

Autism: The Triumph of the Spirit through Play Therapy



Mohamad Yahia H. Hamade
Master of Transnational American Studies (MA-TAMS '15)
BA of English Literature, Psychology
American University of Beirut

Jad, a five year old boy, can be seen at any given moment watching his favorite cartoon show. The same episode is on constant loop, but he does not seem to mind. Jad just sits there, with his gaze fixed on the television set as the purple dinosaur makes gestures and waves towards the camera. Jad responds by waving back and grunting. He is surrounded by his three toys: a yellow truck, an iPad with a purple cover, and his favorite sippy cup. The power suddenly cuts off, and Jad throws a tantrum. He raises his legs and kicks at the wall, knocking down a family portrait. He continues his fit and moves to the television, as if begging the purple dinosaur to return. The auxiliary generator kicks in and his show resumes. Jad calms down and sits gazing away.

Autism is the most common disorder in a group of developmental disorders. This neural development disorder is usually characterized by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests. Other kinds of developmental disorders of autism spectrum disorders include Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified; usually referred to as PDD-NOS. According to the American Psychiatric Association, males are more likely to develop autism than females and disorder is irrevocably life changing to child who is encumbered by it (4th Ed.; DSM IV; APA). Nonetheless, those responsible or are in habitual contact with the child, be it parents or guardians or teachers, find

it obligatory to undergo life-changing habits to ensure the child is secure and well cared for.

It not uncommon to have autism referred to as a merciless and staggering disease which forcibly entraps the child in an endless wormhole of disorientation and exertion. The simplest task to any average child such as riding a bike or tying shoelaces requires herculean effort for another child with autism to accomplish. Unfortunately, there are not enough advocacies to the awareness of this incurable disorder. Lack of awareness usually leads to autism being diagnostically misinterpreted as schizophrenia, a mental disorder that is characterized by a breakdown of thought processes and by a dearth of emotional responses (Schizophrenia, Concise Medical Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2010).

However, unlike patients with schizophrenia, a child with



autism can receive a spectrum of innate gifts or talents which can allow for a flow of keen and outstanding genius. Often, the child will be hailed as a pioneer in fields such as music, mathematics, and even building schematics, whereas an average person who has dedicated years in the mastery in such field will find herself lagging in comparison. Mental health professionals are fully aware of the common misconception parents have about children with autism that will be cured if they are placed in typical school to receive an education with children that are labeled as “normal.”

This argument suggests that the only way for children to overcome autism is to undergo rigorous education from an early age in order to understand the world around them through academia. After years of education, and possibly having undergone grade retention, an autistic child might eventually recover. There are a lower percentage of children who made a full recovery by going to schools and surviving an education that did not make sense to them the first time. The problem with this approach is the fact that the child will be separated from their parents and will be afflicted with a heightened level of stress, leading to a severe traumatic experience. The child will have to decode all the stimuli and new information they receive all at once, leading to a conflict within the child and might cause more damage than repairing the problem. A child with autism is already lost in a world of darkness, a world that does not make sense to them and struggle to understand the meaning of everything around them.

Psychiatrists have no magical drug that can cure autism. However, not having a magical pill might be a blessing since the solution is rather physical, something unorthodox in the school of medicine: the utilization of a new system of education through play therapy. The answer to helping children with autism is through another kind of education, and not the traditional education one gets from the typical school. The image of the traditional education system is illustrated in the mind's eye as a nice school with a green lawn, big yellow buses and children with their books and colored lunch boxes. However, the alternative education model suggested in this paper will be a little different. Instead of constant studying there will be playing. Many parents still send their children to traditional schools in hopes that their child will learn to mix with other children will soon be out of this dark place, an escape for autism. The solution is not that simple since the traditional schools do not offer the answer or even help autistic children because

the whole curriculum is based on regular children and what is best for their comfort.

An alternative type of education that is suitable for autistic child's mental abilities is the Son-Rise program, a five day group training program designated for parents who wish to facilitate meaningful progress and steady recovery in their children. The program is child-and-parent-centered in the sense that it is instilled with an effort by parents and mental health professionals to ensure the child is successfully interacting with the world around him or her in an educationally progressive way. The Son-Rise program also offers extensive parent coaching and training techniques that are designed to aid parents in the progressive upbringing of their autistic child. The Son-Rise program maintains that the education of children with autism is not about memorization from text books since they cannot learn words and recite them. This form of education is offered at a slower pace and is more fun for the child. Son-Rise suggests that the way to help a child with autism should be through play therapy.

Play therapy is a technique used to treat many psychological disorders in children and young adults. Play therapy is the use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial challenges and achieve optimal growth and development. For children with autism, it is used to engender optimal integration and individuation; and eventually help them communicate in a non-verbal manner. This will eventually lead to an establishment of a form of verbal communication between the child and the people around. Children with autism will learn through play therapy to familiarize with their surroundings and build a pattern of activities. This is imperative, because children with autism display stereotypical activities and interests that make them feel safe in an environment that is controlled by them. Thus, repetitive activities will habituate the child to a new myriad of stimuli that would not be perceived as threatening anymore. The treatment does not end at play therapy with the child. The parents should be treated as well. Parents, and legal guardians alike, should receive training in play therapy and must be able to spend extended periods of one on one quality time with their children. This form of therapy will improve the child's abilities gradually and make them feel safe. The process is slow and can only progress at the child's pace. Despite the time difference, the product of play therapy is a lot better than typical schools, for the



reasons that play therapy also educates the parents to be more sympathetic and understanding towards their child. After the five days of training and treatment at Son-Rise, the child and parents are able to go back home and implement what they learned. The parents will have to build their own play room which will serve as a controlled environment to interact with their child. Parents will motivate and educate their child from the comfort of their home and will always be in touch with the Son-Rise program for help and support.

Opponents – such as parents and families of children with autism – of the Son-Rise program argue that children belong in schools because these are the primary institutions of education. Play therapy will not help a child with autism know what the Corelli's effect is, or what Boyle's law talks about, they argue. Playing will only teach children that stoves are hot and should not be touched. Furthermore, play therapy equates to pay therapy: it is expensive and requires time and space. Schools indeed are an effective instrument in socializing children and providing them with all the proper skills for pursuing a higher education. Instead, parents that utilize play therapy must build their own play room to accommodate their child and spend

more time inside the house rather than outside where they should be earning bread and butter to feed the family, as the saying goes.

Now, it is granted that argument against play therapy are sound, but we must keep in mind play therapy aims to open the eyes of a child with autism to see the world – for the first time. This allows for sensible and habitual comprehension of their environment and fosters creativity and originality. Play therapy allows the child to come out of the darkness and will see that their parents know what it feels like to be trapped inside one's mind and will be able to free them and are able to explore their world for the first time.

Play therapy is a safe and supportive process to educate children as well as their parents or guardians to find a way out of autism. The success rates at this point are high and many children are qualified to attend schools and universities eventually. Even if the child is not fully cured, in the traditional sense, they will be able to communicate with their parents much easier, and every parent of a child with autism will feel the joy of success when they witness displays of emotion and affection from their child; and their spirit always triumphs.

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