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GROUP CORRECTIONAL AND THERAPEUTIC WORK WITH CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Анотація. У статті досліджується значення групової корекційної та терапевтичної роботи з дітьми, у яких діагностовано розлад аутистичного спектру (РАС), і представлено її як один із найефективніших і найперспективніших підходів у сучасній психологічній та педагогічній практиці. Розлад аутистичного спектру характеризується особливими особливостями розвитку, зокрема труднощами в соціальній комунікації, обмеженими або дуже специфічними інтересами та повторюваними моделями поведінки. Ці особливості є не тільки основними діагностичними критеріями, а й важливими чинниками, що визначають структуру та ефективність групових втручань.

Надається комплексний аналіз науково обґрунтованих практик у сфері групової терапії та навчання соціальних навичок для дітей з аутизмом. Розглядаються різні моделі та стратегії групової роботи, від структурованих занять з розвитку навичок до більш гнучких і творчих терапевтичних форматів. Підкреслюється роль взаємодії з однолітками, кооперативних ігор та моделювання як механізму, що сприяє набуттю комунікативних навичок та просоціальній поведінці. Крім того, у статті підкреслюється важливість залучення батьків як учасників терапевтичного процесу, так і посередників у застосуванні засвоєних стратегій у домашньому та шкільному середовищі.

Особлива увага приділяється ширшому соціальному та культурному контексту, в якому проводиться групова терапія. У статті обговорюється актуальність міркувань, пов'язаних з ідентичністю, таких як повага до мовних уподобань у дискурсі про аутизм та уникнення стигматизуючої термінології. Крім того, підкреслюється необхідність забезпечення зовнішньої валідності при адаптації терапевтичних методів у різних освітніх та культурних середовищах. Це особливо актуально в контексті інтеграції традиційних психотерапевтичних технік із сучасними технологічними підходами, такими як цифрові платформи та системи телепідтримки.

Ключові слова: розлад аутистичного спектру, групова терапія, навчання соціальних навичок, аутистичне вигорання, підтримка сім'ї.

Abstract. The article explores the significance of group-based correctional and therapeutic work with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), presenting it as one of the most effective and promising approaches in contemporary psychological and educational practice. Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by distinctive developmental features, including difficulties in social communication, the presence of restricted or highly specific interests, and repetitive patterns of behavior. These features are not only central diagnostic criteria but also essential factors that determine the design and effectiveness of group interventions.

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of evidence-based practices in the field of group therapy and social skills training for autistic children. Various models and strategies of group work are

considered, ranging from structured skill-building sessions to more flexible and creative therapeutic formats. The role of peer interaction, cooperative play, and modeling is highlighted as a mechanism for fostering the acquisition of communication skills and promoting prosocial behavior. Additionally, the article underscores the importance of parental involvement, both as participants in the therapeutic process and as mediators of learned strategies in the home and school environment.

Special attention is given to the broader social and cultural context in which group therapy is implemented. The article discusses the relevance of identity-related considerations, such as respecting language preferences in autism discourse and avoiding stigmatizing terminology. Moreover, the need to ensure external validity when adapting therapeutic methods across diverse educational and cultural environments is emphasized. This is particularly relevant in the context of integrating traditional psychotherapeutic techniques with modern technology-assisted approaches, such as digital platforms and tele-support systems.

Key words: autism spectrum disorder, group therapy, social skills training, autistic burnout, family support.

Formulation of the problem. Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition that manifests in difficulties with social communication, flexibility of behavior, and interaction with peers. For children with ASD, group-based settings often represent both a challenge and an opportunity: while social environments can provoke stress, they also provide critical contexts for learning adaptive behaviors. Therefore, group correctional and therapeutic programs play an important role in addressing social deficits and promoting integration into educational and community settings [1; 3].

Analysis of recent research and publications. Recent studies emphasize the effectiveness of structured group interventions in developing social skills among children and adolescents with ASD. Gates, Kang, and Lerner [3] provide a systematic review confirming that group-based social skills training has significant positive effects on communication and peer interaction. Soares et al. [8] further highlight that both in-person and technology-assisted interventions demonstrate comparable efficacy in promoting social competencies.

Another important area of research is the concept of autistic burnout, which is defined as a state of chronic exhaustion, loss of functioning, and heightened stress due to prolonged adaptation demands. Higgins et al. [4] stress that group interventions should not only develop skills but also account for autistic well-being and prevent burnout by offering supportive and flexible formats.

At the same time, scholars point to the importance of considering language and identity in autism research. Botha, Hanlon, and Williams [2] argue that person-first or identity-first language influences how autistic individuals perceive interventions and their participation in therapeutic groups. Jonsson, Choque Olsson, and Bölte [5] raise the issue of external validity, noting that results from randomized controlled trials may not always generalize to real-world educational and cultural contexts, which requires careful adaptation of therapeutic practices.

Finally, research underlines the role of parental and family involvement. Karst et al. [6] demonstrate that family participation in group interventions contributes to sustained behavioral changes and greater generalization of skills across home and school environments.

The purpose of the article is to analyze group correctional and therapeutic work with children on the autism spectrum, to determine its role in promoting social adaptation and emotional well-being, and to outline evidence-based strategies for integrating group interventions into educational and clinical practice.

Outline of the main material. Group therapy for children with ASD is based on the principle that structured peer interactions can foster social learning. Unlike individual therapy, group interventions allow children to practice skills in a setting that mirrors natural social environments. Social skills training (SST) is the most widely used approach, typically including modeling, role-

playing, feedback, and homework assignments [7]. In addition to skill acquisition, group therapy provides children with ASD a safe and supportive space to navigate the complexities of social interaction. Shared activities within the group setting promote cooperation, turn-taking, and empathy, while also reducing feelings of isolation that many autistic children experience. Research highlights that such environments encourage the development of emotional awareness and self-regulation, as children learn not only from therapists but also through observation and imitation of peers. Moreover, the group format fosters a sense of belonging and community, which is essential for building confidence and facilitating long-term social adaptation.

Studies indicate that group SST leads to improvements in eye contact, initiation of conversations, understanding of social cues, and development of friendships [3]. Moreover, meta-analyses confirm that group-based approaches are more effective than individual interventions in enhancing social communication because they provide immediate opportunities for reciprocal interaction [8].

An important methodological component of group therapy is the inclusion of structured activities combined with unstructured play. Structured activities may involve role-playing everyday situations (e.g., greeting, turn-taking), while unstructured play enables spontaneous peer interaction. The role of the therapist is to mediate communication, model appropriate behaviors, and provide feedback in real time.

Another crucial aspect of group interventions for children with ASD is the incorporation of parental or caregiver involvement. Parents who actively participate in therapy sessions or receive training parallel to their children are more likely to reinforce newly acquired skills in everyday contexts. This generalization from therapy to home and school settings significantly increases the sustainability of outcomes. Studies show that when parents model positive communication strategies, encourage peer interactions, and create structured opportunities for practice outside the therapy room, children demonstrate more consistent progress in social adaptability and emotional resilience. Therefore, group therapy is most effective when conceptualized not as an isolated intervention, but as part of a broader ecological system that connects children, families, and educational environments.

Furthermore, group therapy for children with ASD has been shown to address not only skill deficits but also the emotional well-being of participants. By engaging in shared experiences and overcoming social challenges collectively, children build a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. This is particularly important in mitigating autistic burnout, which often results from chronic social demands and lack of supportive peer networks. Group-based interventions, especially those that balance structured learning with opportunities for spontaneous play, create an environment where children can experiment with new behaviors without fear of rejection. Over time, this fosters stronger peer relationships, greater tolerance for frustration, and improved coping strategies, thereby contributing to both social competence and psychological well-being.

Parental involvement represents another critical factor. Research shows that when parents are trained to reinforce learned skills at home, children demonstrate greater progress in generalizing behaviors beyond the therapy group [6]. Thus, effective group interventions include not only children but also parents as active participants in the therapeutic process.

Despite clear benefits, challenges remain. One of them is autistic burnout, which may arise when therapy emphasizes masking or over-adaptation. Therefore, recent approaches recommend shifting from purely normative skill training toward neurodiversity-affirming practices that respect autistic identity and promote authentic interaction [4]. This includes creating flexible group structures, allowing for sensory regulation, and validating autistic ways of communication (such as alternative and augmentative communication). Another important dimension of group therapy concerns the creation of environments that are sensitive to the sensory needs of autistic children. Many individuals on the spectrum experience heightened sensitivity to noise, light, or physical proximity, which may affect their capacity to engage in group activities. Therefore, therapists are encouraged to design

interventions that include opportunities for sensory regulation, such as designated quiet areas, the use of sensory tools, or flexible pacing of activities. By acknowledging and accommodating these sensory differences, group programs become more inclusive and supportive, enabling children to participate without becoming overwhelmed. This approach not only increases engagement but also strengthens trust in the therapeutic process, as children feel that their unique needs are respected.

It is important to emphasize that the effectiveness of group therapy largely depends on careful planning of the session structure and the sequencing of social exercises. A variety of methods stimulates active participation and promotes cognitive flexibility, which is essential for adapting to unpredictable social situations. For example, modeling social scenarios allows children to anticipate possible responses from others and choose appropriate ways of reacting. At the same time, role-playing activities help develop self-control, conflict resolution skills, and emotional expression within a safe environment. In the context of group interactions, fostering empathy and cooperative abilities is crucial. Shared tasks and interactive games encourage children to consider the perspectives of their peers and to negotiate solutions collaboratively. This process not only enhances social competence but also strengthens emotional intelligence, as children learn to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotions of others. Additionally, repeated engagement in group activities contributes to building patience, tolerance, and persistence, which are fundamental skills for successful participation in broader social settings.

Therapists play a central role in facilitating these interactions, providing guidance, modeling appropriate behaviors, and offering immediate feedback. Their presence helps maintain a structured yet flexible environment in which children feel safe to explore new behaviors without fear of judgment or failure. Furthermore, the integration of sensory regulation strategies within sessions allows children with heightened sensitivities to engage more fully. Quiet areas, sensory tools, and adjustable pacing of activities enable participants to manage stress and remain focused, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of the intervention.

Parental and caregiver involvement remains a key component of group therapy. When parents are trained to support the practice of social skills at home, children demonstrate more consistent generalization of learned behaviors. Encouraging family participation also strengthens the connection between therapeutic activities and everyday life, creating a more cohesive support system.

Finally, group therapy provides children with opportunities to experience success and social recognition within a peer context. These positive experiences enhance self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging, which are critical for long-term psychological well-being. By combining structured social skill development, spontaneous peer interaction, parental involvement, and sensitivity to individual differences, group therapy offers a holistic approach that addresses both social competence and emotional resilience in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In addition, cultural and contextual adaptation of group interventions plays a vital role in their success. Practices developed in one educational or clinical setting may not always transfer effectively to another due to differences in language, cultural expectations, and educational systems. For this reason, therapists must consider external validity when implementing programs, tailoring strategies to align with the social norms and resources of the communities they serve. Incorporating local traditions, communication styles, and family dynamics can make group therapy more relatable and meaningful for children and their families. Such adaptations ensure that therapeutic methods are not only effective in controlled research environments but also sustainable and impactful in everyday life.

Finally, the future development of group therapy for autistic children lies in the integration of traditional face-to-face methods with technology-assisted approaches. Digital tools, such as interactive platforms, virtual reality environments, and telehealth programs, offer additional opportunities for practicing social skills in safe and controlled settings. These innovations can supplement in-person sessions, providing children with diverse ways of engaging in social learning while reducing barriers related to accessibility or geographical distance. Moreover, hybrid formats that combine direct peer

interaction with digital practice may enhance motivation, increase generalization of skills, and make therapy more flexible for families. As technology becomes more embedded in educational and therapeutic practices, it holds promise for expanding the reach and inclusivity of group interventions.

Furthermore, digital technologies provide new opportunities for group therapy. Online or hybrid interventions expand accessibility, especially for families in remote areas. Soares et al. [8; 9] emphasize that technology-assisted group interventions demonstrate similar effectiveness to traditional formats, although they require careful structuring to maintain engagement and therapeutic alliance. Finally, external validity remains a key issue. As Jonsson et al. [5] note, findings from clinical trials must be adapted to real-world school, cultural, and community contexts. This means that group programs should consider the diversity of autistic children's needs, family cultures, and educational environments.

Promising direction in the development of digital group therapy lies in the use of virtual reality (VR) and gamified platforms. These tools allow children with ASD to practice social interactions in controlled yet realistic scenarios, such as initiating conversations, navigating public spaces, or cooperating on problem-solving tasks. The immersive nature of VR reduces the unpredictability of real-life environments while still providing authentic opportunities for social learning. Gamification elements, such as levels, rewards, and character role-play, can further enhance motivation and engagement, which are often challenging to sustain in traditional therapy settings. Importantly, these technologies can be adapted to the individual sensory preferences of autistic children, thereby supporting a more personalized therapeutic experience.

Equally important is the role of the therapist in digital or hybrid formats. While technology may facilitate structured practice, the therapeutic alliance remains central to successful outcomes. Therapists must not only guide children in navigating digital tools but also monitor emotional responses, mediate peer interactions, and provide feedback that fosters self-awareness and confidence. Maintaining warmth, empathy, and consistency in online settings can be challenging, yet it is crucial to ensure that children experience a sense of safety and belonging. Research suggests that therapist presence—whether physical or virtual—significantly influences the degree of trust and motivation among participants, underscoring the need for training professionals in digital facilitation skills.

In addition, the adaptation of group therapy programs to diverse cultural and educational contexts requires a flexible and inclusive framework. What works effectively in one country or community may not necessarily be applicable in another due to variations in communication norms, family dynamics, and school systems. For example, the role of parents in therapy may be more central in collectivist cultures compared to individualistic ones, where greater emphasis is placed on children's independence. Recognizing and integrating these contextual factors ensures that interventions are not perceived as externally imposed models but as culturally responsive practices that respect the values and lived experiences of families.

Finally, future research and practice should aim to develop interdisciplinary collaborations that connect psychologists, educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and technology specialists. Group therapy for autistic children is most effective when it integrates perspectives from multiple fields, addressing not only social and emotional development but also sensory processing, communication, and adaptive functioning. Interdisciplinary teamwork allows for the creation of holistic programs that better reflect the complexity of autism and the diverse needs of children and their families. By bringing together expertise from different domains, practitioners can design group interventions that are innovative, adaptable, and grounded in both scientific evidence and real-world applicability.

Conclusions

Group therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) provides a comprehensive framework for developing social, emotional, and adaptive skills. It allows children to practice

communication and cooperation in settings that resemble real-life social environments. Structured activities, such as role-playing and guided interactions, help children acquire specific social skills. Unstructured play within the group fosters spontaneous peer interactions and encourages creativity. Children learn not only from therapists but also by observing and imitating their peers. The group setting creates a sense of belonging and community, which is essential for building confidence. Emotional regulation and self-awareness are strengthened through repeated social experiences. Shared challenges and successes help children develop resilience and coping strategies. Parental involvement enhances the transfer of learned skills to home and school environments. When parents support practice outside therapy, children demonstrate more consistent social adaptation. Group therapy also addresses emotional well-being by reducing isolation and promoting self-efficacy. Flexible group structures allow children to engage according to their sensory preferences and comfort levels. Respecting individual differences supports authentic communication and reduces stress. Cultural and contextual adaptation ensures that interventions are meaningful and relevant. Digital and hybrid tools offer additional opportunities for safe and controlled social practice. Technology can increase motivation and accessibility, particularly for families in remote areas. The therapeutic alliance remains central, even in online or hybrid formats. Interdisciplinary collaboration strengthens programs by addressing social, emotional, sensory, and adaptive needs. Balancing structured learning with spontaneous interactions maximizes engagement and skill development. Overall, group therapy fosters social competence, psychological well-being, and long-term resilience in children with ASD.

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