

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN THE SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH ASD



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Janayra Alves Brito¹, Donn Rasnhe Ferreira Sampaio², Letícia Pires Ribeiro³, Sarah Lucia de Sousa Silva⁴, Samille Menezes Melo⁵, Íris Machado Fernandes⁶, Maria Eduarda Gomes Oliveira Costa⁷ and Brunette Carla Saboia Sousa⁸.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of play in the social and cognitive development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition that is characterized by significant difficulties in communication, social interaction, and restricted and repetitive behaviors, affecting the quality of life of children and their families. Play emerges as a primordial form of communication and learning, being crucial for the construction of social and emotional skills. Despite the difficulties that children with ASD face, such as limitations in creativity, engagement in playful activities, and sensory challenges, play, especially when structured, can promote significant advances in the areas

¹ Medical Student

Inta-UNINTA University Center
E-mail: janayrabrito12@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0004-9475-2496
LATTES: 5627227498536149

² Medical Student

UNINTA-INTA
E-mail: krasnhe@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-8637-046X
LATTES: <https://lattes.cnpq.br/6310465208326127>

³ Medical Student

Inta University Center - UNINTA
Email: lpieresribeiro11@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-6085-4739

⁴ Medical Student Centro Universitário Inta- UNINTA

Email: sarahlucia1812@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0005-9502-624X

⁵ Medical Student

Inta University Center - UNINTA
E-mail: samilemello12@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0003-0977-8230

⁶ Medical Student

Inta University Center - UNINTA
E-mail: Iris_machado9@icloud.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-1471-8498

⁷ Medical Student

Inta-UNINTA University Center
Email: meduardaacosta16@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-3780-4212

⁸ Medical Student

INTA University Center - UNINTA
E-mail: brunasaboia@outlook.com
ORCID: 0009-0005-2476-3488

of communication, interaction, and cognitive flexibility. Playful interventions, when combined with the active participation of parents and caregivers, create a safe and stimulating environment, favoring inclusion and autonomy. This article seeks to explore the evidence in the scientific literature on how play can be used as an effective therapeutic tool, contributing to the integral development of children with ASD and promoting their social and emotional inclusion.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder. Playful Activities. Social Interaction. Rehabilitation.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by significant difficulties in communication, social interaction, and restricted and repetitive behaviors. The prevalence of ASD has been increasing in recent decades, leading to a growing interest in identifying effective interventions that can improve the quality of life for affected children and their families.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnosed based on two fundamental criteria, as established by current clinical models. The first involves persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction, and the second refers to restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. The first diagnostic criterion highlights the difficulty of children with ASD in establishing and maintaining meaningful social interactions. These include failures in verbal and nonverbal communication, such as a lack of facial expressions or gestures, and difficulty initiating or responding to social interactions appropriately. In addition, there is an impairment in the ability to share interests and emotions with others, limiting the child's social experiences and, consequently, hindering the development of relational skills (Wehmuth & Antoniuk, 2013). Regarding the second criterion, children with ASD often present repetitive and inflexible behaviors, such as stereotyped movements, rigid use of objects, and repetition of activities. They also tend to adhere inflexibly to specific routines and have a narrow range of interests, which can manifest itself in hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory stimuli, or even in a fascination with sensory aspects of the environment. These behavior patterns reflect the difficulty of adapting to new situations or changes, limiting exploration and the ability to adapt to social and environmental dynamics (Wehmuth & Antoniuk, 2013).

Playing is the main way used by children to communicate, express themselves, relate and learn. It contributes in a unique way to the care of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), bringing spontaneous forms of intervention in the demands, deficit and difficulties presented by them. Playing in its playful proposals contemplates the large number of manifestations of the spectrum, seeking to serve each child, in their particularities, through collective and individual play. Playing as a therapeutic intervention, directed and formulated through a Singular Therapeutic Project - PTS (BRASIL, 2015, p. 73), correlating its relevance within neurodevelopment, leaves the place it often occupies, only related to entertainment and leisure, to occupy a prominent place in

direct intervention with the child in care, assuming the transformative and therapeutic power it has.

We know that playful manifestations are also presented as a possibility of deepening bonds between the therapeutic team and the child and between the child and the family, as it is configured as a practice and enriching in all their life contexts, and is also the focus on guidance to parents and educational institutions.

Play is one of the richest forms of learning and development in childhood, but in children with ASD, it tends to be impoverished and restricted. Children with autism often do not engage in play spontaneously and tend to focus on repetitive activities or isolated play. The limitation in the use of objects during play, the lack of creativity and the low imaginative potential, typical aspects of the normal development of play, are especially striking. These deficits in play often reflect not only a failure to initiate social interactions, but also a lack of motivation to interact with other children or adults in the playful context. Play, in many cases, is marked by ritualizations and repetitive choices, with no room for exploration or meaningful social exchange (Araújo, 2011).

The low exploration of play and the limitation of social interactions can be further intensified by sensory difficulties, often observed in children with ASD. Changes in sensory processing affect how these children experience the world around them. They may have inadequate responses to environmental stimuli, such as sounds, textures or movements, which directly interferes with their ability to engage in playful activities. In addition, these sensory changes can lead to excessive or exaggerated behaviors, such as intense body movements or constant manipulation of objects, which hinder participation in games and social activities. This disorder in sensory modulation can cause additional difficulties in motor development and in the execution of everyday tasks, which further impacts the quality of play and the child's involvement in exploration activities (Bernert, 2013).

In addition to sensory and motor difficulties, children with ASD also face significant challenges in motor planning, which further compromises their ability to engage in play. They have difficulty organizing and performing motor actions in a coordinated manner, which can result in rapid transitions between toys or activities without in-depth exploration of either. The lack of imitation of actions and low functionality in the use of toys are common characteristics, reflecting a limitation in the development of fine motor skills and the ability to play in a more structured and creative way. This is also accompanied by

difficulties in the development of symbolic play, such as pretend play, which are observed in much lower levels compared to typically developing children. The lack of imitation and the inability to participate in representative play limit the learning potential of children with ASD, impairing their socialization and cognitive abilities in general (Bernert, 2013; Araújo, 2011).

In summary, ASD imposes significant challenges to children's development, especially with regard to socialization and participation in playful activities. Behavioral rigidity, limitation in play patterns, and sensory alteration contribute to a reduced play experience, which directly impacts the learning and social interactions of these children, interfering with their ability to explore the environment naturally and interact constructively with others.

In this context, play emerges as a fundamental activity not only for child development in general, but especially for children with ASD, as it offers a natural and engaging means to promote social, emotional and cognitive skills. The act of playing transcends mere fun; It is an essential component of human development. For typical children, play is a way to explore the world, develop creativity, and learn to interact with others. In the case of children with ASD, playing can serve as a bridge to the acquisition of social skills that are often challenging. Studies demonstrate that both structured and unstructured play can facilitate social interaction, allowing these children to practice and improve their communication and empathy skills in a safe and controlled environment. In addition, play plays a crucial role in cognitive development.

Playful activities stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, aspects that are often compromised in children with ASD. Through games and play, they have the opportunity to experiment with different scenarios and roles, which can help in understanding emotions and emotional regulation. This ability to engage in playful activities not only promotes learning but also contributes to building self-esteem and self-confidence. However, it is important to recognize that children with ASD may present unique challenges that make it difficult for them to participate in conventional play activities. Therefore, targeted interventions that consider the specific needs of these children are essential.

Health professionals, educators, and families should collaborate to create inclusive and adapted play environments where children can interact with their peers in a meaningful way. The use of assistive technologies and structured play such as board games, imitation play, building activities, movement games, card games, structured art activities, role-

playing games, puzzles, team games, and sensorially rich activities can be particularly beneficial, providing opportunities for children to develop social skills in a supportive context. Given this scenario, this article seeks to explore the importance of play in the social and cognitive development of children with ASD, analyzing the evidence available in the scientific literature on how this activity can be used as an effective therapeutic tool. The practical implications for professionals and caregivers will be discussed, as well as the strategies that can be implemented to maximize the benefits of play in the lives of these children. In the end, it is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the vital role that play plays in the integral development of children with ASD, promoting not only their individual growth, but also their social and emotional inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a literature review that aims to analyze the impact of play on the social and cognitive development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The search was conducted on the following platforms: Google Scholar, UpToDate, PubMed, SAGE Journals, ResearchGate, and Wiley Online Library. As inclusion criteria, studies published between 2005-2025 in Portuguese and English were defined, as well as peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, and original studies that addressed the relationship between play and social and cognitive development in children with ASD. The exclusion criteria were duplicate studies, studies with an exclusive focus on adults or populations not related to ASD, and studies with incomplete methodology or without a direct relationship with the theme. Keywords structured according to the Health Science Descriptors (DeCS) were used, namely: autism spectrum disorder, playful activities, social interaction, rehabilitation. After the initial search, the articles were screened based on the relevance of the title and abstract, then the full texts were read and analyzed to verify their adequacy to the objective of the study, finally, the data were organized and categorized into central themes to facilitate analysis and discussion.

RESULTS

The data analyzed indicate that play plays a fundamental role in the development of children who need early stimulation. The use of play as a therapeutic and relational resource enables a broad investment in the child's potential, respecting their chronological and corrected age, their preferences and creating a welcoming environment for the family.

Child development is directly associated with neuronal processes that occur from birth, driven both by biological factors and by the quality of the experiences and interactions experienced by the child. In this sense, the Central Nervous System is not completely formed at birth and, over time, more mature structures inhibit primitive behaviors, allowing the acquisition of more complex motor and cognitive skills (Vilanova, 1998). In addition, evidence indicates that neuroplasticity plays an essential role in this process, as the child's interactions with the environment directly influence neuronal organization, promoting transformations that favor learning and global development (Guerra, 2008). Thus, enriching experiences, such as playing, have a positive impact by stimulating neural connections and improving the child's adaptive capacity. In the context of children with ASD, playing stands out as an important means of communication and expression. Even when the child plays alone, there are indications that he uses his imaginative potential to symbolically interact with toys or fictional characters, which contributes to the construction of language. This process helps to expand vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and structure sentences.

In addition, playing favors the learning of social rules, allowing the child to understand the importance of negotiation, conflict resolution and respect for the rules established in playful contexts (Cordazzo & Vieira, 2007; Hansen et al., 2007). It was also observed that, for children with ASD, structured games can be more effective than free interaction games, since they have clear objectives and less demand for spontaneous affective involvement. This type of activity facilitates the participation of these children, promoting the development of social skills, such as cooperation and alternating shifts. Thus, the results suggest that structured play can be an essential tool in promoting child development within the autistic spectrum, contributing both to the improvement of communication and to the expansion of social interactions. The types of structured activities that play an essential role in the development of children with ASD are games that follow a logical sequence, such as boards, block assembly, and Jenga, as they favor cognitive organization and understanding of rules (Barton; Lawrence; Deurloo, 2019). On the other hand, dynamics that involve joint attention, such as action and movement games — for example, the walking dead, tag, hide and seek, stamping, volleyball, and soccer — stimulate verbal and non-verbal communication, promoting greater social engagement in the school environment (Wong; Kasari, 2012).

In the cognitive aspect, symbolic play represents a challenge for children with ASD, especially due to the difficulty in establishing spontaneous social bonds. However, this form

of play is fundamental for the development of imagination, problem-solving, and behavioral flexibility, allowing the child to explore different social roles and increase their ability to adapt and autonomy (Kasari; Freeman; Paparella, 2006).

In addition, structured interventions have been shown to be effective in expanding the playful repertoire of these children. A study evaluating the Learn to Play program revealed significant advances in creativity, language use, and play involvement, underscoring the importance of these approaches in stimulating child development (Stagnitti; O'Connor; Sheppard, 2012).

According to Araújo (2011), children with ASD have serious difficulties in imitating facial movements and gestures, in addition to facing challenges in imitating actions with objects, often occurring late. Studies by Hobson and Hobson (2008), cited by Araújo (2011), suggest that these difficulties are not due to an inability to imitate the actions themselves, but rather to a compromise in emotional reciprocity, that is, in the ability to subjectively identify with the other. In this sense, by exploring the imitative potential of children, starting with simple imitations, such as facial expressions or speeches from therapists, caregivers or other children, significant progress can be observed. An example of a playful activity that works on this imitation would be performing actions with a toy, such as feeding farm animals, being imitated by the child, even if he has difficulties with eye contact. This type of activity indicates that the imitative deficit is being addressed and that it can be expanded to other social relationships of the child. (Cipriano; Almeida , 2016)

Children with mild autism, in turn, may exhibit rigid behaviors, such as not accepting mistakes (when the child gets angry about having painted a drawing out of the frame unintentionally, for example), mechanized communication, and difficulties in interacting with other people. These children tend to be more passive and lack spontaneity in play. In this context, it is essential that playful activities are promoted, with an emphasis on play, which offers flexibility and freedom, favoring the development of social and emotional aspects of these children. During play, these children will be encouraged to adopt a more active and engaging role, where they and the others involved will have to negotiate decisions about the playful moment. From these interactions, they will be able to transfer the skills acquired to other contexts of daily life. This process can result in improvements in the quality of their relationships, reflected in greater flexibility in interactions with family and friends, in addition to expanding their repertoire to resolve conflicts more independently, without depending on the intervention of third parties or the manifestation of disruptive behaviors. For children

who are also on the Autism Spectrum, but who have behaviors significantly different from those described above, the proposal involves more structured games, starting with simple playful activities and evolving to more organized games. These children, who often exhibit disorganization in their actions, such as being disoriented in play, with uncoordinated postures (such as moving repetitively and twirling with objects), motor difficulties (such as lack of control in movements, frequently bumping) and rigidity (manifested in intolerance to limits and resistance to the intervention of others), benefit from more planned and sequential activities. According to Almeida (2011), these structured games favor the child's organization, providing a context of predictability and control.

Organized games, such as board games (example: real estate game and game of life), construction games (such as assembling towers with Lego blocks) and other games with clearer rules, such as memory games; or puzzle, can be particularly effective. These games have a well-defined beginning, middle and end, with clear objectives and pre-established rules, which help the child develop planning and organization skills. This is reflected not only in the playful context, but can also be transferred to activities of daily living (ADLs), such as self-care, for example, teaching the child to plan and perform simple tasks, such as brushing teeth or bathing. In addition, this structure allows the child to better understand the importance of endings and transitions, helping those who become disorganized at the end of an activity to understand that the process has a beginning, a middle and an end, facilitating the acceptance of the endings of therapeutic activities (Wong and Kasari, 2012). In general, the findings reinforce that the inclusion of play, especially in structured and directed contexts, not only favors social and emotional development, but also strengthens essential cognitive skills. This evidence highlights the need to integrate playful activities into educational and therapeutic interventions aimed at children with ASD, providing more effective support for their growth and learning. The role of the family is fundamental in this context, because often, due to lack of guidance or difficulty in dealing with certain behaviors, family members end up adopting a permissive posture. This approach aims to prevent the manifestation of disruptive behaviors, but at the same time, it can end up reinforcing rigid behaviors and making it difficult to introduce new experiences. As a result, the environment becomes impoverished in stimuli, limiting the child's participation in playful activities and the creation of new experiences. This can occur due to lack of time, guidance, or even due to family factors, such as fears and unfounded beliefs. For example, in an everyday situation, a mother may prevent her child from

participating in a board game, fearing that he will become frustrated or react aggressively during the process. However, by making this decision, she loses the opportunity to promote an experience that would help her child develop social skills and learn to deal with frustrations in a controlled way.

On the other hand, some families report that they use play as a tool to get to know their children better and stimulate the development of behaviors that can be modified gradually and procedurally. In this sense, by including themselves in games, they acquire a greater repertoire of strategies and, consequently, become more prepared to deal with disruptive behaviors effectively, promoting an environment richer in stimuli and positive experiences for the child. According to Friedmann (2011), the participation of parents in playing with their children favors the creation of a more intimate relationship, in addition to facilitating the choice of toys that meet the specific needs, abilities and interests of children. The active involvement of parents in play can be an effective way to strengthen family bonds and promote the child's development in a more targeted way. Saviani (2014) also highlights the importance of playing in the construction of bonds between parents and children, stating that this interaction not only deepens affective bonds, but also boosts the development of the child's cognitive, affective and relational skills.

This process of bonding through play is not limited to the family environment, but can also be explored by therapists and educators who accompany the child in his daily learning. In addition, any activity that involves the child leaving their comfort zone and facing their difficulties, mediated by playful resources offered by a multidisciplinary team, can be considered an intervention through play. Examples of instruments may include voice, singing, touch, gaze, toys, or early intervention materials such as balls, rollers, and fabrics, used in specialized centers. These strategies can be understood as effective interventions in the context of Autism, providing the child with the opportunity to evolve and overcome barriers. Thus, playing, whether through games or play, with the use of toys and other materials, should be seen as an important intervention tool for children on the autism spectrum, working as a resource, strategy and therapeutic action. According to Cipriano and Almeida (2016), Playful activities that involve Sensory Integration resources are essential to provide children with sensory experiences that meet their specific needs, focusing on the most affected systems. Such activities may include the use of knitwear and fabrics, differentiated textures such as sand, clay, playdough, shaving foam and jelly, as well as raw or cooked foods, proprioception discs and swings. In addition, sensory

stimulation, such as the use of moisturizing cream, can also be integrated, always within a playful context, where play becomes a powerful tool. These practices have a great impact on the sensory modulation of children with ASD, acting on the tactile, vestibular, proprioceptive, auditory, visual and olfactory systems. The use of music during these activities is especially effective, as it contributes to the creation of a playful and welcoming environment, favoring the participation of children and enhancing the benefits of these sensory experiences. Symbolic play, initiated by the child or with structured toys, involves representative actions and make-believe, arousing the child's interest and attention, especially with regard to language. Materials such as plastic food baskets, miniature household utensils, plates, forks and spoons are excellent for stimulating the role-playing game. In addition, unstructured toys can be easily incorporated into symbolic play, just by giving space to imagination and creativity. Theatrical and dramatization games, on the other hand, promote playful interactions, favoring the development of expressive and social skills.

Construction games, such as interlocking blocks, are resources that favor the development of concentration, attention, visual-motor coordination, patience, perseverance, in addition to stimulating independence and the feeling of accomplishment. They also encourage abstract thinking, the recognition of similarities and differences, logical reasoning and problem-solving, providing an environment of exploration and creativity (ALMEIDA, 2010). In addition, music and movement play an important role in the development of attention and communication. Musical instruments, such as drums, keyboards, maracas, tambourines, and xylophones, provide opportunities to explore sounds and encourage curiosity. (Cipriano; Almeida , 2016). Music can also be used to help children who resist the beginning and end of appointments, as a way to signal these moments. Games that involve singing and movement are valuable for exploring the body and sensations, while hand games, in which the adult interacts eye to eye with the child, help to establish bonds and strengthen communication (FRIEDMANN, 2011). Therefore, from the considerations presented, it is possible to conclude that playing, when inserted in appropriate therapeutic and educational contexts, is an essential tool in the development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), promoting significant advances in the social, cognitive and emotional areas.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the various therapeutic approaches that involve playing as an intervention instrument for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) evidences its relevance in the process of social, cognitive and emotional development of these individuals. Play, in addition to being a natural form of expression and learning for children, when used in a targeted and structured way, can become a fundamental therapeutic tool. Various types of playful activities, such as symbolic games, construction games, sensory activities, and other interaction practices, have shown positive results in stimulating imitation, communication, and cognitive flexibility, skills that often present challenges in children with ASD (Kasari et al., 2006; Stagnitti et al., 2012).

The results obtained demonstrate the relevance of playing as an indispensable therapeutic and educational strategy for children with ASD. Structured play, as indicated by Barton et al. (2019), offers an environment that reduces behavioral barriers and facilitates social interaction, which is essential for the development of interpersonal skills. In addition, Wong and Kasari (2012) emphasize that activities focused on joint attention directly contribute to increased engagement and communication, crucial elements for social integration. In the cognitive sphere, Kasari et al. (2006) and Stagnitti et al. (2012) highlight the importance of symbolic and creative play in the development of more complex skills, such as planning, creativity and language. These practices not only promote advances in cognitive development, but also prepare the child for broader and more challenging social contexts.

In the context of symbolic play, for example, games involving make-believe, in which children imitate actions and interact with objects in a representative way, have shown a significant impact on verbal and non-verbal communication skills (Almeida & Cipriano, 2016). Activities like these stimulate language and logical reasoning, in addition to promoting a greater understanding of social roles, contributing to the development of essential skills for interpersonal relationships and adaptation to different daily situations. Materials such as toy utensils, miniatures of everyday objects and unstructured toys favor imagination and creativity, making symbolic play an important strategy to expand the communicative and social repertoire of children with ASD. In addition, structured activities, such as games with defined rules, beginning, middle and end, provide organization and predictability that favor emotional modulation and behavioral control of children. These games have a positive impact on the development of problem-solving and self-control

skills, as they require following rules and completing tasks in a sequential manner. The application of these activities is not restricted to the playful context, but can be extended to everyday life, as in Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), for example. In these activities, children with ASD can be guided to plan and perform tasks related to self-care, such as brushing their teeth or bathing, which contributes to the promotion of autonomy and independence, in addition to encouraging greater acceptance of the completion of activities, especially for those who tend to become disorganized with the transition between moments of play and the end of activities (Almeida & Cipriano, 2016).

However, it is important to emphasize that the implementation of play-based interventions requires trained professionals and appropriate environments, in addition to adaptation to the individual needs of children. The inclusion of these practices in educational and therapeutic contexts should be a priority, considering their proven benefits in both social and cognitive development. The active participation of the family is also a crucial factor to enhance the effects of these interventions. The involvement of parents in playful activities, whether through the choice of appropriate toys or by creating moments of family interaction, strengthens affective bonds and allows parents to better understand the needs and preferences of their children (Friedmann, 2011; Saviani, 2014). As authors such as Friedmann (2011) and Saviani (2014) point out, playing together with the child favors not only the strengthening of family ties, but also the development of cognitive, affective and social skills, creating a safer and more stimulating environment for the child. Therefore, the evidence discussed throughout this study reinforces the importance of play in the therapeutic process of children with ASD. The use of structured play activities, combined with the active participation of the family and the application of sensory strategies, not only contributes to the development of essential skills, but also provides a more inclusive and welcoming environment. These practices, when well implemented by qualified professionals, play a crucial role in improving the well-being, quality of life and social integration of children with ASD, thus becoming an indispensable instrument in pedagogical and therapeutic interventions aimed at this audience. The inclusion of play as a central approach in interventions should be prioritized, with appropriate adaptation to individual needs, ensuring that these practices continue to expand developmental potential, promote inclusion, autonomy, and quality of life for children with ASD (Barton et al., 2019; Wong & Kasari, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the various therapeutic and educational approaches that involve play as an intervention tool for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) reveals how essential this practice is in the process of social, cognitive and emotional development of these individuals. Structured play interventions, such as symbolic games, construction activities, and sensory games, demonstrate a significant impact on the development of essential skills, such as communication, socialization, self-control, and cognitive flexibility. Play, when integrated into the therapeutic and educational context, provides children with an opportunity to interact with the world around them in a more organized and meaningful way, facilitating the expression of their emotions, thoughts and needs.

In addition, the results indicate that, by involving parents and caregivers in the playful process, interventions become more effective, promoting not only the strengthening of family ties, but also the creation of a more welcoming and stimulating environment for the child with ASD. The active participation of parents in playful activities favors the understanding of the child's specific needs and allows appropriate strategies to be applied in daily life. This collaboration between professionals, families, and the child himself is critical to the success of interventions, since individual needs must be taken into account, and play practices must be adapted to optimize outcomes.

Finally, the benefits of playing, when correctly oriented and contextualized, are evident in the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills, contributing to the promotion of autonomy, inclusion, and quality of life of children with ASD. For these results to be achieved, it is necessary that trained and specialized professionals offer continuous and individualized support, respecting the particularities of each child. Play, as a therapeutic and educational tool, should therefore be integrated as a central approach in interventions aimed at children with ASD, promoting broader, more balanced and inclusive development. Ongoing research and practice in this area is essential to ensure that play remains an effective and transformative resource in the lives of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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