



Mind Games as a Social Tool for Communication, for a Child with Asperger Syndrome within the Integrated Classroom (Case Study)

Manor, Ilan, Jan. 1999

Ilan Manor, the author of the article, is a psychologist and founder of the Eshcolot Hashiva program and a member of the team developing a unique Eshcolot kit for the inclusion program.

Autistic children and children with Asperger syndrome are not used to interact with normative children of their own age. Due to their difficulties, they study in special schools or in “communication classes.”

In recent years, an attempt has been made to integrate these children in regular classes in the spirit of normalization, based on the assumption that the contact with other children of their own age will provide them with tools for social integration.

The integration and inclusion of these children in regular school classes exists with the help of an assistant. In many cases, the children are disconnected from their classmates and learning does not permit interaction and the creation of social communication.

This study addresses the challenge of inclusion of these children in the regular school.

This is a case study examining the process of advancing the communication skills of a 10-year-old child with Asperger syndrome in a regular fourth grade class as part of a mind games class.

The goal of the research was to examine whether and how the communication skills of a child with Asperger syndrome can be enhanced by means of mind games as a social tool within a regular educational framework.

The rationale behind this research goals is based on several factors:

- According to the developmental approach (Piaget, 1962), the child’s interaction with their surroundings forms the foundation for learning in its deepest sense;
- The idea that playing games is a positive and genuine incentive for creating interaction, in contrast to artificial incentives used in the past that proved inadequate (Lovaas, 1977);
- The attraction of children with Asperger syndrome to analytical and logical thought (Asperger, 1979) is presented inherently in mind games;
- The mind game is a structured activity that contributes to the sense of control, thereby reducing anxiety among children with Asperger syndrome.

The study focused on the process the child underwent with his peers during the game interaction. It examines whether this interaction influenced the advancement and development of the child’s communication skills and how he reacted during the game in relation to himself and to other children.

The research adopted the interpretative-constructional paradigm in the social sciences; the selected research method was qualitative research.

The author's conclusion in light of the findings was that the child's communication skills were reinforced and the child underwent change following this process.

Progress was possible thanks to the interaction through play between the child and other children. The mind games were shown to be a suitable tool for the child's cognitive abilities and were effective in advancing his communication skills, particularly when he was integrated in a group game.

The study also found that the improvement in the child's communication skills was related to the presence of a teacher who supported him, children who helped him, and the child's own personality structure.

The communication skills that were developed:

1. Diverse nonverbal communication, including eye contact and social gestures;
2. Richer verbal communication;
3. Social initiative;
4. Cognitive flexibility;
5. Mentalization;
6. Ability to accept losing and emotional regulation during anger and frustration.

During the process, difficulties arose in the game interaction, including a lack of initiative by the child to create communication with other children; a motivational and behavioral pattern typical of these children (DSM-IV, 1987); a lack of familiarity with accepted social codes (Frith, 1981); dependence on the adult; and egocentric and inflexible behavior with a lack of compromise; and a disrespectful attitude toward the child by other children.

In order to address these difficulties, a group game was formed for four participants, as well as assistance and support from one of the children and from the adult.

This case study is a first step in the study of mind games as a therapeutic and educational tool supporting the challenge to include children with Asperger syndrome in the regular classroom.

In light of the promising results in this study, and in order to attempt to construct a field-based theory, several additional studies should be undertaken in this area.

Bibliography:

American Psychiatric Association, (1987), Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3rd rev. edn (DSM-IV), Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Asperger, H. (1979), Problems of infantile autism, *Communication*, 13, 45-52.

Frith, U. (1991), Asperger and his syndrome, In U. Frith (ED.), *Autism and Asperger syndrome*, Cambridge University Press.

Lovaas, O.I. (1977), *The autistic child: Language development through behavior modification*, New-York: Irvington.

Piaget, J. (1962), *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*, New-York: Norton.

