

Autism Sports Education: Transforming Lives of Families

Beyza Merve Akgül¹, Tebessüm Ayyıldız Durhan² and Suat Karaküçük³

Abstract

It is very important to integrate individuals with autism into social life in order to minimize the effects of autism, which is a developmental problem that lasts for a long time and needs to be lived together and is increasing numerically every day. In this context, 14 parents of individuals with autism participated in the research conducted to determine the effect of the Sports Education Project for People with Autism (SEPA), which was carried out in cooperation with Gazi University, on the daily lives of autistic individuals and their families. In the research, the phenomenology design, which is among the qualitative research methods, was utilized. Using homogeneous sampling technique, focus group interviews were conducted with 14 parents who had been attending the SEPA for 4 months without interruption. In general, the participants found the impact of SEPA on their daily lives to be positive; in terms of parents, they stated that it allowed them to share problems with other parents and increase solidarity, thus allowing them to socialize, contributed positively to family interactions and made them feel happier. In terms of their children, they stated that they contributed positively to their physical and social development and that this situation facilitated their children's daily lives. The findings obtained support that projects such as the Children with Autism Education Project will contribute positively to the life processes of individuals with autism and their families. It is recommended that studies in this direction be expanded.

Keywords: Autism, Sports, SEPA, Education, Family

INTRODUCTION

Neurodevelopmental disorders include a variety of conditions that affect the normal development of individuals' nervous system and brain. These disorders can affect the quality of life of individuals who experience difficulties in areas such as learning, communication, behavior and social interaction. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social communication and interaction and limited, repetitive behaviors, interests and activities. In a broad perspective, ASD means that each individual may show different symptoms and degrees of severity. There is no cure for ASD, but early intervention and education can contribute to managing symptoms and helping the individual realize their full potential (Akbuga, 2023; Karakoc, 2023; Sungu et al., 2023).

Various educational approaches are being developed to improve the quality of life and maximize the potential of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In this context, movement training plays an important role. Motor skill difficulties and coordination deficits observed in individuals with autism can create obstacles in daily life activities and social interactions. However, appropriate movement training programs can alleviate these skill difficulties and improve the quality of life of individuals (Fournier et al., 2010). Movement training provides individuals with autism with body awareness and encourages participation in physical activity. This can improve their overall health and well-being, as well as their emotional regulation skills (Pan et al., 2017). Furthermore, regular physical activity can reduce negative symptoms commonly seen in individuals with autism (Bremer et al., 2015). It is important that movement education programs are individualized and that specialists develop strategies appropriate to the needs of individuals with autism. Techniques such as various movement games, sports activities and yoga are important in terms of supporting emotional regulation while increasing the motor skills of individuals with autism.

Movement training programs are an important tool to support the development of individuals with ASD. These programs can support the development of motor skills, balance and coordination, sensory integration and social interaction. It is accepted that recreational sports activities that improve the quality of life of individuals with

¹ Gazi University, Faculty of Sport Sciences

² Gazi University, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Email: tebessum@gazi.edu.tr

³ Yozgat Bozok University, Faculty of Sport Sciences

autism, improve the ability to live more independently, provide effective socialization, control stress and provide solutions to many problems by gaining strength to use their physical abilities more functionally can be an alternative form of treatment. The main purpose of this research is to examine the effects of the sports education project (SEPA) prepared for autistic children on the daily lives of children and their parents.

METHOD

A phenomenology design was used in the study. Data were collected through focus group interviews, a technique of qualitative research methodology. A focus group is a technique that aims to collect data by creating a polyphonic environment where participants do not feel the need to hide their real thoughts, usually with 4-12 participants with some common characteristics and a moderator (Gülcan, 2021). Using the "homogeneous sampling" technique, focus group interviews were conducted in 2 groups with 14 parents who had been attending the SEPA for 4 months without interruption. The interviews lasted 70 minutes and were audio recorded.

The focus group meetings were conducted by a facilitator and an assistant facilitator. The Family Interview Form used during the focus group meetings consisted of four sections. The first section included one question to obtain a general view of the family. Two transition questions in the second section explored the expectations with which the families started SEPA and how they carried out the project. These questions were expected to facilitate focusing on the key questions in the following section. The third section included four key questions. The key questions were designed to address the main objectives of the research. In the final section, a brief summary of the meeting was provided and participants were given the opportunity to have their final say.

The application, the SEPA project, consists of three main activity areas: Sports, Sherborne Developmental Movement Training and Special Days Celebrations and Festivals. Accordingly, the aims of SEPA are evaluated from the perspective of individuals with autism, parents, society, the university and the students involved in the program. It consists of sports branches, sportive exercises and some games with some original or adapted forms, carefully selected according to the needs and wishes of autistic children.

The implementation steps of the project are given below;

SEPA consists of three main activity areas: Sports, Sherborne Developmental Movement Education and Special Days Celebrations and Festivities.

1. Sports Program;

It consists of sports branches, sportive exercises and some games in original or adapted forms, carefully selected according to the needs and wishes of autistic children.

Sports activities can be further classified as indoor and outdoor activities, swimming and folk games activities. Indoor activities include table tennis, badminton, basketball, and some instrumental and non-instrumental movements to improve physical ability and body coordination, while outdoor activities include hiking and other nature activities. Indoor activities constitute the predominant part of SEPA in terms of numerical participation, time allocated and functionality.

2. Sherborne Developmental Movement Education;

Children aged 4-7 years with autism are included in the program. The training is held in the Sports Hall of the Faculty of Sports Sciences, which is furnished with floor cushions and equipped with special materials. Volunteer and certified students provide the training. Our students have received their training from the courses organized by the Sherborne Union, an international organization and Turkey Representative Office. It is applied for one hour on Saturdays and Sundays in 8-month periods. More than 50 individuals with autism have benefited from Sherborne developmental movement training in different periods.

3. Special Days Celebrations and Festivities;

At the beginning of each school year, an 'opening' is held to mark the start of SEPA. Children with autism and their families, administrators, staff, some guests and teachers-students come together for a get acquainted party.

The orchestra is invited and music and dance are enjoyed. "April 23rd National Sovereignty and Children's Day" is celebrated with enthusiasm and joy in the celebration hall decorated with Turkish flags and Atatürk posters. Since the end of the program is in May, the closing celebration is held in open areas with trekking and picnic.

Data Analysis

The data collected through focus group interviews were analyzed using the inductive analysis technique. In inductive analysis, the stages of writing the data on paper, writing descriptive index and interviewer comments, coding, filing and forming themes were included.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study, which examined the impact on the life processes of the participants with autism and their parents who participated in the children with autism education project, are presented below. The findings showed that the families who participated in the SEPA were of the opinion that the program had many positive effects on their children and themselves.

The participants also stated that their weekends gained meaning and their motivation increased accordingly, and that the fact that the project was supported by the university gave them confidence. They stated that they were unable to afford the education provided for individuals with autism because it was very expensive outside, that they felt very happy that this project was carried out in the name of "social sensitivity", and that they established a very special bond/communication with their volunteer trainers. They did not report any problems with the SEPA, the coordinator and the trainers. However, they expressed that the project should continue in the summer and that its continuity should be ensured.

The research findings were grouped under four themes:

- (a) Characteristics of SEPA: Expectations of the families from the project, how the project is carried out at home, the continuation of the program by the families after the end of the project, and the most important/beautiful aspects of the project;
- (b) The benefits of SEPA for children with autism and their families;
- (c) Problems arising from families, children, coordinators/trainers in the project;
- (d) Suggestions for families, coordinators and institutions for better implementation of the program.

Sample items for the findings are given below.

B1 "..... Plus, I cannot find friends for my child outside, the children here are friends, they are friends for me too. We spend quality time here and I am very happy. I have participated in this project before, I knew about it before, my child has made friends before and we see the children we meet here for socialization. This is such a productive thing for my child that it ..."

A8 "Here, especially when I see that my child is happy, it reflects on us. It looks good. It was especially comforting for us to have a project within the semester. Here, we should thank the university for producing a project with academic studies. This project adds a lot to us because the interaction of parents who have had similar experiences with children, our interaction with children is very important, we all believe in different things, there are many different experiences. There is the help and support of the state, the message that you are not alone, but unfortunately it is completely empty. Your work is completely superior to special education."

B7 "I am one of those who believe that he can do things with hand-arm coordination and he succeeded. At the age of 23, the most problematic thing was when he was crawling, I saw him as a baby, he was turning around and he was doing it here too. Getting on top of those crates, on those balance boards, he does it differently because he was somehow separated from his mother and he has friends. There is no throwing the ball to the basket, no jumping, but I think he is very successful for me."

B5 "My daughter did not listen to commands, she would run away when given a command. When we started, she was very stubborn, but now we have overcome this. There were some limitations in her physical movements, she would immediately become lazy, she would not want to climb the stairs, she could not squat, but now she squats very well. And communication has really improved, he communicates with me when he wants something. He used to get very angry, now he is very good."

A2" *...what I noticed is that you develop children's muscles here. We also went to other sports schools, but here I see that they exercise their muscles. They had sandbags on their feet, they had trouble walking, but since their muscles work more easily, they started to walk a little more. When he plays a game, he plays carefully and coordinated. He is more harmonious, independent and pleasant because of the children here. We had gone to the other sports school but we couldn't solve this problem, here he gained self-confidence, he can go up and down the stairs independently."*

B2" *.... He started to get enthusiastic and started doing sports at home. We bought a sports equipment at home. He jumps on the trampoline until he is exhausted. These are things we like because our children have a burst of energy. When he wanted something else, he wouldn't look at anything else, he wouldn't turn around. Now I can offer an alternative. It has benefited our current life."*

A5" *...my son's desire to act independently has increased. Besides, the common problem of children with autism is that they cannot make their own timing plans and make repetitive movements. I see improvement in this regard, he started to make his own schedule after dinner..."*

When the findings are summarized, parents of children with autism stated that their children made great progress; their children's skills increased, inappropriate behaviors decreased, they were more harmonious and happy in their daily lives, and they moved more easily in groups. They also stated that their own parenting skills improved, problems were shared with other parents and solidarity increased, thus allowing them to socialize, contributing positively to family interactions, making them feel happier and reducing their feelings of loneliness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the research conducted to examine the possible gains of individuals with autism spectrum disorder within the framework of their participation in the project implemented with the support of movement education revealed that parents thought that their children showed positive development within the scope of the project. In this context, in the focus group interviews conducted with the parents of 14 children with autism who were included in the study, it was determined that the participants obtained positive gains from the project.

Different studies show that educational programs in individuals with long-term developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder contribute positively to various parameters of individuals (Dawson-Squibb et al., 2020; Hiller et al, 2018; Hotez et al, 2018; Schultz, Schmidt, & Stichter, 2011; Tonge et al., 2014; White et al., 2017). Therefore, in parallel with the findings obtained, the literature also reveals the benefits of various educational programs in managing diversity processes such as autism.

In a study involving the training of parents of individuals with autism, it can be said that there was a finding that parents of individuals with autism should receive more information about the educational stages of the approach to children with autism (Shultz et al., 2011). In this context, it can be said that the level of awareness of parents has a relative impact on children with autism in terms of participation in the current project as a parent-supported application. In this respect, the current project consists of a content transferred with parental approval in terms of reaching children with autism. Therefore, it is expected that parents will have a higher level of awareness and consciousness to send their children to various programs such as movement education. In parallel with this, they reveal the increase in their quality of life with their own statements.

A different study also determined the effect of parent training on adaptive behavior, autism symptoms and cognitive/language skills of young children with autistic disorder. Parent training and behavior management resulted in a significant improvement in adaptive behavior and autism symptoms at 6-month follow-up for children with greater delays in adaptive behavior. It was concluded that a 20-week parent training program including skills training for parents of young children with autistic disorder resulted in significant improvements in child adaptive behavior and autism symptoms for low-functioning children (Tonge et al., 2014). It is observed that raising awareness of the families of individuals with autism through training programs has positive contributions (Dawson-Squibb et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be said that applications such as the SEPA, in which parents can be involved together with individuals with autism, will make positive contributions to both the parents and themselves of children with autism.

It was determined that practices such as the SEPA, given by experts trained to understand and manage autism spectrum disorder processes in detail, made significant contributions to the development of the participants.

In parallel with the findings obtained, various trainings carried out in cooperation with universities and the involvement of students and experts who have the chance to gain active experience by doing and living in this way are among the factors that increase the quality of the program. In a study conducted in this direction, it is observed that there is a need to realize related training processes (Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, 2011). Therefore, it is considered that projects such as the SEPA should become widespread both in terms of training experts and delivering well-trained experts to individuals with autism.

In another study, it was observed that students with autism who came to the stage of university education achieved positive outcomes within the framework of the supportive transition program and facilitated their transition to university within the scope of the determined program (White et al., 2017). In a similar study, it was stated that if appropriate supports are not available during the transition to university, their success may be jeopardized by organizational, social/emotional and academic difficulties. The effectiveness of a support group model for university students with autism spectrum disorder in improving psychological and functional outcomes was evaluated through the support group study. In this context, it can be said that positive improvements were observed in many parameters of the participants (Hillier et al., 2018). In another study, participatory training programs designed by university students with autism were found to be meaningful in terms of helping participants' achievement and effectively improving social skills (Hotez et al., 2018).

As a result of the findings obtained from the current study and as a result of the literature review, it can be said that by supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder with various educational programs, improvement is observed in many vital functions such as their social development, communication skills, psychosocial parameters. In this direction, it is evaluated that more studies should be conducted on individuals with autism and support processes should be improved with different educational programs. In this context, different training programs should be designed by experts in cooperation with universities, facilities should be used in cooperation with local administrations and sustainable implementation programs should be prepared.

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