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Abstract. Playing games is an activity that serves many purposes at the age of preschool children, especially influencing their social and emotional development. It provides a way to test magical thinking, learn roles, learn friendship and develop control, allowing them to grow, to adapt and to act. The present study aims to determine the level of social and emotional development of children aged 6 and 7 years, with typical development, compared to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), both before and after the application of a therapeutic experimental program, using, in an interdisciplinary approach, formative games, for knowing and establishing emotions, but also group games, which require socialization and interpersonal relationships. Results show significant differences between children with typical development and children with ASD, and some improvements in the emotional and social development of autistic children after the therapeutic program.

Keywords: social development, emotional development, play, typical children, children with T.S.A.

1. Emotional and social development in preschoolers

   Social skills are learning behaviors, adaptation, social acceptance, which allow effective interaction between people (Gresham and Elliot, 1984). They allow modeling a person's behavior to achieve functional social interactions. Help given to other people, initiating relationships, exchanging things, activities, compliments, are ways to express social skills.

   Emotional competence maintains cognitive development during preschool, preparation and adaptation to school through its collaboration with social competence (Carlton and Winsler, 1999). This competence represents the ability to be aware, to understand one's own emotions and those of others and the way in which the individual acts according to them, to achieve interpersonal exchanges and manage emotions (Saarni, 1990).
Emotional competence consists of the following elements: expression and experience of emotions, emotional regulation and understanding of one's own emotions and those of others (Denham, 1998).

Between 4 and 7 years old, children become more aware of themselves as people, being interested in establishing friendships with others, understanding moral judgments (for example: The child behaved badly at school), make comparisons with others and manage to bring the game dramatically much closer to reality taking into account a series of details, such as: time, space, etc.

Children spend a lot of time in groups, forming friends according to certain criteria: age, sex, ethnicity, interests. Equal commitment and mutual exchanges represent the strongest friendships (Papalia, Wendkos Olds & Feldman, 2010).

The great progress of preschool is represented by the ability to understand, regulate, control over one's feelings. Children who are able to understand their emotions are able to control how they manifest and have sensitivity to what others feel. They can easily talk about their own feelings as well as those of others, making connections between emotions and experiences or desires. An important thing to emphasize is the fact that affective understanding becomes complex with age.

On the other hand, autism is a series of secondary disorders (disorder of ideas, interruptions of ideational flow, language difficulties and stereotypes, various states of strong arousal, which can alter with depression and hallucinations in the mental plane) that they relate to a defining category of primary disorders. This term was introduced in 1911 by Eugen Bleuler. In other words, it indicates a lack, loss of contact with reality, resulting in an impossibility or a barrier, difficulty in communicating with others. Children in this category have a particular type of behavior towards both people and objects. The impression created is that these children live in a world created with objects that use them in a stereotypical way. He does not communicate with other people and does not show interest in them, the established relationships being sometimes fragmentary. They do not show reaction in the parents' way, they do not want to participate in group games, they keep the same types of situations they are used to (Enăchescu, 2000).

At the age of 6, 7 years, the child reaches a new phase more balanced and more stable, especially from an emotional point of view. The child gladly offers help, cooperates happily in various tasks, and the demands tend to decrease during this period. He discusses entrusting him with different responsibilities, thus increasing his self-esteem, because he thinks before acting and has the desire to do everything well.

Another important affective characteristic is represented by the fact that these children do not react to the emotional, sentimental signs of the people around them and do not seek consolation or appreciation (Bucă, 2004).

There have been far fewer studies on the difficulties of regulating emotions and how to distinguish the emotional behavior of children with autism. Social communication and impaired socialization were associated with emotional control and poor emotional responses.

Peeters (2016) defines autism as intellectual loneliness, mentioning qualitative differences in the development of social interactions, communication, imagination or perception over time. Children with T.S.A. has difficulty understanding abstract aspects of communication, largely manifests anxiety or panic, mainly in connection with the uncertainty of things to come.
According to Buică (2004) there are a series of qualitatively significant difficulties in the social development of children with this disorder, such as: improper application of non-verbal behaviors (facial expression, posture, avoidance of eye contact, gestures), failure to achieve certain social relationships with people of the same age, normal from a developmental point of view, lack of spontaneous intention to share their own joys, interests. Moreover, there is a lack of social reciprocity, but also emotional (do not participate in group games, collective; prefer solitary activities)

The game contributes to the achievement of varied and complex educational objectives. They contribute to solving tasks specific to aesthetic and moral education. The game focuses on clarifying, consolidating, synthesizing, evolving and enriching knowledge. (Bache, Mateias, Popescu & Şerban, 1994).

2. Game and formative valences

The game has become important in the formative action through which some authors discuss the concept of "playful epistemology", whose role is to analyze the traditional theory of knowledge and identify how life can be given to education through games (Castell, 2011, apud Cojocariu & Boghian, 2014). Games have complex formative functions, for the period from childhood to youth. Among these functions we can name assimilation of behaviors, accumulation of experience and information, various functions of physical development and social functions.

Playing is the fundamental premise of an effective educational-therapeutic process. This is the basic form of the manifestation of the child's life. According to Cătălin Mamali (1974) the game is one of the products of everyday life that provides scientific thinking not only a rich study material, but also models, methods of analysis, through its variety and availability. Games contribute to the achievement of varied and complex educational objectives. They contribute to solving tasks specific to aesthetic and moral education, and focus on clarifying, consolidating, synthesizing, evolving and enriching knowledge.

Through play, children perform activities in the sense of personal identity, solve environmental problems, experience a multitude of possibilities for adaptation, create a series of solutions, expressing their experiences through symbols, thus thinking more abstractly, communicating with others as well as with himself, using many words, expressing himself plastically or through various nonverbal signs, they use the surrounding objects for the purpose for which they are created, they show creativity, they focus their attention on action.

For both the teacher and the therapist, the work done with each child is a unique responsibility and contributes to the continuous construction of personality. The need to exercise in education is represented by a series of general and special skills, such as: psycho-pedagogical and psychosocial skills (Stan & Andrei, 1997).

3. Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives pursued during the research are the following:

O1 - Identify significant differences in social and emotional development between children with typical development and children with autism spectrum disorder

O2 - Implementation of a social and emotional development program both for children with autism spectrum disorder and for children with typical development
O3 - Quantifying the performance of the evolution of social and emotional behavior in the therapeutic program D.E.S.

The research hypotheses that we presumed are:

H1 - It is assumed that there are significant differences in emotional development between children with typical development and children with T.S.A. from the point of view of parents before applying the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H2 - It is assumed that there are significant differences in emotional development between children with typical development and children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher / therapist before the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H3 - It is assumed that there are significant differences in the social development of children with typical development compared to children with T.S.A. from the point of view of parents before the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H4- We assume that there are significant differences in the social development of children with typical development compared to children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher / therapist before the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H5- We assume that there are significant differences in emotional development between children with typical development and children with T.S.A. from the point of view of parents following the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H6 - It is assumed that there are significant differences in emotional development between children with typical development and children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher / therapist following the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H7 - It is assumed that there are significant differences in the social development of children with typical development compared to children with T.S.A. from the point of view of parents after the application of the personal development program (D.E.S.)

H8 - We assume that there are significant differences in the social development of children with typical development compared to children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher / therapist before the application of the personal development program (D.E.S)

H9- It is assumed that there are significant differences between the initial and final time of testing emotional development in children with T.S.A. from the parent's point of view.

H10- It is assumed that there are significant differences between the initial and final time of testing emotional development in children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher

H11- We assume that there are significant differences between the initial and final time of social development testing in children with T.S.A. from the parent's point of view

H12- We assume that there are significant differences between the initial and final moment of social development testing in children with T.S.A. from the point of view of the teacher.

4. Sample and instruments

Two groups of participants contributed to this research. Group A consisted of 30 children with typical development, aged between 6 and 7 years from the National Pedagogical College, "Constantin Brătescu" Constanța, and group B consisting of 30 children with autism spectrum disorders, with chronological age between 6 and 7 years at the "Black Sea" Psychological Center. A comparative study was conducted between the 2 groups of participants, following the social and emotional acquisitions.
This research was attended by psychologists, therapists and teachers and parents from the institutions presented above. The methods, techniques and tools of psychological, educational and social assessment used in this research are: Observation, the pedagogical experiment, the analysis of the products of the activity and psychological screenings on social and emotional development from the Development assessment platform for children aged 3-6 / 7 years (PEDa, Cognitrom, Cluj-Napoca).

We shall describe the Personal development program that we conducted. Following the results obtained in the initial testing, we noticed significant differences between children with typical development and children with ASD emotionally and socially. Because we noticed the difficulties present both in children with ASD and in children with typical development, we considered it necessary to implement a personal development program through games. The main activity practiced during preschool and children's schooling is play, so we can make changes to the insufficiency and lack of social and emotional skills, which helps to develop throughout life. In the case of children with ASD, we noticed difficulties in social interaction and especially in expressing and understanding the emotions of others, rather than understanding their own emotions.

We consider these skills among the most important acquisitions necessary for children, because by building and developing them we can discuss social adaptation and solving interpersonal needs.

The objectives of the proposed therapeutic program were achieved, with different results, depending on the competencies of the participants.

In emotional development, the proposed goals were the following:

- Objective 1 - identifying one's own emotions and those of others through games and images.
- Objective 2 - awareness of children's emotions through group activities.
- Objective 3 - the correct labeling of emotions through the imagistic exemplification of states similar to the situations presented in the exercises performed.
- Objective 4 - identify the contexts in which positive or negative emotions are manifested.
- Objective 5 - associating emotional feelings with certain contexts representative of the situations encountered through the proposed games.

In social development, the objectives we wanted to achieve are the following:

- Objective 1 - developing children's cooperation skills through teamwork during various activities through which exchanges of ideas and information are made.
- Objective 2 - practice the skills of sharing the toys often used in children's work, by learning the behavior of asking and giving.
- Objective 3 - acquiring negotiation strategies.
- Objective 4 - practicing emotional control skills in a social context (patience, waiting).
- Objective 5 - building social relationships through interaction in game situations.
- Objective 6 - developing communication skills with others, in interactions in game tasks.

The program includes games, types of activities based on the development of social and emotional skills and abilities. In the following lines we will make a presentation of the activities we carried out during the therapeutic program.
5. Findings and Results

From the point of view of emotional development, both the parent and the teacher, respectively the therapist, observe the emotional skills of each child.

The first 8 hypotheses of the research aim at the existence of differences between children with ASD and children with typical development, analyzed from the point of view of the parent and teachers, taking into account the following dimensions: emotional development and social development.

After testing the normality of the distribution of the scores, we made a comparison between the assessment made by both parents and teachers, regarding the social and emotional development of both ASD children and children with typical development. Results are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Emotional and social development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Typical/ASD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sum of Ranks</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>15.50</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>60</td>
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<td>1830.00</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1832.50</td>
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<td>15.68</td>
<td>1830.50</td>
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<td>15.75</td>
<td>1830.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final emotional assessment (Teacher)</td>
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<td>16.68</td>
<td>500.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>44.32</td>
<td>1392.50</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>16.85</td>
<td>1829.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We used Mann-Whitney U test for statistical comparisons. Results are shown in the table below.
As we can see in the previous tables, there are statistically significant differences between children with typical development and children with autism spectrum disorder, both for emotional and social skills.

From the point of view of emotional development, both the parent and the teacher, respectively the therapist, observe the emotional skills of each child. The observation, the analysis by the teacher, respectively the parent, of the competencies developed by the children during this period underlined the existence of statistically significant differences. Emotional development has a major role in adapting the child to the environment.

The inability of children with autism to establish emotional bases between themselves and others explains most of the defensive behaviors of these children. Moreover, the avoidance of eye contact, impersonal speech, indifference to objects, phenomena or beings is explained (Buică, 2004).

The same observation can be made in social development. We found statistically significant differences between children with typical development and children with ASD in terms of observations, notes made by parents and teachers. This is because autism consists of difficulties in acquiring cognitive, linguistic, motor and social skills.

We observe, based on the scores obtained, learning behaviors, adaptation, social acceptance that allow effective interaction between people. Some important aspects observed in the application of the therapeutic program are represented by: low tolerance for change, qualitatively significant difficulties in social development, lack of social reciprocity and emotional reciprocity, poor eye contact and difficulties in starting and maintaining conversation in children with ASD.

Moreover, it has been observed that most children with ASD it does not react to the emotional signals of those around it, nor does it seek consolation or appreciation.

When we talk about children with typical development, more than half of them manage to easily develop and strengthen emotional skills. It is noticeable the expression and identification of emotions, made by children with typical development.

Children who have serious problems in developing this skill do not recognize emotions, do not express their emotions, cannot understand emotions and do not improve their regulation or self-regulation. This results in insufficient training and maintaining relationships with others,
maladaptation to school. Another thing we noticed is the behavioral problems due to negative emotions and a lack of emotional regulation.

Our results are supported by other research, which suggests significant differences between children with typical development and children with ASD. Thus, it can be emphasized that children with autism have a component of emotional empathy and an activation of the affected behavior during preschool, which is a deficiency of emotional and social skills. Children with T.S.A. presented a moderate excitement regarding the activities performed observed by: interrupting the game to focus on others or reflecting body tension, presenting the intention to react (Butean, Costescu & Dobrean, 2014).

The next 4 hypotheses assume the existence of significant differences in both emotional and social development in children with ASD following the application of the therapeutic program. For children with typical development, during some personal development classes, we applied the personal development program with the whole class. In the case of children with ASD the program was implemented during socializing classes, with 8, 9 or even 10 children in a group.

The implementation of this personal development program represented the intermediate stage of the research design. At the end of it, the evaluation of emotional and social skills was performed in order to identify the existence of an improvement acquired as a result of the activities carried out. The results obtained, transposed in set 2 of hypotheses, can be seen in the summary table below. It is important to note that we looked at, statistically, the differences in emotional and social skills only for children with ASD.

Table 3. Emotional and social development after the personal development program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Typical/ASD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sum of Ranks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional assessment (Parent)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>34.62</td>
<td>1038.50</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional assessment (Teacher)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>Typical</td>
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<td>833.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>33.23</td>
<td>977.00</td>
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<td><strong>Social assessment (Parent)</strong></td>
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<td>Typical</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td><strong>Social assessment (Teacher)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>33.68</td>
<td>1010.50</td>
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</table>

We used Mann Whitney U Test to statistically test the differences. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test - Emotional and social development for ASD children after the personal development program
According to our results, the existence of a statistically significant difference is observable only in the social development of the participants, and only from the perspective of the parents. We consider that the improvement observed by the parent, on a social level, has been achieved, because the environment in which the children spend most of their time is with the family. Within the family, the child develops the first skills, acquisitions. The family is the primary factor in the formation and socialization of the child. Parents are the primary and strong source of emotional support, learning, security of children, thus outlining the fundamental framework within which its bio-psycho-social and spiritual needs are met (Jigău, 2007).

Through the activities we observed the manifestations of the following symptoms of children with ASD: poor social interaction, a limited area of activities and interests, and poor social communication or even lack of communication.

A possible explanation of the results obtained concerns the way in which the observations are made by the evaluator. Thus, while the parent analyzes the integral behavior of his own child, the teacher simultaneously analyzes the whole group, assigning to each student a label, characteristic, depending on the reaction of the children in different situations. The implementation of the DES program argues that the use of educational games contributes to the development of increased motivation, learning and memory skills. Through the proposed games, we offered children support in establishing connections, developing mental structures designed to help them gain freedom and autonomy in building interpersonal relationships.

Our results are supported by other research in the field, which involves the implementation of therapeutic programs in order to improve social skills in children with autism. Thus, intervention programs that involve motor activities and exercise contribute to the development of social interactions in the case of children with ASD (Najafabadi, Sheikh, Hemayattalab, Amir, Rezaei & Hafizi, 2018), water and fitness activities (Pan, 2011)

From the point of view of emotional development, things do not change. Following the implementation of the personal development program, there are visible differences, even if they are not statistically significant. As with social skills, parents noticed a greater difference after applying the program.

We observed through the implemented program the development of the following acquisitions: the expression of emotions, primary feelings and continues as the child grows with the expression of more complex emotions. One important thing is that by making the games based on the emotional realm we noticed that the participants with ASD develops compensatory mechanisms for emotion recognition to compensate for the processes of disturbed emotions.

We aimed at the fact that both social and emotional development are basic aspects in the child's evolution and in the instructional-educational process, so that educators and parents must offer time and dedication to this part that belongs to education.
Conclusions

In conducting this research, we aimed to highlight the positive role that games, activities on social and emotional development have at the age of 6, 7 years.

During this period, changes are made in the child's life. Whether it is activities, games, songs, the emotions and feelings of the little schoolboy accompany all its manifestations. They retain an important place in the child's life and have a strong influence on their own behavior.

What we proposed in this research referred to the identification of differences between children with ASD and children with typical development, the development of a therapeutic program and the quantification of skills, performance obtained from the implemented program.

These are the objectives that we have considered throughout the research, objectives that have been achieved.

The 12 proposed hypotheses were verified, validated. The first 8 hypotheses refer to the existence of significant differences between children with ASD and children with typical development, in terms of socio-emotional development, before and after the implementation of the therapeutic program. And the following 4 assumed the existence of representative differences for children with autism, from the point of view of the teacher and the parent, between the 2 moments of the research, differences obtained by implementing the therapeutic program. Even if we did not obtain statistically significant differences for all 4 hypotheses, they are visible.

This happened because we had some limitations of the research, these being: aspects from the point of view of the sample, the inclusion in a certain type of diagnosis of children with ASD and the short period of 3 months.

We would like to carry out research on a larger sample and for a longer period of time in the future.

The coordinators and therapists of the “Black Sea” Psychological Center, the teacher Geauzar Aila from the “Constantin Brătescu” National Pedagogical College and the parents by offering their agreement and participation in the research significantly contributed to the success of this research.

References:


