

# Interpersonal Communication of Parents to Children with Special Needs in Assisting the Implementation Distance Learning

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on many fields, including education. Learning activities are shifted from face-to-face learning into distance learning using online media. Due to this situation, parents encounter challenges regarding their role in accompanying their children with special needs while they study at home. In that sense, communication becomes an important aspect for parents to consider when assisting online learning for children with special needs who are studying at home. This research aims at identifying interpersonal communication developed by parents for children with special needs in assisting their children in the implementation of distance learning. This is a qualitative descriptive study with data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 6 parents of children with special needs from SLB Negeri Surakarta. This research used Interpersonal Communication and Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PAR Theory) which is based on parental acceptance of children. The findings suggest that the interpersonal communication carried out by parents in assisting their children in distance learning cannot be separated from parental acceptance of their children. Acceptance by parents, that is, their ability to understand the children's condition and be aware of the child's needs, is an important factor in parents' willingness to provide learning assistance during distance learning.

**Keywords:** children with special needs, interpersonal communication, distance learning, learning assistance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, WHO declared a new outbreak of Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) as an international public health emergency, causing widespread anxiety among the general public [1]. In addition, many countries implemented large-scale or national school closure policies in March 2020 to reduce COVID-19 transmission in schools [2]. Based on statistical data from UNESCO Global Monitoring of School Closures due to COVID-19, on 7 September 2020, it was recorded that 59.9% of the total registered students of 1,048,817,181 students were affected, and 132 countries experienced closures.

During the pandemic, Indonesia also implemented a policy to close schools, namely by conducting distance learning using online media held at home, shifting the primary role of learning assistance from schools to parents. Handling children with special needs can be difficult for parents in these situations [3]. In addition to the ongoing challenges of inclusivity, adequate access to distance learning during the COVID-19 period is viewed as a challenge for children with disabilities and their parents [4].

Due to COVID-19, more than 60 million students in Indonesia were temporarily undergoing distance learning, affecting their education process in unprecedented ways [5]. The results of the research

entitled "Indonesia Education Readiness to Conduct Distance Learning in COVID-19 Pandemic Situation" concluded that the implementation of distance learning in Indonesia still needs to be evaluated in terms of teacher readiness in selecting the appropriate learning platform for students [6].

The study titled, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education of Children with Disabilities," which was conducted in Kosovo special schools in 2020, discovered that support teachers, assistants, therapists, activists, service providers, children with disabilities, and parents of children with disabilities in Kosovo were facing many challenges and concerns as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns, physical distancing, school closures, and the shift to distance learning, and a lack of support service [7]. Furthermore, the study discovered numerous challenges encountered by children with disabilities and their parents as a result of the lack of inclusivity during the COVID-19 period, such as insufficient technology and a lack of prior experience with online learning.

The findings of a study conducted in 2020 by Kathryn Asbury, Laura Fox, Emre Deniz, Aimee Code, and Umar Toseeb titled "How Is COVID-19 Affecting the Mental Health of Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Their Families" showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the loss, worry, and changes in mood and behavior in parents and children with special needs. Parents are unprepared for the new circumstances that necessitate them to accompany their child's distance learning process [8].

This is where the importance of communication that parents build for their children with special needs comes into play, so that distance learning can continue to progress and children do not experience academic stress. Children with special needs are classified as follows: 1) children with physical disabilities, such as vision impairment and hearing disorder; and 2) children with intellectual disorders, including children with mental retardation and autism. It is more difficult for them to participate in online classes and interact with teachers and other students through computer screens. Based on the aforementioned background, the purpose of this research is to look deeper into interpersonal communication between parents and children with special needs at SLB N Surakarta during the distance learning assistance process.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Interpersonal Communication***

Kathleen defined interpersonal communication as "a communication process between one person and another that creates a relationship between them." Interpersonal communication is a two-person activity in which they meet face to face and give each other feedback [9].

Research related to the interpersonal communication of children with special needs was previously conducted by Dinar Kurnia Kasih from the Faculty of Communication and Informatics, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) in 2017. She investigated interpersonal communication between teachers and students at SLB E Prayuwana Surakarta in increasing the independence of students with special needs, particularly disabled children. One of them is the existence of nonverbal interpersonal communication between teachers and students. Nonverbal communication carried out by the teacher is the use of sign language in conveying messages [10].

Engaging in interpersonal communication can establish better interpersonal or individual relationships. This will help the two parties, namely the communicator and the communicant, improve and maintain their good relations [11].

This interpersonal communication is commonly considered more effective to change a person's behavior and opinions because in this interpersonal communication a communicator can see directly how the communicant responds. Communication certainly has a purpose, including interpersonal communication.

### ***2.2. Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PAR Theory):***

Parental acceptance-rejection theory reveals that parental acceptance-rejection is universally associated across all ethnic groups, races, cultures, languages, genders, and geographic boundaries of the world, with specific constellations of personality dispositions that are one possible expression of psychological adjustment [12].

Perceived acceptance and rejection form the warmth dimension of interpersonal relationships. One end of the continuum is marked by perceived acceptance; in PAR Theory, this refers to the warmth, affection, attention, comfort, nurturing, support, or simply love that one can feel from another person.

Children should receive parental attention and affection. Parents' attention and affection can aid in the child's growth and development. Parental acceptance influences parents' interpersonal communication with their children when assisting learning at home. Acceptance behavior is expressed when parents act with feelings of love, both verbally and nonverbally. As a result, children have a high level of emotional comfort and security while learning at home.

Furthermore, the acceptance felt by children during childhood will have a long-term positive impact on the success of psychological and academic adjustment during learning activities [13]. On the other hand, rejection from other important people, particularly parents, has a negative psychological impact on children.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach. All factors, both oral and written, from the data sources were presented to answer the problems in the research. The research was carried out in Surakarta, with the research population consisting of parents, both mothers and fathers, who had special needs children and provided distance learning assistance at the elementary school level.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific criteria or considerations related to the research objectives. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an open-ended question guide. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to obtain the data comprehensively, which was then translated into English for the purpose of writing research reports.

Interviews with parents were conducted directly, while observations were carried out at the participants' homes to facilitate data collection while still adhering to health protocols. Furthermore, data were collected in rotation from one participant to another, which was divided into two sessions: the first session was used for data collection for approximately 2-5 hours per day, and the second session was conducted if there were insufficient or incomplete data.

Observations were made to collect data by directly observing the object under study. The non-participant observation method was chosen for this activity. This observation was carried out by observing from a distance to obtain data on the support and implementation of learning.

Inductive data analysis was performed, which is based on the facts discovered and can be built into a hypothesis or theory. The data validity was preserved by triangulating data sources.

## 4. RESULTS

**Table 1.** Information of Parents of Special Needs Children at SLB Negeri Surakarta

Parents' Initials	Children's Special Needs Category	Children's Sex	Children's Level
AT	Intellectual disabilities	Male	Grade 3
MN	Intellectual disabilities	Female	Grade 3
EL	Autism	Male	Grade 4
NJ & SD	Autism	Male	Grade 3
TS	Vision impairment	Male	Grade 4
ED	Hearing disorder	Female	Grade 3

From Table 1, this research included six parents who have children with special needs from various categories, such as vision impairment, hearing disorder, intellectual disabilities, and autism. These children attended SLB in grades 3 and 4. The research findings are divided into several units of analysis.

### 4.1. Children as Priority

Parents were aware of their children's needs, specifically the need for learning assistance. According to six informants, they placed their children in an important position at home, taking into account family circumstances, both in daily life and in learning. As stated by MN in our interview: "It depends, but I always prioritize children over other matters for the sake of their learning" (Interview with MN, 7-4-2021)

MN considered the child's position in the family to be critical, particularly in terms of their learning. This was intended to encourage parents to continue to monitor their children's academic development for them to grow. Parents played a role in directing children during learning because children still required assistance, so parents must balance work and children's learning activities.

In the midst of their work, parents still prioritized their children by accompanying them to study at home. After finishing their work, the five informants preferred to spend time with their children, then, focus on assisting children with their studies. Informant ED

explained that her child would feel happy if she accompanied her in learning activities at home, and she would also complete the task assigned by the teacher.

#### **4.2. Use of Learning Media**

Parents served as teachers at home during distance learning, explaining material provided to children from school through students' worksheets and digital platforms such as Whatsapp and Youtube.

Because the children did not understand the material, informants accompanied them to learn and explained it to them. They gradually assisted the children and occasionally used hand gestures, which are nonverbal body movements, to illustrate and explain to children how to count using fingers. As used by Informant ED: "Usually, I try to imitate the way the teacher explains the material. For example, when I teach her to count numbers, I usually teach her like any other kid, but if she doesn't understand, I will use objects or pictures that she likes. For example, I use a pencil to teach addition. Now she is also learning how to use IT. When asked to draw numbers, she sometimes refuses, but when instructed to use the keyboard, she eagerly accepts. Aside from that, I also use simple and colorful items in teaching my kid" (Interview with ED, 10-4-2021).

Informant imitated the way teachers explain the material. This occurred because parents were already aware of the importance of nurturing and supporting their children in learning. Parents did not only assist but also participated in explaining the contents of the material as teachers for children at home so that they knew their children's abilities.

#### **4.3. Learning Strategy**

When children studied at home, many factors influenced their learning environment, causing them to become bored and lazy to continue learning. In that case, parents employed their own strategies for dealing with situations when their children were unmotivated while learning. If the children got bored, one of the strategies to maintain their motivation was to give them a brief pause to restore their mood.

Giving children a short break to avoid boredom was thought to be effective because it took into account the difficulties and emotions of children while ensuring that learning activities continue to run well. This strategy was practiced by Informant EL: "Yes, as I previously stated, I usually give a short pause for him to rest and do whatever he wants, such as listen to the radio." I occasionally offer to take her for a walk to her aunt's

house. He usually goes to his aunt's house in the afternoon" (Interview with EL, 08-4-2021).

In addition to granting the children's wishes, parents also offered something that they could do together, such as going for a walk and promising to do something after learning, to motivate them to continue learning. Learning assistance at home must be done without coercion. Parents prioritized their children's emotional stability while also paying attention to their academics.

#### **4.4. Creating a Comfortable Environment**

Informants created an environment that appeared natural and comfortable as a form of learning support for children. AT, one of the informants, stated that she typically created a different environment. This is evidenced by the following interview results: "Yes, I do occasionally create a different atmosphere." For example, my child can study in front of the house, inside the house, or anywhere else that he feels comfortable. My children usually study in the bedroom at a table. To keep him from getting bored, I invite him to the front. He looks so happy when he is in videos, so I take him out in his school uniform and send the video to the teacher. As a result, the atmosphere is similar to that of a school. This may make him feel more at ease" (Interview with AT, 2-4-2021)

It is critical to creating a learning environment in which children do not get bored to maintain their interest in learning and make them feel more at ease. The remaining five informants did the same thing. Parents cultivated an environment that fostered a natural desire to learn in their children. Parents considered this method to be very effective, such as studying in front of the TV, in front of the house, or outside the house using the mat so that children feel comfortable.

Furthermore, the informants attempted not to force their children to study in a strict environment because they already understood the child's condition, which could not be suppressed. However, in some situations, ED, one of the informants, may create both comfortable and tight situations depending on what material was studied. ED would create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere if the subject was her child's favorite, however, it would be different when she taught Mathematics. She argued, she needed to create a strict atmosphere in a certain subject, because if she did not, her child would not complete the task. She added: "You know, the pandemic has taken too long. So, I occasionally allow my child to study outside of his room. For example, at the front part using mat" (Interview with ED, 10-4-2021)

All informants attempted to create a comfortable learning environment and atmosphere in order for children to learn effectively. They did not force their children to study in a strict environment because they were aware of the condition of children that could not be suppressed.

#### **4.5. Giving Praise and Touch**

Parents typically used praise and touch to respond to their children's condition. Children with special needs often show unstable emotional states, making them easily irritated and depressed. Praise and touch were used by the informants to keep their children's emotional states stable. Learning activities ran smoothly and well when the child was in a stable condition.

The use of intonation and tone when communicating with children also affected their condition. When the child was shouted at, he or she became down. As a result, parents should use a soft tone and intonation so that children listened to the instructions. A soft and gentle tone of voice makes children less emotional, whereas a loud, harsh tone of voice causes the child to feel sad, emotional, and even cry.

In addition to the emotional bond between parents and children, this was also related to physical and verbal affective behavior. Physical and verbal affectionate touch by parents, such as stroking the back and giving compliments, was very meaningful for children. Children also responded to their parents' attitudes; for example, children becoming more enthusiastic about learning, as explained by Informant EL: "Yes, he became happy. I enjoy giving compliments, and he appreciates it. When he is praised, he sometimes smiles, hugs, and caresses" (Interview with EL, 8-4-2021)

The children's responses and expressions affected parents' moods and led to satisfaction. It gave them great joy to educate and love the children. In addition to the children's response to their parents, they also expressed their reaction toward learning activities, as perceived by MN: "Yes, she is happy she wants to do it again, and she is also motivated. She wants to demonstrate her ability to do so. For example, if she is assigned the task of creating a dance video, she is immediately excited to show the dance" (Interview with MN, 7-4-2021)

Praise had a significant impact on the continuity of children's learning at home; children became more motivated, and their enthusiasm for learning increased.

#### **4.6. Giving Reward**

Informants rewarded children when they excelled at something, particularly when studying. This was intended to increase children's enthusiasm for learning while also serving as a form of parental support for their children. In an interview, MN stated: "Yes, of course, an example of a reward that I give is that if a child succeeds in doing a task, I will let her play on her cellphone. This will usually excite her. She likes playing HP as motivation. Besides, what else do I give? Yes, she likes snacking. She does not really like toys. She loves playing with her cell phone or eating snacks. If she obeys the rules, I will give her a bonus in the form of things she likes" (Interview with MN, 7-4-2021)

Rewards given by informants to their children included giving permission to play with cellphones, buying food, going for walks, and so on.

#### **4.7. Understanding the Children**

Informants tried to understand the children's condition while not forcing them to study. They also attempted to solve their children's problems. In addition, parents also used things that children enjoy as entertainment to keep their interest in learning stable. They were also sensitive to children's needs and concerned about their comfort while learning.

One of the informants, ED, explained that as a mother, she gradually taught her children to be disciplined and willing to express their feelings. Even so, not all informants disciplined their children, but they were all very familiar with the child's condition and needs. Informants MN and TS were still required to ask the children's wishes because the children were unable to express their feelings and opinions. This was different with informant ED. ED explained the following in an interview: "Ditya is the type of child who likes to complain, but she also needs to be asked what she wants. For example, if I asked her to write the numbers 1 to 10, she will bid if she only wants to write three numbers. Normally, I responded to this by suggesting her to write three numbers in the morning, and three at night" (Interview with ED, 10-4-2021).

During distance learning assistance, parents always paid attention to their children's learning comfort so as not to impose their situation and condition at home. They tended to give children space in their learning while remaining focused on their academics.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the above-mentioned analysis, it is clear that parents accept their children's condition and are willing to assist children in learning during distance learning. This acceptance is reflected in the warmth and affection shown by parents, as well as their attention and comfort, nurturing, and support.

In the family, parents need to establish interaction and communication with their children so that their growth and development are optimal, where the children become the main point or priority. This research found that all informants put their children as a priority in the family. The method used by the informants is in line with research conducted by Cahyani (2015), which said that acceptance is knowing and fulfilling children's rights, one of which is unconditionally loving the child, accepting all of the child's strengths and weaknesses, placing the child as an important person (priority) in the family, and providing material support to children [14].

The closeness of parents and children increases when they collaborate on learning activities because they spend more time together. As stated by Rohner, R. P., Khaleque, A., & Cournoyer, the placement of the dimensions given by parents to children arises from the quality of the affectionate bond between parents and children. According to this theory, parents become important figures for children because the emotional and psychological conditions of children are dependent on the quality of their relationship with their parents [15].

Furthermore, Rohner, R. P., Khaleque, A., and Cournoyer asserted that the placement of dimensions given by parents to children is influenced by the quality of the affectionate bond between parents and children [15]. According to this theory, parents become important figures for children because the emotional and psychological conditions of children are dependent on the quality of their relationship with their parents.

In addition to emotional bonds, informants engaged in physical and verbal behavior to make children feel accepted and to express a warm and affectionate attitude toward children. In line with Rohner, R. P., Khaleque, A., & Cournoyer, when parents act as the above participants do with feelings of love, they are considered affectionate [12]. Physical forms of behavior include hugging, kissing, and stroking, while verbal behavior is done by giving awards, compliments, and saying pleasant things or other positive things to children. Behavior that is full of

warmth and affection and love is an expression of parental behavior that reflects acceptance [16].

From the results of the research, parents tended to provide assistance and explain the material by using gestures because their children did not understand the material provided. According to Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter in Mulyana, non-verbal communication includes all stimuli (except verbal stimuli) in a communication setting, produced by individuals, which have potential value for the sender or receiver [17]. As a form of parental support, the informants also provided learning facilities for children in the form of IT and writing tools such as pencils, so that children could understand the material better and learn more comfortably. The various methods used by parents to assist distance learning cannot be separated from good parenting, in which parents understand the characteristics and needs of the child in order to produce a good relationship.

According to Training and Faculty (2016), the relationship between parents and children is critical in developing children's trust in their parents. When this is accomplished, parents will be able to fulfill their role as educators [18]. For school-age children, communication between parents and children has an impact on a child's school experiences, such as school readiness and academic and social success at school. During a pandemic, a child's learning environment at home is critical for school readiness and academic success during distance learning.

Parental acceptance is expressed through concern for children, sensitivity to children's interests, as well as a good relationship with children [19]. It was discovered that parents try to accommodate their children's wishes as much as possible. This is done to keep children's interest in learning and to make them feel at ease. Parents communicate with their children using soft tones and intonations. Refiana (2019), argued that children with special needs frequently communicate with vocals, which are nonverbal elements in speech, namely how to speak, which includes speech tone, loud or weak of voice, speaking speed, voice quality, intonation, and others [20]. Using a soft and gentle tone of voice makes children feel more cared for and comfortable with their parents.

Ahsani (2020) explained understanding children's learning styles is expected to make learning easier for children. The use of appropriate learning styles, such as selecting a learning atmosphere and preparing a learning environment for children, can make children feel at ease and home while learning. Children will also not feel

compelled to learn. In terms of parenting styles, parents tend to educate their children by following their wishes while keeping their emotions in mind. This is demonstrated by rewarding children to increase their enthusiasm and challenge them to be more active.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions presented, it is possible to conclude that parental interpersonal communication in distance learning assistance for children with special needs cannot be separated from parental acceptance of their children. Acceptance by parents implies that they understand the child's condition and are aware of the child's needs, as well as emphasizing the importance of parents to provide learning assistance during distance learning. There are similarities in the acceptance of children in terms of assistance, namely that parents do not force the child to learn and are sensitive to the child's needs. Besides, they also act as teachers during distance learning. Some examples of parental acceptance of their children are seen from support, affection, and parenting styles performed by parents.

The findings of this research provide information about the description of parental assistance for children with special needs during distance learning. Researchers conducted observations to obtain more objective data. One of the limitations of this research is the limited time available for data collection, which is dependent on the parents' free time and the child's willingness to be observed.

Parental learning assistance appears to have been carried out effectively. This is evident from the children's responses and their enthusiasm for learning. Parents need to be more patient and control their emotions in dealing with children during distance learning assistance. This is because, with the child's behavior, parents may lose their temper and will even yell and scold the child. For school-age children, communication between parents and children has an impact on a child's school experiences, such as school readiness and academic and social success at school.

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