

Play in supporting the development of children with autism spectrum disorders

## SUMMARY

**Key words:** interaction, parent, therapist, therapy of a child with autism spectrum disorders, early support of child development, play, autism spectrum disorders.

### Theoretical assumptions

The theoretical basis of the author's own research is the findings on the essential features of play, its functions and arguments confirming the importance of play for the child's development. The work explains the essence of the autism spectrum, describes the concepts explaining the pathogenesis of the autism spectrum, and also shows the specificity of play of a child with autism spectrum disorders. It was recognized that early support for the child's development “is a process of planned and systematic interactions aimed at shaping such patterns of interaction between caregivers and the child that are most conducive to improving its physical, mental and social functioning. The interventions are carried out by a team of specialists in close cooperation with the family and cover children at risk of disability and disabled children from the moment the threat is detected or the disability is diagnosed until they start school” (Twardowski, 2022). The paper analyzes the discourses of early development support and therapy trends in children with autism spectrum disorders.

### Problems

The subject of the research is play in supporting children with autism spectrum disorders. The research was focused on finding answers to the following research problems: (1) how does the development of children with autism spectrum disorder manifest itself in the context of play activity? (2) how do parents conceptualize the essence of play and its importance for the development of children with autism spectrum disorders? (3) how do therapists conceptualize the essence of play and its importance for the development of children with autism spectrum disorders?

The aim of the research was to identify and describe the spheres of development of children with autism spectrum disorders in connection with the manifestations of their play activity, to learn and describe the ways of understanding and defining play and its importance for the development of children with autism spectrum disorders by parents and therapists, as well as to develop recommendations for teaching practice.

## **Method**

The research project included two modules. Both modules fall within the orientation of qualitative research, both are rooted in the interpretive paradigm. The first research module concerned the development of children with autism spectrum disorders in the context of play activity. In its implementation, the method of individual cases was taken into account. The second research module concerned the conceptualization of the essence of play and its importance for the development of children with autism spectrum disorders by parents and therapists of children with autism spectrum disorders. For its implementation, the phenomenographic method was used.

The research group consisted of children with autism spectrum disorders and their parents, as well as therapists. The first module covered 15 children with autism spectrum disorders. The second module included the participation of parents and therapists of children with autism spectrum disorders who participated in the research in the first module. 15 parents and 15 therapists participated in the study. Children with autism spectrum disorders covered by the study were the charges of the Non-Public Kindergarten with Departments for Children with Autism "Further Together" in Zielona Góra.

## **Results**

Mental, linguistic, emotional, social and motor development have an impact on the development of play in children with autism spectrum disorders. The analysis and interpretation of the research material shows that the play activity of children with autism spectrum disorders significantly differs from the play of their peers in the developmental norm. However, it cannot be said that the analyzed group of children does not play. The games of children on the spectrum are schematic, often take place in isolation, there are visible limitations related to imagination and the ability to create. Children have difficulty understanding the behavior and emotions of their play partner. The play of children with autism spectrum disorders depends on their level of functioning. The surveyed parents conceptualize play as pleasure. In their opinion, it is a joyfully spent free

time, during which the child develops involuntarily, without any effort. Parents approach play in an emotional way. They associate it with establishing family ties. In the parents' understanding, play activity satisfies emotional needs and allows for the expression of feelings. When considering the importance of play for a child's development, parents focus on areas that are disturbed in children on the autism spectrum. They emphasize the importance of play for comprehensive development, but put special emphasis on the development of speech, communication and social skills. Parents' statements show that daily therapeutic activities are more important to them than play. In addition, the child's resistance and reluctance cause them to often give up playing, explaining it with frustration, fatigue and lack of competence. For this reason, instead of playing with toys, they frolic and cuddle the child more often to establish a relationship with him. The surveyed parents positively assess support from therapists. The possibility of using several forms of help makes parents try to play at home and feel more competent in relations with their children.

The surveyed therapists conceptualize play as an activity that brings joy to the child. Thanks to it, the child gains experience, develops various skills, learns. The essence of play is that it cannot be forced into it. Therapists use play activities and objects and toys that the child likes to establish a therapeutic bond. They also see play as an opportunity to diagnose a child's skills. This way of experiencing the described phenomenon causes that play becomes mainly a means to achieve therapeutic goals. The statements prove that therapists use various therapeutic approaches with contradictory assumptions when playing with children. They use structured games rooted in the behavioral trend, but they also prefer games characteristic of the developmental trend. Therapists limit children's use of toys that, in their opinion, lead to overstimulation and therefore isolation. Therapists, supporting parents, show them games having sources in various therapeutic trends. The therapists' statements prove that the experience gained in practice is the most valuable source of knowledge about playing with a child with autism spectrum disorders.

Recommendations for teaching practice concern the inclusion in the education of teachers and therapists of subjects related to playing with a child with autism spectrum disorders. Greater and more effective support for parents of children with autism spectrum disorders in the use of play in the process of early development support is very important.