is not just a pastime or an interest, but important in every sense of the word. It is a safety net, an engine, an identity. A place where one is able to succeed.

In this report you have met youths who've found their best friends through games and helped them recover from depression. Youths who feel more understood in a Discord server than in their classroom. You have also heard from parents who've seen their child develop and grow with the help of an interest often dismissed – finding a way back to contact, closeness and trust. Several of the stories show it's



not about escaping reality, but shaping a reality where one can thrive. When youths are given the opportunity to engage in gaming culture and associations on their own terms, they are actively engaging in the fundamentals of our society such as cooperation, leadership and democratic values. However, this is contingent upon adults listening to them, realizing their potential and choosing to support rather than limit. By taking their interests seriously – especially those who do not always fit into the traditional mold – we construct an interwoven society. In gaming culture NDD-youths are allowed to be creators, problem solvers and team players. Here they do not only level up in the game but in life itself.



To read more about the questions we've asked during the report (in Swedish), follow the QR-code or visit <https://sverok.se/fragebatteri/>

More than just games

What does gaming really mean to young people with NDDs? Young people's interest in gaming is often met with incomprehension or negative perceptions from adults. In this report, young people themselves have their say.

The report shows that gaming culture is important to young people with NDDs in several ways. It can offer a long-awaited sense of community, a creative outlet and an opportunity to participate on their own terms. For some, this involvement also becomes a gateway to community life, where young people have the opportunity to exercise leadership, make decisions together and learn democratic processes in practice.

Discover why it is more important than ever to create meeting places around gaming for young people who otherwise risk being excluded from kinship and community!