

**PLAYING UNDER THE FUNCTIONAL FOCUS AND  
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THEORY OF MIND  
*THE FUNCTIONAL PLAY*  
*AND CONTRIBUTIONS THEORY OF MIND***

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**Summary**

The present work aims to present the act of playing from a functional perspective and the development possibilities based on the social interaction of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during early childhood. The characteristics of ASD and the intervention of play for social development are presented, as well as the conceptual differences between play, toys and games, and the importance of the mediator in the play relationship. To carry out this study, we started with bibliographical research, with input from studies and contributions from authors who defend play as a stimulating resource to facilitate human development in the social aspect, relating to the influences of the historical and cultural context. In this sense, it was possible to perceive the contribution of the act of playing from a functional perspective and the possibilities for development in the social interaction of children with autism spectrum disorders.

**Key words:** Social interaction. Functional Play. Children with ASD. Human development.

**Abstract**

The present work aims to present the play of play under the functional approach and the possibilities of development from the social interaction of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) during early childhood. The characteristics of ASD and the intervention of play for social development, as well as the conceptual differences between games, toys and games, and the importance of the mediator in the relation of play are presented. In order to carry out this study, we started with a bibliographical research, with contributions in studies and contributions of authors who defend play as a stimulating resource to facilitate human development in the social aspect, relating to the influences of the historical and cultural context. In this sense, it was possible to perceive the contribution of play under the functional approach and the possibilities of development in the social interaction of children with autism spectrum disorders.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

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Difficulties in social interaction, language and the execution of stereotypical movements are behaviors presented by people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These behaviors bring some harm to the child, among which those related to social and learning development stand out.

This research sought to understand how playing contributes to the development of children with autism, favoring social inclusion and cognitive development.

Around the world, professionals from different areas, researchers and families of people with autism are looking for alternative contributions and better results for situations that provide learning and socialization for these children, and are reporting the importance of structured games that can contribute to these results.

Through a review of the literature on the subject, we sought to relate studies from various research studies that point to functional play as a facilitator of social interaction for autistic children.

Thus, the work initially presents a review of ASD, addressing the main aspects of etiology and behavior, relating play with autism, social development and highlights its main benefits.

Finally, some games are presented that can be encouraged to achieve objectives related to social interaction. The relevance of attention to care and perspectives in the playing process is highlighted, due to the need to understand the particularities present in children with this disorder.

## **2 AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: ETIOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is classified in the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as a disorder associated with a medical, genetic or environmental condition, another mental or behavioral disorder with or without intellectual or language impairment. or cognitive (APA, 2014).

From this perspective, ASD is a disorder that causes a series of developmental disorders with characteristics that imply behavioral manifestations that are different from the typical pattern, and can be represented by several repetitive and undesirable behaviors compared to established patterns.

Considering that the aforementioned disorder is classified as a global developmental disorder, the person presents difficulties in their development process, especially in their expressiveness. Papim and Sanches (2013, p. 20) cite difficulties in aspect of ASD, such as:

[...] the difficulty presented by the person with autism in communicating, both through verbal and non-verbal language. This characteristic influences the autistic person's permanence in isolation. If language is not stimulated to develop, this will help keep the child away from socialization.

Interventions are not intended to be a cure, as autism is not characterized as a disease but rather allows for more adaptive behaviors if carried out early.

The characteristics of autism can be manifested in different ways even before the age of three and interventions can be varied with programs, methods and psychopedagogical approaches. Using play in its social context can stimulate the child's development since authors such as Vygotsky point out the positive relationship between playing and child development (VYGOTSKY 2000, GOÉS 2008).

Playing takes place in social relationships mediated by language, explicit and implicit instruments. Children are not born capable of playing social roles; they develop in a socio-historical process of appropriation of language based on the experiences they have lived.

In this way, playing starts to have a relationship with cognitive development, enabling the understanding of the senses, creativity, imaginations, through pretend play, for example. Play becomes a space capable of creating an environment favorable to interaction, communication and construction of situations that reflect the actions experienced in their environment.

Considering this, children with autism, like others, can develop their capacity for playful activities, however this occurs in the relationship between the act of playing in the cultural environment, in social life, in experiences with other children, toys and games (FREITAS , 2008).

### 3 PLAYING AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Playing is one of the child's main forms of expression, a cultural activity of childhood, which demonstrates possibilities for new experiments, for symbolically realizing fantasies, learning about reality, perceiving the partner's intentionality, repeating imitations and experiences.

Along this path, scientific studies of historical-cultural theory identify relationships that may have a contribution from play in the development of learning, language and interaction with others.

For Vygotsky (2007), in his historical-cultural perspective, man constitutes a social being, inserted into culture through interaction with others to constitute his subjectivation. Playing enhances development as you learn to be, to do, to live together, it stimulates curiosity, language, concentration, socialization and autonomy, which are fundamental for people with autism to develop.

Thus, playing with autistic children must first be functional considering their preferences, their social and cultural context, tolerance and free, far from rules, in principle there must be intentionality in the play for it to have results.

Neurotypical children with atypical development must have a moment of creative play in their learning, which they relate to their own experiences. Therefore, play is a resource that can stimulate children's development and provide ways to facilitate school and routine learning. She elaborates situations with meanings related to the culture experienced in her social group (BONTEMPO, 1996; GOÉS, 2002).

From this perspective, using play as an intervention resource is to enhance children's motivation to make learning more enjoyable, with possibilities to achieve and overcome challenges.

Through play, the child will show interest, curiosity, exchange, interaction, which will possibly provide opportunities for better development conditions in undesirable behaviors, understood by inclusion through play, which are internalized as a daily practice in the child's life with ASD, within its peculiarities.

Therefore, the person who proposes games must play the role of mediator of the child's relationship with the toy, in a playful practice, without judging the atypical way of playing of the child with ASD.

In this sense, in order to propose intervention with results in the social development during the early childhood of children with ASD, the definitions of games, games and toys must be understood, considering playing as a playful activity in childhood, and playing with the appearance of rules in play with the aim of gain and victories. And the toy is the resource to meet the functional objective of the game.

The Larousse dictionary, cited by Bertoldo and Ruschel (2011, p. 1), differentiates these three elements as follows:

“Game = Action of playing; fun, play, fun”. Here are some examples:  
“football game; Olympic Games; Checkers; gambling; wordplay;  
pushing game.”  
“Toy = object intended to amuse a child”.  
“Play = action of playing, fun. / Joke, mockery. / Little party between friends or relatives. / Anything that is done out of imprudence or frivolity and that costs more than expected: that joke cost me dearly.”

In this way, it is understood that each of these elements has a nature, and that therefore, in the case of education for the development of autistic people, this must be taken into account.

#### **4 FUNCTIONAL PLAY AND THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS FOR THE PERSON MEDIATING THE PLAY WITH THE AUTISTIC CHILD**

In children with ASD, playing occurs in an atypical way because they tend to play differently with toys. It generally focuses on the parts and not on the purpose of the toy, that is, on the social use that the toy presents, often the wheel can attract more attention than the car itself.

Therefore, children with ASD need to be encouraged to play willingly, giving the child the opportunity to discover the function of the toy and the pleasure of playing without rules, but with guidance, as play itself will lead to creativity, imagination and fulfillment. of thoughts in real situations.

Thus, playing is used in a functional way as the main form of instruction, based on the child's skills or preferences, applying play that will contribute to the development of the child with autism in speech, touch, integration, coordination , command, predictability, not on the part of a toy, but on the whole in the process of playing.

According to Williams, Redd and Costall (2001), the difference between symbolic playing and functional playing is that in the former there are three forms of manifestation: the act of replacing the object, attributing false properties to it, and or even attributing the presence to imaginary objects. Functional play refers to the appropriate use of an object, or even the conventional association of two or more objects. Creativity and imagination are not so stimulated, but they are used to fit certain objects into situations with the spoon that feeds the doll, placing the cup of tea on the saucer, so that make-believe is not necessarily involved in this case.

Therefore, the person who proposes games must play the role of mediator of the child's relationship with the toy, in a playful practice, without judging the atypical way of playing of the child with ASD.

However, to reach the objective, the mediator of the play process must be aware that they need to be aware of the difficulties that autistic characteristics can present to the development of play, so that they can respect the child and adapt the games (VYGOTSKY,2007).

In addition to play being considered a socially constructed activity, authors based on historical-cultural theory (VYGOTSKI, 2000; LEONTIEV, 2003) attribute to it a fundamental role in child development, as it provides the child with the appropriation of culture in which she lives, because during play she (re)produces the situations, scenarios, sayings, objects, rules, ways of acting, values and forms of relationships of the social group (GÓES; LEITE, 2003 ).

Important aspects for the play mediator are knowing about the child with ASD; limitations and preferences or abilities, organization of the child's tolerance, proposing a space free from competitive stimuli, such as visual pollution, toys or games that are taking place in the surroundings that are not in the context in which you want to develop. The place must be prepared for the proposed game until the objective is achieved.

What will be the zone of proximal development today will be the level of real development tomorrow, that is, what is possible for the child to do today with help, they will be able to do tomorrow alone, and here the objective is that with play, they can language and social interaction can be initiated or developed, so that later what is play today can be the beginning of integration with supposed social groups, be it in the family, at school, etc.

To ensure that through the process of relationship with play, which begins with the mediator, the toy and the autistic child, for now, will later develop towards the mediator, the

child, the toy and a colleague, and later it can be developed with the mediator, the child, the colleague and another child and the toy, as developments progress it can be considered the mediator, the child, another child, the colleague, the toy and other children... until the child and a small group of children can arrive.

In this way, it is possible to work in a way that is focused on the autistic child and on social inclusion in speech and actions with more development and social quality in a gradual way, which can be achieved slowly or not, so the development limit of each person must be respected. child.

## 5 THE PLAY AND THEORY OF MIND

The Theory of Mind arises from cognitive psychology and refers to the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, and has been widely used in medical psychology in order to better explain certain changes in the behavior of human beings, among which are Childhood Autism, Psychoses, Schizophrenia and others (CAIXETA; NITRINI, 2002).

When it comes to the study of autism, the Theory of Mind, in comparison with affective theories that consider autism a *deficit* innate in the ability to establish an affective relationship with others, the Theory of Mind, also starts from the point that autistic people have a *deficit* in the ability to establish representations of other people's mental states (HAPPÉ 1998, PASSERINO, SANTAROSA, 2005).

The theory refers to a skill that requires some effort to understand what is happening in the personal universe and in others, in terms of mental state:

In order to be able to infer about the mental states of others, we must be equipped with an ability that allows us to develop a measure (that is, a system of references that enables comparisons between our internal, subjective world and the external world, of others). ) of what others think, feel, desire, believe, doubt. This ability was called Theory of Mind (PREMACK; WOODRUFF, 1978, apud CAIXETA; NITRINI, 2002, p. 106).

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Therefore, this theory is one of the possibilities of understanding the world of autistic children, using instruments that can measure their internal and external capacities for social interaction.



According to Beyer (2002), the difficulty in mental representation is not restricted only to the assimilation of informative or formal knowledge, but can also be perceived in the understanding of human relationships, one of the most complex points in the study of autism.

If there is a lack of this theory in autistic people, there are also difficulties in carrying out symbolic or imaginative actions, since they are metarepresentations, that is, representations of representations, where the imaginary intertwines and creates new meanings (CUXART, 2000).

Thus we have the Theory of Mind being the notion, intention, understanding of the mental state of the self and the other, that is, doing or acting without intention does not present a developed Theory of Mind. Because it concerns the ability to attribute mental states (beliefs, desires, knowledge, and thoughts to other people and produce people's behavior based on these attributions (BARON-COHEN; LESLIE; FRITH, 1985).

In the case of children with autism, as they present difficulties in understanding the symbolic, there are also difficulties in developing the Theory of Mind. However, this ability can be stimulated in the fields of play by working on situations based on emotions, make-believe, functional games that can evolve, always in a natural environment, with incentives and praise, but also with immediate correction of errors. , teaching the concepts and not just passing on instructions will contribute to the development of theory of mind.

Trevarthen (2004) conclude that from a very early age, children with typical cognitive development are sensitive to the emotions expressed by others and by the end of the first year of life they are able to use people's eye line as an indication of what is attracting their attention (BUTTERWOTH , 1995) and at eighteen months able to behave according to desires, understanding the desires of other people.

It is thus observed that the theory of mind is initially related to experience, starting its process of cognitive development, these experiences and information are acquired through social interaction coming from the child's possible relationship with other people, understanding emotions, intentions and beliefs. other people in certain situations.

Therefore, from the age of early childhood, the child, still in preschool, even with a theory of mind in a process that is not yet sufficiently elaborated, depends on experiences in the family and in the social environment, and this can be stimulated with songs, storytelling, conversations and pretend play. These experiences, which are part of the process of acquiring theory of mind, can come from daily conversations and which



They are then perceived and adjusted, changing the child's understanding and starting to have their own beliefs. Therefore, using play resources will contribute to their possible development in dealing with their imagination in a creative way.

In this sense, language deficits would be a consequence of these children's inability to communicate, whether verbally or not, with other people. In the same way, this impairment would also harm mental states, leading to disturbances in social behavior. Therefore, through games using the senses such as vision, touch, and hearing as an attraction to shared attention, we could make gains in enabling the child to interpret behavior not only through perceptual means but also through thought, belief, etc.

## 6 GAMES THAT CAN STIMULATE AUTISTIC CHILDREN

For children with autism, playtime must occur away from other stimuli and be easily adapted to the situations and context in which the child finds himself. Among the games that can be played are:

- Bowling, with throwing balls into plastic bottles, can help develop tactile, visual, auditory perception, temporal notion, strength, visual and motor coordination, verbal and non-verbal communication, expressions and social interaction.

- Presentation of animals in plastic, puppets, paper, or rubberized materials (in narrative or songs) in addition to some stimuli mentioned above, they can also promote the imitation of sounds, imagination and identification of animals. You can work on memory and associations.

- Soap bubbles: also developing appreciation, waiting time, locomotion, speed, initiative, balance.

- Storytelling: presentation of objects, or images, and then with costumes. In addition to the stimuli mentioned, it can also contribute to the development of concentration, attention, imagination, creativity, sensations, expressions and emotions, developing the theory of mind and language.

- Dancing in front of the mirror: also great stimuli for recognition, imitation, eye contact, discoveries, and sensations.

The absence of Theory of Mind in children with autism may justify the impoverishment of pretend play and this is often reported in many

studies that demonstrate a lower frequency of symbolic games with autistic children, so it is possible that some work proposals can encourage pretend play with autistic children (KEEN, *et al*, 2007).

According to Leslie (1987), pretend play helps to emerge the earliest manifestations of the ability to manipulate and characterize information regarding the mental states of oneself and others. Pretend play, whether symbolic or fantasy, allows children to treat objects by giving them properties that are different from those they have in reality. They can also assign themselves and others roles that are different from those they usually exercise, generating imaginary scenes and representing them (MORAIS; OTTA, 2003).

According to Pellegrini and Bjorklund (2004), pretend play has an essentially social function, which can help younger children to gain a perspective on other players. Pretend play pretends something, so that the child is able to understand that there is a representation of something that in reality could be something else, such as a plastic telephone that could be a device used for two people to communicate with each other. communicate remotely.

However, it must also be understood that some stereotyped reactions can function as a means of organization for the child. Therefore, the appearance of behaviors during symbolic or imagination activities may arise as variations in attention and concentration, mood changes without an apparent cause, and needs for assistance in learning self-regulation.

Therefore, certain precautions must be taken, especially in long activities that may require time reduction, in the use of manipulative objects and games, and play commands must also be facilitated so that they flow harmoniously and spontaneously. It is also important to use supporting figures that facilitate the understanding of associations of ideas, use tone of voice and facial expressions to facilitate communication, there must be advance preparation of what is going to happen, with dialogues that are easy to understand and the telling must be significant for the child's understanding.

It is also necessary to play while playing, that is, not all games should contain programmatic content situations, but rather teach social coexistence in games, rules of good coexistence trying to overcome stereotypical behaviors, using a lot of humor, stories with characters, creation, touch, reactions to situations, etc.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article sought to reflect on the act of playing and the developmental contributions to the social interaction and language of children with ASD during their early childhood. According to the assumptions already presented here, we conclude that autism is a disorder with qualitative impairment in several areas of development with impairments in communication, social interaction, and language.

However, researchers point out that several early interventions can improve the development of children with autism, helping to prevent their stereotypies and behaviors from causing so much harm and offering improvements in their social quality.

It was explained that playing with the child must be functional, that is, with intentions to offer the child pleasant moments in the game, in a way that contributes to the development of social interaction and language.

The play mediator, an important agent in this process, can be a member of the school, family or social groups, but must always respect the characteristics of the autistic child and model play, providing, in addition to social inclusion, creation, imagination, experiences and discoveries. and thus meet the social and cognitive objectives that will contribute to the child's social quality by developing the areas of interaction and language.

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