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STUDY ON PRETEND PLAY IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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ABSTRACT

Autism is known as a 'spectrum disorder,' because the severity of symptoms ranges from a mild learning and social disability to a severe impairment, with multiple problems and highly unusual behavior. Autism is generally referred to the Triad of Impairment. Since there is less socialization and imagination in these children play behaviour is also disrupted. In play, children expand their understanding of themselves and others, their knowledge of the physical world, and their ability to communicate with peers and adults. Play fosters children's development intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and creatively. Hence the researcher undertook a study with 20 children with autism, from NEST (Need based Education Service and training) Trichy. It enabled the researcher to understand the presence of pretend play in children with autism and to find out the relationship between eye contact and dimensions of communication with regard to pretend play. Standardized tools were used to study these aspects and analysis was done with the assistance of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Findings reveal that all children with autism engage in pretend play at different developmental stages. But the degree varies depending on their age, eye contact, types of communication and the years spent in school. The findings are discussed in relation to the rehabilitation intervention to enhance pretend play behaviour in children with autism.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way people communicate and relate to people around them. Some people have accompanying learning difficulties but everyone with the condition share difficulty in understanding the world. People at the high-functioning end of the autistic spectrum are described as having Asperger syndrome. All people with autism have impairments in social interaction, social communication and social imagination. This is known as the triad of impairments. Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) defines Autism as a disorder affecting functioning at even the simplest levels. It typically appears early in life, before age 2 1/2. It remains a subject of controversy in its diagnosis its basis (the causes of), and treatment methods. The characteristics of Autism are in the following areas

- social behaviour
- cognitive development
- interaction patterns
- language
- response to environment
- functional behaviour?.

The play of children with autism can be seen as impoverished. As Sherratt (1999) postulates, the difficulty that children with autism experience in pretend play arises from difficulties they have in both the fluid organisation of thought processes and in communicating these thoughts to others. Further, disturbance of play in autism may lead directly to disturbance in all aspects of development (Jordan and Libby, 1997) although it could be that an inflexibility of thought processes causes an impairment in play and also an impaired development of other skills (Sherratt, 2001a). Sherratt and Peter (2002) suggest that teaching children with autism to play may increase a fluidity of thought and reduce conceptual fragmentation. In particular, if play is taught to young children it may assist them in reducing repetitive and rigid behavioural patterns and encourage communication development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Play brings a number of opportunities for children to interact with other people. Children are very interested in playing. It helps the children to develop in all areas. With regard to children with autism, their interest in play is very much to themselves especially in the areas of imagination and play. They are usually seen playing in isolation/playing by themselves.

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This research intends to study the pretend play behavior of children with autism in the play situation, because one of the triad of impairments found in children with autism is lack of imagination, which is a prerequisite for play particularly, pretend play. Pretend play is observed with regard to 4 dimensions like functional play, symbolic play, fantasy play and social play. Hence the researcher has used the descriptive method for this study. The universe selected by the researcher is children with autism in 'NEST [Need Based Education Service and Training], Trichy, and with twenty children of ten boys and ten girls. The method of sampling used by the researchers is simple random sampling. Based on this the objectives of the study have been formulated namely to study the play behaviour in children with autism, to understand the presence of pretend play in children with autism and to study the eye contact and dimensions of communication with regard to pretend play. The variables chosen for the study are age, sex, ordinal position of the child, educational status of the parents, communication, eye contact as independent variables and functional play, symbolic play, fantasy play and social play as dependent variables.

PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is performing an imaginative action in a functional manner. The child usually makes use of pretend play from the age of about eighteen months. The child may pretend that a block is a car (object replacement), that teddy bear is alive (projection of pretend qualities. Pretend play is a valuable opening to the emotional and cognitive universe of the child. It reflects the child's ability to form internal representations.

FUNCTIONAL PLAY

Functional play dominates from the age of nine to twelve months and is accompanied with the sharing of joint attention. Play items at this age are used intentional, according to their function like uses object out of context and without situational cues eg. Takes empty cup to mouth.

Symbolic Play

As children develop representational skills, parent-child play begins to include the creation of pretend roles, imagined scenes, and the symbolic manipulation of objects and language.

Symbolic play is first observed with 1- to 2-year-old children. Children are most likely to initiate engagement, seeking out adult participation. Parental roles are audience and facilitator. Symbolic play with parents involves discussions of feelings and inner states.

FANTASY PLAY

Children begin making the transition to toddlerhood around the age of two. By this age they realize one thing can stand for another. By processing this knowledge, toddlers are able to imitate or imagine events in ways they do not exist. Through this fantasy play, children can examine events and relationships in ways that are different from the original intent.

SOCIAL PLAY

Social play is dominant during the first six to eight months of age and occurs simultaneously with early interaction/joint attention, when the child relates to one adult at a time.

TOOLS USED FOR DATA COLLECETION

Self prepared Socio -demographic Schedule to collect information pertaining to the Respondents.

Observation Profile for rating the play behaviours of children with autism

This tool is a 4 point rating scale developed by Val-Cumine, Julia Leach and Gill Stevenson (2000). It has 3 major components namely social interaction (7 areas), communication (4 areas), play and imagination (9 areas – Manipulative/Exploratory, organizing, structure constructional, Cause and effect / means to an end play, interactive, pretend play – functional, pretend play – Symbolic, pretend play – fantasy and Pretend play – social) which attempt to indicate the response / behaviour of children with autism during play.

Scoring is done as N = Not present, I = Infrequent, D = Developing and F = Fluent

(N = 0, D = 1, I = 2, F = 3), when development is high, higher the score.

Table 1. 't' Test difference between the respondents eye contact and various dimensions of pretend play

Dimensions of Pretend Play Eye contact	Functional Play		Symbolic Play		Fantasy Play		Social Play	
	Mean	't'	Mean	't'	Mean	't'	Mean	't'
Yes	1.31	**2.48	1.00	**2.024	5.38	**2.892	3.62	**4.853
No	0.00		0.00		0.57		0.14	

Statistical Inference -

* P>0.05 Not Significant

** P<0.05 Significant

Table 2. Inter correlations matrix between the dimensions of pretend play

	Functional Play	Symbolic Play	Fantasy Play	Social Play
Functional Play	1			
Symbolic Play	*0.547	1		
Fantasy Play	0.299	**0.744	1	
Social Play	**0.702	*0.544	0.375	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted for nearly 4 months and the salient findings are analyzed and presented below. Table 1 clearly indicates that there is a significant difference between the dimensions of pretend play with regard to eye contact. This may be because eye contact plays a significant role in the development of play. A child who has more eye contact seems to be effective in functional play, for eg. "Takes empty cup to mouth". If the child has better eye contact there seems to be more imitation. Imitation results in the child engaging in symbolic play activities like, "using toys / materials as if it were something else". "Child will be someone / something else, Adopts and acts out a role" These aspects of fantasy play are achieved only if the child has good eye contact. Eye contact is very essential for child with autism to develop their play skills, especially to have joint focus and role enactment. It is also observed that children with better eye contact have better interaction thus resulting in good social play among the peers and with significant others.

There is a positive correlation between dimensions of pretend play namely fantasy play, social play with regard to age and duration in school of the respondents. Negative correlation is seen between functional play and age because when children mature in age, functional play vanishes, as it dominates from the age of 9 to 12 months, and the child uses non verbal cues for communication. With regard to duration in school as they spend more time / years in school, their functional and social play significantly increase and this is seen in the table. Hence the parents are to be motivated to send their children to schools for better intervention and follow-up programmes. This table shows a positive relationship between all the dimensions of pretend play. There is a positive correlation between functional, symbolic and social play, as functional play increases social play also increases, because by playing with others, children with autism, learn to establish social contact and thereby bringing about better social relations which helps them to be able to solve their own problems and bring about better communication. There is also a significant correlation between symbolic play and fantasy play because fantasy play influences the child to get involved in directing their actions on realistic objects. Hence the increase in pretend play behaviour helps in the increase of imaginative play, ultimately increasing communication and social interactions.

Rehabilitation Interventions

Since parents are not aware of the importance of play, the significance of play should be explained to parents through workshops and awareness programmes. In special schools various new play equipments can be fitted to increase the interest of the children with autism in play; Regular group play sessions should be organized in the school. Specific activities can be done to improve eye contact in these children. With the assistance of all these interventions play development especially the dimensions of pretend play can be significantly fostered in children with autism.

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