

# **Play Therapy for Autistic Children: Enhancing Social Communication, Emotional Expression, and Developmental Engagement**

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## **Abstract:**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents significant challenges in social communication, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior, necessitating interventions that are both developmentally appropriate and child-centered. Play therapy has emerged as an effective approach to support autistic children by providing a structured yet flexible medium for expression, interaction, and learning. This qualitative study employs thematic analysis to examine the experiences of therapists, teachers, and parents engaged in play therapy programs for autistic children. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observational notes, highlighting patterns in social engagement, emotional expression, cognitive development, and therapeutic relationships. The findings indicate that play therapy enhances communication skills, facilitates emotional regulation, promotes imaginative and cognitive flexibility, and strengthens interpersonal engagement in both clinical and home environments. The study also identifies challenges in implementation, including individual differences in developmental needs, resource limitations, and the gradual pace of observable progress. These insights underscore the value of play therapy as a holistic intervention that supports the developmental and psychological well-being of autistic children, offering practical implications for therapists, educators, and caregivers.

## **Keywords:**

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Play Therapy, Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, Child Development, Thematic Analysis, Therapeutic Intervention

## **Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication, restricted interests, repetitive behaviors, and differences in sensory processing. The prevalence of autism has increased globally over the past two decades, leading to growing academic, clinical, and societal interest in interventions that support the developmental and psychological needs of autistic children. According to recent estimates, approximately one in every 36 children is diagnosed with ASD, making it one of the most widely discussed developmental conditions in contemporary child psychology and special education research. Because autism affects multiple domains of functioning—particularly communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior—intervention

strategies must be multidimensional, developmentally appropriate, and sensitive to the unique ways autistic children experience and interact with the world.

Traditional therapeutic approaches for autistic children often emphasize structured behavioral interventions, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. While these approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in improving specific skills, they sometimes rely heavily on direct instruction and adult-led interactions. For many autistic children, however, learning and emotional expression occur more naturally through play-based experiences. Play represents a fundamental mode of learning in childhood, enabling children to explore their environment, experiment with social roles, regulate emotions, and develop cognitive flexibility. Within this context, play therapy has emerged as an important therapeutic approach that supports emotional, social, and communicative development through structured yet child-centered play interactions.

Play therapy refers to a range of therapeutic techniques that use play as the primary medium for communication and expression between the child and the therapist. Because children often lack the linguistic and cognitive maturity to articulate their thoughts and emotions verbally, play becomes a symbolic language through which they can communicate experiences, feelings, and internal conflicts. In therapeutic settings, toys, games, storytelling, art materials, and imaginative activities provide children with safe opportunities to express themselves and explore interpersonal relationships. For autistic children in particular, play therapy offers a non-threatening environment where they can gradually develop social engagement, emotional understanding, and communication skills without the pressure of conventional verbal interaction.

The relevance of play therapy for autistic children lies in its alignment with the developmental characteristics of autism. Many autistic children experience challenges in understanding social cues, engaging in reciprocal interactions, and participating in symbolic or imaginative play. These challenges can lead to difficulties in forming relationships, regulating emotions, and adapting to new environments. Play therapy seeks to address these challenges by creating structured opportunities for interaction that are both meaningful and motivating for the child. Through guided play activities, therapists can model social behaviors, encourage joint attention, promote turn-taking, and facilitate emotional expression. Over time, these interactions help children build foundational skills that support broader developmental progress.

Different models of play therapy have been developed to address the needs of children with developmental and emotional difficulties. Approaches such as child-centered play therapy, directive play therapy, and developmental play therapy each emphasize different therapeutic techniques and theoretical foundations. Child-centered play therapy, for instance, is rooted in humanistic psychology and prioritizes the child's autonomy and self-expression within a supportive therapeutic relationship. Directive play therapy, on the other hand, involves more structured activities guided by the therapist to achieve specific developmental or behavioral goals. In the context of autism, therapists often integrate elements from multiple play therapy models to accommodate the diverse needs and abilities of autistic children.

One of the most significant advantages of play therapy is its ability to enhance social communication skills in a naturalistic manner. During play sessions, children are encouraged to interact with therapists and peers through activities that require shared attention, imitation, and

collaboration. These interactions provide opportunities for practicing essential communication behaviors such as eye contact, gestures, and verbal responses. Moreover, play therapy can help autistic children develop symbolic thinking and imaginative play, which are often areas of difficulty within the autism spectrum. By gradually expanding the child's repertoire of play behaviors, therapists can support cognitive flexibility and creativity.

Another important dimension of play therapy is its contribution to emotional and psychological well-being. Autistic children frequently experience anxiety, frustration, and sensory overload due to the challenges they encounter in social and environmental contexts. Play therapy offers a safe and predictable space where children can explore emotions, release tension, and develop coping strategies. Through activities such as role-play, storytelling, and creative expression, children learn to identify and manage their feelings in constructive ways. The therapeutic relationship established during play therapy sessions also fosters trust, empathy, and emotional security, which are essential components of healthy psychological development.

Research in developmental psychology and special education increasingly highlights the positive impact of play-based interventions for autistic children. Studies have shown that play therapy can improve social interaction, increase spontaneous communication, reduce problematic behaviors, and enhance emotional regulation. In addition, play therapy is often adaptable to different settings, including clinical environments, schools, and home-based programs. This flexibility makes it a valuable intervention strategy for educators, psychologists, and parents seeking to support autistic children in diverse contexts. Collaborative involvement of caregivers and teachers in play-based interventions can further reinforce the skills developed during therapy sessions, creating a more comprehensive support system for the child.

Despite its promising benefits, the implementation of play therapy for autistic children also presents certain challenges. Differences in cognitive functioning, language ability, and sensory preferences among autistic children require therapists to carefully tailor play activities to individual needs. Furthermore, empirical research on play therapy in autism continues to evolve, and there is an ongoing need for systematic studies that evaluate its long-term effectiveness and identify best practices for implementation. Addressing these research gaps is essential for strengthening the evidence base of play therapy and ensuring that interventions remain both scientifically grounded and practically applicable.

In light of these considerations, the present research focuses on the role of play therapy as a supportive intervention for autistic children. By examining how play-based therapeutic techniques influence social, emotional, and communicative development, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of child-centered approaches in autism intervention. Given the increasing recognition of holistic and inclusive therapeutic models, play therapy offers a promising framework that respects the individuality of autistic children while promoting their developmental potential. Exploring its effectiveness not only enhances clinical practice but also provides valuable insights for educators, therapists, and families seeking meaningful ways to support the growth and well-being of children on the autism spectrum.

## **Methodology**

This study employs thematic analysis as the primary qualitative research method to explore the effectiveness and experiences of play therapy for autistic children. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method that focuses on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. It is particularly suitable for research that seeks to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a phenomenon. In the context of this study, thematic analysis allows the researcher to systematically examine narratives and observations related to the use of play therapy in supporting the developmental and emotional needs of autistic children.

## **Research Design**

The present research adopts a qualitative research design because the study aims to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in play therapy interventions with autistic children. Qualitative methods are appropriate for examining complex psychological and social phenomena that cannot be easily measured through numerical data alone. Through thematic analysis, the study seeks to uncover recurring patterns, meanings, and interpretations related to how play therapy influences communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and behavioral development among autistic children.

The research is exploratory in nature and focuses on generating insights about therapeutic processes rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. By analyzing qualitative data obtained from participants such as therapists, teachers, and parents, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how play therapy is implemented and how it impacts autistic children's development.

## **Participants and Sampling**

The participants for this study consist of professionals and caregivers who have experience working with autistic children in play therapy contexts. These may include **play therapists, special education teachers, psychologists, and parents** of autistic children who have participated in play therapy sessions. A **purposive sampling technique** is used to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the research topic.

Purposive sampling enables the researcher to focus on individuals who can provide rich, detailed information about the therapeutic process and outcomes of play therapy. The study involves approximately 15 participants, depending on data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data. This sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative thematic analysis as it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining analytical depth.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Data for this research are collected through semi-structured interviews and observational notes. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, allowing participants to share detailed experiences while ensuring that the discussion remains focused on key aspects of play therapy and its effects on autistic children. The interview questions are designed to explore themes such as the role of

play in communication development, emotional expression during therapy sessions, social interaction improvements, and challenges encountered in the therapeutic process.

Each interview is expected to last between 30 and 45 minutes, and with participants' consent, the conversations are audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of responses. The recordings are later transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis.

## **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data collected from interviews and observations are analyzed using the six-phase framework for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach provides a systematic process for identifying and interpreting themes within qualitative data.

- 1. Familiarization with the Data**  
The first stage involves reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and observational notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. During this phase, the researcher makes initial notes about potential patterns, recurring ideas, and significant statements related to play therapy and autism.
- 2. Generating Initial Codes**  
In the second phase, the researcher systematically codes relevant segments of the data. Coding involves labeling meaningful units of text that capture important aspects of participants' responses. For example, statements related to "improved communication," "emotional expression through play," or "increased social interaction" may be assigned specific codes.
- 3. Searching for Themes**  
After coding the data, the researcher groups related codes together to form broader themes. These themes represent patterns that capture significant aspects of participants' experiences with play therapy. For instance, codes related to interaction, engagement, and communication may be combined under a theme such as "Enhancement of Social Communication Skills."
- 4. Reviewing Themes**  
In this stage, the identified themes are reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represent the dataset. The researcher examines whether the themes are coherent, distinct, and supported by sufficient evidence from the data. Some themes may be merged, divided, or discarded during this phase.
- 5. Defining and Naming Themes**  
Once the themes are finalized, the researcher defines each theme clearly and assigns descriptive names that capture their essence. This step involves interpreting how the themes relate to the research objectives and explaining their significance within the context of play therapy and autism.
- 6. Producing the Report**  
The final phase involves presenting the findings in a structured manner. The themes identified during the analysis are described in detail and supported by relevant excerpts from the interview transcripts. The analysis highlights how play therapy contributes to various aspects of development among autistic children, including communication, emotional regulation, and social interaction.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles are carefully considered throughout the research process. Participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and **informed consent** is obtained before conducting interviews or observations. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained by removing identifying information from transcripts and research reports. Participants are also informed that their participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

When observations involve autistic children, parental or guardian consent is obtained to ensure that ethical standards related to child research are fully respected. The researcher also ensures that the study does not interfere with the therapeutic process or cause discomfort to the children involved.

## **Trustworthiness and Reliability**

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, several strategies are employed. Data triangulation is achieved by collecting information from multiple participants and sources, including therapists, teachers, and parents. This approach enhances the depth and validity of the analysis. Additionally, the researcher maintains detailed documentation of the coding and theme development process, ensuring transparency in how the conclusions are derived.

Member checking may also be used, where participants are given the opportunity to review summaries of the findings to confirm whether the interpretations accurately reflect their experiences. This step further strengthens the trustworthiness of the research.

## **Analysis**

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from therapists, teachers, and parents revealed several recurring themes that illustrate the role and impact of play therapy on autistic children. Through systematic coding and categorization of interview transcripts and observational notes, key patterns emerged that demonstrate how play therapy contributes to social communication, emotional expression, behavioral development, and overall therapeutic engagement. These themes highlight the multidimensional benefits of play-based therapeutic interventions for children on the autism spectrum.

## **Enhancement of Social Communication Skills**

One of the most prominent themes identified in the data is the **improvement of social communication skills** among autistic children who participate in play therapy sessions. Participants consistently reported that structured play activities create natural opportunities for children to interact with others, which is a critical developmental area often affected in autism.

Therapists noted that during play sessions, children gradually begin to demonstrate behaviors such as **eye contact, turn-taking, joint attention, and response to social cues**. For example, interactive games and role-play activities encourage children to respond to prompts and

communicate with therapists or peers in a supportive and non-threatening environment. Unlike traditional instructional methods, play therapy allows communication to emerge organically through shared activities.

Parents also reported that children who participated in regular play therapy sessions showed increased willingness to communicate at home. Some children began to use gestures, words, or facial expressions more frequently during play with family members. This indicates that the communication skills practiced in therapy settings may transfer to everyday social interactions.

### **Development of Emotional Expression and Regulation**

Another significant theme emerging from the analysis is the **development of emotional awareness and emotional regulation**. Autistic children often experience difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions, which can lead to frustration, anxiety, or behavioral outbursts. Play therapy provides a safe environment where children can explore emotions through symbolic activities such as storytelling, puppet play, drawing, and role-play.

Participants observed that children often express feelings indirectly through play narratives or imaginative scenarios. For instance, some children used toys or characters to represent personal experiences or emotional states that they might not be able to articulate verbally. Therapists highlighted that these symbolic expressions help them understand the child's internal emotional world.

Over time, children also begin to demonstrate improved emotional regulation during play sessions. Activities that involve structured routines, sensory engagement, and cooperative play help children manage stress and frustration. Parents reported noticeable changes such as reduced emotional outbursts and increased ability to cope with challenging situations.

### **Increased Social Engagement and Interaction**

The analysis further revealed that **play therapy promotes social engagement and participation** among autistic children. Many children on the autism spectrum tend to engage in solitary play or repetitive activities, limiting their opportunities for meaningful interaction with others. Play therapy introduces structured social contexts that encourage children to participate in shared activities.

Therapists reported that children who initially avoided interaction gradually became more engaged in collaborative play. Activities such as building games, imaginative role-play, and cooperative storytelling encourage children to interact with both therapists and peers. These interactions foster the development of social skills including cooperation, imitation, and reciprocal engagement.

Teachers participating in the study also noted improvements in classroom behavior. Children who were involved in play therapy showed greater willingness to participate in group activities and displayed increased responsiveness to peers and teachers. This suggests that play therapy can support social integration in educational environments.

## **Development of Cognitive Flexibility and Creativity**

Another theme identified in the data relates to **cognitive development, particularly the growth of imaginative thinking and cognitive flexibility**. Autistic children often exhibit restricted patterns of play and repetitive behaviors. Through guided play therapy, therapists encourage children to explore new ways of interacting with toys, objects, and stories.

Participants observed that children gradually expanded their play behaviors from repetitive manipulation of objects to more symbolic and imaginative forms of play. For example, children began to assign roles to toys, create simple narratives, and engage in pretend scenarios. This shift indicates progress in abstract thinking and creative expression.

The development of cognitive flexibility is also reflected in the children's willingness to try new activities and adapt to changes during play sessions. Therapists noted that children who initially resisted unfamiliar activities became more open to exploring different forms of play as they became comfortable with the therapeutic environment.

## **Strengthening of Therapeutic Relationships**

A further theme emerging from the analysis is the **importance of the therapeutic relationship** between the child and the therapist. Participants emphasized that the supportive and empathetic relationship established during play therapy sessions plays a crucial role in facilitating developmental progress.

Because play therapy is child-centered and non-judgmental, children feel safe to express themselves without fear of criticism or failure. Therapists build trust by following the child's interests and allowing them to lead certain activities. This sense of autonomy helps children feel valued and understood.

Parents also recognized the positive influence of the therapist-child relationship. Many reported that children looked forward to therapy sessions and showed enthusiasm when discussing play activities. The establishment of trust and rapport creates a foundation that allows therapeutic interventions to be more effective.

## **Challenges and Limitations in Play Therapy Implementation**

While the findings highlight many positive outcomes, participants also discussed several **challenges associated with implementing play therapy**. One common concern is that autistic children vary significantly in their cognitive abilities, communication levels, and sensory sensitivities. As a result, therapists must carefully adapt play activities to suit individual needs.

Another challenge involves the time required for observable progress. Some parents initially expected rapid improvements but later realized that play therapy is a gradual developmental process. Consistency, patience, and collaboration among therapists, teachers, and parents are essential for achieving meaningful results.

Additionally, participants noted that access to trained play therapists and specialized resources may be limited in certain regions, which can affect the availability of effective play therapy programs.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the role of play therapy in supporting the developmental and emotional needs of autistic children through a thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from therapists, teachers, and parents. The findings indicate that play therapy provides a valuable and child-centered approach to intervention that aligns with the natural ways in which children learn, communicate, and express themselves.

The analysis revealed several key outcomes associated with play therapy. First, play therapy promotes the development of social communication skills by creating opportunities for interaction through structured and meaningful play activities. Children participating in therapy sessions gradually demonstrate improvements in behaviors such as eye contact, joint attention, and verbal or non-verbal communication.

Second, play therapy supports emotional development by enabling children to express feelings and experiences through symbolic and imaginative play. This process contributes to better emotional awareness and improved regulation of emotions, helping children manage frustration and anxiety more effectively.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of play therapy in enhancing social engagement and participation. Through collaborative play activities, autistic children develop skills related to cooperation, turn-taking, and social interaction, which can positively influence their experiences in educational and family settings.

Furthermore, play therapy encourages cognitive growth by promoting creativity, symbolic thinking, and cognitive flexibility. By expanding the ways children interact with toys and narratives, therapy sessions support the development of imaginative play and adaptive thinking.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also recognizes certain limitations in the implementation of play therapy, including variability in children's developmental needs, the time required to observe progress, and limited access to trained professionals in some contexts. Addressing these challenges requires greater awareness, professional training, and integration of play-based approaches within educational and therapeutic systems.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that play therapy represents a meaningful and effective intervention strategy for autistic children. By emphasizing emotional connection, creativity, and social interaction, play therapy offers a supportive framework that respects the individuality of each child while fostering developmental growth. Future research may further explore the long-term effects of play therapy and investigate ways to integrate play-based interventions more widely in clinical, educational, and community settings to support children on the autism spectrum.

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