

ÖZEL GEREKSİNİMLİ ÇOCUĞU OLAN ANNELERİN OYUN HAKKINDAKİ GÖRÜŞLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

EXAMINATION OF THE OPINIONS ABOUT PLAY OF MOTHERS WHO HAVE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Özet

Oyun çocuklar için eğlenceli olduğu kadar eğiticidir. Oyun oynamak, çocukların bilişsel, dil, sosyal, psiko-motor ve kişilik gelişimlerine katkı sağlamaktadır. Oyun çocuğun hayal dünyası ile gerçek dünya arasında bir köprü işlevi görerek kişiler arası iletişimlerini geliştirmektedir. Başka bir ifadeyle çocuklar oyun yoluyla empati kurarak başkalarını anlamayı, başka kişilere saygı göstermeyi, karşılıklı ilişkilerde kendine düşen sorumluluğunu fark etmeyi, sabırlı olabilmeyi, kuralların varlığını ve onlara uymayı öğrenmektedir. Tipik gelişim özelliklerinden farklı özellikler gösteren özel gereksinimli çocuklar için de oyun tüm gelişim alanlarına katkı sağlayan bir araçtır. Bu araştırma ile özel gereksinimli çocuğu olan annelerin oyun ile ilgili görüşlerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Bu araştırma nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden olgu bilim yöntemi kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler araştırmaya gönüllü olarak katılan ve özel gereksinimli çocuğu olan toplam 15 anneden yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme yolu ile elde edilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler içerik analizi ile incelenerek yorumlanmıştır. Ayrıca geçerlik ve güvenirlik çalışmaları yapılmıştır. Araştırmaya katılan annelerin çoğunluğu oyunun çocuklarının gelişimi açısından öneminin farkında olmasına karşın çocukların oyun oynama konusunda birtakım problemlerle karşılaştığını belirtmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: özel gereksinimli çocuklar, gelişim, oyun

Abstract

Play is both fun and educational for children. Playing games contributes to children's cognitive, language, social, psychomotor and personality development. Play acts as a bridge between the child's imagination and the world, improving their interpersonal communication. In other words, children learn to empathize with others through play, to respect others, to realize their responsibilities in mutual relationships, to be patient, to have rules and to obey them. Play is a tool that contributes to all developmental areas for children with special needs who exhibit characteristics different from normal development characteristics. This research aims to examine the views of mothers with children with special needs on play. This research was conducted using the phenomenological method, one of the qualitative research methods.

Data were obtained from a total of 15 mothers with children with special needs who participated in the research voluntarily through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed and interpreted. Validity and reliability studies were conducted on the obtained data. Although the majority of the mothers who participated in the research were aware of the importance of play for their children's development, they stated that their children encountered some problems in playing games.

Keywords: children with special needs, development, play

INTRODUCTION

Play is as old as human history itself. In other words, children have been playing various games since the earliest days of history. As a result of scientific studies on child development, it has been recognized that play is indispensable for children's development. Play contributes to children's learning by supporting all areas of their development, as well as making them happy (Poyraz, 1999:136). In other words, play is as educational as it is enjoyable for children. Playing games contributes to children's cognitive, language, social, psychomotor, and personality development (Özer et al., 2006: 54-57). Play acts as a bridge between the child's imaginary world and the real world, developing their interpersonal communication skills. In other words, through play, children learn to empathize with others, understand others, show respect for others, recognize their responsibilities in mutual relationships, be patient, and learn about the existence of rules and how to follow them (Burgaz Uskan and Bozkuş, 2019: 127).

The development of children defined as having special needs differs significantly from typical developmental characteristics as a result of certain circumstances experienced before, during, or after birth. In other words, due to developmental problems that arise at various stages of life, some children may lag behind or develop faster than their peers due to significant deficiencies, delays, or advances in their physical, cognitive, language, and psychosocial development. Play is also a tool that contributes to all areas of development for children with special needs who exhibit characteristics that differ from typical developmental characteristics (Ayan et al., 2012:81). Supporting their psychomotor, cognitive, language, and psychosocial development through play is effective in integrating children with special needs into society.

Finding solutions to situations encountered during play contributes to children's cognitive skills by using their imagination, while physical movements in play support the development of children's psychomotor skills (Pehlivan, 2016: 3282). Additionally, the ability to recognize and express emotions and understand the emotions of others, which is acquired through play, contributes to language development and psycho-social development. Children with special needs may often be deficient in acquiring social skills compared to their peers (Pijl et al., 2008: 388). Deficiencies in social skills also bring many behavioral problems (Papatğa, 2012:9). Play can be used as an effective way to acquire and develop social skills. Research shows that play is effective in developing psychomotor, language, and cognitive skills in children with mild intellectual disabilities (Yaman, 2015:62), Down syndrome (De Falco et al., 2008:499; Uygur, 2022:55), learning difficulties (Fallon and MacCobb, 2013:217), and autism spectrum disorder (Akgün-Giray, 2022:95; Deniz, 2019:89; Gülveren et al., 2022:69). Additionally, incorporating appropriate games into early intervention programs can help children with special needs develop their senses (Kaya, 2010: 13). In this regard, it is extremely important for the development of children with special needs that teachers in school environments and parents in home and social environments support these children in acquiring the necessary skills to play with their peers.

Play is a natural tool that supports all areas of development for both typically developing children and children with special needs. However, children with developmental delays may have difficulty initiating play, so it is very important for someone who understands their needs to initiate play (Kaya, 2010:13).

In Turkey, the Portage Early Childhood Education Program and the Small Steps Early Education Program are the most widely used educational materials among intervention programs implemented at home by parents to support the development of children with developmental disabilities during early childhood (Kaya, 2010: 18). First developed by Shearer and Shearer in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin and implemented as a project, the Portage Early Childhood Education Program consists of three main components: child-led play, family focus, and structured instruction (Cengiz and Yaşar-Ekici, 2022: 192-194). The Portage Early Childhood Education Program, which has been implemented in 87 countries, including India, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Turkey, was first implemented in Turkey by Hacettepe University in 1989 (Sazak-Pınar, 2006: 79). Research has shown that it contributes to the development of children with special needs (Biber, 2012: 121). The program includes various games that parents can play with their children, aiming to support all areas of development (Cengiz and Yaşar-Ekici, 2022: 223-224).

The Small Steps Early Education Program was developed to support the cognitive, receptive language, communication skills, fine motor skills, and gross motor skills of infants aged 0-4 with developmental delays by enabling parents to assist their children in the home environment. It was first implemented in Turkey in 1996 with the support of a voluntary organization by Ankara University, Gazi University, Istanbul University, and Anadolu University (Birkan, 2001: 18). Research results show that this program, which incorporates structured play environments, is effective in children's development (Birkan, 2002: 106).

In a recent study, early childhood special educators' perceptions of play for children with disabilities in preschool inclusion settings were examined. Qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with three teachers, two of whom were also mothers, were analyzed. The study concluded that teachers perceive play as a positive environment where children with disabilities learn while having fun, and therefore incorporate play environments into their daily routines to help children acquire and develop various skills (McGrew, 2021: 52-55).

Children with developmental delays require intensive support from their families in order to progress (Sevinç and Babahanoğlu, 2016: 112). Mothers undoubtedly play a very important role in supporting the development of children with special needs through play. Based on this fact, it is essential for mothers to be aware of the importance of play in their children's development and to create environments conducive to play for their children's development in order for children with special needs to adapt to society. In this context, the aim of this study is to examine the views of mothers of children with special needs on play. The study sought to examine mothers' awareness of the importance of play, what they do to encourage their children to participate in play, and their experiences in this regard.

METHOD

Research Design

This research was conducted using the phenomenological method, which is one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenological research aims to determine the experiences and opinions of participating individuals regarding a specific phenomenon. In other words, phenomenological research focuses on what participants experience and how they experience it, limited to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014:15). The aim of this study was to determine the views of mothers who have children with special needs regarding play.

Procedure

For this research, "Ethics Committee Permission" was obtained from Hitit University with the decision number 2024-8 dated 03.04.2024. Furthermore, the Helsinki Declaration has been adhered to throughout this process. The data were collected by interview method. Mothers were informed about the purpose of the research and confidentiality principles at the beginning of the interview.

They were also asked to consent to voice recording during the interviews. None of them refused the recording.

Participants

The participants consisted of 15 mothers of children with special needs aged 3-12 who were receiving educational support at a special education and rehabilitation center in the center of Çorum province. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling was used to select data-rich cases for the effective use of limited resources (Yağar and Dökme, 2018:4). Prior to the study, the researcher informed the mothers about the research, and those who volunteered were included in the study. The mothers who participated in the study were coded as P1, P2, P3, etc. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant Code	Age	Educational Status	Child's Gender	Child's Age	Child's Status	Special Needs
P1	46	University	Female	4	Down Syndrome	
P2	44	Elementary school	Male	5	Autism	
P3	41	Elementary school	Male	9	Cerebral palsy	
P4	43	Elementary school	Male	12	Autism	
P5	44	Elementary school	Male	12	Autism	
P6	40	Elementary school	Female	10	Learning disability	
P7	49	Elementary school	Female	7	Learning disability	
P8	30	University	Male	3	Hypermethioninemia	
P9	42	High school	Male	5	Speech impairment	
P10	38	Middle school	Male	6	Epilepsy	
P11	39	Elementary school	Male	5	Down Syndrome	
P12	41	University	Female	6	Down Syndrome	
P13	29	University	Male	5	Autism	
P14	38	High school	Female	6	Autism	
P15	40	High school	Female	4	Autism	

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form was used as data collection tool. The form, consisting of 5 demographic and 7 open-ended questions, was developed by the researcher. After a detailed review of the relevant literature, open-ended questions were determined regarding the views of mothers of children with special needs on play. Then, two academics, one in special education and the other in educational sciences, were consulted to ensure that the questions were clear and appropriately worded. Thus, the final version of the interview form was created.

Data Collection

Research data were collected through face-to-face interviews in May and June 2024. First, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and informed consent to the mothers; interviews were conducted with mothers who were willing to participate using pre-prepared questions. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes, ranging from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 30 minutes. Permission was obtained from the participants to record the interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected from semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and sent to the participants for confirmation. Subsequently, content analysis was performed to identify concepts and relationships from the data obtained. As a result of this analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified and the content was interpreted (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013:260). Direct quotations from participants' responses were also presented, taking into account different opinions, explanatory power, relevance to the topic, diversity, and extreme examples (Ünver et al., 2010:66).

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, detailed reporting of the data obtained and explanation of how the results were reached are important criteria for validity and reliability (Yalçın, 2022: 223). In addition, the findings must be consistent and meaningful within themselves, in line with the conceptual framework, and the resulting concepts must form a meaningful whole. In this context, the researcher must take the necessary measures regarding the internal validity of the research. On the other hand, the findings should be confirmed using appropriate strategies and should be found realistic by the participants (Creswell, 2018:184).

In this research, the findings were produced from data obtained through semi-structured interviews. To ensure internal validity, efforts were made to ensure the consistency of the data collection tool and findings with the relevant literature. The opinions of two academics, one in special education and the other in educational sciences, were sought during the data collection tool development process, and the findings were supported by participant confirmation and direct quotations. In addition, the compatibility of the codes and themes determined as a result of the analysis was examined separately by another coder. Reliability calculation was made using the formula of $\text{Reliability} = \text{Consensus} / (\text{Consensus} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100$ suggested by Miles and Huberman (2015). It has been concluded that it is reliable with over 80% consensus between the coders.

FINDINGS

Four themes were identified based on the analysis of data obtained from interviews with participants. Sub-themes were then identified based on the content of these themes. The identified themes and sub-themes are shown in Figure 1.

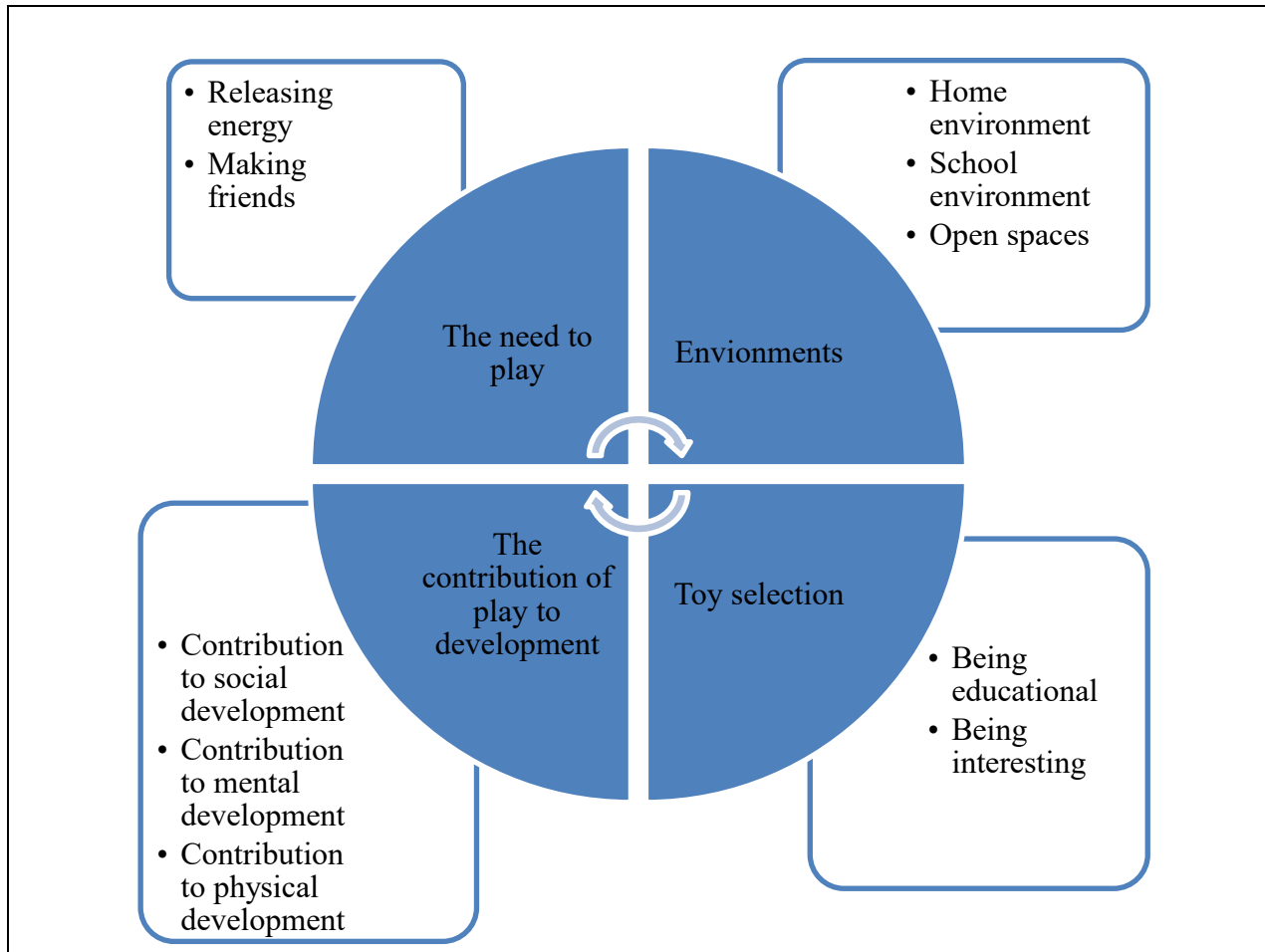


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes

Based on the results of the analysis, four themes were identified: the need for play, the contribution of play to development, play environments, and toy selection. Sub-themes were identified within each theme. The analysis of the identified themes and sub-themes, along with direct quotes from the participants' responses, is presented below.

1. The theme has been determined as the need for play. Under this theme, the sub-themes of releasing energy and making friends are included. As an example of the sub-theme of releasing energy, P2 stated, "Play is very important for a child's development. I take my child to the park so they can release their energy and relax. He also goes to sport courses. That has been very beneficial. He used to be bothered by noises and was afraid. He has overcome his fear because he has been going to sports for two years." Similarly, P9 stated that play is a necessity for children, saying, "Play is as important a need for children as eating. They release their energy through play. They like to play anyway, and if they don't play, they become restless. Play is essential for children," emphasizing that play is a necessity for children to release their energy.

Another sub-theme in this theme is friendship. For example, P5 expressed her opinion saying, "Play is, of course, very necessary for children. Through play, they learn to express their feelings. They communicate with their friends. They learn friendship through play." P13 expressed her views as follows: "Play is very beneficial, of course. He plays with his friends at school. Through play, he adapts to his friends. He learns to communicate with his friends. I think the child's age, special circumstances, and interests should be taken into account when choosing a game. Therefore, teachers or parents who guide children are also important."

2. The theme is the contribution of play to development. Under this theme, three sub-themes have been identified: contribution to social development, contribution to mental development, and contribution to physical development. Regarding the contribution of play to the child's social development, P6 expressed her views as follows: "Of course, she needs to play with her friends to socialize. She has one or two friends, but unfortunately, these children are mostly excluded. She plays with friends she gets along well with. She is already introverted and not very social. But she needs to socialize." Similarly, P12 expressed her views as follows: "Actually, she likes to play with her friends. She mostly adapts socially. She needs to be with her friends for social development. Through socialization, she gains self-confidence and becomes a more successful individual."

Another sub-theme under the theme of the contribution of play to development is its contribution to mental development. Regarding the contribution of play to a child's mental development, P3 said, "Children learn through play, and their minds develop. Educational games are especially necessary for a child's mental development. Teachers also play educational games at school. Teachers say that they participate in the games and are compatible. It is also beneficial for them to play with educational toys at home." Likewise, P8 expressed her opinion by saying, "Games that support mental development will certainly be beneficial. We try to contribute to their mental development by choosing games and toys that are appropriate for his age and special needs. I pay attention to these factors when choosing educational games."

Another theme under the theme of the contribution of play to development is its contribution to physical development. On this subject, P7 expressed her views by saying, "Playing games develops children in every way. They socialize, relax, get rid of their stress, and feel at ease. For example, when they play with their friends in the park, their appetite increases, they eat their food more nicely, and they feel sleepy, so it is also beneficial for the body." On the other hand, P13 states, "Play is beneficial to children in every way. They form friendships, socialize, and then develop physically. Since he is only 5 years old, he plays active games, run, climb in the park, and so on. This also provides physical benefits."

3. The theme has been determined as play environments. The sub-themes of this theme are home environment, school environment, and open spaces. Regarding the home environment sub-theme, P1 said, "These special children require a lot of attention. I constantly pay attention to my child, play with her, and do things together. We play household game, sing songs, do puzzles, and do housework together. She likes to play with water, and we play in the garden. It is very important to spend quality time with the child." Similarly, P10 stated, "He does not play alone. He likes to play with me or his father. We prefer to play educational games at home. We play intelligence games. Also, he likes to play ball outside."

Regarding the other sub-theme, the school environment, P4 said, "He gets along well with his friends at school. He gets along well with them and follows the rules. His teachers choose games that are suitable for them. They play with educational toys such as puzzles and building blocks. He plays with his friends at school, and we even meet with his friends outside of school. Thankfully, he gets along well at school." However, P6 stated, "Unfortunately, my child does not have many friends at school because she is an integration student. Because she is a special education student, there are those who do not be friend her. She plays with a few friends she likes. She is trying to fit in. It is important for her to fit in and learn to share. In general, she likes school and her friends."

Another sub-theme of the play environments theme is open spaces. Regarding this sub-theme, P7 stated, "I take her to the park on sunny days. She loves playing outdoors, of course. She gets bored at home sometimes and wants to go to the park. I can't send her alone, of course. She plays with her friends, plays hide and seek, swings, slides, she loves it." Regarding the same sub-theme, P13 expressed her views as follows: "It is very beneficial for children to play in open spaces, but I need to supervise him during play. He enjoys playing in the park, like all children. He enjoys playing with a ball. I take him to play in the park, outdoors, as much as possible."

The fourth theme is toy selection. The participants' views on toy selection were discussed under two sub-themes: being educational and being interesting. P3, who believes that toys should be educational, said, "I especially prefer educational toys for my child. They are necessary to support the child's mental development. We play with educational toys as a family. It is very beneficial." Similarly, P14 expressed her views by saying, "Educational value is a priority for me when buying toys, and I see the benefits of educational toys. They contribute to the child's development. Of course, suitability for the child is also important. It is necessary to play with the child in different environments and with different toys. Children develop through play."

Among the participants who emphasized the importance of toys being interesting, P11 said, "Toys that are appropriate for the child's age, interests, and abilities are beneficial. I prefer sturdy and durable toys. I try to choose toys that are interesting, attractive, develop creativity and imagination. I make sure that the child enjoys playing with them." P15, who shares a similar view, said, "Taking into account their special circumstances, we try to choose toys that will interest them. We also try to make some toys at home ourselves. For example, we make houses out of cardboard for her dolls and sew clothes out of old fabrics. She enjoys playing with her toys, and we make together even more."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Play, which is a very important need for children, is particularly indispensable in supporting the development of children with disabilities, who are among children with special needs, due to their disadvantages (Gürsoy et al., 2019:45). Therefore, mothers of children with disabilities must be aware of this situation and support their children's development through play, providing the necessary social environments, opportunities, and time for their children to play. This will enhance both communication between the mother and child and the mothers' ability to cope with the problems they face (Babahanoğlu and Kaya, 2023). The purpose of this study is to examine the views of mothers of children with special needs regarding play. Conducted using the case study method, one of the qualitative research methods, the data for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with a total of 15 mothers who volunteered to participate in the study and who have children with special needs. The data were analyzed using a descriptive approach, interpreted under the themes created, and supported by direct quotations.

Almost all of the mothers who participated in the study are aware of the benefits of play for the development of children with special needs. In this context, most mothers support their children playing at home, at school, and in open areas. Especially outdoor playgrounds present a suitable environment for releasing energy and making friends for children with special needs. In a study examining the views of 157 parents of children with special needs aged 0-6 regarding outdoor playgrounds, Yılmaz (2019: 50-56) found that the majority of parents took their children to the park every day or 1-2 days a week and spent less than an hour there. Additionally, the majority of parents stated that their children were happy and had fun while playing in the park, that they were able to release their excess energy by breathing fresh air, and that outdoor parks were therefore important for their children. Furthermore, Tenikeci and Cevher-Kalburan (2021) examined the opinions of parents of children with special needs about outdoor playgrounds. This qualitative research was conducted with 12 parents who have children with special needs between aged 0-6. Four categories were identified as a result of content analysis as positive and negative opinions, concerns, expectations. As positive opinions parents stated that children would be happy, feel free and release their energy. However, parents stated some concerns about physical environment and expected playgrounds that support children's motor and social skills. In other words, playgrounds should have friendly design for children with special needs which allows children with mental or physical disabilities to participate in educational and entertaining activities with other children without being excluded from social life or labeled.

Another important point raised by the mothers who participated in the study was the contribution of play to children's adaptation to the social environment. Most of the participants stated that their children adapted to their friends through play, in other words, that it supported their social development. However, P6, who stated that her child was an integration student, mentioned that her child was excluded by some of his friends, had a few good friends, and was trying to adapt. In line with this finding, Güler (2009:45) and Duran Düşünür (2018:73) state, based on the results of their research, that integration students do not have many friends in the school environment and are sometimes excluded.

The contribution of play to the mental and physical development of children with special needs was also emphasized by the participants. Some mothers stated that sports and outdoor games contributed to their children's physical development. Some mothers stated that they tried to support their children's mental development through educational games.

The literature indicates that children with developmental delays may have difficulty initiating play and therefore need support from an adult (Kaya, 2010:13). In this context, it is important for mothers to be aware of this need. Most of the mothers who participated in the study stated that they create opportunities for their children to play both at home and in open areas, aware of this situation. In addition, the participants stated that they are conscious about choosing toys for their children, paying attention to whether the toys are suitable for the child's education and whether they attract the child's interest.

The fact that this qualitative study draws on the views of 15 mothers can be considered a limitation of the research. In other words, as a characteristic of qualitative research, it is not possible to include a number of participants in the study that is representative of the population (Karataş, 2015:70). In this context, the generalizability of the research results is limited. Nevertheless, this study is important in terms of shedding light on the practices in the field and future research, as it examines the views of mothers of children with special needs regarding play. In practices in the field, informative activities can be organized for mothers according to the type of special needs to contribute to their children's development by playing games with family members at home, at school, and outdoors with their friends. In future scientific research, the problems and solutions of mothers in this regard can be determined with a larger number of participants. It is also recommended that experimental studies be conducted to determine the effectiveness of play activities in which mothers participate with their children.

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