

I acknowledge the use of Copilot (<https://copilot.microsoft.com>) on [29/09/25, 02/10/25, 03/10/25, 04/10/25, 06/10/25, 12/10/25, 20/10/25, 30/10/25, 31/10/25] to find research references and sources.

I used the prompt(s):

1. Find me research on how free play effects the emotional regulation of children with autism in the early years.
2. Show me academic sources defining autism.
3. Do ALNco refer children to autism diagnostic services in Wales. Give links.
4. What is a health visitor. Give academic sources.
5. Find me an academic source on why children with autism struggle with emotional regulation in school. Sources should be from 2020 onwards.
6. Find me academic sources stating that there are staff shortages causing issues providing support to children with autism in UK
7. Find me an academic source that states that flexibility is a benefit of interviews during research papers.
8. Find me an academic source which states that interviews are good for research papers as if the interviewer can rephrase questions.
9. Show me books and academic journals which give benefits and limitations to non-probability sampling.
10. Show me academic sources that say what risks can come to universities when their students are doing research projects.
11. Show me academic sources which state the risks that children participating in research can face.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence

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How does guided play support the emotional regulation of children with ASD in the early years?

1. Literature Review

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be described as a developmental disorder that impairs an individual's communication, social interactions and atypical behavioural patterns, which can be restrictive and repetitive (Campisi, 2018; Qin *et al.*, 2024; World Health Organisation, 2025). The World Health Organisation (2025) and the National Autistic Society (2025) state that ASD encompass a spectrum that varies from person to person, and that while some individuals with ASD can live independently, others require lifelong care, that puts restraints and demands on families providing support. Expanding on this, it has been reported by the British Medical Association (2024) that 1 in 100 children have a diagnosis of ASD in the United Kingdom.

According to guidance from the Welsh Government (2021) and the National Health Service [hereafter NHS] (2022), children who present with ASD symptoms can be referred to diagnostic services by various professionals, including health visitors. Health visitors support the development of children and present developmental review questionnaires such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, to families (ASQ, 2025; NHS Wales, 2025; NHS, 2023). If developmental delays are detected, the health visitor may refer the child to diagnostic services. Part of the diagnostic observations done by specialists involve observing the child through play appropriate for their age and language skills, which includes talking about pictures in books and puzzles (NHS, 2024; NHS Wales, n.d.). However, after a diagnosis is made, there are often problems in supporting children with ASD. One of these problems is that, despite the code of practice on delivering autism services highlighting the diagnostic and post diagnostic support is available, cuts in funding and critical staffing shortages have left a demand for a surge of services in the NHS (Gibbons, 2025; Welsh Government, 2021). Therefore, educators need to fill the gap, to be able to support both diagnosed and undiagnosed children in their care, which could be done through the medium of play.

The importance of play for children in the early years has been highlighted by MacDonald (2022) and Bottrill (2022), who hold the view that play is crucial to

children's ability to construct the meaning of their surroundings, and which provides children with endless opportunities and self-chosen challenges. Play allows freedom, choice and control over aspects of their life in an adult world, which is crucial for children with ASD (Waters-Davies, 2022; Moyles, 2015). This is supported by the General Comment 9 in Article 31 on the right of the child, which states that the right of play is not only essential to the social and cognitive development of a child, but also to the development of their emotional strength (United Nations Committee on the Rights of a Child, 2013). Although, the term guided play is not specifically mentioned in the policies provided to schools by the Welsh Government, it is mentioned in the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales that during play, an engaging experience and effective environment is needed to be inclusive to children with ALN to support the emotional development of young children (Welsh Government, 2023).

Research by Cai *et al.* (2018) and Bennet, Parsons and Kovshoffformat (2024) state that children with ASD experience considerable difficulties compared to neurotypical children, relating to repetitive behaviours, social communication and sensory differences. This is illustrated in the work of Eisenhower and Blacher (2017), which states that these ASD symptoms are linked to the emotional dysregulation that children face, and that this difficulty in emotional regulation increases over time. This work defines the term 'emotional regulation' as part of the extensive concept of self-regulation, or the ability to control one's actions and responses in order to pursue a goal (Berkovitz, Eisenhower and Blacher, 2017). This is supported by Jahromi and Stifter (2008, cited in Berkovitz, Eisenhower and Blacher, 2017, pp. 68) and Williford *et al.* (2013, cited in Berkovitz, Eisenhower and Blacher, 2017, pp. 68), who believe that features of self-regulation can include cognitive regulation, such as goal-directed reasoning, and behavioural regulation, such as the monitoring of physical movement and constraining impulses. This is similar to the research by Conner *et al.* (2021), who reports that, compared to neurotypical children, children with ASD are two to four times more likely to have a clinically elevated emotional regulation impairment. This elevated emotional regulation causes difficulties for those who care for the children, therefore, can anything be done to bring this elevated emotional regulation down to a manageable level?

According to Yu *et al.* (2018), there has been a continuous discourse in the early years regarding the benefits of free play, compared to the direct, structured instruction for children's development. The work of Gupta *et al.*, (2023) shows that structured play therapy is more suitable for younger children in encouraging a greater self-expression and exploration.

However, Gupta and Dutt (2025) state that Carl Rogers' person-centred theory and Virginia Axline's principles of nondirective play therapy emphasise on complete acceptance and empathy. In this approach, the therapist follows the child's lead and gradually builds trust, which is effective with children who struggle with emotional regulation, such as anxiety and the ability to adapt, which will foster the child's autonomy and resilience (Gupta and Dutt, 2025). This disagreement between structured and free play could be solved by Skene *et al.* (2022), Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2009) and Zosh *et al.* (2018), who propose a middle-ground called guided play, which can be defined as an educational approach that is similar to play based learning, which encompasses a compromise between free play and structured learning. Hopkins *et al.* (2019, cited in Skene *et al.*, 2022, pp. 1168) and Weisberg *et al.* (2016) state that during guided play, the learning experience needs to be meaningful to the child, as play naturally enables pleasure and free choice while including the guidance of a supportive adult, who can expand the capacity for learning beyond what the child may achieve on their own.

Skene *et al.*'s (2022) study on how guided play enhances children's learning and development in education contexts states there were no improvements in socioemotional competence. However, Skene *et al.* (2022) seems to have made no attempt to account for children with ASD. Berkovits, Eisenhower and Blacher (2017) state that there is very little research in connecting emotional regulation to the frequent behavioural problems of children with ASD. Therefore, it is important to consider that children with ASD have a need to control their environment to soothe their restrictive behaviour, and that by being guided by educators in play, it can expand the child's capacity for learning, while improving their emotional regulation (Qin *et al.*, 2024; Sanchez, 2025).

2. Methodological Considerations

This section will consider the methods used on this research project on 'How does guided play support the emotional regulation of children with ASD in the early years?' It will look at who the sample is, the types of methods to be used and triangulation.

A sample is a small group of the population that researchers obtain data from (Conan, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016; Sharma, 2017). For this study, the sample will be early years educators and children aged 3-4 in general nurseries in South Wales. There would be approximately 40 children and 20 early years educators. Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) state that for quantitative research, the research usually samples a large part of a population for greater reliability, and that the minimum sample size for this should be thirty. This research is using 40 children as a sample, rather than a larger number, due to time limitations. However, this research could be used as a pilot for a larger study. According to, Arian, Campbell, Cooper and Lancaster (2010, cited in Lowe, 2019, p. 2), a pilot is a small feasibility study designed to test various parts of the methods planned for a larger research study.

The sample will be decided upon through non-probability sampling. Non-probability sampling is defined by Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) as where the sample does not have to represent the population and rather targets the research towards a particular group. This research looks at a particular group of the population, children with ASD, rather than the whole population, therefore non-probability sampling will be used. Non-probability sampling is beneficial to this research as it is cost-effective, compared to other sampling types, and is adequate where researchers are piloting before precluding towards the main study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

This research considered the types of methods that can be used. Questionnaires were deliberated, however it has limitations. Ranganathan and Caduff (2023) defines a questionnaire as a tool which consists of a series of questions used to collect information from respondents, which learns about their opinions, knowledge and beliefs. The researcher can see that there are benefits of using questionnaires, for instance, it tends to be more reliable due to the anonymous nature and therefore, it may encourage respondents to be more upfront and transparent about their feelings

and willingness to be a part of the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Bell, Waters and Johnson 2024). However, it is important to consider that questionnaires can cause confusion. For example, respondents may misunderstand a question and will not be able to ask any follow-up questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This could be an issue with this research as some terms could be unfamiliar with the educator taking the questionnaire, for example 'guided play'. Additionally, Hammond and Wellington (2021) and Walker and Solvason (2014) state that researchers often agonise about the response rates of questionnaires, and that unless respondents complete questionnaires at the time you hand them out, researchers will rarely get them back. In fact, Walker and Solvason (2014) believe that it is worth thinking about the possibility of encouraging engagement. Therefore, this research will not use questionnaires as part of its method.

This research then considered using interviews as part of its method. According to Newby (2014) and Bispo (2022), there can be an issue with respondents not answering truthfully, as they may reconstruct their interpretation to position themselves in a better light or they may want to please the researcher. Additionally, Newby (2014) states that compared to questionnaires, interviews take longer to administer, so this could be a limitation if time was an issue with this research. However, according to Ruslin *et al.* (2022) and Newby (2014), one of the most important characteristics of interviews is flexibility, due to its ability to enable adaptability and allow the researcher to explore points and ask follow up questions if the respondent makes a point that raises a different angle on an aspect of interest. Flexibility is also important as if a question is misunderstood by the respondent, unlike questionnaires, it can be rephrased by the researcher (Newby, 2014; Demirci, 2024). This is particularly important in this research as if an educator does not understand the terms used by the researcher, for example, what guided play actually encompasses, the researcher can explain the term in detail. As stated previously, this is not possible with questionnaires, as the educator taking the questionnaire will be alone and will have no opportunity for follow up questions. Therefore, interviews are an excellent method to use in this research.

Another benefit of interviews is the ability to hear the respondents voice, the way they phrase their sentences and hearing the pauses, exclamations and tone of their reply could nuance the interpretation of their response (Newby, 2014). However,

another limitation of interviews is the Halo effect. The Halo effect is defined as where existing information about a situation or participant may be used to judge later data or people or may bring about a particular reading of later situation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). For example, this could happen when people think a person who looks good is also regarded as intelligent, even though intelligence is not connected to physical attractiveness (Todotrov *et al.*, 2009, cited in Gabrieli, Lee, Setoh and Esposito, 2021; Nicolau, Mellinas and Martin-Fuentes, 2021). Compared to questionnaires, interviews seem to have more benefits regarding this research, therefore, interviews will be used as part of its method.

This research considered using observations to support the use of interviews. Observations can be defined as a method used by researchers to note the behaviour of a subject and involves gathering data of people in their natural setting (Duke University, 2025; Kumar and Sharma, 2023). There are many benefits to observations. One of these benefits is that observations are an effective way to provide the foundations for a project as it produces deep and rich data, which is beneficial for qualitative research (Walker and Solvason, 2014). Qualitative research is defined by Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2022) as a type of research which explores the deeper insights into real world problems. Instead of collecting numerical data, qualitative research gathers participant's experiences, perceptions and behaviours (Tenny, Brannan and Brannan, 2022; Lim, 2024). Additionally, observations are an efficient way to make sure that data collected through alternative methods are supported (Walker and Solvason 2014). For example, interviews are being used in this research to find out how educators feel and know about guided play and the benefits towards children with ASD, particularly towards emotional regulation. By asking the educator how they feel and observing them in action, there is a greater chance of identifying the truth in the educator's statement.

However, there are limitations with observations. Observations can have issues with reactivity, for example, participants may change their behaviour if they know they are being watched (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The term for this is the Hawthorne effect. This is defined by Oswald, Sherratt and Smith (2014) as a change in the subjects normal behaviour, associated to the awareness that they are being watched or studied. An example of the Hawthorne effect is the educator knowing that they are being watched, this may change their behaviour as they could be worried as

being seen as incompetent. However, there are ways for the research to overcome the Hawthorne effect. Oswald, Sherratt and Smith (2014) state that one of the ways the researcher can do this is through the process of triangulation. Triangulation is defined as the use of more than one method to research in order to better the certainty in the findings (Bryman, 2003 cited in Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2014; Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Triangulation is an important technique for the researcher in an observational study as it gives the research validity and allows the researcher to verify, compare and triangulate any information before it builds the foundation of knowledge. (Robert-Holmes, 2018; Fetterman, 2018, cited in Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2014). Therefore, due to the triangulation helping to validate observations and counter the Hawthorne effect, observations will be used in this research. Additionally, observations are beneficial for qualitative research, so for that reason, observations will be used in this research, to see the way the educators are currently using guided play to support the children, and to see how educators use guided play, after training is given.

In conclusion, this research will use a sample of approximately 40 children with suspected or diagnosed ASD, and 20 educators. The researcher will use a range of methods to find out how guided play effects the emotional regulation of children with ASD. Firstly, the researcher will interview educators about what they know and how they feel about guided play and the benefits for children with ASD. Secondly, the researcher will then use observations to observe how the educators currently use guided play with children with ASD. Thirdly, the researcher will intervene with a training course on how to use guided play to support the need for emotional regulation. Fourthly, the researcher will then observe the educator again to see how the educator has taken on board the training, and to see if the children's emotional regulation has improved. Finally, the researcher will interview the educators again, to see how they now feel about guided play and if they have seen an improvement in their children's emotional regulation.

3. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent is defined by the UK Research and Innovation [hereafter UKRI] (2024) as giving reasonable and suitable information about the research, to allow participants to make a purposeful choice about if they would like to participate. According to Green (2012) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [hereafter NSPCC] (2023), when considering the involvement of young children in research, children cannot give informed consent due to being under the age of legal responsibility. Therefore, it is essential for the researcher to receive informed consent from those who have legal care over the child, such as a parent, guardian or local authority figure (Green, 2012). According to the British Educational Research Association [hereafter BERA] (2024), it is ordinarily expected that participant's consent to be involved in a study should be acquired at the start of the study, and that researchers will remain thoughtful and open to the possibility that participants may wish to withdraw their consent at any time. It should be made clear to the participants that they can withdraw at any point without needing to provide an explanation (BERA, 2024). Additionally, researchers should be alert to non-verbal cues that individuals who previously consented to participate may no longer wish to do so (BERA, 2024).

According to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David [hereafter UWTSD] (2022), it is particularly desirable that children themselves should be engaged in the consent process. It is arguable that children are capable of being partners in research and they have the right to receive information, have their feelings listened to and to give or withhold consent if judged competent to do so (UWTSD, 2022). Principles of consent apply to children as well and this can be described as assent (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011; BERA 2024). BERA (2024) endorses the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and acknowledges that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express those views freely, as well as have them taken into consideration.

Prior to giving consent, Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) and BERA (2024) state that it is necessary for the researcher to provide the potential participants with information about the research project, which may take the form of an information sheet. The information sheet explains to the potential participant, openly and clearly,

all the procedures involved in the research so that they can make a fully informed decision as to if they are going to participate or allow their children to participate in the research (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013). The information sheet will also provide the participants with the information on how the researcher will protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants (University of Cambridge, n.d.).

While both confidentiality and anonymity are both principles that can help provide informed consent to participants, through guaranteeing the privacy of their personal data, there are differences between the two (Kang and Hwang, 2023). According to UWTSD (2022) and Kang and Hwang (2023), anonymity can be described as concealing the identities of participants in all documents which have developed from the research. Anonymity should be respected, and researchers must take care when deciding whether or not sensitive information or personal data should be recorded (UWTSD, 2022). Meanwhile, confidentiality is defined by UWTSD (2022) and Bos (2020) as being concerned with who has the right to access data provided by participants of the research. The researcher can protect both confidentiality and anonymity by following data protection legislations. As stated by His Majesty's Government [hereafter HM Government] (n.d.) and UWTSD (2022), data protection is managed by the UK General Data Protection Regulation [hereafter UK GDPR] and the Data Protection Act 2018. Everyone responsible for using personal data must follow data protection principles (HM Government, n.d.). This legislation defines the university's responsibility to ensure that there are appropriate measures in place to protect personal data (UWTSD, 2022). Those accountable for using personal data must ensure that information is handled in a way that ensures security and kept for no longer than is necessary (HM Government, n.d.). HM Government (n.d.) states that under this legislation, participants have the right to be informed about how their data is being used, access their own personal data, as well as stop the processing of their data and have it erased.

Also stated in the information sheet is the purpose of the study, along with the overall aims and procedures that participants may be involved with, indicating the potential benefits and risks connected with being involved in the research project (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013). A risk is defined by the British Psychological Society (2021) and Beauchamp and Haughton (2012) as the potential physical or mental harm, discomfort or stress to participants, that a study may develop. There are some

risks that can come to participants in this research project. According to UKRI (2025) and Beauchamp and Haughton (2012), there can be a risk to a participant's reputation, their links to the community and their position of employment. Relating to this research, during the initial observation, there can be a risk of the educator not coming across knowledgeable on guided play, particularly with the benefits it can have on the emotional regulation of children with ASD. Therefore, this could give a negative view of the educator, and more so the school as a whole. To mitigate this risk, it is important that the researcher ensures anonymity and confidentiality, as this will allow the participant to be more trusting and honest to the researcher, without fear of repercussions (UK Statistics Authority, 2022).

There can also be risks towards the participating children. According to the NSPCC (2023), children may find participating in research stressful, and the impact of this can greatly be affected by the age or potential vulnerability of the children involved, such as those children with ASD. Therefore, to mitigate this risk, children should be told the nature of the research and what will be expected of them (NSPCC, 2023). Additionally, the research should take place in a friendly and comfortable environment, and the children should be allowed to warm up before the task beginnings, as well as take breaks during the research (NSPCC, 2023). Therefore, the observations taking place in this research will be done in the children's own classrooms to cause less of an impact on the children.

There are also risks that can come to the researcher. According to Beauchamp and Haughton (2012), risks for the researcher include harm to the researcher's emotional wellbeing. Although all researchers hope to be objective, it is important to think about how the researcher will manage their own emotional response to what they see and hear (Beauchamp and Haughton, 2012). To mitigate this risk, Robert-Holmes (2007, cited in Palaiologou, 2012) suggest that an inexperienced researcher should stick to topics that are emotionally safe for the researcher. This risk can be minimised early into the planning stage of the research, during the process of choosing an area or topic to research (Beauchamp and Haughton, 2012).

Another risk to the researcher is gatekeeping. Children, particularly those with ASD, are closely guarded by gatekeepers (Gray, 2012). According to McLeod (2008, cited in Palaiologou, 2012) and Gray and Carville (2008, cited in Palaiologou, 2012),

gatekeepers are described as overprotective and difficult individuals who are attempting to access the views of young children or vulnerable groups, particularly those with ASD. A gatekeeper typically may include early years professionals, classroom teachers and school headteachers (Gray, 2012). An example of gatekeeping in relation to this research, is that the headteacher of any school part of the research may only allow their best behaved children to participate in the research. They may do this so that the school is looked upon in a positive light. However, this could tamper with the research results. McAreavey and Das (2013) suggest that during research, some of the earliest ethical decisions that a researcher may come across, during the development of a choosing participants, may be connected to gatekeeping. To mitigate this risk, the researcher may need to evaluate the gatekeepers' intentions and how the relationship between the gatekeeper and researcher is initiated and sustained (McAreavey and Das, 2013).

Additionally, risks can generate for the university. One risk that can occur is damage to the university's reputation (University of Essex, n.d.; Conan, Manion and Morrison, 2018). According to Ary *et al.*, (2002, cited in Conan, Manion and Morrison, 2018), the researcher has responsibilities and obligations to different parties, including universities. One of these responsibilities is not to put the reputation of the university at risk, as well as compromise future opportunities for further research (Conan, Manion and Morrison, 2018). To prevent this risk, the researcher must follow the university's research ethics and integrity code of practice, which ensures that researchers maintain high ethical standards and promote values of care and respect (UWTSD, 2022).

Another risk for universities is legal risks (University of Essex, n.d.). According to Hack (2012), universities are responsible for all projects undertaken under their aid, and they must make sure that these projects comply with legal requirements. For example, a legal risk can be that data is not stored correctly, which can intrude on the participant's privacy. Therefore, the researcher must follow the university's research and ethics code of practice. As stated previously, the researcher must follow UK GDPR regulations, as well as the Data Protection Act 2018 (UWTSD, 2022; HM Government, n.d.).

In conclusion, this research must make sure that all legislations are followed, as well as the university's code of practice to ensure that all risks are accounted for (HM Government, n.d.; UWTSD, 2022). The researcher must ensure that all participants have given informed consent (Green, 2012). Additionally, children are able to give assent, and their views must be considered (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011; BERA 2024).

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