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Features of Social Skills in Preschool Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study aimed at identifying the characteristics of social skills in preschool children with autism spectrum disorders. The study methodically examined both quantitative and qualitative data derived from observations and questionnaires administered to parents, teachers, and professionals working with children diagnosed with autism. The analysis focused on critical aspects such as the manifestation of social interactivity, the capacity for non-verbal communication, the level of empathy, and the understanding of social norms. The study was conducted in preschool educational institutions and rehabilitation centers for children with disabilities in Kazan. The study involved 16 participants (13 boys and 3 girls), ranging in age from 3 to 7. A thorough analysis of the research results indicated that the social skills of the children under study were either not formed or were formed at a rudimentary level. The analysis revealed that the majority of the children under study exhibited an absence of peer and adult interaction. Furthermore, children have not yet developed play activities and self-care skills. The majority of the children exhibited a low level of initiative and activity. Additionally, these children demonstrated behaviors such as excessive noise and aggression. The practical significance of this study lies in the fact that the results presented can be used by professionals working with children with autism spectrum disorders. These results can form the basis for developing individualized educational plans aimed at helping these children develop social skills.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, preschool children, social skills, communication, self-care skills, language skills.

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of neurodevelopmental conditions characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (Vlasova & Ivanova, 2019).

Educating and raising children with ASDs require creating specialized psychological and pedagogical environments. Currently, there is an increased focus on diagnosing and addressing challenges related to ASDs.

The main barrier to integrating children with autism into society is their lack of essential household and self-care skills, as well as their inability to communicate effectively through speech and adequately express needs. This is accompanied by significant behavioral problems (Borisova, 2021).

These challenges necessitate a comprehensive assessment of these skills in order to determine the specific needs of each child. Through this diagnostic process, it will be possible to identify the current level of skill development and devise appropriate intervention strategies (Grigorenko, 2018).

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to determine the features of social skills in preschool children with autism spectrum disorders.

Literature review

The main obstacle to the social integration of a child with autism spectrum disorders is the underdevelopment of social skills. Foreign and domestic researchers (T. Peters, K. Gilberg, A.V. Haustov) note in their works that children of this category have insufficiently formed skills of everyday life and self-care, expressed behavioral problems, and demonstrate an inability to use language for communication, to adequately express requests, demands, comments (Gilberg & Peters, 1998; Haustov, 2008; Peters, 1999).

Social skills are understood as skills without which it is impossible for a child with autism spectrum disorders to be integrated into society. Russian and foreign scientists refer to socialization skills as the following skills and abilities: socially acceptable behavior; self-care skills; social play; listening behavior skills; request expression skills; intraverbal skills (Nigmatullina et al., 2021).

The development of the above skills in children with autism spectrum disorders has a number of peculiarities.

A particular challenge for children on the autism spectrum is the development of self-care skills. The most important self-care skills are: the ability to use the toilet, wash hands, use a towel after washing hands; the ability to use cutlery, hold a cup and drink from it; the ability to use napkins, a handkerchief; the ability to dress and undress independently, put on and take off shoes (Borisova, 2023).

Emerging difficulties in the formation of self-care skills are largely associated with contact disorders, with problems in expressing requests, with difficulties in concentration, with behavioral stereotypes, etc. Also, children with autism spectrum disorders are not capable of imitation, and therefore it takes a long time and is difficult to acquire self-care skills (Bondy et al., 2020).

One of the main reasons why children with autism have difficulty integrating into their peers is behavioral problems. These problems can manifest themselves in aggression towards others (blows, bites, pinches), self-aggression (blows, self-bites), inappropriate laughter, screaming, crying, stereotypical movements, and other forms (Tager-Flusberg & Kasari, 2013).

Most often, problematic behavior in children with autism has a specific function. Some behavior can be triggered by internal needs and bring physiological satisfaction, acting as a kind of «self-stimulation». This behavior is aimed at achieving pleasant sensations or reducing discomfort, such as pain. Impairments in the development of communication and social skills, characteristic of children with autism, can lead to unusual behaviors that require special attention (Borisova, 2023).

As a rule, children with autism spectrum disorders realize these stereotypes alone and do not let other people into their «game», also children themselves do not try to participate in the games of other children. Many autistic children do not like to play with other children and need privacy. Some children with autistic disorders are interested in playing with other children or adults, but the process of playing together is difficult because of the lack of communication skills. Children with autism spectrum disorders have not formed imitative skills; they are not able to understand and accept the rules of the game: to wait their turn, etc.; they do not know how to share toys. The above-mentioned features complicate the formation of play activities. Thus, children with autism spectrum disorders show problematic behaviors that limit their interaction with others (Borisova, 2023).

Other skills necessary for the successful inclusion of a child with ASD in society are those related to language development (Nikolskaia et al., 2017). Such skills are the ability to adequately express requests, name objects and subjects, imitation, and intraverbal skills. The most important is the ability to express a request, because in requests the motivation of the child is concluded. The child’s requests should be expressed not only by nonverbal means, so the formation of the ability to name objects of the surrounding reality and actions is not

less important. The necessity of the development of echo skills lies in the fact that they are the basis of the formation of expressive speech (Kumar & Patel, 2022).

In order to participate in a conversation, children must learn intraverbal skills, which include the ability to answer questions and complete what the other person is saying. The development of intraverbal skills begins with filling in the blanks in children's poems and songs, and is effectively taught by asking the child to complete the adult's sentences during everyday activities and games. The next stages of work include teaching the child to answer the questions «what?», «why?», «where?», as well as forming the ability to make judgments about the future or the past.

Children with autism spectrum disorders face difficulties in developing listening skills. B.F. Sinner emphasized that listening includes not only speech perception, but also other important aspects. The listener should be able not only to listen to the speaker, but also to follow instructions, look in his direction, nod, quickly respond to questions and remarks, fulfil requests, provide necessary items or information, and also show emotions – smile, be sad, express sympathy.

For children with autism, these skills can be especially difficult because of their perception and interaction with the outside world. They may have difficulty concentrating, understanding non-verbal cues, and responding emotionally. Therefore, it is extremely important for them to create a structured and predictable environment in which their communication skills can be developed gradually and taking into account their individual characteristics (Borisova, 2023).

The diverse nature of the population of children with autism spectrum disorder presents a significant challenge in developing personalized educational approaches. Several factors contribute to this complexity:

- Within the group, there is a wide variation in the degree of heterogeneity, where even individuals with the same clinical diagnosis demonstrate significant differences in the intensity of autistic symptoms and associated developmental issues.
- Individuals within this population vary in terms of the level and intensity of their disorder, ranging from disengagement and active resistance to self-focus and extreme shyness.
- Uneven development of various cognitive functions can result in formal logical thinking surpassing the development of communication abilities in some individuals.

Research has identified critical areas of difficulty in the development of social skills among children with autism, which can form the basis for designing effective interventions.

Methodology

In order to identify the peculiarities of socialization skills of children with autism spectrum disorder, a study was conducted on the basis of preschool educational institutions and rehabilitation center for children with disabilities in the city of Kazan. The study included 16 children aged from 3 to 7: 13 boys, 3 girls. In the course of the study, the following methods were used for a comprehensive assessment of the formation of socialization skills in preschool children with autism spectrum disorder: «Protocol of pedagogical examination of children» by A.V. Haustov, E.P. Krasnoselskaya, S.V. Vorotnikova, Y.M. Erofeeva, E.V. Matus, A.I. Stanina, I.M. Haustova, T.V. Sheptunova; «Diagnostics of social development of the child» by A.M. Shchetinina.

The first stage of the study was to assess the formation of self-care skills, behavioral characteristics, as well as play and language skills using a protocol of pedagogical examination.

The methodology includes ten tables with age norms. Each table contains parameters of development of one or another function characteristic of neurotypical development of a child aged from 1 to 7.

The protocol can be used to assess children's behavioral characteristics, communicative skills, perceptual skills, cognitive skills, language skills, play characteristics, formation of large and fine motor skills, characteristics of self-care skills, maladaptive behaviors.

The scoring is done in points. Depending on the skill formation, points from 0 to 2 are given:

«0» – the skill is not formed: the child never performs and does not use this skill or only tries to perform it;

«1» – the skill is partially formed: the child began to perform the action in the last month or sometimes uses the skill (for example, only with close people, only with adults, only at home, etc.);

«2» – the skill is fully formed: the child uses this skill in different situations, in different places, with different people.

The tables «Behavior», «Communication», «Language», «Play», «Self-care», "Disadaptive behavior» were selected for the study of socialization skills (Haustov, 2008).

In order to study the activity, initiative, independence of preschool children with autism spectrum disorder, as well as the formation of socio-cultural forms of communication, conflict-free behavior, and non-violent interaction in children, we conducted a diagnosis using the methodology «Diagnosis of social development» by A.M. Shchetinina.

For this purpose, during the study, the following protocols were filled in for each child: «Map of initiative», «Map of independence», «Map of activity». All protocols were completed after several observations of the children.

The Map of Initiative makes it possible to assess the child's aspiration to the main roles in games, aspiration to leadership, to initiate some activity. When analyzing the results, each parameter is given a score from 0 to 4 points, the sum of the scores is calculated, and the level of initiative is determined: high – 23–44 points, average – 11–22 points, low – 0–10 points.

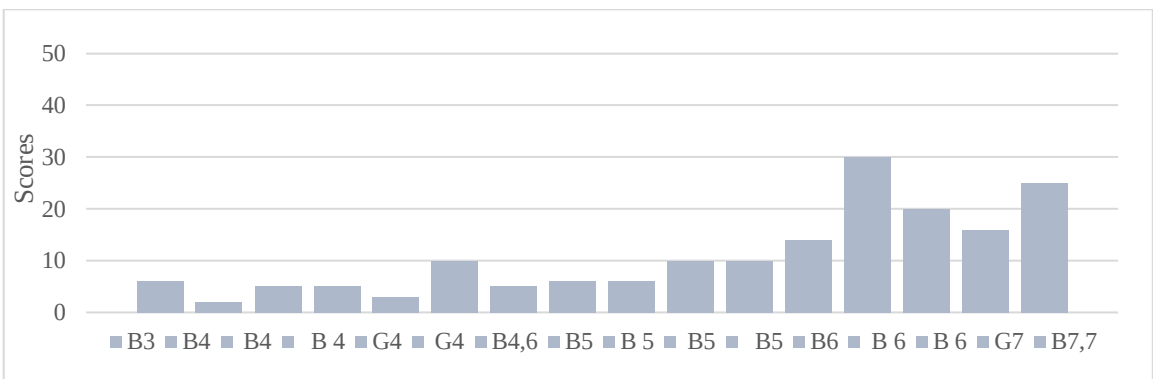
The Independence Card allows us to assess the child's attitude to help from adults and peers, the desire to perform tasks and assignments independently. When analyzing the results, each parameter is scored from 0 to 4 points; the sum of the scores is calculated, and the level of initiative is determined: high – 25–48 points, average – 13–24 points, low – 0–12 points.

The activity card allows us to assess the child's involvement in games with peers, interest in everything new, aggression, etc. When analyzing the results, each parameter is scored from 0 to 3 points; the sum of the scores is calculated, and the level of initiative is determined: high – 35–48 points; average – 17–32 points; low – 0–16 points (Shchetinina, 2000).

Results

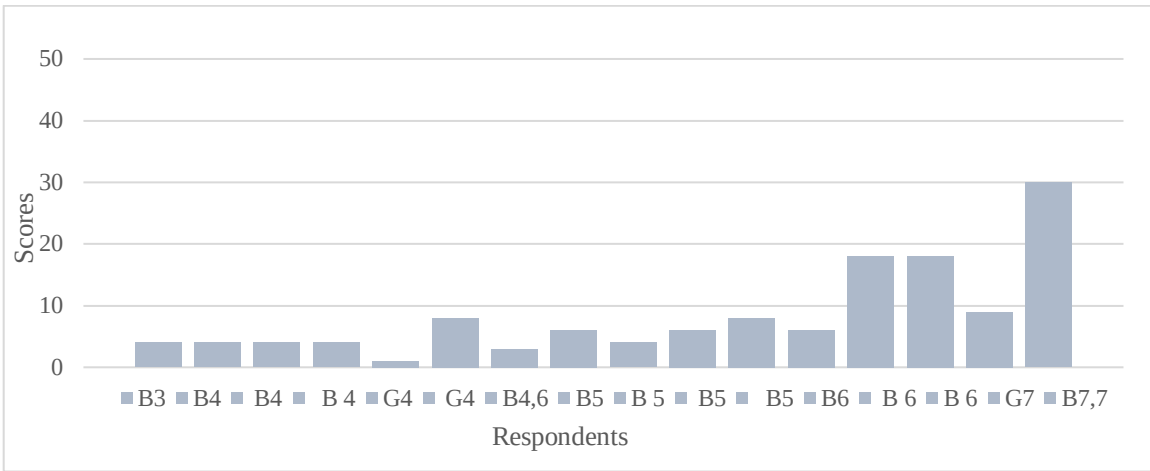
The results of the survey according to the «Pedagogical Survey Protocol» method showed that the socialization skills of the children studied are not formed or are formed at a low level. It was also revealed that the development of social skills of the respondents does not correspond to the age norms.

Table 1. Results of the Survey on the «Behavior» Scale of the «Pedagogical Survey Protocol» Methodology.



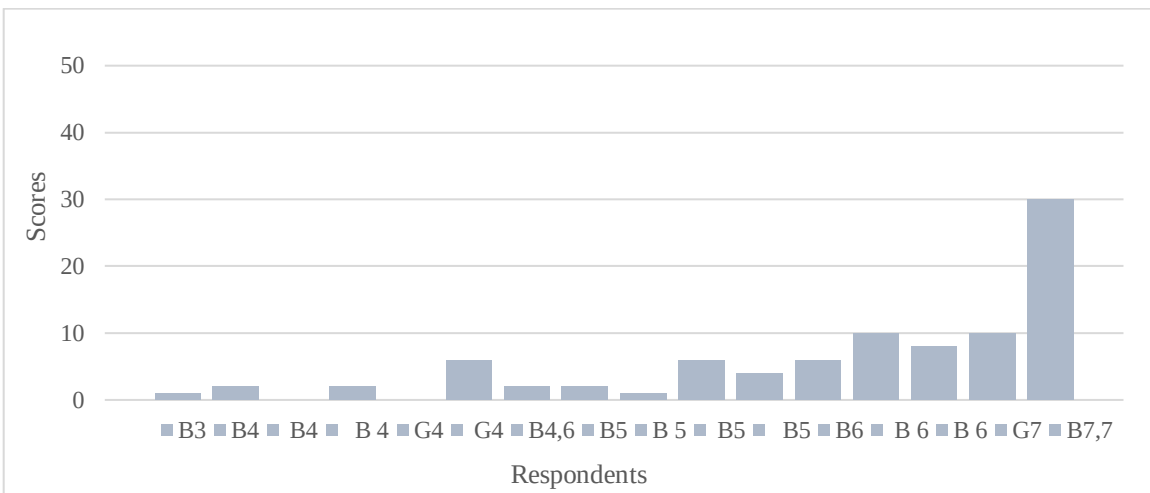
The study of the respondents' behavior showed that the children's behavior in the sample corresponds to the normative indicators of a two to three-year-old child. The majority of the children do not respond to their names, do not imitate the actions of adults, and do not follow the instructions and orders of an adult. Only a few children in the sample have relatively «high» scores. They are able to perform pre-learned actions on demand, respond to words of prohibition, ask adults for help, and follow their instructions.

Table 2. Results of the survey on the «Speech» scale of the «Pedagogical Survey Protocol» methodology.



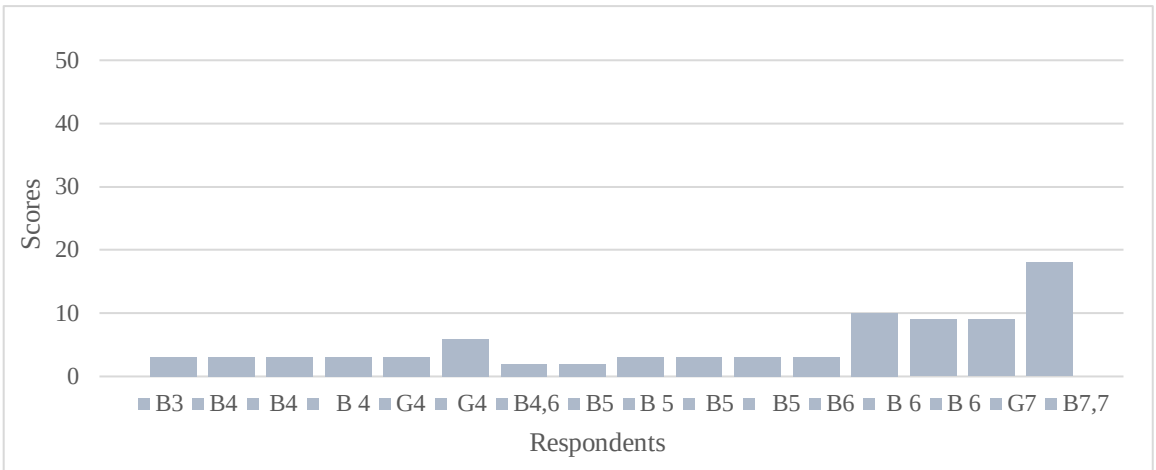
The children's language skills are also formed at a low level. Most children of the sample have only babbling and mumbling. They do not pronounce words, do not use babbling and humming to communicate with adults, do not repeat new syllables, exclamations, and interjections after adults. The children with the highest scores have speech in phrases of 3–4 words; they are able to attract attention through speech and verbally express a request.

Table 3. Results of the survey on the «Communication» scale of the «Pedagogical survey protocol» methodology.



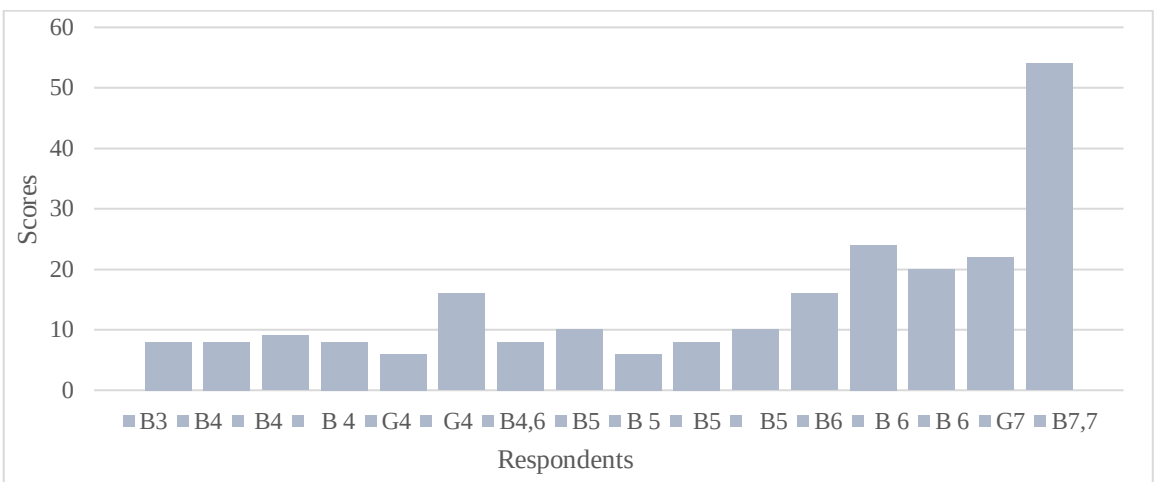
Communication skills are not formed or are formed at a low level in the majority of the children studied. Children are not able to express requests, demands, refusals, agreements, as well as to attract attention with the help of gestures or words.

Table 4. Results of the survey on the «Play» scale of the «Pedagogical Survey Protocol» methodology.



Play skills are also not formed or formed at a low level in all children of the sample. In most cases, the subjects manipulate only objects. Children are unable to perform functional actions with toys and household objects, and to imitate play actions of other children.

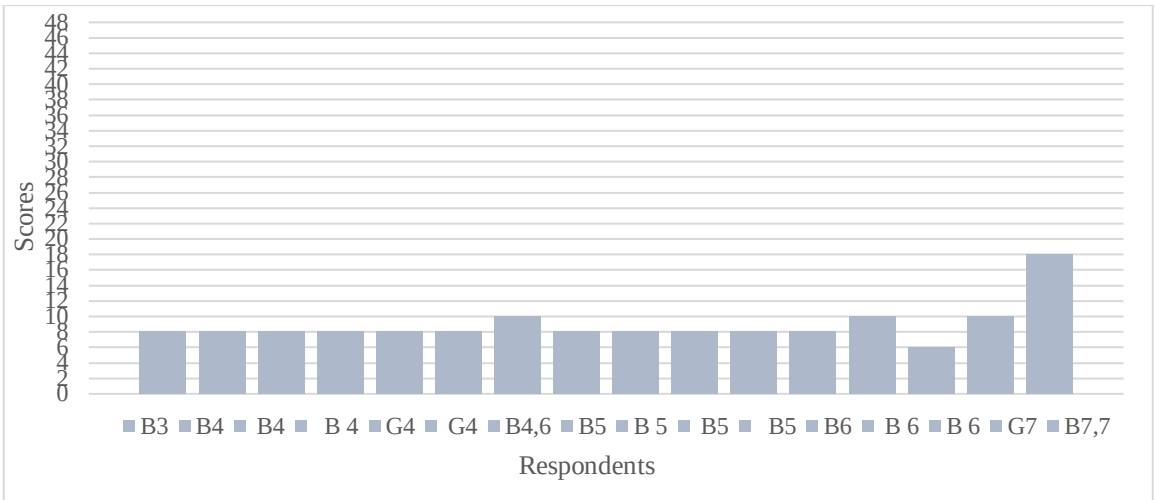
Table 5. Results of the survey on the «Self-care» scale of the «Pedagogical survey protocol» methodology.



The study of self-care skills showed that the majority of the children in the sample were able to chew and swallow food independently; and to drink from a cup or glass with the help of an adult. However, the majority

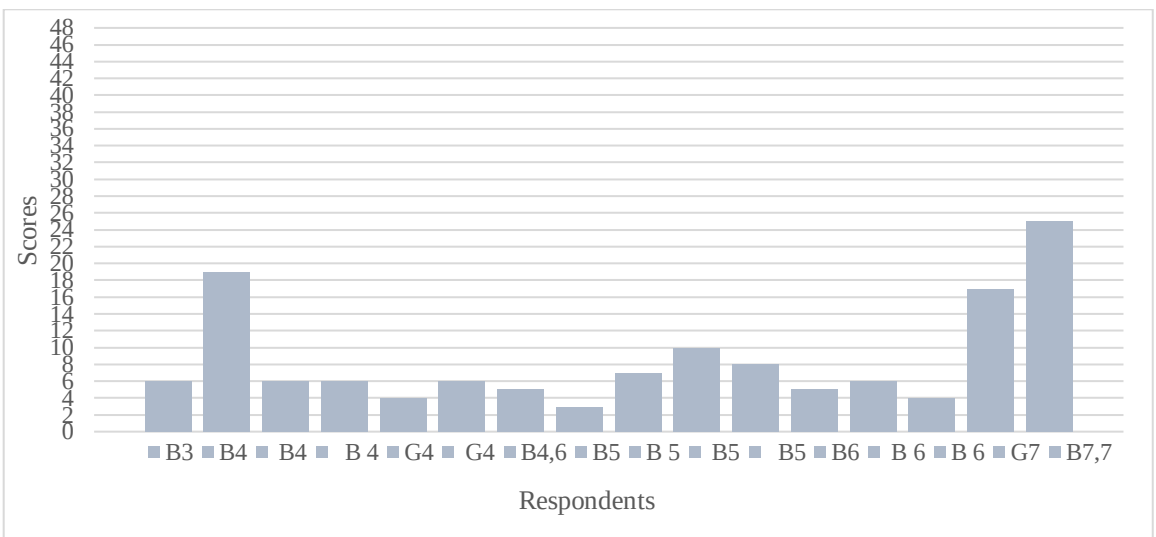
of respondents have not developed the ability to eat, dress and undress themselves, wash their hands, ask for and go to the toilet.

Table 6. Results of the study using the method of A.M. Shchetinina «Map of independence».



Analysis of the results of the study of independence skills showed that the subjects do not ask for help from adults and peers, cannot clean dishes, toys, or things without the help of an adult. The children do not perform assigned tasks, cannot play independently and with peers.

Table 7. Results of the study using the method of A.M. Shchetinina «Activity map».



The study of activity showed that the majority of subjects do not actively interact with adults and peers. The children are not included in the game; they rarely show interest in new things. The subjects often try to isolate themselves, may be noisy and aggressive.

Discussion

Children with autism represent a polymorphic group. Common to all children is impaired social interaction, which subsequently leads to communicative difficulties, which in turn slows down and distorts the child's further mental and speech development.

The main manifestations of impaired formation of socialization skills are insufficient development or lack of development of everyday skills and self-care skills; inability to use speech for communication, to adequately express requests, demands, and comments; and pronounced behavioral problems.

O.S. Nikolskaya and E.R. Baenskaya emphasize that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have a distorted or absent need for communication, which is manifested in avoidance of contact and difficulty maintaining dialogue.

M.M. Liebling states that communication difficulties are one of the primary factors hindering successful integration of children with ASD into society (Nikolskaia et al., 2017).

The conducted research has shown that these skills are not formed or are formed at a low level. The test subjects do not communicate with adults and peers; the majority of children have not formed speech skills, and self-care skills are also formed at a low level. In most cases, the respondents have a low level of initiative and activity: children cannot find things to do on their own, do not ask for help from adults and peers; they do not show interest in games with peers, may behave noisily and show aggression.

The above features make it difficult to include children with autism spectrum disorders in society. The results of this study may be useful in understanding the characteristics of children for parents and educators working with children with ASDs. This knowledge will help to create a more inclusive and safer environment for children.

Understanding the social skills of preschool children with autism spectrum disorders can increase the effectiveness of specialized curriculum development. This will allow for more successful social inclusion of children with ASDs.

Conclusion

The study revealed the specific features of the social skills of preschoolers with autism spectrum disorders. Most of the children in the sample did not respond to their names, did not imitate adult actions, and did not follow instructions or orders from adults. Most children of the sample have only pronunciation of various sound complexes. They do not pronounce words, do not use sound complexes to communicate with adults, do not repeat new syllables, exclamations, and interjections after adults; they are not able to express requests, demands, refusals, consents, as well as to attract attention with the help of gestures or words. All the children in the sample do not have any play skills or have only a low level of play skills. In most cases, the subjects manipulate only objects. Children are unable to perform functional actions with toys and household objects, and to imitate play actions of other children.

The study of self-care skills has shown that the majority of the children in the sample are able to chew and swallow food independently, to drink from a cup or glass with the help of an adult. However, the majority of the respondents have not developed the ability to eat, dress and undress, wash hands, ask for, and go to the bathroom independently.

When analyzing the results of A.M. Shchetinina's methodology, it was found out that the majority of the children in the sample have a low level of initiative and activity: children cannot find their own business, do not seek help from adults and peers, the subjects do not show interest in games with peers; they may behave noisily and show aggression. Thus, we can conclude that the socialization skills of the children studied are not formed or are formed at a low level.

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