

Abstract of the doctoral dissertation

The Role of Parents in Shaping the Social Behaviors of Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Context of Therapeutic Support They Receive

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Research subject and objectives with scientific justification

The topic of this dissertation focuses on the broad issue of supporting young children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), as well as the experience of support by parents from the institutional system, including teachers and specialists involved in the educational and therapeutic process. Due to the vastness of the subject, which encompasses the child with ASD, their development, and their family environment, the author has concentrated on supporting the stimulation of the social domain, which is the most deficient in cases of ASD diagnosis. This research perspective led to the formulation of the central research question:

"What therapeutic support provided to parents enables the shaping of social behaviors in their children with autism spectrum disorder?"

Given the significance of early childhood in early development support, the author has focused on two subjects in this study: the first, at the core of the research, is the child with autism spectrum disorder, with its array of characteristic traits and developmental atypicalities. The second subject is the parent, who has the strongest influence on the child in the upbringing process tailored to the child's abilities and needs, as well as those of the immediate family. Parenting is a two-subject process, where mutual, interdependent activity between both subjects is essential, with continuous reciprocal interaction.

The author distinguishes several subject layers in the research. If the central subject is the child with ASD, the deep subject of the research is the child's development

(methodologically limited to the social domain). The second layer includes the parental upbringing influences, corresponding to the previously mentioned characteristics. The third, most external layer in this project, and the direct subject of the research, is the support provided by the therapist to the parent, which optimizes the parent's upbringing efforts. The formulated question demonstrates the broad scope of the issue and the complexity of raising a young child with developmental disorders, providing an opportunity to explore these layers. The essence of the research problem is, essentially, to ensure that therapeutic intervention supports, rather than disrupts, the parent's process of raising their child with ASD in their natural, functional environment.

Research methodology

The research was conducted in a foundation providing comprehensive support for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families. This foundation operates a therapeutic preschool, a therapeutic elementary school, and a counseling center for individuals with autism. The study involved 13 children with ASD, confirmed by a psychiatrist's diagnosis, along with their parents. The research included observing the child's participation in educational and therapeutic activities in specialized facilities, as well as an in-depth analysis of the child's development, considering both functional assessment and environmental resources and limitations. Tools for multi-profile assessment of the child's functioning, commonly used by specialists in the foundation's facilities, were employed, alongside the ADOS-2 observation protocol, a standardized tool known globally as the "gold standard" in clinical autism diagnosis. Complementing the observations, the Child's Play Skills Checklist was used to assess basic skills for independent play and play with others in a peer group, as well as to track developmental changes.

The data gathered through observations and information allowed for the development of an individualized case study for each child, featuring a detailed functional profile. The selected methods were used for data collection and analysis, as well as for evaluating the developmental changes in the studied children that occurred as a result of the therapeutic interventions.

Research outcomes and conclusions

The research allowed for the identification of several significant aspects related to the functioning and support of children with ASD and their families. First and foremost, the highly individualized functional profile requires the consideration of the disorder's specifics and the development of a diverse therapeutic pathway tailored to the child's needs. The support provided by specialists should be grounded in empirically tested approaches, with goals presented to parents in a clear and understandable way. Approaching the therapy of the child and family requires a holistic view of the issues surrounding autism spectrum disorders. Social awareness of early symptoms of autism still needs improvement, especially in terms of taking diagnostic steps to ensure timely and optimal support.

Parents of children with ASD experience various forms of assistance from the system and specialists, yet there is no uniformity or standard that could serve as a foundation for comprehensive work with the child and family. Parents are not provided with systemic psychological help upon receiving the diagnosis and must seek out important information and deal with their emotions on their own after the diagnosis. Many parents reported the need for information about ASD at the time of diagnosis.

Holistic therapeutic interventions lead to developmental changes, though these are individually linked to the child's neurodevelopmental predispositions. However, equal access to support and systemic assistance does not always result in the same developmental outcomes.

For the author, the research project provided new experiences, particularly from sincere and long conversations with parents. It prompted many reflections on finding optimal strategies for supporting families.

