

# Training for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder:

## Does it improve their affective functions?

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**Abstract**—Children are every couple's dream. However, having a child with special needs is not something expected by any parents. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have become a challenge for parents to develop potentials in them. Unfortunately, many parents feel stressed and unconfident in their own ability, thus fully relying on physicians or therapist for the therapy process. The training and workshop of Independent Intervention Program (Program Intervensi Mandiri or PIM) are activities focused on improving parents' ability in designing and implementing their own program for their children. This present study was conducted to determine the effectivity of PIM training and workshop towards parents' affective functions. Quasi-experiment pretest-posttest method was employed in this study. The result shows that there is a significant difference observed in four aspects, 1) the confidence in performing social intervention on children, 2) the belief in the success of the intervention process, 3) the expectation regarding children's development, and 4) the lower stress level when facing the children and the impact of the hindrances.

**Keywords**—autism spectrum disorder; training; parents

### I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects approximately 1% of the world population [1]. ASD is one of the brain's neurological development disorder. An individual with ASD face hindrances in social interaction, being less-skilled in communicating and exhibiting repeated, rigid behavior, as well as showing unusual interests [2]. Such disorder affects the lives of those with ASD. Hindrances in social skills lead individuals with ASD to failure at school, social, or work settings. This failure causes them to become less confident and have low self-esteem, triggering anxiety, depression, and mental health issues. The lack of social skills also makes individuals with ASD prone to bullying and mistreatment (Autism Bedfordshire, n.d.).

Besides the individuals themselves, the impact of the disorder affects parents and other family members [3]. According to Autism Bedfordshire (n.d.), taking care of children with ASD give various challenges, emotionally, financially, and physically. Parents might feel judged by the

public, having a sense of guilt for not being able to interact with their children and not knowing the best way to help them.

Based on the result of a study conducted by Shawler & Sullivan, the improper implementation of discipline on children with ASD becomes a stress mediator for parents and children's behavior. Children are more likely to exhibit destructive behavior if their parents teach them hard ways, using punishment and violence as opposed to other discipline strategies [4].

Unhappy children may lead their parents questioning the way they nurture and teach their children since parents may face greater responsibilities for their children's behavior [5].

Selzer et al. stated that mothers of children with ASD who have a history of problematic behavior exhibits lower cortisol activity. Such decrease is similar to cortisol activity drop observed in people with chronic stress such as war veterans and family of children with chronic illness [5].

Parents are also concerned about their children's school achievement, self-esteem, stress management skills, learning difficulties, bullying, mental health, social acceptance, social skills, and more importantly, social survival skills [6].

The study conducted by Brobst, Clopton and Hendrick show that parents (either mother or father) have stress related to the intensity of their children's problematic behavior and their own perspective on the severity of their children's disorder. The concern and pressure faced by parents often times disrupt their lives in social settings, as well as their functions as parents, particularly affective functions [7].

This is in line with Miranda et al., noting that stress faced by parents of children with ASD may arise from two aspects, namely the children's disorder and their roles as parents. The results of the study show that parents experience stress since the interpretation of parenting limit their freedom, feeling frustrated with the effort to maintain their identity and controlled by children's expectation and needs [8].

As a way to improve the affective functions in parents, we implemented an independent intervention program to help parents overcome developmental hindrances faced by their children. In addition to giving materials to enable parents

understand their children’s condition better, parents were trained to be able to give treatment to their children. In this PIM program, we also provided samples and motivations for parents to be assured and confident in their ability to handle their children, as well as growing some hopes for their children’s development.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

The study was conducted using quasi-experiment pre-test-posttest design. Parents’ affective functions were measured before and after the training.

B. Participant

Seven parents of children with ASD from RH therapy institution in Bandung, Indonesia were chosen as participants. The chosen participants have to fulfil these criteria: (1) having children with ASD, (2) being willing to participate in the training.

C. Instrument

For this study, self-evaluation questionnaire was used as study instrument, which later was filled by parents before and after the training. The questionnaire measures affective functions, including: (1) the confidence to perform social skills intervention on the children, (2) the belief in the success of the intervention process, (3) the hope in the achievement of children’s development, and (4) the stress level in facing children’s hindrances and the impact of such hindrances.

The questionnaire was in form of rating scale with scores ranging from 1 to 9. The score categories on confidence, belief in the success of the intervention process, and hope in the children’s development are explained as follows:

- Score 1-3 belong to “low”,
- Score 4-6 belongs to “average”, and
- Score 7-9 belongs to “high”

Each category can be defined as follows:

- “Low” category, meaning that parents’ affective functions are categorized as “poor”.
- “Average” category, meaning that parents’ affective functions are categorized as “sufficient” or “adequate”.
- “High” category, meaning that parents’ affective functions are categorized as “good”.

The self-evaluation score categories on stress level related to children’s hindrances and their impact are explicated as follows:

- Score 1-3 belong to “low”,
- Score 4-6 belongs to “average”, and
- Score 7-9 belongs to “high”

Each category can be further explained as follows:

- “Low” category, implying that parents’ stress level when facing problems or hindrances and consequent impacts is low.
- “Average” category, implying that parents’ stress level is medium when coping with problems and hindrances, including the consequent impacts.
- “High” category, implying that parents’ stress level when dealing with problems, hindrances, and the consequent impacts is relatively high.

D. Data Analysis

The data for the study were analyzed quantitatively using non-parametric statistical Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test technique and SPSS version 20.0. The test was performed at level significance of  $\alpha=0.05$ .

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The test result on the difference in parents’ affective functions before and after the training is shown on table 1.

TABLE I. THE TEST RESULT OF THE SCORE DIFFERENCE IN PARENTS’ AFFECTIVE FUNCTIONS BEFORE AND AFTER THE TRAINING

EVALUATION ASPECTS	Pre	Post	Gain	p	Z
The confidence to perform social skills intervention on children	4,29	8	3,71	,016	-2,410 <sup>b</sup>
The belief in the success of the intervention process	4,71	7,86	3,14	,018	-2,375 <sup>b</sup>
The hope in the achievement of children’s development	5,14	8,29	3,14	,017	-2,388 <sup>b</sup>
The stress level in dealing with children’s hindrances and the resulting impacts	6,71	4,14	-2,6	,026	-2,220 <sup>b</sup>

Based on table 1, it is found that after participating in the training, there is an increase in the score on confidence subject, gaining 3.17 points at the significance level of 0.016 ( $p<0.05$ ). The belief aspect gains 3.14 points at the significance level of 0.018 ( $p<0.05$ ) and the hope aspect gains 3.14 point at the level of significance of 0.017 ( $p<0.05$ ). In addition to this, there is 2.6 points decrease for the aspect of stress level at the significance level of 0.026 ( $p<0.05$ ). It implies that all affective functions of the parents have significantly improved after they participated in the training.

In addition to giving self-evaluation questionnaires, we also performed scoring on parents’ affective functions based on interview. Based on the interview held, it can be inferred that parents gained several affective benefits from the training program, including (1) an increased motivation to improve their skills in overcoming their children’s hindrances, (2) a growing concern and initiative to participate in seminars or discussions on autism treatment, (3) a positive trigger to share

knowledge and experience with others, as well as cooperate with other parents in treating their children, and (4) a growing hope and belief in the achievement of children's development as the result of the intervention.

These findings are in line with the findings of study conducted by Kabot et al. in McStay, showing that the treatment and training approach on children with ASD should focus on the improvement of parents' confidence in their own ability regarding treating or accompanying their children [5]. The betterment of parents' perception on their parenting skills would result in an experience, giving them knowledge about playing roles as therapist and co-therapist and allowing them to make decisions regarding the treatment and children's future. This result also supports the result of an experiment conducted by Steiner using "Strength" approach in educating parents of children with ASD, leading to a conclusion that parents who get examples and guidance from therapist in treating their children are able to cope with chronic stress sources arising from the parenting [9].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on this present study, it can be concluded that the Independent Intervention Training Program (PIM) for parents of children with ASD can improve their affective functions. The achievement is indicated by an increased confidence in performing social skills intervention on the children, a growing belief in the success of the intervention process, a hope regarding the achievement of the children's development, and a lowered stress level in facing children's hindrances and the consequent impacts.

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