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## Social skills and behavior autism spectrum disorder during covid-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

The research aims to describe the social development and behavior of autistic children and find ways to develop the social skills and behavior of autistic children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research method is qualitative research. The data were collected using interviews, documentation studies, and observations on parents and special assistant teachers for children with autism spectrum disorders of primary and secondary school age. Check the validity of the data used source triangulation. The results showed that autistic children during this pandemic experienced a decline in behavioral, social, and communication aspects. The method that is considered effective in overcoming this is by using daily activities for the development of social skills and behavior. The components of these activities are 1). Creating communication using verbal and visual language. 2). Develop new routines by forming new habits. 3). Monitor the mental development and physical health of children. 4). Establish regular collaboration and communication with schools. 5). Utilize existing human resources at home. 6). Literacy practice in children. 7). Always involve children in daily activities at home. 8). Encouraging children's social relations to connect with friends and teachers by utilizing technology media.



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### Introduction

Covid-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is a new type of virus that attacks the human respiratory system. This virus belongs to the group of coronaviruses, namely SARS Cov-2, which spreads through droplets or small particles. General symptoms of people in this situation and condition certainly have an impact on all aspects, not only on the economic aspect, which is greatly affected but also in the field of education (Aji, 2020; Dewi 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic, which has been running for more than a year, has not only had an impact on children who generally do not experience barriers to mental, social, language, behavioral, cognitive, and physical growth. But it is very unfavorable for the position of children with special needs (ABK) (Mauludy, 2020) especially in autism disorders who should experience communication, social and behavioral disorders as well as emotions. In line with (Sunaryo and Surtikani, 2011). children with special needs are aimed at a group of people. Children who have abnormalities or differences in such away from the average normal child in terms of physical, mental, emotional, social or mix these characteristics and cause them to experience obstacles to achieving optimal development so that they require special education services to achieve optimal development. Autism is a condition of a person from birth or during infancy, which makes him unable to form normal social relationships or communication (Prayino, 2020; Dewi, 2021). This results in the child being isolated from other humans and entering a world of repetitive, obsessive activities and interests (Baron-Cohen, 1993).

Symptoms that appear in this 2-year-old child are difficulties in social interaction and communication and have a limited pattern of behavior and interest. According to (Anagnostou, 2015) social communication deficits are also an early indicator of autism spectrum disorders and are a factor in long-term outcomes. According to (Powers (1989 in Yusuf, 2018)) the characteristics of autistic children were existed six symptoms/disorders, namely: the field of social interaction: a). Not interested in playing with friends or prefers to be alone. b). No or little eye contact, or avoid making eye contact., c). Likes to pull other people's hands to do what he wants, for example when he wants to ask for a drink. Field of communication (speech, language, and communication): a) Language development is slow or completely absent. b) Enjoys imitating or parroting (echolalia); If you like to imitate, you can memorize the words or songs without understanding their meaning. c) The child looks deaf, has difficulty speaking, or has spoken but disappeared d) Sometimes the words used do not match their meaning. e) Repeatedly meaningless babbling, in a language no one else can understand; Speech is not used as a means of communication. f) Some of these children do not speak (non-verbal) or speak little (less verbal) until adulthood. This is in line with (Yuwono, 2012) that the characteristics of autistic children have three disorders that are interrelated with one another, namely: behavior, social interaction, and verbal communication. Inadequate language is a hallmark of autism spectrum disorder (autism). Autism is a behavioral and dimensionally defined developmental disorder of the immature brain that has a wide range of severity and many genes are involved (Rapin & Dunn, 2003).

In the situation and condition of stay at home, doing all activities at home. Based on the government's policy through the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) which issued Circular Letter Number 15 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for the Implementation of Learning From Home in the Emergency Period for the Spread of Covid-19. Through the Expert Staff of the Minister of Education and Culture in the Regulatory Sector, Chatarina Muliana Girsang conveyed this Circular Letter Number 15 to strengthen the Circular Letter of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 4 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Education in the Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Emergency Period. "Currently, learning services are still following the Minister of Education and Culture's SE number 4 of 2020 which is strengthened by the Secretary General's SE number 15 of 2020 during the Covid-19 emergency," This circular changes all arrangements for implementing face-to-face learning was replaced with online learning. The position of children with special needs was very worrying when this policy was implemented because many parents were not ready to replace the role of teachers in educating children with special needs including autistic children at home.

Minsih's research (2021) stated that one of the problems of children with special needs during the pandemic included the unpreparedness of the school curriculum and the ability of parents to educate children with special needs. Autistic children have limitations in several aspects including aspects of social communication and behavior due to maturity disorders in the dimensions of the immature brain (Rapin & Dunn, 2013)). Of course, this is very influential when face-to-face learning is replaced with online learning which is only knowledge transfer, while activities carried out in schools in the form of social therapy, cognition, and speech therapy were carried out routinely must be stopped and the loss of interaction with friends which also affects development social. (Lynch & Irvine, 2009) research that a good inclusive education provider school will give special attention through special and added services for children with special needs so that they can learn well. And in this case, the school, namely the special assistant teacher (GPK) must always coordinate with the family related to the education system during this pandemic. Parents were directed to have ways of continuing their children's education at home so that all the obstacles experienced by autistic children, especially in the social and behavioral aspects, can develop well during this pandemic.

Research by Shorey, Esperanza (Shorey, Haugan, and Evelyn, 2020). Parenting a child with autism is a challenging lifelong journey, in which service providers and family members play integral roles in ensuring positive parenting experiences. Therefore, the development of culturally tailored supportive programs is necessary to provide parents with emotional and informational support that increases their parenting self-efficacy and parenting satisfaction while ensuring the positive well-being of caregivers and the maintenance of positive family dynamics. So, based on the statement above, it can be emphasized that habituation and culture are needed in providing emotional support and information to parents in increasing self-efficacy and parenting satisfaction. The purpose of this study is to describe the behavioral and social conditions of autistic children and find ways to develop the social skills and behavior of autistic children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Method

This research will use the type of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a type of research based on facts that look real without any form of calculation and data is obtained by describing the process and meaning by using the researcher as a key instrument (Sugiyono, 2015). The purpose of qualitative research is to understand individual views, find and explain the process, and explore in-depth information about the subject or limited research setting (Putra, 2013). The research design that will be used in this research is phenomenological research. Phenomenological research is one kind of qualitative research that looks at individual experiences. Data is a collection of facts, information, and events that are collected to obtain information. This study will use books, journals, and documentation about the implementation of learning.

Data collection is one of the most important parts of research. Data collection techniques are the ways or steps researchers take in taking and finding data. By the opinion Sugiyono (2015) that data collection techniques are a strategic step because it is the main goal in research. Data collection techniques are interviews, observations, and documentation studies. The validity of the data is to test the research conducted to maintain the quality of the data to remain valid. To check the validity of the data based on the criteria. By using triangulation of sources and methods. In this study, the data analysis technique was carried out using qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2016). Data analysis in this study used inductive analysis simultaneously, continuously, or repeatedly until it was complete, or finding a saturation point or data constant by going through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification.

## Results and Discussion

### The condition of children with autism during the pandemic

Online learning which is the mainstay of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic is considered ineffective and tends to cause various problems, especially for children with special needs, including children with autism. Based on the results of interviews from several parents and special assistant teacher (GPK) at schools providing inclusive education that with online learning children with special needs experience setbacks both in social aspects, independence, behavior, emotions, and enthusiasm for learning. Even parents have difficulty in handling and mentoring while at home. This is in line with what was conveyed by Gz's mother who has a child with autism that:

*During these two semesters I was overwhelmed, madam, because in your memory it is GPK, we as parents who accompany at home have not been able to properly replace the role of GPK as a companion, in the current PSBB conditions, it is very difficult for us. What's more, Ananda still has a younger brother with who I have to help study. So it's hard, right, Ms*

Based on the excerpt of the interview, it shows that parents are not ready to replace the role of GPK in schools to become mentors for autistic children while at school. This is due to the lack of parental attention to children's learning activities due to the busyness of parents. However, there are also, many parents who care and have full awareness of accompanying their children during the pandemic. This is as stated by GPK that many parents of students with special needs with autism are very cooperative and have a strong commitment to providing the best way to help children during online learning at home. The GPK for inclusive education at Muhammadiyah Alam Mentari elementary school stated that:

*Good communication and relationships between teachers and parents greatly facilitate us as well as GPK in educating children in this Covid situation and condition. Because of this situation, more children are with their parents at home. Parents continue to communicate with teachers regarding their children's daily activities at home because this is an agreement between the school and parents. Children's activities are contained in the daily activity book of each ABK which can be innovated by parents. Parents are required to report the assistance system at home.*

Based on the interview excerpt above, it can be concluded that GPK hopes that communication with parents of children goes well so that the development and growth of children with special needs can run optimally. This is also based on guidelines made by teachers for parents of children with special needs in assisting the online learning process through zoom meetings and Whatapps groups. With these guidelines and guidelines, it is very easy for parents to give to assist. Parents are also required to create innovative and varied activities for autistic children. During this pandemic period, the social development of autistic children stagnated and even experienced a setback, this was felt by some parents of autistic children and was strengthened by the statement of the Lth assistant teacher who stated:

*This condition was very difficult for us and parents of autistic children, where these children have limitations in social aspects, behavior, and verbal communication. This condition adds to the limitations if we and our parents are not skilled and intelligent in managing this situation. The skill in managing this is by creating children's activities while at home. The school and the family must be committed to assisting children at home.*

Based on the facts above, it can be understood that the decline in social aspects and behavior of children with autism during the pandemic is very much felt by teachers and parents. So that parents and teachers must take ways to create meaningful activities for children so that the social conditions and behavior of autistic children can be fulfilled properly. Because autistic children have strengths, namely strengths in aspects of consistent behavior and systemic thinking, but they tend to have difficulty in adapting to new social conditions. Therefore, parents must be consistent in assisting and must strive to determine and choose the best pattern to identify their superior potential through the right program to accommodate their needs. Here are some behaviors and social attitudes of autistic children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Behaviors and social attitudes of autistic children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aspect	Condition	Need
1. Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children tend to be alone</li> <li>• Fear of leaving the house</li> <li>• It's hard to say hello to friends</li> <li>• Anxious about Covid news</li> <li>• Hard to get along</li> <li>• Empathy is difficult</li> </ul>	<p>Have good social communication. Have the desire to leave the house, be able to socialize, and have the idea that it is safe to go out of the house with health protocol.</p> <p>Must have a desire to interact with peers.</p>
2. Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignorant with the existing situation</li> <li>• Behavior is getting disorganized</li> <li>• Only focus on one activity</li> <li>• Decline in speaking</li> <li>• It's hard to pretend</li> </ul>	<p>Have a good concern, have a directed attitude, can behave in a variety of ways.</p> <p>Creating activities that require children to always communicate verbally.</p>

### Strategies for Assisting Children with Autism

Strategies for educating and assisting autistic children during the pandemic are based on information sources for parents of autistic students and special assistant teachers (GPK) who accompany autistic children. Based on interviews with MKF parents that while accompanying autistic children in learning, Mother did the following ways:

*I continue to try to give the best education for Ananda during this Covid-19 pandemic, Ms. by continuing to communicate with GPK, seeking information through webinars, consulting with experts via WhatsApp and occasionally I invite family members to be all involved in assisting Ananda in completing their daily activities so that social development and behavior is getting better. I tried to understand him that in this pandemic we must be healthy and always happy as the key to avoiding Covid-19.*

Based on the interview excerpt above, it can be concluded that several parents are committed to educating their children at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, in line with the interviews of parents while accompanying autistic children at home are:

*We invite children to chat consistently with simple words and accompanied by visuals. Create a new habit that must be scheduled that could paste on the wall. Involve siblings to have the opportunity to accompany children. Inviting children to do physical activities such as sports and activities according to their hobbies. The school organizes Daily Activity activities for children with autism.*

The statement above is an illustration of the mentoring program that has been implemented by parents to try to find the best pattern in assisting children with special needs during this pandemic. Furthermore, the school in this case the special assistant teacher (GPK) has full responsibility for conducting online learning for children with special needs (ABK) to always communicate with parents regarding assistance at home. The role of GPK will be successful if it can set up good cooperation with the parents/families of ABK because during online learning the role of parents is very vital in assisting their learning at home.

This study also made several observations during online learning activities using the Zoom application in class II at Muhammadiyah Alam Surya Mentari elementary school where the class had several children with



special needs with two children who had autism, the two children followed Zoom with the assistance of people old at home and on schedule. The accompanying teacher will make occasional home visits according to the schedule made in addition to limited face-to-face meetings at schools. As with Fz's Parents interview:

*The school initially carried out a face-to-face learning system using a zoning system, but because the meeting pattern was deemed ineffective because the zones where students' homes were located far apart finally face-to-face meetings were held in a limited way at school with a schedule once a week, namely every Monday starting at 08.00 - 10.00 WIB and the next teacher visits home, the rest is via zoom, Ms. This policy only lasted a few times, the rest of the re-learning was done online due to tightening rules from the education office regarding face-to-face learning.*

Based on this explanation, the school has tried to provide the best education for all its students, especially for children with special needs with autism by imposing home visits to carry out learning at home but on a limited basis. Furthermore, learning assistance is carried out by the family (father, mother, brother, etc.) simultaneously according to the schedule that has been prepared. The school always coordinates with the child through the family and the family must establish good cooperation so that the roles of the two-run harmoniously. The process of mentoring learning for autistic children by parents and GPK during the pandemic era can be reduced from the following two statements:

*We always communicate via WA Group to remind parents of daily activities that have been conveyed to children, parents should always report their child's progress to the school every weekend (GPK Class II SD M ASM).*

As a parent, I always try to do whatever the school has instructed me to do to always accompany your child to study at home, including accompanying your child to do activities all day from waking up to sleeping again, not just doing activities according to daily activities because of that I see it's too simple, madam, so I developed it again. I invite children to do morning sports activities by running, cycling, sunbathing, giving children routine tasks so that children can be responsible for their duties, doing kitchen activities, gardening, and creating games just to fill time for togetherness. It all depends on the schedule, Ms. .mainly so that the child's atmosphere is not boring (MFS mother)

This had done by the school and the family so that the growth and development of children with special needs with autism go well during the pandemic. Based on the development of the results of interviews and observations, it was being formulated that the ways to grow social skills and behaviour of autistic children in the Covid-19 pandemic era used by parents and teachers are:

- Creating communication using the verbal and visual language regularly and repeatedly.
- Develop new routines such as forming new habits by creating a new schedule for children. By using the board of choice so that children can express their wishes.
- Monitor the mental development and physical health of children by providing opportunities for all family members to convey what they feel, either verbally or visually (symbols & pictures).
- Establish regular collaboration and communication with the school.
- Utilize existing resources at home by making a list of child assistance by whom and what their roles and duties are.
- Involve children in daily activities (cooking, washing, farming and cleaning the house)
- Learning assistance through literacy practices of reading, writing, expressing and telling stories.
- Encourage social relations for autistic children who prefer to be alone through collaborative activities and communication with family members, to be involved in daily activities at home.

Based on some of the points written, it was reduced that parents of autistic children have innovations and various ways in developing social skills and behavior of autistic children. Because these two aspects are aspects that must be built in autistic children who have social, behavioral, language and emotional communication disorders. Some of the activities carried out are based on the direction and guidance of special accompanying teachers, but many of the activities carried out are creative ideas from the family (parents and siblings). Family is the main key that supports the development of autistic children in the mindset of this pandemic, therefore the key must be ensured that its role is correct so that this support runs well. The following are some examples of autistic children's activities during the pandemic with the mentoring process.

Table 2. Autistic children's activities during the pandemic with the mentoring process.

No	Activities	Time	Development Aspect	Associate
1	Share and role play with siblings	13.00	Social - Behavior	Siblings (Brother & Sister)
2	Using the board of choice so that children can express their wishes.	Anytime	Behavior - Emotion	Father
3	Morning exercise: running, cycling, sunbathing and swimming	07.00-08.00	Behavior - Emotion	Father
4	Inviting to speak verbally and visually	Anytime	Language	Mother / Sibling
5	Learning by doing (practice the material learned)	Anytime	Behavior	All Family Members
6	Video Call, Zoom and meeting with teachers, friends and relatives.	08.00-10.00	Social communication	Mother
7	Literacy Exercise, • Watching the video and telling story (Explanation on Covid) • Read and re-write important points in the story • Make healthy living tips and make videos with friends • Draw the object you like and retell the context	10.00-11.30	Cognitive- psychomotor- Behavior	Mother/sibling
8	Guess the word games then re-write	19.00-20.30	Language-Social	Father
9	Sports: watch youtube and follow the movement	Weekend	Physical-Motor	Mother/Sibling
10	Engage in parental activities (washing the car, participating in cooking, planting, and cleaning the house)	Weekend	Motor, language, behaviour, and emotion	All family members

### Strategies for Assisting Children with Autism

Autism occurs in children aged 24 months because of neurobiological disorders that can cause problems in communicating and interacting. Symptoms of autism are characterized by a lack of interaction and unstable emotions and poor views of the interlocutor in communicating so that children are considered strange figures. In this pandemic condition, the position of autistic children is very disadvantaged due to various policies during the pandemic that are disconnecting social interactions. In this case, the family and school must decide the best pattern in creating a conducive learning atmosphere to optimize the social, behavioural and verbal development of children with autism.

Communication between schools and families should go well as (Hornby, 2014) states that schools providing inclusive education must have the same goal in educating children with special needs, this is for optimal child development. This is also in line with (Smith, 2014) that parents and schools are the main keys for the development of children with special needs and therefore must have a uniform vision between the two.

GPK continues to try to find solutions to the obstacles it experiences, because it has its own challenges in teaching autistic children in inclusive school (Lindsay, 2013). Based on observations in autistic children that their behavior has regressed, it can be seen that negative behaviors such as: increased reflex action, increased self-talk, even children perform hysterical actions for no reason because theoretically children with special needs autism experience behavioral, social, and behavioral barriers, emotional, language and cognition. As (Yusuf, 2018) states that autism experiences developmental barriers in terms of interaction, communication and behavior which are often classified as mild and severe.

Autism was understood as a neurobiological disorder that affects the way children learn, communicate, exist in the environment and in their social relationships (Yuwono, 2014). As a characteristic of disorders that were owned in aspects of behavior, social interaction, and verbal communication, even some literature mentions that accompanying disorders are emotional disorders and lack of motor coordination and sensory

perception related to difficulties in catching and throwing and jumping (Worth, 2012). The characteristics of this disorder can be illustrated in the following figure:

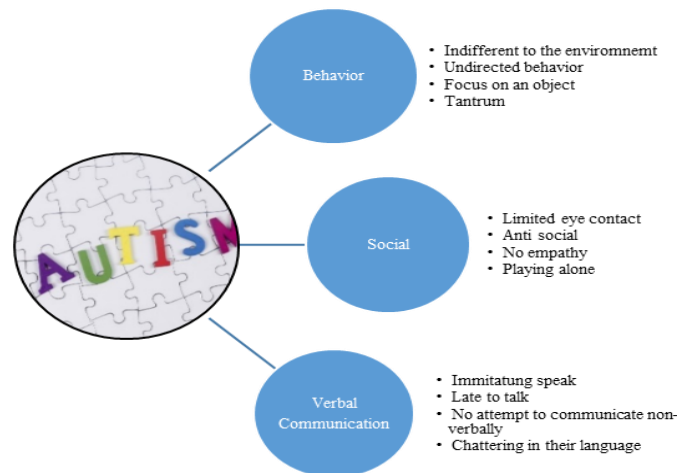


Figure 1<The Characteristics of ASD>

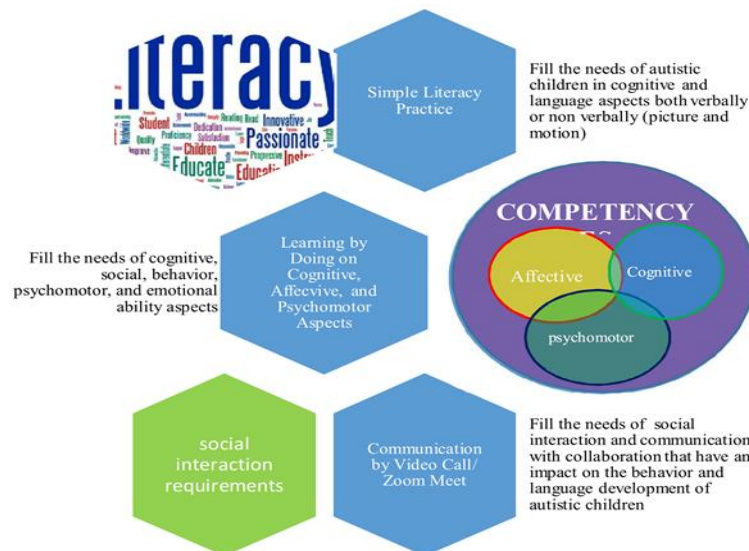
The three aspects of disorders in autistic children above have elements of connection with one another, usually autistic children have developmental disorders in aspects of language-verbal, social and behavioral with different symptoms according to their respective maturity levels. The child's inadequate language development is a hallmark of autism spectrum disorder. Autism is a developmental disorder defined by behavior and due to immature brain dimensions (Rapin & Dunn, 2003). During the Covid-19 pandemic, autistic children will experience developmental setbacks if the family/parents are not able to find the best pattern for learning, how to guide them and how to give the needed therapeutic services such as occupational therapy, speech therapy and physiotherapy. Of course, all of these processes must be standardized according to the applicable health protocol and always prevent the wheat and chocolate diet and diet to minimize hyperactivity. As (Yuwono (2014)) states that autistic children must go on a food diet to reduce their excessive behavior and are not per general behavior.

Teachers must have a priority scale in implementing the programs that have been prepared. As (Florian, L., Young, K., & Rouse, M. (2015) stated that teachers who were forged in schools providing inclusive education were equipped with various competencies to educate children with special needs. Because the characteristics of ABK Autism as stated by Yusuf (2018) have deviations in behavior, communication and interaction so that they experience limitations in social interaction. Because children with autism experience disorders and deviations in language, emotional and social aspects (Yuwono, 2014; Handojo, 2013). Autism spectrum disorder is a construct used to describe individuals with certain disorders, especially in the combination of disturbances in social communication and repetitive behavior, highly restricted interests and/or sensory behavior that begins early in life (Lord. C., 2020).

From several forms of behavioral deviation, parents and GPK should carry out the process of optimal guidance and educational assistance for autistic children with more emphasis on the aspects of the deviation (Minsih, 2021). For example, children experiencing social deviations should be involved in social activities by communicating socially with friends, relatives and neighbours online through video calls. In line with Surilena (2004) that social interactions of autistic children must be carried out comprehensively with family and school support through social support provided in the form of instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. These three supports, if given consistently, will be able to develop the social attitudes of autistic children. According to (Vismara (2010) that the provision of scientific services (therapy) for children with autism spectrum disorders but the intervention program applies scientific teaching principles from applied behavior analysis (ABA) has been identified as an effective model for developing children's skills.

Parents need to facilitate children's activities to stay connected with friends, teachers, therapists and others by utilizing available facilities. As (Garnida (2015) states that children with autism will experience growth and development of behavior, social, emotional and language if they are given special treatment and relevant services, namely: a good education system, relevant therapeutic services, dynamic family support and the role of positive community support. (Elkins, 2003) states that parental support has a significant

influence on the development of children with special needs. Thus the importance of parental involvement in determining the learning success of children with special needs is also stated by (Hornby (2014) that there several aspects that have a very important role in realizing the success of inclusive schools including the existence of a parental participation model. This model can be described in a close relationship between one another, namely information, collaboration, communication, relationships, support, policies that are synergized with one another. The following are activities that have been successfully carried out by parents of autistic children who are often applied at home during the Covid-19 pandemic:



Picture 2 <A Parental Participation Model>

## Conclusions

The process of optimal guidance and educational assistance for autistic children with more emphasis on social activities by communicating socially with friends, relatives and neighbors online through video calls, zoom, Gmeet etc. Social interaction for autistic children is carried out comprehensively with family and school support through social support, intervention programs and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy from professionals. Parents must try to create innovations in providing activities for autistic children to develop their social skills, behaviour and communication so that they can function normally. Some of the activities carried out for the social skills and behavior of children with autism, namely: 1) Creating communication using verbal and visual language. 2) Developing a new routine is like forming a new habit by creating a new schedule for the child. 3) Monitoring the mental development and physical health of children. Establish regular collaboration and communication with the school. 4) Utilize existing resources at home. 5) Involve children in daily activities. 6) Learning assistance through literacy practices of reading, writing, expressing and telling stories. 7) Encouraging social relations for autistic children.

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