

**‘Specialization in ICTs and Special Education: Psychopedagogy of Integration’
Postgraduate Program
DEMOCRITUS UNIVERSITY OF THRACE Department of Greek Philology
in collaboration with
NCSR DEMOKRITOS Informatics and Telecommunications Institute**

**THE SYMBOLIC AND DIDACTIC PLAY OF CHILDREN IN THE AUTISM
SPECTRUM**

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POSTGRADUATE
THESIS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

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Abstract

Play constitutes a distinctive feature of childhood. Its contribution to the different areas of a child's development is crucial. In children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental disorder primarily characterized by deficits in social interaction, restricted interests and repeated behaviors, deficits regarding play skills are apparent. Their greatest deficit concerns symbolic or pretend play skills. The aims of the present review are the collection and critical analysis, first, of empirical studies aiming at improving symbolic play skills and, second, of interventions incorporating symbolic-didactic play to teach skills positively associated with symbolic play. The research question concerns whether positive changes in the deficits of children with autism can be achieved, through early interventions, in preschool or school settings. After systematic research, via the electronic search engine Google Scholar, empirical studies, from 2010 onwards, published in scientific peer-reviewed journals, were collected. The empirical studies were critically analyzed based on the quality indicators concerning sample characteristics, research design and intervention features, so that their effectiveness and the feasibility of their application can be determined. The studies that were finally collected only concern the application of interventions targeting the improvement of symbolic play skills. No studies were found, however, concerning the application of symbolic-didactic play as the sole independent variable for the instruction of other skills. Most interventions were applied on preschool children in special education settings. All studies report positive results on the increase of symbolic play. The critical analysis of their characteristics reveals certain limitations whatsoever. Nevertheless, the effort of applying interventions in natural settings with the involvement of the school staff is important. In the present review, reaching general conclusions is difficult owing to the limited number of studies. Despite the specific limitation, its contribution to highlighting the importance of conducting more research with more rigid methodological criteria and quality indicators is important, so that the application of related interventions in natural (pre)school settings could increase in number.

Keywords: autism, symbolic play, pretend play, interventions, (pre)school setting

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