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Autism and play therapy - characteristics and considerations

التوحـــد والعـلاج باللعـب – خصائـــص واعتبـارات

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Abstract:

Play is of pivotal significance to the healthy development of a child, and as such, it warrants careful consideration and nurturing. Play constitutes the primary aspect of childhood, serving as the catalyst for numerous developmental processes. It enables children to comprehend the world around them, discern their capabilities, and foster personal growth. Play also functions as a means of escaping self-centeredness. Play therapy, a frequently employed method within the field of childhood studies, is predicated on psychological foundations and employs methodologies consistent with the developmental stage of the child. Its applications extend beyond mere recreational purposes, encompassing the domains of education and diagnosis, and its efficacy in autistic children, grappling with deficiencies in communication and social interaction, is particularly pronounced. Play-based interventions have been shown to mitigate and reduce the manifestations of these conditions, underscoring its significance as a vital tool in addressing diverse developmental challenges.

Keywords: Play therapy; Autism; Child Development; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Social Interaction.

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ملخص:
يعد اللعب أحد أهم الاحتياجات الحيوية للطفل الجديرة بالاهتمام والرعاية، ذلك لان اللعب هو الخاصية والسمة الاساسية للطفولة، وهو المحرك والدافع المساعد في كل عمليات النضج والتكوين، يدرك فيه الطفل العالم بأسره، ووسيلته في اكتشاف ذاته وقدراته المتنامية، وأداة فعالة للنمو، ووسيلة للتحرر من التمركز حول الذات. ويعتبر العلاج باللعب طريقة شائعة الاستخدام في مجال الطفولة، وذلك لاستناده على أسس نفسية، وله أساليب تتفق مع مرحلة النمو التي يمر بها الطفل، كما انه مفيد في تعليم الطفل وفي تشخيص مشكلاته وعلاج اضطرابه. فالطفل التوحدي الذي يعاني من قصور في التواصل والتفاعل الاجتماعي، فإن أنشطة اللعب تعد من أنسب الطرق للتخفيف من هذه المظاهر والحد منها.
الكلمات المفتاحية: العلاج باللعب؛ التوحد؛ نمو الطفل؛ اضطراب طيف التوحد؛ التفاعل الاجتماعي.

1. Introduction:

Scientific research has confirmed that play is an important and effective educational tool in the life of the child, and has a significant impact on the formation of his personality, with its various dimensions (mental, social, moral and educational). Furthermore, play, when subject to specific goals, becomes a successful educational mediator. Play is of paramount importance for the child, as it represents the child's preferred occupation. The satisfaction of the child's desire to play necessitates the relinquishment of other activities, the selection of suitable engaging games, and the provision of psychological and educational guidance to children during play.

Cognitive-Behavioral Play Therapy is among the experimentally proven interventions to facilitate children's understanding and dealing with harsh and difficult life situations. The use of toys, fairy tales and symbolism presented by the therapist and representing the child's emotional experiences gives children an opportunity to understand what they have experienced by uniting with the character of the hero. This may help them gain a better understanding of their emotions, make it easier for them to express them, modify their troubled thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and ultimately promote healing and growth.

2. Definition of play and its importance

Play is defined as that free activity in which a person participates without regard to material or substantial benefit. The simple level of play that is easily observed is available in young children before society intervenes by organising play and using it as a means of social normalisation.

The researcher defines it as the activity in which children explore the properties of

objects in two or three dimensions, including their sounds, colours, shapes, sizes and textures. In this way, children demonstrate their growing ability to imagine, listen, observe and use a variety of tools, with the aim of expressing their thoughts and communicating their feelings and those of others.

Taylor defines play as the breath of life for the child, and not merely a means of passing the time or occupying oneself. Play is an integral component of the process of upbringing, exploration and self-expression. (Abdul Hadi, 2004, p. 26)

Piaget (1974) defined it as a process of representation or learning that transforms the information received to suit the needs of the individual. In his 1950 paper, Erikson (1950) defined play as the function of the ego, an attempt to synthesise the physical and social processes of the self.

Suzan Ezéks's position on the subject of play is that it is the work of the child and the means by which he grows and advances. Furthermore, she asserts that play is a symbol of mental health. (Al-Lababidi & Khalayla, 2005, p. 07)

This assertion is corroborated by (Abdel Fattah, 1995, p. 15), who posits that play constitutes an activity undertaken by the child and can be euphemistically designated as "work". The obligation of childhood to work in order to grow, and the child practices this practical activity by distinguishing between play and work and becomes differentiated between them from the point of view of the reality that he has acquired, and takes his movement to the real world through the world of work and discovery.

3. Definition and importance of play therapy

The significance of play therapy lies in its recognition as a fundamental innate activity for children from birth, with its forms encompassing both individual and collective, organised and random expressions. The act of play, irrespective of its specific nature, fosters a sense of pleasure and happiness in children, thereby contributing to their growth in multiple domains, including the emotional, social, cognitive and physical. Play is one of the activities that lead to diagnostic and therapeutic goals, through its ability to facilitate communication between the child and their physical and social environment. In addition to providing children with the opportunity to acquire new experiences and skills through discovery, exploration, imagination and problem solving, it also contributes to the reshaping

of emotional experiences.

Play is an important, necessary and pivotal activity for the human being in general and the child in particular, where the primary role of play within the child's life lies in helping the physical, mental and even emotional development, through this technique the child becomes able to perform many diverse skills and prepares for learning and enhances the integration between his mental development and social life until play becomes a language in which the child talks and games become words. (Elbeltagi, Al-Biltagi, Saeed, & Alhawa, 2023, p. 02)

This is confirmed by (Reem Mohammed, Nermin Kamal, 2023) in that play becomes for the child a language in which he communicates with others, and the game becomes the word by which he expresses his desires, tendencies and what he wants, as the child drops everything that wanders in his being and his mind through his dealings with that game.

Due to the interactive characteristics of the gameplay. It has been used as a therapeutic intervention method with children with emotional, social and behavioral problems. It has become one of the effective and effective clinical ways to deal with children's problems, by providing a safe communication environment. Play becomes for children – as we mentioned earlier – as their linguistic dictionary, through which they reflect their thoughts, needs and feelings, as the child deals in play with realistic visible and invisible things, which are symbols of other things that the child experienced directly or indirectly. Through play therapy, the child drops feelings of stress and anxiety on toys and toys (Gelolard, 2001).

There have been many definitions of play therapy, and each researcher has taken his knowledge within the framework of the theory he adopts. Shaefer (1993) defined it as a process between a personality in which the therapist systematically uses the therapeutic ability to play, such as: role-playing, communication and discharge, to help the child deal with the psychological problems he faces, and to prevent future problems. The play therapist uses a range of techniques that determine how to use the play material in order to ensure appropriate therapeutic use.

The American Society defines play therapy as the systematic use of theoretical models to establish a relationship between a personality, while the therapist employs the therapeutic ability of play to help the child deal with the current challenges he faces, and prevent future problems, to achieve normal growth in all developmental manifestations. (Al-Huyan & Dawood, 2015, p. 408)

Therefore, play is used as an important way to control, guide and correct the child's behavior. It uses the integrated and balanced physical, mental, social and emotional play of the child, as it strengthens him physically, provides him with general information and social standards and controls his emotions. Play is used to satisfy the child's multiple needs: such as his need to play himself when he plays, his need to possess when he feels that there are things he owns or wants to possess, and his need to control when he feels that there are parts of his environment that he can control. And his need for independence when he plays in freedom and when he expresses himself in the way he prefers without the guidance of others.

Play also provides an opportunity to express and vent emotionally the tensions that arise from conflict and frustration, and this appears when the child expresses his problems when dealing with play movement and speech, and when he repeats situations that affect his emotional problems. The child also finds a solution to his conflicts and problems while playing, for example, sometimes the child may neglect his doll or reject it or destroy it, and all this is of great importance in understanding and expressing his emotions.

4. The historical development of play therapy

Play therapy has been utilised in a variety of forms within a range of theoretical orientations (Kessler, 1988). The initial implementation of play in psychotherapy can be traced back to a group of therapists who adopted the principles of psychoanalysis. A comprehensive review of the extant literature on psychoanalysis was conducted by Thomas and Ross (1993), who noted the utilisation of psychoanalytic methods by prominent figures such as Hug-Hellmuth, Anna Freud, and Burlingham. These practitioners employed play as an alternative to free fall, thereby demonstrating a heightened level of responsiveness and encouragement towards children in comparison to their approach with adults in free fallout.

Klein also pointed out the value and importance of communication during gameplay. She suggested that play for a child is like free fall apart for adults. She also advocated the direct interpretation of the unconscious processes expressed by the child during play, as she used automatic play in the treatment of psychologically striking children to reveal unconscious desires, fears and conflicts.

Psychodynamic play is the focus of the therapeutic process. They pay more attention to

the use of play for the purpose of child development, compared to what the tradition of metamorphosis recommends (they consider it more a constructivist developmental method than an analytical one that is sold to reveal motives and causes).

Client-centered therapy has developed its concepts through Axline, which uses unguided play, in which the therapist focuses on communicating with the child. During therapy sessions, the therapist empathizes and understands the child's issues, and rarely provides explanations for the child's behavior and motivation.

Proponents of cognitive theory have also developed their methods to match play therapy. Meichenbaum suggested that a child can be taught self-control through the use of visualization and imagination, and he used play as a means of modifying thoughts.

Knell also developed cognitive-behavioral methods that use modeling and reinforcement, in addition to the methods used by Gardner who used mutual storytelling as a means of therapy (Knell, 1997). (Rabbahi, 2011, pp. 108-109)

5. Playing in the light of theories

5.1 Psychoanalysis

Through psychoanalytic theory, Freud emphasized the need to use play as a means of analyzing the psychology of children, which is difficult to analyze by free fall or by following other methods. Freud interpreted the illusionistic play associated with imagination as a way to bring down desires and re-enact the traumatic events that the child experienced.

Klein also assumed that child play was an alternative to the crumbling technique as the norm in adult analysis, and developed a method of therapy in which a number of small dolls were used to express patterns of initial relationships with subjects. She paid great attention to the observation, and pointed out that the child expresses his fantasies and real life experiences through symbolic formulations and through playing with these small dolls. The use of free play is the result of the child's inability to express his desires fluently, as his ability to verbally express is not yet complete.

She considered "Anna Freud" play as a diagnostic tool in the context of developmental development as play is inherent to the developmental paths and part of them, and pointed out in this regard that play begins with the newborn child as an activity that gives him pleasure or pleasure, and includes the mouth, fingers and skin surface through the mother's body during feeding, then the play moves from the body of the mother and the child to other alternatives such as pillow and dolls. etc., which is an expressive subject charged with lipids,

narcissism and lebido subject (the first thing a child plays with). (Metwally & et al., 2007)

5.2 Behavioral theory

Behavioral theory is one of the theories that interpreted play as a link between a set of stimuli and responses, meaning that the child masters the game through repetition, practice and reinforcement, as this affects the child's skill level. (Abdul Hadi, 2004, p. 47)

Watson noted that the successful movements of the animal in its attempt to get out of the cage are the ones that remain, while the failed movements go and do not return, that is, the organism responds directly to the successful actions that lead it towards the end, while the failed movements that have occurred at the time of exposure to the situation for the first time do not return and do not appear in the behavior after practicing the learning process, and learns in the correct way to respond to the situation. (Al-Lababidi & Khalayla, 2005, p. 36)

5.3 Jean Piaget theory

Piaget looks at adaptation on the basis of two complementary processes, namely representation and assimilation or alignment, where Piaget attributes the process of mental development in the child to the continuous activity between these two mechanisms. Where he sees that representation that converts the emerging information received to suit the needs and requirements of the individual, and thus play and simulation are an integral part of the process of mental or cognitive development.

Piaget believes that the child at the age of 2-4 years continues to play symbolic or play illusionary, he believes that at this age language becomes episodes linked with mental development and when then grow language and flourish symbolic play, and in the period between 4-7 years is symbolic play more linked to reality, and this is what Piaget expressed, the child imitates realistic experiences more likely because he becomes more social and can share with others in their experiences. (Al-Lababidi & Khalayla, 2005, p. 42)

5.4 Self-expression theory

This theory is the latest theory of play and is based on "Bernard Masson" in his presentation of his theory that man is an active creature, however, his physiological and anatomical composition imposes some restrictions on his activity, and adds to that that the degree of physical fitness greatly affects the types of activity that we can practice and that his

psychological tendencies push him to certain patterns of play.

This theory is consistent with the theory of "Alfred Adler", which explains the methods of play, as Adler believes that the nature of the psychological composition of the human being is what determines the way he plays in a direct or indirect way, and therefore the children's play reveals their tendencies, motives, trends and needs, and therefore the child must be left to play until he satisfies his tendencies, motives and needs. (Khattab & Abdul Karim, 2008, pp. 50-51)

5.5 Surplus Energy

This theory is attributed to (Frederick Schler -1709/1805- and Herbert Spencer-1830/1903- - Schiller & Spencer) and its conclusion is that the function of play lies in getting rid of excess energy in humans and directing it to work, as it emphasizes that play is a natural result of the presence of excess energy in the organism, and then uses this excess energy in play. Evidence has been provided that children play more than adults because there is someone who takes care of them. Other scientists have rejected this idea, as it is possible to direct one's energies into creative fields and purposeful activities, whether the energy is excess or not. (Rabbahi, 2011, p. 112)

6. Play in an autistic child

- Definition of autism

Autism is derived from the Greek word AUT, which means self, ism, which means closure, and the term as a whole means closure to oneself. The word suggests that these children often integrate or unite with themselves and show little interest in the outside world. (El-Sherbiny, 2011, p. 26)

The National Association for Autistic Children defines it as "one of the basic pathological manifestations that appear before the child reaches thirty-two months and includes developmental disorders and sensory responses to stimuli, speech, language, and belonging to people and family." (Al-Nimr, 2011, p. 36)

In Kanner's diagnostic definition: Wolf & Chick mentions that Kanner was the first to use a method to diagnose autism, and Kanner explains that these qualities are the diagnostic criterion for autism:

1- Severe lack of emotional communication with others.
2- Love of routine and strong dislike for any change in his daily life program.
3- Inappropriate adherence to things.

4- Appearing as a deaf, dumb child.

5- Show or retain some good cognitive abilities.

Ornitz (1989) defines it as a severe developmental disorder in behavior in children without obvious neurological signs, persistent neurological dysfunction, biochemical changes or genetic markers. (El-Sherbiny, 2011, p. 26)

7. Stages of play development in children with autism disorder

7.1. Sensorymotor play

Sensory-motor play begins in children with autism disorder as it begins in normal children, but lasts for many more years than in normal children.

7.2. Organizational play

It is for the child to organize the games and arrange them in rows or on top of each other or put one inside the other. We notice that children with autism disorder tend to this type of play, as they describe things in rows and get very angry when anyone tries to change the order of things.

7.3. Career play

Around the fourteenth month, the natural child begins to use things according to their functions, he may raise a small phone to his ear as evidence of his knowledge of the function of the phone. For children with autism disorder, they practice functional play, but they practice it at a level less developed than the level of normal children, a practice commensurate with the level of their cognitive development, and they notice only one of the characteristics of the game.

7.4. Symbolic (representational) play

Around the eighteenth month, the child begins to develop imagination and pretense through play. He may put a banana on his ear pretending to be the phone speaker, pretend to be drinking a fake drink, and at the age of three or four the child pretends to be a different character. This type of play is rare in children with autism disorder, and when they practice this type of play, they lack imagination, they cannot play with imaginary things that do not exist in front of them, and their play is constant and does not change, it goes in one form and in one way every time they play. (Al-Shami, 2004, p. 171)

8. Characteristics of play in an autistic child

We find the autistic child, in which a set of symptoms are shown, which are manifested in three main elements: repetitive stereotypical movements - deficiencies in social interaction - weakness in communication with others, in addition to the clear difference between him and the normal child in play, the latter expresses his experiences through imaginative play and even while playing with others, while the autistic child prefers to play individually and confined with one game and refuse to change it, and this leads to a loss of imagination and Creativity. (Belazzouz & Jaber, 2021, p. 688)

- Autistic children tend to play sensory with the things around them and rely on their mouth to communicate with those things, due to their slow development first and second to the presence of a neurological defect in these children makes them interested in sensory information close to them such as: taste, smell, touch.
- Autistic children prefer toys with sensory characteristics more than other toys, such as dolls representing people or animals, because they do not distinguish that the dolls resemble real individuals.
- Autistic people play less flexibly, repetitive and therefore have difficulty playing with other children. They also spend less time playing symbolic, pretentious, pretend and functional, often due to deficiencies in social relationships and communication with others.
- The autistic child prefers to deal with adults more than his desire to deal with young people, and responds well to adults familiar to him when they play familiar games or sing him familiar songs or practice familiar humor.
- The absence of group play in an autistic child, preferably individual play.
- As the autistic child loses the ability to imagine, he is unable to play imaginative or imaginary, does not use dolls or cars like children, or cars driving on the street. As the autistic child ages, his tendency to organize and arrange things evolves to become in the form of rigidity and rigidity in the use of play materials and the repetition of similar activities and the use of things in a stereotypical manner. (El-Sherbiny, 2011, pp. 90-91)
- The autistic child does not play with toys, but rather chews or waves them.
- He does not play in the traditional way, as he may line things up in one row.
- He does not play in an exploratory way and is less innovative in his game.

- His play is characterized by repetitiveness and stereotyping, as he does not diversify in the way he plays.
- He cannot imitate the play of others.
- He destroys and breaks games because his thinking is inflexible, illogical and his response is slow to complex situations in the game.
- Has difficulty playing alternately with other children.
- Tends to play with the parts of the game and not the game as a whole. (Aliwan, 2007, p. 57)

9. How to play with autistic children and considerations to be taken into account

9.1. First of all, as specialists and educators, the following must be taken into account

- A child with autism disorder cannot share with others or tell them his interests, so it is necessary to know his interests and play with him in proportion to them.
- Interpret the child's words and actions by commenting on his play during the game. Keep in mind that the child wants to build a connection with others while playing.
- Play with the child in the same way he plays by imitating his movements to encourage him to interact and share and imitate others in play.
- Enter the child's world while playing and insist on playing with him (not insist on it or force).
- Follow a certain way of playing and repeat certain words every time playing with the child, such as repeating the name of the game at the beginning of the game, and uttering a word that indicates the end of the game, such as the word salvation.
- Role-playing with the child.
- Since children with autism disorder are very bored, it is necessary to diversify the games while playing with them. (Nassif & Haidar, 2007, p. 14)

9.2. In terms of game selection

Choosing the appropriate games for the autistic child is important and a difficult task, as games, especially motor ones, are very useful and have a great impact on directing the desired behaviors in the child, as well as developing his focus and attention. These skills are among the foundations that seek to train the autistic child on discipline and adaptation to

form the social links and relationships that the autistic child needs. (Al-Qasim, Majid, & others, 2000, p. 122)

- Accordingly, the game must indicate visual stimuli in order to attract the autistic child to stare at the lights and focus and stabilize his eyesight, because most autistic children stare at their hands.
- The game should contain auditory stimuli because they are always interested in (muttering) the autistic with tones.
- The game must contain tactile stimuli , because the autistic usually tries to hit his body or put his fingers in his mouth so the games must also be soft.

Since the behavior of the autistic child is a bit strange, so it is necessary to choose the appropriate games for these behaviors in order to become more interesting to him so that he can benefit and enjoy life like other normal children. (Abdel Razzaq, 2002, p. 54)

- Games should vary and are not limited to industrial games, but go beyond them to include: natural games such as those taken from nature (pebbles, tree branches and grass).
- Various toys in the house, which are often objects that can be thrown away: such as strings, ribbons, cork stoppers, in addition to games related to popular culture and heritage and transmitted orally from one generation to another, such as hide and seek and rope game. (Nassif & Haidar, 2007, p. 9)

9.3. Breadth of the playing room

The vastness of the playroom plays a vital role in the treatment process, as the narrow space leads to a strong closeness between the children and the therapist, which can lead to feelings of tension and frustration. Spatial proximity imposed on children may generate aggression and strengthen defenses, isolated children may become more withdrawn and aggressive children may quarrel with each other.

On the other hand, a very wide play bubble is not desirable, as it invites aggressive children to run and play roughly, and helps withdrawals avoid contact with the therapist and other members of the group (in the case of group play). For all these reasons, the playing room should be medium in size and the therapist should make sure that it is suitable for the nature of the game and the number of cases.

9.4. Chronological age and appropriate toys

Research (Lipo, Dor Feman and Genot) has shown that it is better to offer each age what suits him from games, so children are divided in terms of chronological age into two stages or two categories: the first stage from three years to nine years, and the second stage from nine years to thirteen years.

- With children of the first stage: use games accurate size and soft and flexible tools such as clay, drawing tools, water and sand, so that the child can use them without the need for certain tools, these games help children to express and train on specific situations and solve situations of family relationships.
- The same tools as the previous lose their effect with children of the second stage: for example, the feeding bottle and dolls that represent the family are not considered a good way to vent and are also not considered symbols of communication, but on the contrary, such games with older children may become ill-impacted, as they may lead to regression and increased use of psychological defenses. (Abdel Fattah, The Psychology of Group Therapy for Children, 1998, p. 59)

9.5. The importance of play for autistic children

Play is an important part of the child's growth and development process, as play contributes significantly to providing the autistic child with social competence and personal information, and play for autism helps the following:

- Develops the child's fine motor skills.
- Enhances his imagination abilities.
- Enhances his ability to rely on himself.
- Relieves feelings of anxiety.
- Improves cognitive skills and problem-solving ability.

- And general play therapy

- It is one of the most appropriate ways to treat children, as it is used to help solve some problems and disorders that some children suffer from.
- It is used educationally and diagnostically at the same time.
- Provides developmental experiences for the child in situations appropriate to his developmental stage.

- Provides the opportunity to involve and deal with parents in the treatment process.
- It is considered a permissible field that provides an opportunity for emotional venting, which relieves the emotional tension of the child.
- Provides the opportunity for social expression in the form of a microcosm of what is in the external real world.
- An educational tool that helps in creating the interaction of the individual with the elements of the environment for the purpose of learning and developing personality and behavior.
- A way to bring concepts closer and help in realizing the meanings of things.
- A tool of expression and communication between children and each other on the one hand, and between them and their teachers on the other.
- An effective tool in individualizing learning, organizing it to face individual differences, and teaching children according to their capabilities and abilities. (Sadiq & Al-Khamisi, pp. 8-9)

10. Conclusion

Play therapy is a technique involving a variety of activities, which has been identified as a suitable method for addressing the challenges faced by autistic children in a number of areas. Firstly, it can be argued that it plays an important role in the development of the emotional, social and sensory-motor aspects of the autistic child. Secondly, it can be considered an effective educational method for this group. The aim of play therapy is to teach children with autism the skills to communicate and interact with others through play.

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