

Child-led play for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Lessons learned from Parents

Bermain dipimpin oleh kanak-kanak dengan Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Perspektif Ibu Bapa

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Abstract

Play is important for children's development and used as teaching and learning tool for children. Children's skills including physical, emotion, social and cognitive are potentially to develop that could transform children into their full potential. Play is effective in supporting children's development and learning when it is child-directed and focuses on play as the main aim with development and learning as the by-product. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) faced multifaceted challenges and resulted in receiving little benefit from play. This qualitative study through in-depth semi-structured interviews explores parents of children with ASD's perspectives about child-led play for children with ASD. Analysis of the interviews found that children with ASD were able to engage in child-led play activities at home and showed positive outcomes in their play, social, language and communication skills as well as their prosocial behaviour. Although positive outcomes have been shown, interpretation of the findings should be cautionary due to limited representation of the data for Malaysian population and can be further improved with varied and more participants. Various source of data to be analysed are recommended to increase sensitivity of the finding interpretation.

Keywords: Play, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Parent's Perspective, Home-Based, Child-Led Play

Abstrak

Bermain adalah penting bagi perkembangan kanak-kanak dan digunakan sebagai alat pengajaran dan pembelajaran untuk kanak-kanak. Kemahiran kanak-kanak termasuklah fizikal, emosi, sosial dan kognitif berpotensi untuk berkembang dan boleh mengubah seseorang menjadi diri mereka yang berpotensi penuh. Bermain berkesan dalam menyokong perkembangan dan pembelajaran kanak-kanak apabila ia diarahkan oleh kanak-kanak dengan memfokuskan bermain sebagai matlamat utama, dan perkembangan dan pembelajaran adalah sebagai hasil sampingan. Kanak-kanak dengan Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) menghadapi pelbagai cabaran dan ini menyebabkan mereka kurang mendapat manfaat daripada bermain. Kajian kualitatif ini meneroka perspektif ibu bapa kanak-kanak dengan ASD tentang aktiviti bermain dipimpin oleh kanak-kanak bagi kanak-kanak dengan ASD melalui temubual mendalam separa berstruktur. Analisis temubual mendapati bahawa kanak-kanak dengan ASD boleh melibatkan diri dalam aktiviti bermain dipimpin oleh kanak-kanak di rumah dan menunjukkan hasil positif kepada kemahiran bermain, sosial, bahasa dan komunikasi, serta tingkah laku prososial mereka. Walaupun hasil positif telah ditunjukkan, interpretasi dapatan kajian perlulah dibuat dengan berhati-hati disebabkan oleh perwakilan terhadap data tersebut bagi populasi Malaysia dan ini boleh ditambahbaik dengan melibatkan peserta kajian yang lebih ramai dan bervariasi. Bagi meningkatkan sensitiviti interpretasi dapatan kajian, analisis data dari pelbagai sumber adalah dicadangkan.

Kata kunci: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Bermain, Berpusat di Rumah, Bermain Dipimpin oleh Kanak-kanak, Perspektif Ibu Bapa,

INTRODUCTION

Play is a part of children and learning is one of the main concern of parents for their children. Play is a multifaceted activity that supports children learning and development. It can be described as a creative activity that is voluntary, internally-motivated, process-oriented, fun, enjoyable that is performed for a non-serious purpose (Apter & Kerr, 1991; Burghardt, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). By definition, play is not an activity for a serious purpose such as learning, but since it is a process-oriented activity, play supports children's learning indirectly. Play is an integral tool for teaching and learning and play through learning has been recognised and practiced both globally and locally as outlined in both national curricular for early childhood education in Malaysia (Colliver & Flear, 2016; Department of Prime Minister, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2016). In the context of learning through play, the role of educators and parents has been established to be the facilitator as it should focuses on children's exploring their environment and acquire new knowledge, skills and behaviour as they engage in play activities. It should be focusing on play, however, previous studies reported the opposite concept where the adults (i.e., educator and parents) directed the play instead of the children, and the focus of play is not child-directed outcomes through play but adult's predetermined outcomes for learning (Colliver, & Flear, 2016; Nachiappan, Munovah, Abdullah, & Suffian, 2017; Rogers, 2013). There are a lot of studies explore play for typically development children in the context of development and learning, but there is scarce of information available for children with ASD. Therefore, the study was formulated to explore child-led play for children with ASD.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Play has been established as children's main occupation with the key features of play are enjoyment and pleasure of the player (Hughes, 2010; Stagnitti, 2010). The activity can be a purposeful occupation in supporting learning and development if it fulfils the aspects of play. The four aspects of play are 'doing', 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging' (Wilcock, 1999, 2006). Wilcock (2006) describes what children are 'doing' during the play showed their abilities, skills and developmental level that interconnected with their 'being' in play activities. 'Being' in play is about the children, as the player of the activity. The player who enjoy spending their time playing, explore and engage with their environment and other people. When children engage in play activities, these two aspects complemented each other. The other two aspects of play that are 'becoming' and 'belonging' are the potential results of play. With play activity, children's skills including physical, emotion, social and cognitive are potentially to develop. In turn, children could transform into their full potential and able to 'belong' in social life with their families, peers and society. All four aspects of play – 'doing', 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging' when being fulfils, it can benefits skills development and learning for children including typically developing and developmental delayed children such as children with ASD (Wilcock, 2006).

Through play, children learn and develop a range of skills including motor, cognitive, social, language and communication, play skills and behaviour through play activities (Roman-Oyola et al., 2018; Yogman, Gardner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2018). Literatures has been frequently reporting play and its benefits for typically developing children (Bodrove, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013; Walker, & Gopnik, 2013; Yogman et al., 2018). Similarly, children with ASD should be benefited from play activities as well. However, studies on children with ASD were mostly reporting on their limitation in play skills, but not the importance of it in fostering children with ASD's development and learning (Hughes, 2010).

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experienced myriad of difficulties and they are highly dependent on their parents for daily living activities as well as play. They demonstrated challenges for playing in comparison to typically developing children. This is due to children with ASD's limited play interest and play abilities, impaired social interaction and communication, lack of theory of mind ability, and rigid behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Children with ASD typically present with abnormal play skills and behaviour including limited play interests, abnormal use of play object, repetitive movement in play and difficulties in pretend play (APA,2013;

Hughes, 2010). These difficulties hinder both children’s and parents’ involvement in play activities. This is because parents perceived a challenge in engaging with their children with ASD, leading to lack of participation in play activities (Roman-Oyola et al., 2018). Not only the play skills, playfulness is also a key factor for any play activity to be beneficial for children, which children with ASD has a lack of it (Hobson, Lee, & Hobson, 2009; Skaines, Rodger, & Bundy, 2006). Playfulness is referred to the player’s motivations and dispositions during play (Skard & Bundy, 2008).

Playfulness paired with the fours aspects of play can posed a benefit for children with ASD too, depending on the quality of parents’ involvement in play activities to support children’s participation in play (Flippin & Watson, 2015; Shire, Gulsrud, & Kasari, 2016; Kasari, Gulsrud, Wong, Kwon, & Locke, 2010). However, too often, play losses its nuances and benefits for children when the adults (e.g., educators, parents) are in control of the activity and focused on the benefits of play to children’s development (Colliver & Fleeer, 2016; McInnes, Howard, Crowley & Miles, 2013). For play to be effective in promoting children’s learning and development, both educators and parents need to shift the control of play activity to children and focused on the play activity itself and not its potential benefits (Roman-Oyola et al., 2018), which is the conceptual and practical concept of learning through play. Hence, the rationale of this study is to explore parents’ perspectives on children with ASD’s play with the practice of child-led play activities at home.

OBJECTIVE

This study aimed to explore parents’ perspectives on their children with ASD’s play upon engaging in child-led play activities at home.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was carried out with four families involving seven parents of children with ASD in Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur using semi-structured interviews to obtain an in-depth perspective of the parents. Potential participants were recruited from a university-based occupational therapy clinic upon obtaining research ethics from the university. Parents who express their interest in participating were contacted and briefed about the study. Those who fulfil the inclusion criteria, that are, living with and have primary care responsibility over child aged between three and six years old diagnosed with ASD, have ability to understand, read, and communicate verbally in Malay language; as well as consented to take part in the study were included in the study. The demographic characteristics of the families involved in the study is shown in Table 1.

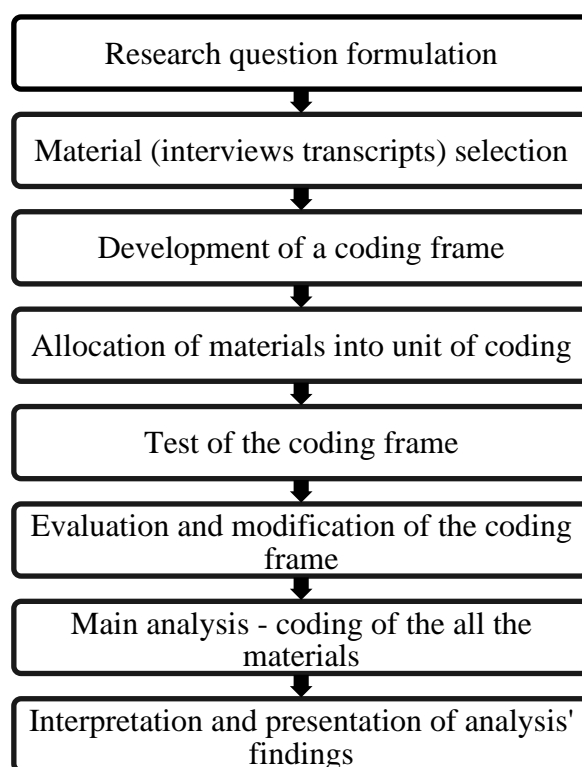
Table 1: Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants

Participants	Age group (year)	Race	Occupation	Gender and age of child with ASD (years)	Numbers of siblings
Mother 1	37-42	Malay	Housewife	Male, 6	1 younger sister
Father 1	37-42	Malay	Self-employed		
Mother 2	37-42	Malay	Housewife		
Mother 3	31-36	Malay	Housewife	Male, 5	None
Father 3	31-36	Malay	Self-employed		
Mother 4	31-36	Malay	Professional	Male, 4	1 younger sister
Father 4	31-36	Malay	Professional		

Parents were interviewed at the conclusion of eight week of practicing child-led play activities at home. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Malay language using seven base questions and probe questions were asked based on the participants' responses. The interviews generally lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes for each family. For families involving both parents, interviews were conducted jointly but each parent was asked to provide their own response for each question to ensure the interview captures parent's perspectives fully. All interviews were audio-recorded and anonymised.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the qualitative content analysis following the eight steps illustrated in Figure 1 (QCA; Schreier, 2012). Analysis was completed inductively and all themes and categories were derived from parents' interviews transcripts. The information obtain from the interviews were triangulated with other sources to ensure the data was reliable and trustworthy including the observation notes and video recording of play activity recorded prior to and after parents practicing child-led play activities at home. Member checking with the participants prior to data analysis procedure was also conducted. Furthermore, an audit trail conducted by a blinded auditor was completed to ensure the analysis was conducted in a logical manner that findings of the analysis are reflective of the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Parents' interviews were analysed and interpreted in Malay language initially and translated into English once finalised.

Figure 1: Steps of Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012)



FINDINGS

Analysis of parents' interviews resulted in two themes with each theme consists of several categories. The themes and corresponding categories are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and categories

Themes	Categories
Theme 1: Play for children with ASD	i. Balance of play and academic activities ii. Play for learning iii. Play is doing it together iv. Play is challenging due to children's limited interest in play
Theme 2: Benefits of child-led play activities	i. Increase interest in play ii. Expand play skills iii. Increase use of verbal language iv. Increase in verbal communication expression v. Improve social communication vi. Increase social interaction vii. Increase expression of emotion viii. Improve positive behaviour ix. Improve cognitive skills

Theme 1: Play for children with ASD

Theme 1 discusses parents' perspectives about play for children with ASD. All seven parents' participants shared their understanding and acknowledged that play is somewhat important for their child with ASD. Despite acknowledging the importance of play, parents still felt that children need to have a balance between engaging in play activities and academic-based activities. For example, a mother of a five-year-old boy with ASD mentioned that, "we have to balance, playing alone...of course cannot." Although parents collectively felt that play should be balanced with academic activities, a few parents shared their understanding on the use of play activities for their children's learning. Parents mentioned during the interview how they used play activities in exchange of table task activities that they frequently used before the study. A father of a six-year-old boy with ASD shared this during his interview:

"Children learn from play; we do not teach our children using book or anything...when he play he thinks. At home, we play games based on academic. All types of toys, anything that we can find at the night market, all of them can be used."

As aforementioned, parents acknowledge the use of play and their understanding of play. However, the way parents played with their children were directed by them and not the child with ASD. Upon practising child-led play with their children with ASD, parents disclose that they now understand that play is doing it together and not instructing the child what to do. A mother of a six-year-old boy shared this during her interview, "before this, we will 'ok, get on the swing, ten times...ok, you are done.' We just instruct him, then we teach him. That was it. We did not play with him. Our way is to instruct him." Meanwhile, another mother also expressed the same sentiment and she described what has changed in the way she played with her son:

"We have to join their world first, observe, study what they like. When he interacted with us, then we join him. Before this, I will say 'you cannot play this, cannot do that. Instruction, instruction, instruction.'"

The same sentiment was shared by other parents as well when they shared that they just let their child take the lead when playing and they will follow their child's lead without instructing them or pressuring them to do something else. Majority of the parents expressed their happiness and feeling of less stressful when engaging in play activities that are focused on the play activity itself, leading by their children.

Nevertheless, parents also felt that play for children with ASD is challenging due to the children's limited interest in play itself. Some parents said that although they let their child take the lead during play, the child himself seems uninterested in playing. The child did not play unless parents encouraged him to do so and when parents encouraged their child, they did it in a way of instructing the child what to do.

Theme 2: Benefits of child-led play for children with ASD

Theme 2 discusses the benefits that parents noticed when they engaged in child-led play activities with their children with ASD at home. This theme consists of eight categories that further explained the theme in detail. All seven parents shared during their interviews that their children with ASD demonstrated a number of skills developments including interest in play as well as expansion of play skills. Some parents mentioned that their children with ASD have shown an increase in interest with playing either playing with toys or playing solitarily or social play. Their children with ASD also was reported to have expanded their play skills. All parents shared that their children have engaged in social play with them, their siblings and also other familiar people such as relatives and friends in school. One parent even shared that their children initiated pretend play. The following excerpts illustrating the benefits of child-led play on children's play skills:

“He loves pretending to cook. He hid a snake toy in the oven and he called us. He asked me to open it, trying to prank us. So, we pretended to be surprised.” (Mother of a four-year-old boy with ASD)

“He played alone while talking, then, he pretended the object into a telephone.” (Father of a six-year-old boy with ASD)

“He covers himself or I hid myself and then I called him. He did try to find me, but if he cannot find me, he started to cry.” (Mother of a five-year-old boy with ASD)

“He was the one attacking us with the sword. He ran after us, attacking us, before this, he did not.” (Father of a five-year-old boy with ASD)

In addition to the improvement in children with ASD's play skills, parents also reported that their language and communication skills showed positive impacts. These include increasing use of verbal language and increase of expression in verbal communication. Parents noticed that their children with ASD used more verbal language when communicating with them during daily life after practicing the child-led play activities at home. For example, a mother shared that her son now will use longer, but simple sentences when he asked her for something and also when he refused to do something instead of using actions. The other five parents also shared the same improvement except for a mother whose child with ASD was non-verbal. Majority of parents also mentioned that their children not only used verbal language more than before but also were able to express what they are feeling verbally, for example, the six-year-old boy with ASD was reported saying *'this is good'* to her parents when they were playing together at home.

Children with ASD's social skills has also improved as reported by the parents. Both social communication and social interaction with family members and other familiar people has increased. Parents shared that their children with ASD interacted with them and other family members more frequently than before. One of the parents believed that his child with ASD interacted more with him because he engaged with him more while joining his child's playing. Meanwhile, another parent shared that their son greeted him and his wife whenever he saw them at home and also talked to his younger sister. Even the mother whose son was non-verbal also reported that her child has started communicating with her and her husband at home using gestures. Further improvement in social interaction was also reported by parents where they witnessed their child with ASD were interacting with other people including extended relatives and friends around their house. For example, the mother of a six-year-old boy with ASD mentioned that her son greeted someone who passed by their house with *'hi friend'* or *'hi guys.'* Meanwhile, the mother of a non-verbal boy with ASD shared this during her interview:

“his cousins will pile up the toys at the living room, then, he will go and find what he likes, because now he likes cars, so he will see if there is one. Then, he will take the car and go somewhere else, if he sees there are people laughing in that group, he will come and see. He now likes to explore what is it that they are laughing about.”

Child-led play activities were also noted to have positive impacts on children with ASD's expression of emotion. Parents reported during the interviews that their children can express both positive and negative emotions accordingly. All seven parents expressed the same sentiment of their children seem happier and smile more after they practice the child-led play activities, saying that *'he seems happy, he smiles more'*. Not only feeling happier, parents also reported that their children expressed their negative emotions as well when they did not like something that they were told to do so, such as expressing anger, fear and also sulking. Furthermore, parents also shared that their children's positive behaviour has significantly improved. Children with ASD were reported to demonstrate patience, sharing and cooperating with others and tolerating with others. Parents also reported that their children with ASD's occurrences of tantrums episodes has reduced. The following excerpts from parents' interviews further illustrates children with ASD's positive behaviours changes.

IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS

Play has been known to be one of the impaired skills for children with ASD. In addition to impaired play skills, lack of social interaction also has been reported to be a hindrance for both children with ASD and their parents in engaging in play activities (Pierucci, 2016; Roman-Oyola et al., 2018). Although previous studies typically found that children with ASD who has difficulties in ranges of skills need structured guide when engaging in play activities (Lee, Chan, Lin, Chen, Huang, & Chen, 2016). However, in this study, parents reported that their children's play has improved with the practice of child-led play. This is probably due to parents' involvement in their children's self-directed play despite reporting their children's challenges to engage in child-led play due to their interest in play. All parents shared that they were able to engage in child-led play with their children with ASD and expressed their happiness related to the play experiences with their child. This is aligned with the output reported by Roman-Oyola and colleagues (2018) in their study of parental experiences in play with children with ASD.

Parents reported that their children with ASD's cognitive skills including the child's problem solving, creativity has improved. The improvements were demonstrated either during play activities where their children initiated and engaged in pretend play more often or during non-play activities. These skills are among the 21st century learning skills that children have to acquire and it is one of the reported benefits of play (Resnick, 2017; Yogman et al., 2018). In relation of cognitive skills development, children with ASD in this study also has been reported to be more interested in playing and showed an expansion of play skills including initiating pretend play. Children with ASD were not commonly reported to engage in pretend play often (Jarrold, 2003; Lee et al., 2016; Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2000). This could be due to children's experience of leading the play and with parents joining them, increase the playfulness of the play for children. Furthermore, it is partly due to the opportunity given to children to self-direct the play activities that lead them to explore the world around them and beginning to understand their preferences and interest in various things including toys (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, Zosh, Golinkoff, Gray, Robb, & Kaufman, 2015). Playfulness has been noted to be the challenge for children with ASD to engage in play activities, and since it has increased, it probably expands children's play skills as well (Hobson, Lee, & Hobson, 2009; Skard & Bundy, 2008). It is also worth to note that children's pretend play skills may linked to their language development improvement that was also reported improved with child-led play activities (Walker, & Gopnik, 2013).

Parents in this study observed their children with ASD's skills that developed the most were social and communication skills. This study's findings support the benefits of play on social, communication and language skills for typically developing children are similar for children with ASD and it was expected as play itself is fundamentally social skills as it usually involves other people which

will highly likely encourage children's language and communication (Pellis, Pellis, & Bell, 2010). This is also probably linked to a more effective, longer and pleasant child-parent interaction during the child-led play activities leading to children with ASD have the opportunity to communicate and socialise better with their parents (Roman-Oyola et al., 2018).

It is noted that play does not only beneficial for children's skills development and learning, but also for changing children's behaviour into more prosocial and adaptive (Yogman et al., 2018). This is evident in this study as almost all parents reported that their children with ASD has developed more prosocial and adaptive behaviour such as sharing, patience and cooperation with others. Children's positive changes in behaviour might be due to children's ability to regulate themselves or feeling less stress as they engage in child-led play, just like illustrated by parents' excerpts stating that their children seem happier. This is corroborated with Hatfield and Williford's (2017) experimental study that reported child-led play reduced typical developing pre-schoolers' level of stress and improved their behaviours. However, this study's findings are opposite to the findings reported in Corbett, Schupp, Simon, Ryan and Mendoza (2010) where children with autism in the study were found feeling increased stress when engaging in social play.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study suggest that both parents and children with ASD has the ability to engage in child-led play activities. Despite some challenges being reported, engagement in child-led play activities has positively influenced a range of skills development for children with ASD including play, social, language and communication skills as well as their behaviour. The findings worth noted to provide information and emphasis to educators and parents in Malaysia to encourage child-led play for children with ASD. Nevertheless, the limitation of this study has to be address in order to interpret this study's findings for general population. This study only involved a small number of parents in Malaysia with male children diagnosed with ASD from the Malay ethnicity group and this could limit the true effect of child-led play activities for children with ASD's skills development and learning. Furthermore, it would increase the sensitivity of the interpretation of child-led play activities' impacts with the inclusion of parents' reports on the frequency of child-led play activities at home. It is recommended for the extension of this study to include participants from various ethnicity group to reflect the Malaysian population fully and also both gender of children with ASD. It is also suggested that the data being analysed and reported include the observation of child-parent play activities to provide a more in-depth understanding of the implementation of child-led play activities and its impacts.

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