

## The needs of play in children with disabilities. An Italian research

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### Abstract

*The article presents a research developed collaterally within the framework of the European research project “LUDI. Play for Children with Disabilities” (<http://ludi-network.eu/>, 2014-2018). One goal of the project is to provide guidelines on play for children with disabilities. To reach this goal, first of all the needs of users have been investigated through an empirical research conducted by two semi-structured questionnaire addressed to representatives of disability associations and parents of children with disabilities. The article reports briefly the theoretical framework of the research, the results of the survey at european level, and more in- depth the results of a research conducted by the Special Education group of research at University of Florence with the same methodology at disability associations of Livorno, in Tuscany (Italy). The results are similar to those of European research: it emerges that the needs on play of children with disabilities are the same regardless of the type of disability and the context in which the children live.*

**Keywords:** Play, Disability Play, Users' Needs, Parents, Association.

### 1. Main concepts of Cost Action “LUDI. Play for Children with Disabilities”

The European research project “LUDI. Play for Children with Disabilities” (<http://ludi-network.eu/>, 2014-2018) is a Cost Action that integrates 100 researches, professionals and users from 32 European countries, who come from different research areas: education, psychology, sociology, engineering, occupational therapy, speech therapy. The final goal of

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the Action is actually to create a common perception and knowledge of widespread practices on the theme of play for children with disabilities (COST, 2013).

But the innovative part of the project concerns its main concept: the play for the sake of the play, that is an end in itself, according to Garvey (1990, p. 4) "Play is a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities normally associated with recreational pleasure and enjoyment"; not the play used for educational, rehabilitative or therapeutic purposes, as we usually mean for the children with disabilities.

We start as well from the assumption that all children have the right to play and that the play of children with disabilities is a right enshrined in the UN "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (CRPD, 2006, art. 30). In order to see this right realized, it is necessary to systematize theoretical and methodological aspects of the play for children with disabilities. This is why the researches and professionals of the project was organized into specific Working Groups (WGs):

Working Group 1 - Children's play in relation to the types of disabilities

Working Group 2 - Tools and technologies for the play of children with disabilities

Working Group 3 - Contexts for play of children with disabilities

Working Group 4 - Methods, tools and frameworks for the development of the child with disabilities' play.

At the moment the Action produced:

- a theoretical study of the characteristics of the play in relation to the different types of disability (Besio, Bulgarelli & Stancheva-Popkostadinova, Eds., 2017);
- a systematic review of literature concerning the barriers in playing, with an analysis of the environments in which they can arise: home environment, educational settings, the built environment, the natural environment (Barron, *et al.*, 2017);
- an users' needs report on play for children with disabilities, with the non-mediated opinions of representatives of the associations for disability, and parents of children with disabilities, and, to a lesser extent, the children themselves (Allodi Westling & Zappaterra T., Eds., 2018, *in print*).

In the article we present one of the tasks managed by Working Group 4 that is to gather information about the children's experiences and needs concerning play. In the European

research the survey was the aim to have a snapshot of the needs, disregarding the type of disability, about the wishes, constraints, suggestions, challenges that the users' needs perceive.

## 2. Methodology and main results in European research

The survey on user needs on play for children with disabilities at European level was conducted by members of “LUDI. Play for Children with Disabilities”, Working Group 4, under the supervision of Serenella Besio (University of Bergamo), Chair of the Action, Pedro Encarnação (*Catholic University of Portugal*), Vice-chair, and Mara Westling Allodi, Leader of WG4 (*Stockholm University*). The WG4 Deliverable has been published: Allodi Westling M. & Zappaterra T. (Eds., 2018, *in print*). *Users' Needs Report on Play for Children with Disabilities. Parents' and children's views*. Berlin/Warsaw, De Gruyter.

Through an empirical research conducted by two semi-structured questionnaires we investigated the needs of children with disabilities in the play. One questionnaire was addressed to the representatives of the most important associations of disability, or family associations of disability; the other was addressed to parents of children with disabilities.

The structure and issues of the questionnaires are similar, but the version for the parents contained more open questions. The identification of questions to ask the representatives and parents has been driven by the knowledge that the Action “LUDI” wants to have a large and triple impact:

- scientific, on the recognition of the right to play for children with disabilities, and on the adoption of measures to allow the exercise of this right;
- societal, training parents and professionals to become proficient at interacting with children with disabilities in order to give them the chance to learn and grow through play;
- technological, planning and designing technology products and tools for play by expanding the number of people able to use them and also improving their competence.

From Associations of families 75 questionnaires were collected in 24 countries and from parents of children with disabilities 129 questionnaires in 26 countries. The

responses were analyzed by detecting the percentages in the closed questions and by a content analysis in the open-ended questions.

The answers of Association's representatives indicate what is most important are peers, societal attitudes and behaviours and supportive adults. And then, for quantity of responses, more time, adapted or special environments, policy measures and financial resources, outdoors environments, indoor environments, toys, improved skill of children, high tech tools.

The children with disabilities do not have the same opportunity to play: in terms of relationship: the playmates, peers, friends are the need largest reported in the questionnaire of both Associations and parents; in terms of toys and spaces: they reported need to adapted toys, accessible toys to loan, association resources that have appropriate spaces; in terms of cultural and educational perspectives: facilities and trained staff, parents' creativity, purposeful planning. They emphasize the importance of a more general educational training about the play of both parents and professionals.

We have cataloged the needs in terms of facilitators and barriers, according with World Health Organization (ICF, 2001):

- *facilitators*: adapted toys, association resources, accessible toys, parents' creativity, purposeful planning;
- *barriers*: children's characteristics, physical barriers: accessibility and usability, the lack of toys and the lack of not specifically adapted games, natural and structured environments.

Very similarly, the parent's view of child's needs about play indicates what is most important are peers, and then, for quantity of responses, adapted toys, high tech toys, a competent adults (facilitator, mediator, model, with skills), to have fun, improved skills, outdoors environment of play, time to play, societal attitudes and behaviours, policy and resources.

The children's experiences of play were as well reported by the parents when possible, by mean of an interview with their child. The direct voice of users has been thematised as activities and events; partners in play; emotional states; agency in play; evaluations; places. From this part of the research briefly the results are as follows:

Play emerges in the children’s’ experiences as meaningful and pleasant activities that they can engage with, in which they observe, communicate, share and experience participation in social relationships.

Play is an activity in which they feel positive emotions as joy, happiness, relax, fun, excitement.

Play is also empowerment for the children: they may also experience agency as they can decide and have power when they play. In the evaluation theme, several children expressed that they wanted to play for more time, to have more options and adaptations, and to overcome barriers and limitations.

### 3. The Italian research about users' needs on play for children with disabilities

The survey about users' needs in play for children with disabilities is addressed in Italy especially to four different associations in the city of Livorno: “AIPD Livorno”, “Autismo Livorno”, “Volare Senz’Ali”, “Disabilandia”.

The survey covers a heterogeneous field of disabilities: in this way we permit to give importance to each disability, examining a larger panorama.

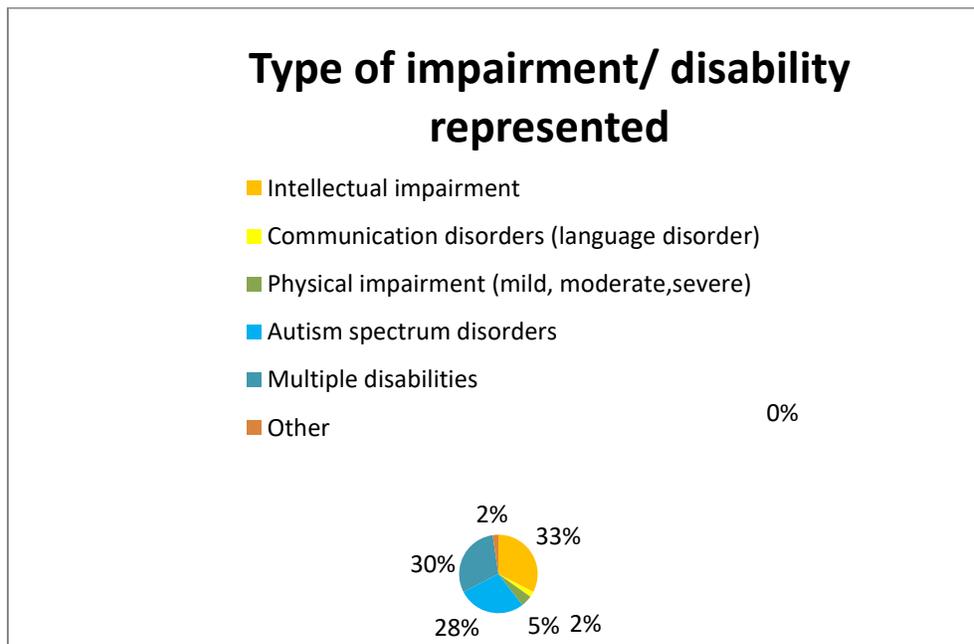


Fig. 1: Types of disability (percent) reported by the Parents’ Association that participated in the survey (N=43).

### Result from the research among Representatives of Association

It is possible to understand the play's importance in the disabled child's life, analysing the results emerged from the research of the representatives of the associations.

The first question asks the referent if children with disabilities have enough opportunities to play, according to their special needs: no representative answered "Yes, a lot". This data clearly represents the conditions of the disabled child's play, which is not fully developed as it should. One of the representative underlines that often a child needs an adult for playing, and usually the parent has not got the possibility to prepare an adequate context to play, so frequently the time spent in the association is the only one in which the child can play.

In response to the second question, the survey asks if the representative thinks that parents are happy with their children's play. Only one representative out of four answers "Yes", the other representatives reveal that problems of inclusion still exist, and they reveal that it's easier to organise activities within the association rather than in another setting, because professional figures and special environments are needed to take care of disabled children in the best way possible.

At the third question, every representatives answer that the play "for play sake" is very important because it consist in building up relationship and developing contact to other people. This is a right of every child because it increases the quality of life, it makes humans alive.

The fourth question asks to fill a table asking what could help a child with disabilities with the play. Eleven different needs have been reported (toys, high tech tools, peers, time, adapted or special environments, indoor environments, outdoor environments, a knowledgeable adult, policy measures, financial resources, improved skills needed for play, social attitudes and behaviours, other), in which each Representative expresses the degree of importance correlated to the disabled child play.

The needs underlined as "very important" are the following: peers, adapted or special environments (to share with peers and usable by disabled children), a knowledgeable adult, policy measures, financial resources, improved social skills.

The need underlined as "important" are the following: special toys, time (referred to parents' time to play, or referred to the time that the child needs for a specific activity, that

can be more than the time used by a child with a typical development), adapted or special environments, indoor environments, improved skills needed for play.

The fifth question asks to the representative where and with whom usually the children of the association play. The table considers several contexts to complete, divided in indoor environment and outdoor environment and different categories to evidence with whom the child usually plays (alone, alone in presence with peers, peers, parents, family members, other adult).

The representatives of the association answer that in the indoor environments children usually play with peers (for example at the school with classmates), with parents, or with other adults (educator), in the outdoor environments children usually play with parents.

The last question asks to the representatives of the association if during their experience they found improvements within the last five years in the play of children with disabilities, as changes in toys, high-tech tools, indoors environment, outdoor environment, educator, rehabilitators, adult, peers, society in general.

The survey underlines that there are been lots of changes in these fields: high-tech tools, behavior of the educators and rehabilitators, behavior of peers.

#### **4. Results from the research among parents of children**

The second part of the survey is addressed to parents of children with disabilities. The parents answer to several descriptive questions about the disabled child's play.

The parents, who answer to the Ludi Cost survey, are 43. This number is significant to immortalize the needs and the habits of the children with disability of the city of Livorno.

Every parent that answered to the questionnaire has got Italian nationality. The 84% of the children are boys, the 16% of the children are girls. This data is interesting, because it makes us reflect about gender differentiation in boys and girls' play, since most of the reviews are based on data prevalently coming from males.

The age of the sample is twelve years and half. The first question requests the parent to write three thoughts/words that come to his mind when thinking about the play of his child. Parents describe the main play activity of the children (water, amusement park, constructions) or the quality that characterize the play (speedy, creative, bizarre). Later the questionnaire invites parents to give a motivation about their choice. In this field, the

importance of the play in the children's life clearly appears: the parents are aware about the fundamental role of the play moment. The questionnaire asks then where and with whom the children generally play. At this question half of the parents answer that their children play indoor (at home or at school), the 42% of the children plays both indoor and outdoor, only the 7% plays mainly outdoor. The children's company is heterogeneous: the 39% plays with parents or other adults, the 35% plays with peers (friends, brother/sister), the 26% plays alone.

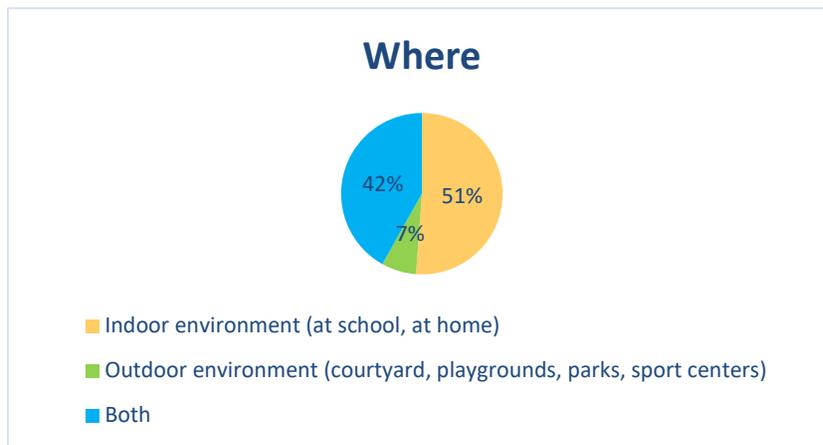


Fig 2: Types of place (percent) reported by the Parents' Association (N=43)

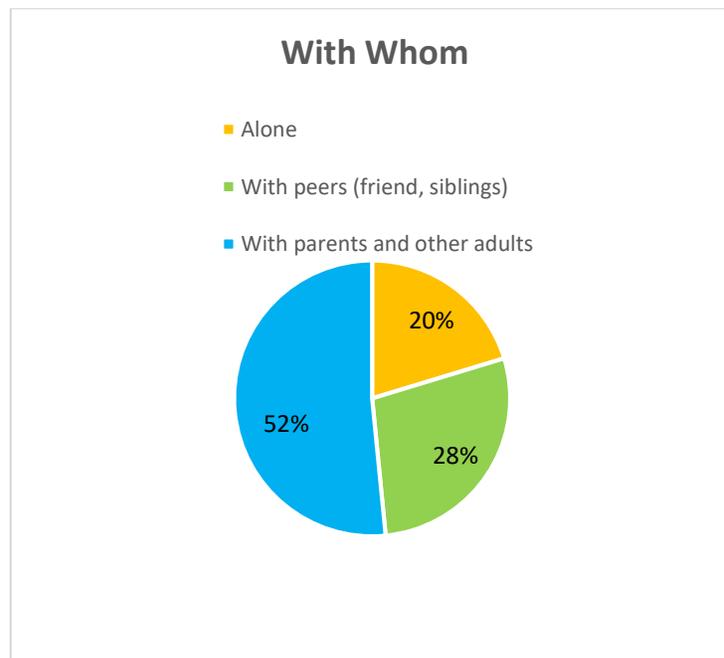


Fig 3: Types of company (percent) reported by the Parents' Association (N=43).

The fourth question asks which are the needs of children so as to play better. This question represents the heart of the research and gives the possibility to make reflections, and it gives the possibility to suggest potential change on the thematic of play and disability.

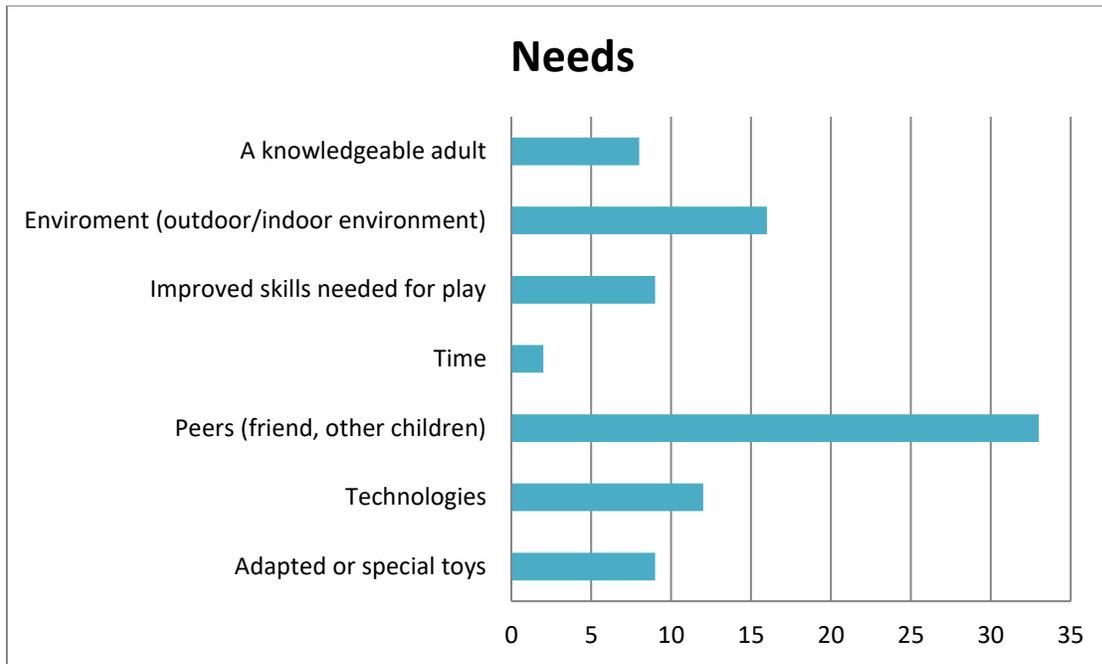


Fig 4: Need (percent) of children with disability in order to play more or better reported by the Parents' Association (N=43).

Most parents say that, in order to play better, children would need playmates. This need can shed light upon a current lack of awareness of disability, although there have been considerable changes compared to the past. The importance of a playmate, of a friend with whom they share the precious playful moment, makes us reflect on how much sociality and relationship with the other are basic needs of the human being, who feels completely alive together with the other.

Other important needs that have been recorded include: spaces and technologies.

Regarding the spaces, a new awareness of the construction of environments without architectural barriers developed (which allows everyone to access to public areas), while about the technologies, significant benefits, derived from the potential of this tool, has emerged and, in some cases, they are able to compensate or minimize deficits or limitations of the child.

Furthermore, the need of special or adapted games and the improvement of skills and trained personnel is reported by the parents, to improve the game of their child. Special toys, since they guarantee special care and attention to details (for example, safe toys, easily manipulated and hardly destructible). Improvement of the skills of the child towards the playmates, respecting the rules, permits a better inclusion in the play. Finally, the need of trained personnel who accompanies the child, a person who pays attention and care, and who creates the social context close to the child himself.

Only 2 parents out of 43 reported the need of more time on their part, because they, submerged by the daily routines between work and therapy, have little time to devote themselves to play with their child. In the cases presented, children with disabilities have a lot of time available and this is often used in anything concrete. The present comment is emblematic in explaining this phenomenon: "Time is just what the disabled child does not need. The disabled child is bored!! Surely there are no internal or external spaces designed to fit him, to make the game and the meeting with the other easier. If it wasn't so, the social inclusion, at the present moment delegated in large part only to the school, would benefit greatly. Special technologies and adapted games are welcomed. There is also a lack of trained/specialized personnel who facilitate the approach to play and to relationships".

It is then asked how much time the child dedicates to the game: 43% plays more than two hours a day, 23% between an hour and two hours, 34% less than an hour.

Finally, the last question in the questionnaire aims directly to children and questions them on the subject of the game: what they like to play, where, with whom, how, how they choose their toys, how they feel when they play, how important it is to play, what they would need to play better. This section is also very important since it gives a voice to the young to express their needs and what they feel about this issue.

37% of the children represented is not verbal and could not answer this question. The children who answered the last question represent the game as a very important activity of their life, which gives color and fun. There are different answers but they all let us understand how the play is fundamental for their life, because it makes them feel alive and allows them to free their passions and their beings, far from moments of rehabilitative care or school learning, but with the only purpose of feeling good in the here and now.

## Conclusions

It was interesting and useful to investigate the results that emerged from the completed questionnaires because, although they do not reflect the global reality in its entirety, they represent a minimal, but precious photograph of the context of a circumscribed reality. It allows us to highlight how, how much and when the children with different disabilities benefit from the play and which needs are essential to develop it in a more appropriate way.

In the analysis of the “Ludi” questionnaires, the inclusion of playmates is the pivotal need that has been reported by parents and referents.

Sociality in the activity of playing is one of the indispensable factors that cannot be forgotten, since play consists also in relationship with others.

The crucial role reported by parents and referents regarding the sharing of the play with the *au-pair* reminds us how much it is necessary today to promote inclusive way of thinking, which will be essential to allow the child with disabilities to play, an aspect of life of central meaning, in which differences are welcomed and appreciated.

The results of Italian research coincide with that conducted by Ludi at the European level: the needs in play of children with disabilities are the same and there are no differences compared to the types of disability and the national context of life.

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