



## The role of family counseling in handling autistic children during at-home learning periods

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**Abstract:** The creation of good relations between family members during the COVID-19 pandemic is considered important to accommodate the learning needs of autistic children as during the pandemic, they are not able to learn optimally. This study aims to establish the role of family counseling in handling autistic children during at-home learning. The research uses a qualitative case study design. The informants were parents and core families of autistic children, and data collection involved interviews, observations, and documentation. The data analysis techniques employed were inductive analysis through reduction, data description, data coding, interpretation, and conclusions. The results show that the involvement of family members took place on a scheduled basis, relations between them improve and making independent. The passion for building self-potential by developing a sense of respect for family members who help with autistic children's activities when learning from home. Family counseling through the involvement of family members can have a positive effect on the behavioral development of autistic children and a beneficial impact on other family members. The implication is that family counseling can be applied to help the social-emotional development of autistic children.

**Keywords:** family counseling; autistic children; at-home learning; COVID-19 pandemic

**Abstrak:** Terciptanya hubungan baik antaranggota keluarga selama masa pandemi COVID-19 dinilai penting untuk mengakomodasi kebutuhan belajar anak autis karena selama pandemi COVID-19 tidak dapat belajar secara optimal. Tujuan penelitian ini menemukan peran konseling keluarga pada penanganan anak autis selama belajar dari rumah. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif studi kasus. Informan merupakan orang tua dan keluarga inti anak autis. Pengumpulan data menggunakan wawancara, pengamatan, dan dokumentasi. Teknik analisis data menggunakan analisis induktif melalui reduksi, deskripsi data, koding data, interpretasi, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pelibatan anggota keluarga dilakukan secara terjadwal agar relasi antaranggota keluarga semakin baik, untuk memandirikan anggota keluarga. Semangat dalam membangun potensi diri dengan mengembangkan rasa penghargaan pada anggota keluarga yang mendampingi aktivitas anak autis ketika belajar dari rumah. Konseling keluarga melalui pelibatan anggota keluarga dapat melahirkan sisi yang positif bagi perkembangan perilaku anak autis serta dapat memberikan dampak yang baik bagi anggota keluarga yang lain. Implikasi, konseling keluarga dapat diterapkan untuk membantu perkembangan sosial-emosional anak autis.

**Kata Kunci:** konseling keluarga; anak autis; belajar dari rumah; pandemi COVID-19

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## Introduction

At-home learning (AHL) is a common term that has been used during the COVID-19 pandemic (Strang et al., 2020). It results from the imposition of lockdown and social distancing policies in countries around the world (Bhamani et al., 2020) and focuses on distance learning activities using internet-based technologies such as chat and video conferencing applications (Pathak et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020).

However, learning from home has three problems that are often discussed in the literature. First, children's difficulty in adapting (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020); many prefer to learn directly in class because learning together is more fun than being at home without friends (Nurulfa et al., 2021). In addition, they may have difficulty understanding and operating the various devices needed to support home learning (Adnan, 2020). The second problem is that of double burden (Irawan et al., 2020). When learning at home, students tend to study more, and are asked to understand all the material in-depth on their own (Nurpatri et al., 2021). Third, the teacher is free from the responsibility for the problems faced by the students (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Many teachers only give assignments to their students to complete and be collected through online learning platforms. Therefore, the pandemic situation has forced parents to replace teachers in order to help their children learn at home (Susanto & Danoebroto, 2021). These three problems can mean that children in this situation experience a decrease in motivation to take part in learning activities.

On the other hand, at-home learning provides opportunities to explore, and gives more opportunities for students to reflect through their independent learning and achieve higher-order thinking skills (Kholiq et al., 2021). The learning process no longer simply involves listening to a description of the material from the teacher, but

students also take part in activities such as observing, doing and demonstrating (Hidayat et al., 2020). This concept is referred to as e-learning, which is considered to have made a significant contribution to changes in the learning process as it focuses on student-centered learning (Hasan et al., 2021). However, the negative impact felt by the community in relation to education is a decrease in children's learning motivation; less discipline amongst children; and a fall in learning achievement in the fields of literacy and numeracy, together with reduced participation and children's curiosity (Asmuni, 2020; Kusumaningrum et al., 2020; Sutarna et al., 2021).

A positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the restoration of the role of family institutions and the creation of good relations between family members. This is because before the pandemic, the role of family was not considered essential because family members were all occupied with their respective activities, so their roles did not function effectively; the ability to understand each other's character in solving their respective problems was weakened; and the understanding of family dynamics was minimal. Indeed, parents' concern for the level of their children's development is still minimal, which is a result of several factors, including ones related to the parents themselves (Amelasasih, 2016; Farida, 2015; Latifah, 2020).

So far, the relationship between family members was weak because all their activities primarily took place outside the home. Autistic children were educated and assisted by teachers in schools and specialized institutions (Sari, 2016). The pandemic forced family members to take over the duties of teachers, professionals, and therapists. However, with at-home learning there are challenges faced by autistic children because their teachers, parents, and other family members are involved in assisting with the learning process (Yuwono, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, the education of autistic children has been neglected (Minsih et al., 2021) due to the lack of family awareness of the rights of autistic children to grow and develop appropriately. Families should encourage learning and continue to pay more attention (D. P. Sari, 2013) to the development of their autistic children, including in activities during at-home learning in the COVID-19 era.

According to the Center for Disability Studies (PSD) of the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) Sebelas Maret University (UNS) Surakarta, the positive impact of AHL is that children with special needs can receive more attention during the pandemic (Humas UNS, 2020). This is in line with special education (SLB) teacher Sihman, who states that during the pandemic there has been communication between teachers and parents regarding the development of children with special needs. This is because during online learning parents can play the role of companions for their children, which has never previously occurred (Amalia, 2021). Family support for children with autism must involve four aspects: emotional support, instrumental support, information support, and assessment support, so that the autistic child can enjoy positive development (Aisyah, 2019). In line with the statement that if the family functions correctly, it will be able to build a strong community and resilience (Amelasasih, 2016; Noor, 2014).

Family counseling is considered the best solution for special needs children with autism during at-home learning as it can revitalize the role of family members in developing their potential. Family support will help autistic children grow optimally, even achieving the same or higher levels than regular student (Farida, 2015). It is very useful in developing the potential of autistic children during at-home learning and is a very effective activity for realizing the influential role of

family members (Farida, 2015; Purnamasari, 2019; Satriah, 2017; Ubaidillah, 2018; Zaini, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a factor that has caused a decrease in the ability and independence of autistic children; meaning their development has declined, as found in other studies (Alhuzimi, 2021; Althiabi, 2021; Amorim et al., 2020; Mutluer et al., 2020; Priyambodo & An-Nisa, 2021; Shahrbanian et al., 2021). This research complements some of these studies, which are less specific in providing solutions to the needs of autistic children during the pandemic, and in discussing the complexity of their difficulties when taking part in at-home learning during the pandemic. Children with special needs are defined as those with disabilities in development and growth (Cieza et al., 2018) and more broadly as vulnerable children at risk from their disabilities. For example, some may face developmental delays which may not have a specific diagnosis but are judged to need special services, support, and monitoring (McLurkin, 2019).

Therefore, the active role of family members in assisting their children and their optimal involvement in counseling are necessary for dealing with the situation. If family counseling takes place regularly, it will have a positive impact on the development of children with autism. It has a beneficial impact on the developmental aspects of autistic children because it includes the following: 1) involvement of family members in counseling activities for autistic children, thus establishing close relationships between family members; 2) helping family members learn to understand family dynamics; 3) equipping family members with the ability to understand the character of children with autism; 4) developing a sense of mutual respect between family members; 5) a balanced spirit of autistic children's growth and development; and 6) application of family therapy as a structural approach to dealing with family problems (O'Farrell et al., 2010; Sackett & Cook, 2021; Stewart, 2020).

On the other hand, such counseling can lead to a rejection of other family members. This is in line with what was conveyed by family members of children with autism, who thought that the complexity of their roles in assisting autistic children by implementing a structural approach. Some family members felt burdened by having to continue to play their role in the mentoring phase during the learning from home process. Therefore, a clear explanation is needed for why they need to care for, and have full awareness of the development of, their autistic children, which is a shared responsibility.

Family counseling is an essential issue in the handling of autistic children because many related studies have only focused on therapists and special education teachers (Badiah, 2017; Rofiah, 2015; Sutarna et al., 2021; Wardhani, 2019). Such counseling is considered a learning solution for autistic children during a pandemic, as it is involved in developing the role of family members in the children's development. Specific studies related to this are few; although there has been research on tutoring and counseling services (Gainan, 2013; Simorangkir, 2019), no studies have specifically covered the involvement of family members.

In current conditions, all families who have children with special needs, including autism, need to strengthen their mental resilience; play a role in maintaining the integrity and welfare of the family (Nurhastuti et al., 2021) and build mutually independent relationships between members (Geldard & Geldard, 2011). The first actions that need to be taken are managing emotions and stress, increasing life motivation, and fostering communication between family members (Nurhastuti et al., 2021). In line with previous research (Farida, 2015), the efforts of parents, especially mothers (with their maternal motives) in guiding autistic children by the habituation of good behavior to understanding behavior, to grow

optimally. During the pandemic, children with special needs are experiencing various obstacles in performing activities at home, especially related to at-home learning. Naturally, such a learning problem is not only one for autistic children, but also for children in general.

## Methods

The study involved qualitative research with a case study design. Case study research can provide researchers with opportunities to explore and describe events from various data sources and points of view (Yin, 2003). This study included the following stages: determining the problems discussed; determining the data sources and informants; collecting the data; triangulating the data; conducting data analysis; and compiling reports. The final part of the study reaches an understanding of the phenomena in question. The study informants were parents, children with autism, and the core family members of the three families of children with autism.

The study data are in the form of field notes and interview excerpts. The basis for selecting the data was their ability to pass the data triangulation stage, namely the data testing process through triangulation methods and techniques (Creswell, 2015). The text used is in the form of interview excerpts in the form of word descriptions about the components of family counseling related to the handling of children with autism.

The process of collecting the study data involved several methods, namely in-depth interviews with the informants, participant observation processes, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted with parents of children with special needs, the core members of the families, and other family members involved in mentoring children with autism. Observations were made to obtain data such as on the technical implementation of at-home learning with the involvement of family assistance. The documen-

tation used was in pictures of involvement activities and the attitudes of family members towards their autistic children. Examination of the written materials related to the research topic was made by observation of autistic children who found it easy to learn from home.

The data analysis technique uses inductive analysis simultaneously. The stages were performed through data reduction activities, data reading, data coding, and data interpretation (Creswell, 2015). In the initial stage, the researcher concentrated on the results of existing data collection, namely observation data, data from online news, and data from interviews with 12 informants, which were in line with the themes discussed. The description was made by establishing relationships between different types of data to build a correlation between the patterns of information conveyed. Data coding was conducted in the form of categorization according to the aspect. The interpretation had the purpose of revealing the meaning of the symbol conveyed by the informant. Interpretation activities are performed by considering the actual events in the field. The technique of concluding was conducted by comparing the data collected, such as the data obtained by the informant with one another, and must be compared.

## Results

The implementation of counseling for children with autism made by family members is equipped with a good understanding. The study was conducted on three families: that of the 14-year-old MKF, that of the 15-year-old MGz, and that of the 7-year-old Chh. The implementation can be carried out in two events: the involvement of family members and building the potential of autistic children.

### *Involvement of Family Members in Counseling*

A close relationship between members is a family dream. It can help family members. With a

good relationship, they can learn from each other and understand the dynamics that occur in the family, so with the ability to understand, they are more open and have character.

It is very important in families of children with special needs such as autism, as was the case with three family members who applied a pattern of involving family members in helping family members' problems, including those of child development. Based on the results of the interviews and the practical aspects, it can be stated that the process of involving each family member is done on a scheduled basis so that the relationship between family members is psychologically closer, and that it can build awareness of trying to learn, being grateful, and being more patient, even though autistic children have high emotions.

### *Responsibility Builds Potential*

The spirit so that children with autism can grow in a balanced way by developing a sense of self-esteem and responsibility in building their potential. It is done by three families who have children with autism, who have been able to take responsibility for assisting family members in learning and activities and can develop the self-confidence of autistic children by always giving appreciation/gifts, as shown in the quotes in Table 1.

Based on the findings of the interviews and observations in Tables 1 and 2, it can be formulated that the family counseling conducted by the three families of autistic children involved two methods: 1) involvement of family members in building the potential of autistic children; i.e., they will receive assignments from their parents according to their respective schedules in accompanying autistic children in their learning so that they can develop optimally. Family members who assist will also realize the benefits of the process and make them mature. From the results of the interviews conducted with MKF family

members, Ch and Gz got the answers. Family members feel the positive impact of counseling, namely building relationships to make them mutually independent of each other. The observations show the emergence of responsible characters in assisting autistic children's learning on a scheduled basis. Full awareness is achieved, and a spirit arises when family members help out.

Based on the results of the interviews and the observations in Table 3, the character of responsibility embedded in family members can

emphasize the cultivation of the value of awareness. There is an emphasis on family members being responsible for helping and facilitating children with autism during at-home learning activities, and carrying out their routines. Finally, communicating the problem can be overcome because the involvement of family members is based on willingness and love for each other, with the aim for autistic children to develop properly.

**Table 1**  
*Family Involvement Process*

Informants	Interview	Aspect/Description
MGz, MM, Mcha2, FGz	"... as an initial stage, we involve every family member in this counseling on a scheduled basis; we do this to make the relationship between them closer psychologically."	Aspect: Involvement of family members. Description: MGz's parents arrange the mentoring schedule.
BGz, Zdn, Hlz	"... When we are involved in certain roles in relation to our younger siblings, we are finally more aware, which ultimately builds our awareness to try to learn, be grateful, and be more patient in behavior, even though sometimes autistic children are easier to provoke emotions"	Aspect: Involvement and caring. Description: Siblings of children with autism feel the impact of an increasing sense of awareness and caring.
BGz, MM, FW, MCh	"... I also think it is a lesson for brothers, sisters, and other family members to understand better that in life there are many dynamics, including the family as the smallest institution. Building good relations between siblings, making family members more independent."	Aspect: The dynamics of life. Description: Makes this experience a process of getting better and more sincere because the dynamics of life make everyone independent and closer.
Zdn, Hlz, BGz	"... as his brother, it is a challenge for me to study harder and seriously assist so that my brother can live a normal life. Now I can accept this condition better than before, where I feel I am not being cared for by my parents."	Aspect: Learn from challenges. Description: You feel that this process increases awareness and improves relationships for the better.
Hlz, MIK	"... my understanding ability is like that of a PLB student, ma'am; even though I did not understand PLBan, I finally learned and understood the character of autistic children. Hopefully, this can help family members' problems. It has made us more independent; now I realize how important our role is".	Aspect: New experience Description: Siblings who play a role feel the positive effects, namely making relationships closer, more independent, building awareness, interacting more harmoniously.

**Table 2**

*Components of Family Counseling*

Component	Aspects Observed	Description
Family Member Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scheduled involvement of every family member</li> <li>Crosschecking the schedule of family member involvement</li> <li>The relationship between family members becomes closer</li> <li>Awareness of family members</li> <li>Building communication and relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The observations showed that there was family involvement according to the schedule, which made the relationship between family members closer and they were able to build relationships and communication.</li> </ul>
Understanding Family Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates an understanding of family dynamics</li> <li>Family members show an open attitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The results of the observations show that there was openness between family members.</li> </ul>
Cultivating Children's Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are indications that you have an understanding of autistic children</li> <li>Brother cares more</li> <li>Helping autistic children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This observation indicates the independence of family members, creating a warm, close relationship.</li> </ul>
Building Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seen responsible for assisting autistic children's learning on a scheduled basis</li> <li>Full awareness is possessed</li> <li>There is a passion for motivating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The observation results show that children with special needs could build awareness and motivation with counseling.</li> </ul>
Learning Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is behavior that shows enthusiasm in accompanying the children</li> <li>Family members show consistent actions and words in carrying out the mentoring schedule.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The observations showed that family members were enthusiastic about assisting their children with autism.</li> </ul>
Showing A' MKF family members, Ch and Gz got the answers 'MKF family members, Ch and Gz got the appreciation answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a reward for family members as a tribute.</li> <li>Family members care for and understand the symptoms of autism</li> <li>There is appreciation for all family members for their positive behavior towards each other.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The observations found that there were rewards for family members who did their job well.</li> </ul>

**Table 3**

*Process of Building the Potential of Autistic Children*

Informants	Interview	Aspect/ Description
MGz, Mns, Mcha2	"... as parents, we emphasize inculcating the value of awareness so that we continue to encourage family members as a whole to have a strong responsibility; brothers and sisters are responsible for helping, assisting, and facilitating children with autism to learn, do activities, and carry out their routines".	Aspect: Cultivation of awareness. Note: The MGz family pays exceptional attention to assisting the process of at-home learning.
Hlz, MIK	"As a cousin, I even often become an exceptional companion for the autistic child I also join the family WA group even though I'm only their cousin."	Aspect: Assistance for family members (brother/cousin). Remarks: Family members are involved in helping to learn according to the division of roles.
MGz, MM, FW,	"Another commitment that we have developed is to appreciate all family members if they do positive things to other members because it is a stimulus and encouragement to develop a sense of mutual appreciation between all family members."	Aspect: Giving appreciation to family members. Description: The role of parents is central; as stated by the Mgz family, the role of family members is a stimulus for tolerance.

## Discussion

The COVID pandemic has strengthened the role of family counseling in dealing with children with special needs in at-home learning. This shows that the pandemic has a positive aspect because it has led to a reorientation of the role of family counseling. As Scott et al. (2000) states, old practices become social facts in every crisis. Family counseling is based on the role of family counseling, which focuses on the following two research findings.

First, the involvement of family members has had a beneficial impact on the socio-emotional development of autistic children during at-home learning (AHL). During the pandemic, family counseling has played a role in helping autistic children in at-home learning. The involvement of family members has proven the truth of Geldard's theory (2011) that family counseling can build relationships between family members and make them mutually independent; such counseling is better known as relationship-disease counseling. It has helped form good relationships between the members of the three families; moreover, it has optimized the role of family members' involvement and independence and strengthened the relationships between family members.

The involvement of family members in helping their autistic children can also reduce all the problems. Gunarsa (2000) states that if all family members feel happy, as indicated by reduced tension, disappointment, and acceptance of all circumstances and their existence (self-actualization), including physical, mental, and social aspects. Do not let stress occur when providing assistance because stress significantly influences parenting practices (Riany et al., 2021).

Family members are responsible for helping, assisting, and facilitating children with autism to learn, undertake activities, and perform their routines. Naturally, this process requires extra

commitment from the family, as research results (Dipeolu et al., 2016; Edy et al., 2018) show that the role of the family in becoming involved has a perfect impact on children with special needs.

The involvement of family members can be considered a solution in handling children with special needs during at-home learning. Family counseling can explain the character of other family members that autistic children have behavioral disorders. This is in line with the contention that the role of the family is significant in developing the potential of family members (Edy et al., 2018; Haryanti, 2017). With family counseling, autistic children can learn well, and follow the learning process in a structured way because they understand the instructions of the teacher teaching via Zoom. This is in line with Bhamani et al. (2020) who states that it is a valuable experience for parents who can help children in their at-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the involvement of family members in assisting autistic children in working on questions on online learning platforms. In the long term, through assistance provided by family members, children with autism can develop well cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally, in line with Farida (2015), who states that tutoring by families for children with special needs can improve their understanding of learning.

Second, responsibility in building self-potential through developing a sense of respect for all members, namely being responsible for assisting autistic children's activities during AHL and other activities. This can develop the self-confidence of autistic children. Family members are appreciated if they do positive things for each other.

Family counseling can shape the spirit of family members in their role in the development of children in a balanced manner in accordance with the development of children with special needs. In line with the initial definition of Sofyan's

family counseling (2013) as an effort given to individual family members through a family communication system so that potential can be developed optimally, and problems can be overcome based on a willingness to help based on willingness, and love for each other. Therefore, it can be stated that family counseling can also develop a sense of empathy and care for the condition of other family members. Other treatments that can be done include managing emotions, increasing life motivation, and fostering communication with family members (Farida, 2015; Nurhastuti et al., 2021) in guiding autistic children by habituation, involvement, and independence until they have a good understanding and show positive behavior allowing them to grow optimally.

The handling of children's emotional cases cannot be resolved individually but provides family counseling to all family members as a component of the system that determines the achievement of family welfare. This is in line with previous studies (Rahayu, 2017; A. Sari, 2016; Yulismi, 2018), which state that family counseling is a solution for handling children with emotional disorders. Involvement of family members must take place effectively, be full of joy, and in an encouraging atmosphere, in line with (Riany et al., 2021), who states that parenting stress has a significant influence on the practice and outcomes of parenting for children with special needs. Because a person's mood also affects the results, cognitive behavioral therapy for those who have past trauma to reduce symptoms of stress disorders (Rakhmasari et al., 2021).

Family counseling is an alternative to dealing with family problems (Geldard, 2011). It contributes to the process of linking the relationships between the elements with one another because the family is the minor social system. The impact that is felt by family counseling

using this structural approach can link relationships with one another. The approach can revitalize the role of family members. In line with Sofyan's (2013) argument, family counseling is based on the family as a real human being, with subsystem functions, characteristics of rules, and behavioral involvement among a family members. The impact of family counseling can provide awareness of the role of the family in all family members (Hermingsih et al., 2017; Meiza et al., 2019), ultimately building communication and awareness, and creating good relationships with mutual independence between family members.

### **Conclusion**

Family counseling undertaken through the involvement of family members can contribute to the positive development of the behavior of autistic children. It can also have a positive impact on family members in understanding character, building relationships, and making children independent. The involvement of family members can be considered a solution to handling children with special needs during at-home learning. Family counseling can provide an understanding of the character of other family members, including children with special needs who experience behavioral disorders. It can also form the spirit of family members in playing a role and being involved in the balanced growth and development of their autistic children. This research has direct implications for the family as an environment that influences the socio-emotional development of autistic children through the involvement of all family members. Recommendations for further research include the use of other eclectic approaches. The limitation of this research is that it only focuses on the structural approach and family social behavior.[]

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