

IMITATIVE SKILLS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRETEND PLAY IN CHILDHOOD

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Play is the leading source of development in the preschool years (Vygotsky, 1966), and this natural tool also supports the realization of the human social, emotional, cognitive and physical well-being (Hurwitz, 2002; Mulligan, 2012). In this way, the child's ability to play seems to be a principal criterion of mental health (Montagu, 1981). But how can we grasp the concept of play? 'Play is defined as the purposeful manipulation of objects in which exploration and practice of effects appear to be the child's goals' (Rogers, Cook & Meryl, 2005. 391.). Furthermore, different qualities of dyadic interaction can also be allowed by play between the caregiver and child, in which the adult would be able to learn more about the child's view about the world. This opportunity is also provided for parents with a less-verbal child who has problems of self-expression. Thus play may be a very useful activity for the child to share his/her needs with others more effectively, and the caregivers can similarly comprehend the child's special needs (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2011). However, various stages of play were distinguished by Piaget (1945, 1965). Research has confirmed that autistic children's social and pretend play patterns differ from typically developing children's play (Jarrod, Boucher & Smith, 1996). But child-driven play has implications on the development of cognitive capacity through the child's own activity. On the one hand, play should reduce cognitive interference and increase the ability to store new information (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Toppino, Kasserman & Mracek, 1991). On the other hand, the child's perseverance at tasks may lead to higher self-perceived competence and support the development of more complex skills and strategies (Bandura, 1997). In my study I examined the appearance of pretend play in the normal and the autistic development of 6-6 pre-school and primary school children, regarding the characteristics of sensory and perceptual processes. The parent-child dyads' interactions were also observed. In the first part of my work I used Bogdashina's Sensory Profile Checklist Revised (SPCR) that was filled in by the parents, while in the second part of my study replica models of well-known characters and everyday tools were provided for the participating dyads. The data analysis was made by Noldus Observer XT 8.0 and SPSS 15.0 Windows for Evaluation Version program softwares. Based on my results, problems with the imitation of the parents' movements and the impairment of pretend play have been confirmed. Furthermore, autistic children's reduced interest in game process and their mothers' increased tendency for leading during the play activity could also be observed. In sum, linking to the previous results, imitation may be the primary deficit in autism, which limits the development of different skills, while play abnormalities reflect the impairment/dysfunction of other problematic areas (Rogers, Cook & Meryl, 2005).

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