

# UNDERSTANDING AUTISTIC PLAY: CHALLENGING THE NEURONORMATIVE LENS

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**How do autistic parents describe playing with their children?**



- Semi-structured interviews with autistic parents / primary carers of autistic children in the UK aged 4-10 years old
- Interviews focussing on experiences of play, including what materials are played with, and where and when play occurs. I also ask participants explicitly about their experiences of play-observation by professionals.
- Transcribed interviews are analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)



I interviewed 11 parents of different genders from across the UK in in the aim of discovering:

(i)what autistic parents do when playing with their autistic children

(ii)their feelings about and understandings of play;

(iii)their perceptions of others' judgements on their play



- Judgement / NT expectations
- Distinctively autistic play
- Empathic connection
- Parenting Impact
- Purposes of play



‘People would always talk, especially because my child isn’t normal, so people would always talk and personally I get to ignore those comments mostly from people in public spaces..... we have quiet times together but not in the place where people are much’



**‘I always feel I am being judged.’**



'so it looks weird to other people and sometimes you do get those people staring like 'what the hell are they up to?' Em...but that is just us. We are just daft. It is fun.'



‘most times the way people look at us, or look at me the way I play with her.....they don’t seem to understand what’s going on. They just be seeming like ‘why is she doing this outside’ or something. But I do not care about that. All I try to do is make sure my child is ok.’



‘sometimes people think we are a bit.....the things we do are unusual.’



- **Distinctively autistic play**
- **Empathic connection**



‘..most times she likes being alone. She sits at open space maybe window, or sometimes my veranda and she just look up the sky or just look up the open space. At times like that I like going to sit with her.’



‘So we can just spend hours and hours if we are on our own, and nobody else is at home, just together.... I mean a little talk here and there. He is very happy on his own with me. As long as I am around.’



I do think that the fact that we are both autistic we seem to have quite a temperamental kind of synchronicity or something. We 'get' each other.



'I am also autistic so I understand things about her better'



(our play) 'didn't always fit with what other people thought we should be doing or what was necessarily socially acceptable to others'



‘sometimes people think we are a bit.....the things we do are unusual.’



- **Parenting impact**



**'It's just something we do most of the time'**



‘Play with her is almost constant because she has a very vivid imagination’



‘It is kind of quite integrated into the day. It is not like a set time or a specific kind of occasion.’



- **Purposes of play**



‘When I am playing with my child, I understand that most people do not understand why I am doing that or why my child is acting that way so... most people do not understand so I don’t want to listen to what people say or try to be judged. I just do whatever thing I know that please my child. I just go for that. I don’t care if I am being judged or not.’



‘For people who don’t understand ..... autistic people at all, to come in and say ‘no, that is not an ok way to play’ takes away... potentially risks some of the strengths of autistic people.’



# Thank you

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