

Autismo: Corporeità, Attività Motoria e Sport

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Abstract

Motor activity and sport can improve balance between body and mind, aiming at maintaining and developing skills and qualities, and allowing stimulating and strengthening individual resources that, over time, can become great strength and adaptation tools. Corporeity is a particular mediator between the individual and the environment, which grants particular privilege to the being. Corporeity is movement, and the latter, through the former, becomes a way of understanding the world; so the body movement itself is a way to communicate, make oneself understood, express one's own thoughts and feelings, and, considering the characteristics and the problems of autism, these elements can represent valid support and help instruments. For a person with autism spectrum disorder, motor activity represents an important opportunity for the support and development of functional skills that, in some areas, are particularly compromised. The body and movement education through game, sport and motor activity provide the autistic subject a concrete opportunity to effectively acquire the fundamental assumptions of the basic social rules, the most suitable behaviors in different contexts, and a greater control of their body and actions.

L'Attività motoria e lo Sport sono in grado di migliorare l'equilibrio tra corpo e mente puntando al mantenimento ed allo sviluppo di competenze e qualità, permettendo di stimolare e rinforzare le risorse individuali che nel tempo, possono divenire strumenti di grande forza e adattamento. La corporeità è un particolare attributo che media tra l'individuo e l'ambiente e che conferisce particolare prerogativa all'essere. La corporeità è movimento, ed il movimento attraverso essa, diviene una modalità di comprensione del mondo, per cui il movimento corporeo stesso rappresenta una via per comunicare, farsi capire, manifestare pensieri e sentimenti, e, considerate le caratteristiche e le problematiche dell'autismo, questi elementi possono rappresentare dei validi strumenti di sostegno ed aiuto. Per una persona con disturbo dello spettro autistico l'attività motoria rappresenta un'importante occasione per il supporto e lo sviluppo delle abilità funzionali che, in alcune aree, risultano particolarmente compromesse. L'educazione del corpo e del movimento attraverso il gioco, lo sport e l'attività motoria offrono al soggetto con autismo una concreta opportunità per acquisire efficacemente i presupposti fondamentali delle regole sociali di base, dei comportamenti più idonei nei diversi contesti, ed un maggiore controllo del proprio corpo e delle proprie azioni.

Keywords

Autism, Sport, Motor Activity, Mind-Body, Corporeity

Autismo, Sport, Attività Motoria, Mente-Corpo, Corporeità

Introduction

Motor activity and sport are fundamental for the correct development of the individual, because, thanks to the discovery and the exploration of one's own body, environment, movement and playful activity, a person has the opportunity to learn many skills and gain more experience, knowing about and better recognizing oneself, one's own potentialities and possibilities. Through motor activity it is possible to improve balance between body and mind, aiming at maintaining and developing skills and qualities; it allows us stimulating and strengthening our own resources which, in the long term, can become great strength and adaptation instruments, capable of consolidating the sense of one's own effectiveness. Education through movement and sport can offer a tangible opportunity to gain greater knowledge about oneself and one's own body, greater competence and a more complete experience of what a person is able to do and achieve. In this sense, motor activity and sport allow gaining skills and qualities that can be spent in everyday life, by simultaneously allowing deepening the knowledge about the use of one's own body and movement, and the ability to manage one's own emotions in a valid and effective way. Through sport and motor activity we can develop and strengthen skills, abilities and potentialities.

It is therefore worth exploring how sport can strengthen and support individuals with autism spectrum diagnosis, by providing them and producing beneficial effects that can stimulate them towards a beneficial and effective developmental dimension. For an autistic person, motor activity, like sport, represents an important opportunity for the support and development of functional skills that, in some areas, are more compromised; in this case, we speak of physical/motor, social, emotional and (in general) educational area. These areas are characterized by different levels of gravity and disturbance, defining it as a complex, multiform and heterogeneous phenomenon.

The body and movement education through game, sport and motor activity provide the autistic subject with a concrete opportunity to effectively acquire the fundamental assumptions of the basic social rules, the most suitable behaviors to be used in different contexts, and a greater control of one's body and actions. Indeed, during their lifetime, autistic people find themselves faced with many difficulties in their personal, social and emotional autonomy. Motor activity acts on individual skills, favoring the development of innate abilities and the acquisition of new and different ones; through sport, it is possible to get involved and experiment oneself, learn how to get to know and control one's own body, develop a greater sense of awareness, motivation, and confidence: all this contributes to a greater recognition of one's own potentialities and abilities.

Therefore, the educational and social value of the movement is recognized and promoted, and leads to consider a variety of useful and meaningful motor practices for autism as a sport, in order to promote its development and progress. Sport involves, welcomes and encompasses different meanings and values that are all identified in its universal concept of training, education and inclusion for every person, at any age and in every condition. The term autism describes a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, and in the interaction between the disabled subject and the reality, the body can represent and depict, in a broader sense, a space through which it is possible to experience a deep contact with oneself and with others, an instrument of personal and social expression, relationship and connection.

1. Corporeity

When we speak of the body, most of the time we mean instinctively the human body, and when we speak of *corporeality*, we refer to our physical body. The human being, understood as an individual, is characterized by two fundamental dimensions: the body dimension, which

encompasses the biological mechanisms of development, evolution and even the experiences, and the cultural and intellectual dimension, able to interpret and organize the reality a person lives, and to attach meanings to the context. These dimensions are associated with each other, and in fact they are inseparable; the human being expresses his unity and his being both through the forms of thought, and through corporeal expression. In this way the concept of the body is enriched; it extends to and projects itself into corporeity, and thus the body, in its mental and physical whole, no longer appears as a purely material (and static, in this sense) structure, but acquires new meanings and dynamic characteristics.

In fact, the intellectual activity is mediated by the corporeal activity and vice versa, so these are two aspects included into a sort of functional channel that connects them in both directions, in a circular modality. In this mechanism, however, a third element must be integrated; the intellectual perspective is projected into the corporeal one, and the latter connects to the external environment understood as a set of relationships, objects, symbols, emotions; an environment that, in turn, expands towards the individual's body and intellectual sphere. In this way we can discover a new function of connection, a new attribute, definable as corporeity, a mediator between the individual and the environment, and which grants particular privileges to the being: if the physical body represents the subject's image, corporeality represents the awareness of one's own body as a mediator between internal and external reality. We speak therefore of an animated and dynamic body, rich in vitality, which mediates our thought, our expressions and our own faculty of communication.

In some forms of disability in some forms of disability, like in autism, this body perspective cannot be found; these are forms in which the deficit in the communication ability, the reduced attention to social stimuli, and the specific difficulties in coordination and spatial-temporal organization, delineate a profoundly different picture, which refers to a clearly problematic condition of the intellectual / physical mediation activity linked to the environment. In the context of the concept of corporeity, therefore, autism is likely to be considered a very significant and representative condition.

The concept of the body as a means of expression naturally links to the movement, and in this sense, by extension, even the organized and structured motor activity is not exclusively attributable to the concept of physical training, but rather it should also be considered as an opportunity of personal growth and development.

Corporeity is movement, and the latter, through the former, becomes a way of understanding the world, so the body movement itself is a way to communicate, make oneself understood, express one's own thoughts and feelings, and, considering the characteristics and the problems of autism, these elements can represent valid support and help instruments. The corporeity is an interface with the external world that expresses itself as dynamic and communicative gestures; in parallel, it can also be expressed in a more planned way that consists of planned and regulated activities, such as sports practice, thus assuming a profoundly educational role.

To develop the dynamism of corporeity means to widen the perspectives of the personality, and develop social relationality and interpersonal relationships. This suggests that there is a real possibility of developing and strengthening in the individual, through motor training, new expression modalities that manifest themselves both through gestures and actions, and by bringing out new forms of relationships with oneself and with the other. The condition of the autistic subject is characterized by the difficulty of fully perceiving the surrounding reality, and by a lack of social sensitivity: in this sense, the stimulus to develop new relationship modalities with the external world, through planned corporeal activity, can be an extremely effective educational/rehabilitation approach.

Movement, planned and properly monitored motor activity can make an important contribution to re-establishing the right balance between intellectual, physical and environmental/relational reality, supporting any problems related to the state of disability. It has been shown that, in a reality such as autism where physical-corporeal, communication and social difficulties are evident, motor activity allows for an original exploration of one's body, and thus of the

surrounding environment; probably, it allows for a review of one's own body scheme, which translates into a concrete opportunity to develop new skills, especially in particularly compromised areas, such as behavioral and communication skills. Basically, thanks to appropriate rehabilitation programs adapted to the person, it is possible to recognize the limits of disability but, at the same time, the real potentialities of mind-body rebalancing too, which must be properly directed to make sure that they manifest themselves through the rediscovery of the actual identity of one's own body.

2. Motor activity, Sport and Autism.

The practice of motor and sports activities, for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, can represent a significant and substantial contribution to their well-being and their health state, favoring and supporting the realization of a space that can represent a set of rewarding and effective experiences, such as the knowledge of one's own body and the support of psychophysical development.

Through sports activities we can redefine those that, by definition, are described as deficits or limits of people with autism, by channeling them towards a path that is useful and constructive; a path that can lead them to a greater knowledge of themselves, their body and its potentialities. Sport, and the activities connected to it, hold a high educational value, bring benefits on physical growth, and develop motor and communication skills, by encouraging socialization.

These main and universal characteristics of motor and sports activity are the mirror of the typical features and peculiarities of the subjects with autism spectrum disorder: the beneficial effect that sport can have on the aspects characterizing the syndrome of autism allows supporting the marked difficulties of these subjects, providing the opportunity to better manage one's own body, one's own movements and aspects that include the relational and communication area.

The preparation of the body to the movement and motor activity can regulate and welcome different difficulties, improving the relationship with oneself and with the others: limiting the rigidity and the stereotypes, typical characteristics found in the autism, lowers the levels of anxiety, by increasing attention and willingness to socialize. In this regard, according to an article published by the "*Autism Research Institute*", one of the most effective treatments for people with autism spectrum disorder is precisely the physical exercise. In fact, several studies show that vigorous and energetic exercises are associated with a reduction in stereotypic, hyperactivity, aggression and self-injury behaviors. Motor activity, together with a long aerobic work, carried out with continuity, has an absolutely positive effect on the behavioral, communication and relational modalities.

For the autistic subject, practicing sports activity is therefore a unique opportunity, an element that can connect and bring his personal world closer to the knowledge about his own body, his own skills and, last but not least, the community in which he lives, in order to achieve greater inclusion. Motor activity allows improving these aspects and peculiarities by enriching and optimizing life quality, aiming at a greater social integration.

The possibility of limiting and defining the characteristics and behavioral attitudes of the autistic subject make it possible to achieve potentialities, contributing to an active participation in one's own life and in community life. The fundamental aspect that sport provides within the variegated autistic world is that of valuing every subject, by leading him towards a path of knowledge and autonomy. The practice of motor activity and sports allows learning one's own qualities, skills and abilities; in this sense, the conscious and organized use of one's own body, through movement and motor activity, allows for the acquisition and recognition of different qualities and competences.

The wide range of motor, behavioral and social benefits have been found in the practice of different activities and sports performed with continuity and regularity: running, horse riding, martial arts, yoga, and swimming are all examples of activities that allow limiting and reg-

ulating behaviors which can hinder these subjects in different circumstances and situations. Through these sports practices, through a congruous use of one's own body, stereotyped and repetitive movements, attentional levels and socio-emotional components turn out to be less present and cumbersome features in these people's lives.

A program of motor activity for individuals with autism spectrum disorder, based only on simple stretching, resistance, flexibility, breathing and balance exercises, can achieve the goal of improving physical health and optimizing motor skills by aiming at: minimizing problematic behaviors thanks to greater attention, encouraging and supporting independent behaviors, increasing personal motivation and strengthening one's own self-esteem. This type of activity is generally matched, during the performance of the exercises, with precise indications on the time, the position to be taken, and the pauses to respect. Having these subjects the chance to be limited and defined by a series of elements, in time and space, allows them achieving greater autonomy and, in parallel, understanding, learning, managing and controlling their own body and movements.

The knowledge about one's own body, and the intimate contact with it through motor activity and sports, represent a path along which to increase and consolidate the ability to reach a deeper understanding of ourselves and our relationships with the world. The autistic person can use motor practice as a tool to learn about and understand himself, his own body, as a communicational and relational modality, as a tool for defining himself and his own abilities. The knowledge of one's own body through sports allows limiting, retaining, separating and communicating, and is of great importance as it favors a better channeling of psycho-emotional aspects, developing a greater control of one's own abilities.

Conclusions

Having examined the main aspects of the relationship between body, motor activity, sport and autism, we can consider all these elements as a real possibility for autistic subjects to develop, from different perspectives. Sports and motor activity can represent an element that leads mitigating some of the motor, communication, social and relational difficulties with which these subjects have to live. The connection between sports and autism is particularly important, because the sports practice in itself allows gaining more knowledge and awareness of one's own skills, by supporting autonomy. Through the movement of our own body, our mind and all the elements connected to it, it is possible to gain great benefits: the connection and the bond we can establish with our body and our movements allow us realizing the actions that lead us to discover new possibilities, potentialities and skills.

In short, thanks to appropriate motor and sports paths for the autistic person, we can recognize, on the one hand, the limits of disability, and on the other, the real potentialities of the mind-body rebalancing, which must be properly directed to make sure that they manifest themselves through the rediscovery of the effective corporeal identity.

In this regard, it is important to consider two elements that are closely related to the world of autism: the first corresponds to the diagnostic characteristics that generally describe the deficitary aspects of autistic subjects; the other refers to the personal characteristics that every subject holds within himself, making him unique and special. In every autistic person we always find an intersection between these two elements: the diagnostic and the personal one. The practice of motor and sports activities allows us considering and supporting these two aspects at the same time, representing a real possibility to improve general deficitiveness criteria and to work on personal characteristics, turning them into resources that can be used in different circumstances.

Sport really seems to represent an opportunity through which to explore and recognize the potentialities of one's own body and its movement, a review of one's own body scheme, which translates into a real opportunity to develop new skills, especially in particularly compromised areas, through a path of discovery, knowledge and awareness. Sports activities represent a spe-

cial place, a learning context where behaviors and relationships acquire great importance and value.

By implementing a project focused on motor activity, which considers every individual's needs and peculiarities, we provide concrete tools to better manage one's own body, movements and emotions, including relational and communication aspects too. In this way we create the conditions for enhancing our skills, generating a precious opportunity for growing.

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