

## **The Effectiveness of Social Play Therapy To Improve Social Skills And Abilities Of Children With Autism**

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**Abstract:** *In the last three years, many children in West Nusa Tenggara, especially in West Lombok Regency in Indonesia, have experienced a developmental disorder called autism. This can be seen from the rise in public attention to include this category of children in schools that hold inclusive classes, such as in Early Childhood Education-Elementary School Lenterahati Islamic Boarding School. The increase in autism is also evidenced by the emergence of various therapy centres for children with special needs, as well as the increasing number of participants enrolled and undergoing therapy. The initial survey results showed seven therapy centres and schools for such children in West Nusa Tenggara, where each centre comprises 25 to 30 students. This means that 375 children in this province suffer from this mental health condition. Therefore, this experience requires many people to think about alternative therapies to help increase positive behaviour and reduce negative symptoms of children with autism. Experts and observers know several alternative therapies, but most have not been fully implemented. This is due to the limited facilities available in therapy centres hence no data and facts show evidence for the effectiveness of applying them to improve the abilities of this category of children. Based on these needs, this research aims to apply therapy with a "social play" model to help improve the positive behaviour of children with autism and determine its contribution to achieving the goals. This therapy is selected as an alternative because it is cheap and can be carried out anywhere and by anyone. It also allows every parent or family with an autistic child to always provide therapy. This is quasi-experimental research, meaning it was not conducted in a laboratory capable of controlling various external factors that might influence changes in the subject's behaviour. The research only consists of the experimental group with male and female subjects and excluded the control due to difficulty getting subjects capable of following the treatment intensely and continuously. The results of data analysis show that group play therapy has a significant effect on improving social skills and abilities for children with autism. This is indicated by the value of  $z = -2,940$ , with an increase in the mean of the pre-test and post-test values of 42.9 and 48.5, for 6 weeks. Therefore, there is an increase of 6.3 items from the provision of play therapy. Research on Social Play Therapy has shown that it can improve social skills and abilities in children with autism due to its play-based approach. This therapy helps children develop social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, and understanding emotions through structured social interactions. Additionally, it provides a supportive environment and trains children to apply the learned skills in their daily lives. With its focus on social interaction and play activities, Social Play Therapy proves to be an effective way to enhance social skills and abilities in children with autism.*

**Keywords:** autism, social play therapy

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the last three years, many children in West Nusa Tenggara, especially in West Lombok Regency in Indonesia, have experienced a developmental disorder called autism. This can be seen from the rise in public attention to include this category of children in schools that hold inclusive classes, such as in Early Childhood Education-Elementary School Lenterahati Islamic Boarding School. The increase in autism is also evidenced by the emergence of various therapy centres for children with special needs, as well as the increasing number of participants enrolled and undergoing therapy. The initial survey results showed seven therapy centres and schools for such children in West Nusa Tenggara, where each centre comprises 25 to 30 students. This means that 375 children in this province suffer from this mental health condition (Hamidah, 2013). Some positive children were detected as having autism disorders but conducted therapy at home, while others did not due to financial constraints and limited parental knowledge. Based on this initial survey, those with this disability in West Nusa Tenggara, especially West Lombok Regency, have reached an alarming number, with a yearly increase. According to Hamidah (2013), approximately 115 children were recorded with autism in West Nusa Tenggara, especially West Lombok Regency, in 2018. This number increased to 167 and 225 in 2020 and 2021, respectively. This condition occurs not only in West Lombok Regency but also in almost all regencies and municipalities in West Nusa Tenggara Province. Currently, the number of children with this mental condition is 1: 150 babies born.

The figure is quite alarming, and the government or health experts have taken no real action to prevent autism in children. Meanwhile, efforts that have been made to reduce the symptoms were given little enlightenment and good intervention in the form of therapy periodically, starting from 2 to 6 hours a day.

Several therapies have been applied in different centres, but behavioural therapy is widely used and considered the basis of behaviour formation and social contact. This therapy gives enough results to determine the level of autism disorders within a relatively short time. Unfortunately, the method first popularized by Loovas as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which emphasizes the concepts and theories of learning, has not been applied correctly. The inaccuracy of applying this method is the emergence of unexpected therapist actions and emotions, hence it will cause unfavourable side effects for both parents and children. This action will have a more difficult effect supposing their parents at home also follow the pattern and model of therapy accepted by the children. The less desirable behaviours and effects are, hitting, pinching, and stepping on the foot. Meanwhile, the accompanying effects are a high-pitched voice, bulging eyes, and frowning.

Parents with inadequate knowledge of the adverse effects of these actions also apply them at home. This is common among those who feel it produces effective results because the child will obey orders without paying attention to their emotions and habituation effects. They also find it difficult when the child does not want to obey their orders and teachings.

Therefore, this experience requires many people to think about alternative therapies to help increase positive behaviour and reduce negative symptoms of children with autism. Experts and observers know several alternative therapies, but most have not been fully

implemented. This is due to the limited facilities available in therapy centres hence no data and facts show evidence for the effectiveness of applying them to improve the abilities of this category of children.

Some previous studies have only revealed that research on social play for autistic children is only cognitive, not yet on social, emotional and behavioral aspects. Adamson LB, & Bakeman R. (2019)

Based on these needs, this research aims to apply therapy with a "social play" model to help improve the positive behaviour of children with autism and determine its contribution to achieving the goals. This therapy is selected as an alternative because it is cheap and can be carried out anywhere and by anyone. It also allows every parent or family with an autistic child to always provide therapy

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This is quasi-experimental research, meaning it was not conducted in a laboratory capable of controlling various external factors that might influence changes in the subject's behaviour. The research only consists of the experimental group with male and female subjects and excluded the control due to difficulty getting subjects capable of following the treatment intensely and continuously.

Data were collected from subjects with mild to moderate disorder levels to obtain their individual basic ability base rate before giving therapy (pre-test). Meanwhile, post-test data were taken after the subjects received treatment for 5 days with a total of 3 hours/day for a total of 6 weeks

This study uses a pre-experimental design because variables other than the independent variables affect the dependent variable. The study design used was a two-group pre-test design, i.e. two groups of respondents were observed/measured before treatment (treatment) and the development of respondents was observed after treatment (treatment) for more accurate results.

The next stage was social play therapy, which was carried out for 6 weeks, to measure the subject's development of all abilities. This research was carried out from mid-June 2021 until the end of July 2021 at Early Childhood Education-Elementary School Lenterahati Islamic Boarding School, West Lombok Regency. After the measurements were completed, repeated observations were made 6 months later. The data obtained were analyzed to determine the function of social play therapy on developing abilities in children with autism.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The results of data analysis show that group play therapy has a significant effect on improving social skills and abilities for children with autism. This is indicated by the value of  $z = -2,940$ , with an increase in the mean of the pre-test and post-test values of 42.9 and 48.5, for 6 weeks. Therefore, there is an increase of 6.3 items from the provision of play therapy. The experimental results are shown in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Pre-test data from the mean as a base rate for social skills and abilities

| No. | Name   | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Mean |
|-----|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 1   | Moly   | 72    | 73    | 74    | 75    | 76    | 74   |
| 2   | Redo   | 75    | 75    | 74    | 73    | 75    | 75   |
| 3   | Laras  | 35    | 32    | 17    | 42    | 50    | 37   |
| 4   | Adit   | 63    | 63    | 63    | 63    | 64    | 63   |
| 5   | Zelika | 4     | 5     | 8     | 8     | 9     | 7    |
| 6   | Zeni   | 52    | 43    | 51    | 55    | 55    | 51   |
| 7   | Naufal | 19    | 19    | 18    | 22    | 25    | 21   |
| 8   | Faizi  | 66    | 64    | 62    | 66    | 67    | 66   |
| 9   | Adisa  | 34    | 12    | 28    | 24    | 32    | 30   |
| 10  | Sahrul | 5     | 5     | 4     | 6     | 5     | 5    |
| 11  | Kiki   | 41    | 41    | 44    | 42    | 43    | 43   |

Tabel 2. Post-test data from the mean as a base rate of social skills and abilities (After 6 weeks of getting treatment)

| No. | Name   | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Mean |
|-----|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 1   | Moly   | 75    | 74    | 75    | 75    | 75    | 75   |
| 2   | Redo   | 76    | 76    | 76    | 76    | 76    | 76   |
| 3   | Laras  | 51    | 47    | 51    | 51    | 52    | 51   |
| 4   | Adit   | 65    | 66    | 65    | 65    | 66    | 66   |
| 5   | Zelika | 9     | 5     | 7     | 7     | 10    | 8    |
| 6   | Zeni   | 62    | 62    | 56    | 58    | 62    | 61   |
| 7   | Naufal | 30    | 29    | 24    | 26    | 30    | 30   |
| 8   | Faizi  | 70    | 20    | 70    | 30    | 70    | 70   |
| 9   | Adisa  | 15    | 30    | 15    | 15    | 17    | 15   |
| 10  | Sahrul | 17    | 14    | 17    | 17    | 17    | 17   |
| 11  | Kiki   | 46    | 46    | 44    | 44    | 44    | 45   |

Based on this measurement, social play therapy can improve the skills and abilities of mental disorders. This statement also answers the problem about the existence of alternative therapies to improve the skills and abilities of this category of children at home by families. Furthermore, this research also proves that their social skills and abilities can develop even though they are treated at home because it is intensively, and they interact with other people normally.

It is important to note that no therapy will be able to change and improve the abilities of this category of children in a short time. The social therapy takes approximately 3 hours a day and is carried out continuously and intensively every day for 6 weeks with a total of 5 days/week. The encouraging results can only be seen after the children have received intensive therapy for 6 weeks. The development and improvement of these behaviours, abilities and social skills will be maintained for a minimum of 6 months, assuming there is continuity and intensive treatment outside the allocated hours. Therefore, f parents and siblings or families living at home and the surrounding community are expected to be supportive.

## **Discussion**

In this research, Social Play Therapy is the therapeutic approach being investigated. Social Play Therapy is a type of therapy that utilizes play as a medium to improve social skills and abilities in children with autism. It creates a structured and supportive environment where children engage in play activities designed to target specific social skills.

The syntax of playing refers to the patterns and organization of social interactions and behaviors during play. In the context of Social Play Therapy, the syntax of playing refers to how children with autism interact with others, engage in cooperative play, take turns, initiate and maintain conversations, share toys, and understand nonverbal cues. It involves observing and analyzing the social behaviors and interactions exhibited by the children during play sessions.

The therapist or researcher would observe and analyze the syntax of playing by closely monitoring the child's play behavior, communication style, social initiations, sharing, cooperation, and responsiveness to others. They would pay attention to the child's ability to engage in reciprocal play, follow social rules, demonstrate flexibility, and use appropriate social communication strategies.

By examining and understanding the syntax of playing during Social Play Therapy, researchers can gain insights into the specific social skills and abilities that children with autism are developing or struggling with. This information can help tailor the therapy sessions to target and address the specific social challenges faced by each child.

Play therapy significantly improves academic abilities and social skills for children with mild to moderate autism. Although other comorbidities do not accompany this range of autism, they can still receive and understand simple instructions and information. Other common comorbidities are ADHD, RM, Anxiety, and Hypersensitivity. This hinders the learning and training process in them, hence a "one on one" treatment known as behavioural therapy is needed.

Social play therapy can improve their social skills and abilities because it is carried out in groups where they are required to interact with friends and therapists. This group also consists of autistic and normal children, who make it quite helpful in providing varied and adequate stimulation.

Group play therapy is not only packaged in the form of games but also consists of varied tasks hence children do not feel bored. It is carried out in a large and slightly open space, which allows for freedom of movement without the feeling of fear. Therefore, this condition is quite pleasant and is not expected to cause trauma.

The number of children with therapists and facilitators is in the ratio of 2:1, hence attention is still very intensive and focused. This provides a significant meaning to the modeling and imitation process, considering that children generally pay more attention to what is taught by the teacher or therapist than their parents.

Understanding pre-academic aspects is also packaged in the form of play, hence they do not feel compelled to understand or remember something. However, they have strong retentive memory because of the high and continuous intensity. Kasari (2012) stated that the intervention or therapy needed for this category of children in the future is comprehensive and capable of providing a situation of "joint attention" and "symbolic play." It aims to teach children to understand what is behind an action and manage themselves. This symbolic play can develop their abilities to understand a situation and make them analyze the environmental role. The development of empathy also follows suit, which can also affect the values and social relations in the family, hence it is expected to be able to foster positive emotions for other

members. Therefore, this therapy will be able to run more intensively and naturally, thereby enabling a higher success rate.

The involvement of parents and other family members promotes the development of children's social skills and abilities and provides support for the growth of positive emotions, adequate personality, and empathy. This kind of condition also builds awareness for the relatives to accept the children's situation and recognize their advantages and privileges. Siller and Sigman (2012) stated that the development of communication and interaction skills of mentally challenged children can be predicted by how intensely the involvement of parents or caregivers is in interactions and building relationships.

## **CLOSING**

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that: 1) Social play therapy can be alternatively applied as a home program. 2) This therapy is also effective in improving children's social skills and abilities with mild to moderate autism. 3) It can provide effective results if it is carried out continuously in small groups comprising 6 people and guided by a trained facilitator. 4) This therapy will improve the social skills and abilities of children with autism, assuming the group also consists of members with normal children. 5) Mothers, caregivers, and other family members have a significant role in the continuity of social play therapy in small groups.

### **Recommendations**

Given the limited number of subjects, other researchers interested in exploring the same field can increase the variety of autism disorders from the mild to severe. The number of samples should also be increased by getting a balanced gender variation between males and females. c. There needs to be a trial for children who have not received diet and medical therapy. One additional variable that could be explored in research related to the effectiveness of Social Play Therapy in improving social skills and abilities of children with autism is the role of parent involvement. Investigating the impact of actively involving parents in the therapy process could provide valuable insights into the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention. Specifically, researchers could examine how including parents in therapy sessions, providing parent training and education on social play techniques, and promoting parent-child interaction and play at home contribute to the outcomes of Social Play Therapy. This variable could be measured by assessing changes in the child's social skills, parent-child interaction quality, and the generalization of learned skills to the home environment. By considering the level and type of parent involvement in Social Play Therapy, researchers can gain a better understanding of the comprehensive approach that optimizes the therapy's effectiveness and long-term benefits for children with autism

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