# Transforming Social Skills in Children with Autism : Inclusive Teaching Best Practices

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**Abstract.** Inclusive education mandates equitable opportunities for all students, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), yet many still face difficulties with social integration in inclusive settings. This study explores strategies employed by companion teachers to support the social skills of children with ASD in inclusive primary schools. A qualitative approach was used with purposive sampling of three companion teachers and three ASD students from ten ASD children at SD Muhammadiyah Ketanggungan, Brebes, Indonesia. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed thematically. Results revealed the use of structured routines, adaptive environments, positive reinforcement, peer-mediated strategies, and interventions tailored to needs. These strategies improved verbal communication, empathy, self-regulation, and peer cooperation. Targeted companion teacher support thus significantly promotes social development in ASD children. The study contributes theoretically by enriching inclusive education literature and practically by offering guidance for teachers and stakeholders in fostering social-emotional growth for children with ASD.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Social Skills; Companion Teacher; Intervention Strategy.

## 1 Introduction

Inclusive education according to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 70 of 2009 is an education system that allows all students, including those with special needs or special talents, to study in the same educational environment as other students in a fair manner. The basic principles of inclusive education prioritize providing opportunities to all students without discrimination, avoiding the use of negative labels, and maintaining balance in its implementation [1].

Although the principles of inclusive education have been regulated, in reality, the education system in Indonesia is still faced with a number of significant challenges in realizing inclusion for children with special needs. These challenges include the availability of facilities, teacher expertise, student needs, and support provided by parents and the community. Many children with disabilities face challenges when trying to be accepted into the school of their choice, and make a serious effort to integrate in a regular classroom environment and mix with peers. As a result, they often face discrimination and isolation, which ultimately leads them to have to attend Extraordinary Schools [2].

Children with special needs are children who experience growth and development with significant differences compared to other children in general. ABK does not only refer to

children with physical or mental disabilities, but also to the specific needs needed by children with different conditions. Each child with special needs has specific characteristics, making them different from other children. All children need services that are in accordance with their abilities and needs. Parents and teachers' understanding of these uniqueness is very important to provide support that is in accordance with the child's condition and potential [3].

Children with special needs include those with autism, who have complex developmental disorders related to cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social interaction, and communication aspects. These children may have difficulty in verbal and non-verbal interactions with the people around them. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects the way they think, feel, and interact with their surroundings. In terms of cognition, autistic children may exhibit a distinctive thinking style and problem-solving abilities, exhibiting exceptional skills in certain areas, but they often find it difficult to grasp more abstract ideas. This affects their capacity to fit in in a social environment [4].

Social skills are very helpful for a person to adapt to social norms or live their lives without feeling difficulties in dealing with various situations and conditions that may occur. Important aspects of social skills include: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. If students have good social skills, they will be more fluent in getting along and adjusting to the surrounding environment. However, if children with autism have difficulty interacting socially or are unable to meet these aspects, they will have difficulty adjusting and building healthy social relationships [5].

Implementing an appropriate approach is essential to support the development of social skills of children with autism so that they can interact and adapt well in the surrounding environment. Good social skills not only make it easier to socialize, but also play an important role in improving independence and confidence. A special approach from schools, especially teachers, is needed to provide appropriate strategies to support the development of social skills of children with autism and create a good learning environment for them.

For this reason, appropriate social skills mentoring models and appropriate strategies are needed so that the interventions provided can meet the unique needs of children with ASD. This study aims to identify and analyze the mentoring model applied by teachers accompanying autistic children in inclusive schools, as well as evaluate its effectiveness in improving children's social skills. With the right understanding and application of the model, it is hoped that children with ASD can develop better social skills, strengthen confidence, and be able to adapt optimally in the school and community environment.

This research is expected to make a contribution both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the results of the study can enrich the treasures of science on assisting children with ASD in an inclusive environment. Practically, the findings of the study can be a reference for accompanying teachers, educators, and parents in developing effective mentoring strategies, so as to be able to optimally support the social and emotional development of children with ASD.

## 2 Theoretical Foundations

Mentoring is a series of structured activities carried out by educators with the aim of helping children's growth and development optimally through full attention and a planned and sustainable approach. The mentoring process does not only involve direct intervention, but also active communication between teachers, children, and related parties to meet the needs of children holistically [6]. In the context of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD),

mentoring is very important to support the development of social skills that often experience obstacles.

Social skills are a person's ability to communicate and interact effectively in a variety of social situations. According to [7] Social skills include understanding the social context, adjustment to applicable norms, and efforts to maintain harmonious and productive interactions. For children with special needs such as ASD, repetitive behaviors and communication barriers are challenges that need to be overcome so that social interaction can take place properly. Aspects of social skills that need to be developed include verbal communication, nonverbal communication, social interaction, conflict resolution, empathy, self-control, and cooperation.

In addition to aspects of social skills, there are several factors that affect children's social abilities. The social environment (learner characteristics) plays an important role in encouraging the optimal use of social skills. The level of child development also determines the extent to which the child is able to carry out his social tasks. Gender factors also have an effect, where boys and girls tend to show differences in their social interaction patterns. Furthermore, cognitive and behavioral impairments are significant barriers to developing social skills, which are commonly experienced by children with ASD [7].

In an effort to improve the social skills of children with autism, [8] put forward some key strategies that are effectively implemented. First, an organized structure and routine helps reduce anxiety for children with ASD and provides a sense of security and focus in learning. Second, social skills improvement can be done through various approaches, ranging from environmental change (ecological variation), strengthening play or academic skills (collateral interventions), direct training of social skills such as social stories (child-specific interventions), facilitated interaction with peers (peer-mediated interventions), to comprehensive approaches that combine several methods at once. Third, functional behavior assessments help understand the goals behind the behavior of children with autism, so that educators can replace them with alternatives that are more positive and in line with social norms.

# 3 Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a study method that aims to understand how companions support the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at SD Muhammadiyah Ketanggungan, Brebes Regency [9]. The focus of the research is the mentoring strategies applied by teachers in the learning process of children with ASD.

The population of this study consisted of 10 children with ASD enrolled at SD Muhammadiyah Ketanggungan, with a sample of 3 ASD children accompanied by 3 special companion teachers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on specific criteria, namely children with ASD and companion teachers who were directly involved in the learning process and mentoring of the child [10]. Data collection techniques include interviews, observations, and documentation to get a comprehensive picture of the implementation of the mentoring strategy. Observation data were carried out to directly observe the mentoring process, such as how teachers provided instructions, gave positive reinforcement, established structured routines, and guided interactions with peers. Interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences, the strategies they applied, and the challenges faced in supporting children with ASD. Documentation was used as complementary

supporting data in the form of relevant notes and learning programs. This approach helps to understand in depth the role of teachers in accompanying children with these special needs.

## 4 Results

This research was conducted at SD Muhammadiyah Ketanggungan, an inclusion school in Ketanggungan District, Brebes Regency that provides special companion teachers for students with special needs, including children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Out of a total of 223 students, there are 10 students with special needs with 6 of them children with ASD. The study involved 3 special assistant teachers as the main participants and 3 children with ASD as the research subjects.

Table 1. Participant Profile

| No | Initial | GPK | Gender |
|----|---------|-----|--------|
| 1 | A | Special Assistant Teacher, Classroom Teacher, Class Companion | Female |
| 2 | B | Special Assistant Teacher, Classroom Teacher | Female |
| 3 | C | Special Assistant Teacher, Classroom Teacher | Female |

The data obtained provides an overview of the implementation of mentoring strategies carried out by teachers to support the development of social skills of children with ASD in the inclusive school environment.

Teachers use various mentoring strategies that are tailored to the needs of children, such as diverting children's emotions by taking them to their favorite places to calm down, as well as providing a choice of activities according to their interests so that children feel comfortable and appreciated. This approach is flexible and integrated, allowing children to develop optimally intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Teachers also create a calm atmosphere and provide positive reinforcement to help children focus and learn independently.

Through daily activities, teachers teach independence, emotional control, and language skills consistently. Play and creative activities such as drawing are used as a means of self-expression and socialization that are important for children's development. The support of teachers and the surrounding environment, including the family, plays a very important role in maintaining the stability of children's emotions and behaviors. As a result, children who previously had difficulties in communication, self-control, and social interaction, showed significant development such as improved speech skills, eye contact, empathy, and cooperation with friends.

Teachers adapt their approach to the child's mood, give room to calm down, and avoid coercion so that the child does not stress. Peer interaction assistance is carried out flexibly according to the child's character, so that children can practice natural socialization. Social-emotional reinforcement and norms are carried out patiently and communicatively, even though children have difficulty understanding behaviors and emotions, teachers guide in a fun and repetitive way. Visual-based individualized learning helps children focus and understand the material. Teachers monitor children's independence that is still fluctuating, especially in basic activities, and provide direction with a flexible and consistent approach to support the development of children with ASD.

Table 2. Summary of Interview Analysis on Teacher Mentoring Strategies

| Aspect / Teacher | A | B | C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Structured Routines | Adaptive approach, structured guidance, consistent education | Flexible and consistent approach | Consistent guidance & supportive environment |
| Emotional Support | Diversion strategies, self-soothing guidance | Empathic approach, emotional regulation | Bonding & social-emotional reinforcement |
| Individualized Learning | Visual-based learning, individual instruction | Minimizing distractions, visual aids | Peer interaction support, flexible approach |
| Social Skills Development | Peer-mediated play, creative activities | Interactive learning, flexible socialization | Comprehensive interventions, social-emotional norms |
| Behavior Monitoring | Functional behavior assessment, pattern monitoring | Behavior adjustment guidance | Direction & monitoring, flexible approach |

In teacher, communication and social development is clearly visible: from passive to more confident and actively interacting. teacher is also getting better at resolving conflicts, showing empathy, controlling himself, and working together in groups. Overall, there have been significant advances in social and emotional skills that support the development of teacher.

Teachers combine theory, observation, and experience in accompanying children with the support of parents and peers even though communication with parents is still limited. The learning environment is made safe and comfortable for children to participate at their convenience., The empathetic and supervising approach helps children manage emotions, develop empathy, and interact socially. Although there were initially difficulties in accepting friends, over time they became more inclusive. Individual learning with minimal distractions is also applied. As a result, AL showed progress in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction, conflict resolution, empathy, self-control, and cooperation in groups.

## 5 Discussion

In this study, the theory of social skills, [7] plays an important role as a framework to see the condition and ability of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in social interaction. Aspects of social skills such as verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, empathy, and self-control are the main indicators to assess the extent to which children are able to adapt to their social environment. The condition of children with ASD who often experience obstacles in these aspects is the main focus of this study, because suboptimal social skills can have an impact on children's difficulties in adapting and communicating with others. Using this theory, researchers can describe the real picture of the social challenges experienced by children and the specific need for assistance interventions.

Meanwhile, the strategy theory outlined by [8] It is used to assess the condition of accompanying teachers, especially in terms of how teachers design and implement effective approaches to support the development of children's social skills.

Strategies such as the implementation of consistent structures and routines, the improvement of social skills through various interventions, and functional behavior assessments provide an idea of how teachers play an active role in creating a conducive environment and supporting the learning process of children with ASD.

The condition of teachers as direct implementers of intervention greatly affects the success of the mentoring process, so understanding the strategies they use is important to know the extent of teachers' abilities and readiness in assisting children optimally.

The integration of these two theories shows a close relationship between the child's condition and the role of the accompanying teacher. Children's social skills, which are the main focus of interventions, can only develop properly if teachers are able to implement appropriate and effective strategies. Thus, this study not only assesses the needs and conditions of children, but also explores how teachers adjust their mentoring methods based on the characteristics of the child and the context of the inclusive school. This is important to ensure that the mentoring process runs holistically and continuously, so as to support the optimal social development of children. The following is a discussion of the results of the research:

## 5.1 Structure and Routine

Structure and routines such as self-eating schedules, orderly queues, use of standard language, reading habits, and consistent consequences help ASD children understand the sequence of activities, reduce anxiety, and improve social interaction [8]. Teachers emphasize discipline through daily habits and strengthening social values; teachers maintain emotional stability with the flexibility of routines, giving space for expression without coercion; while teachers combine coaching consistency with a responsive classroom environment physical contact, visual communicat ion, and safe play spaces. The adaptive approach of these three teachers is in line with various studies such as [11] about structured interventions and consistent schedules, [12] on the use of visual schedules, [13] in visual media and learning environments in interactive visual learning, and [14] on sensory support and individualization. Thus, consistent, adaptive, and responsive structures and routines not only increase independence and reduce tantrums, but also optimally develop the social skills of ASD children.

## 5.2 Social Skills Intervention,

5.2.1 Ecological Variation is an intervention strategy by changing the  environment or activities to improve the social interaction of ASD children.

This approach replaces monotonous activities with more interesting activities to increase child involvement. Although its effectiveness is moderate, this strategy expands the opportunities for children to interact socially. In this study, teachers diverted children to interest-based activities when children were not ready to participate in the main activities, as well as providing alternative spaces such as libraries and MIPA rooms that were quieter and more comfortable.

Teachers adapt the learning environment to the child's sensory sensitivity, such as setting the time of rest and the intensity of activities when the child shows fatigue, according to the emotional and physical needs of the child. teachers handle tantrums patiently and consistently, providing repetitive explanations without pressure, creating an empathetic environment to help children manage their emotions.

These findings are in line with research [15] that show that interest-based activity diversion is effective in reducing maladaptive behavior and increasing child involvement. [16] emphasized the importance of alternative spaces such as Reflection Rooms and Individual Learning Spaces for the emotional needs and focus of children with special needs, in line with the practice of

Teachers. Adjustment of the learning environment by Teachers in accordance with [17] which highlights the importance of adaptation to external stimuli. teachers' empathic approach in handling tantrums supports the findings [18] which emphasizes patience and consistency as the key in managing the emotions of children with ASD.

### 5.3 Collateral skills interventions

Collateral Skills Intervention is a strategy that aims to improve additional skills such as play, academic ability, or other cognitive skills that can indirectly promote the development of social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In this study, teachers combined the reinforcement of positive values such as patience and gratitude with consequences-based discipline to help children control behavior and emotion regulation. Teachers focus on verbal communication and involve peers to gradually foster the child's social awareness. Meanwhile, teachers adjust learning and educate classmates to be more sensitive to differences, supporting a positive inclusive social experience.

These findings are in line with [19] which emphasizes the importance of teaching the value of patience for the regulation of emotions, [20] which shows the role of peer interaction in the social development of children with special needs, and [21] and [22] which underlines the importance of inclusive education that instills tolerance and empathy in the learning environment.

### 5.4 Child Specification Intervention

This approach focuses on training social skills directly to children, for example through social stories or social simulation methods. Children are given an understanding of certain social situations, how to act, and what they can expect, so that they are better prepared to deal with various interactions in daily life. In this study, Teacher applied an individualized approach by creating a calm atmosphere and providing positive reinforcement through sounding techniques.

The goal is to help children focus, feel comfortable, and develop their curiosity. Moreover teachers use visual-based learning, where children learn in a calm atmosphere with face-to-face face-to-face, while the material is delivered using pictures or stories. teachers, on the other hand, emphasize more on setting up a environment with minimal distractions, creating a focused space and providing clear instructions to direct children's creativity The approach carried out by teachers is in line with the findings [23] which states that empathic communication from teachers can encourage autistic students to be more socialized and understand the feelings of others. A calm atmosphere, followed by positive reinforcement, has been shown to be effective in improving children's focus and comfort, as well as supporting them in interacting.

[24] In his research, it is also explained that interpersonal communication carried out by teachers by showing understanding, affection, and patience in communicating with autistic children can affect the actions shown by children. This can increase children's confidence and the desire to blend in with the surrounding environment.

Furthermore, teachers who use visual media in learning support the findings [25] which shows that the use of flash cards improves identification skills in autistic children and makes learning more engaging and effective. The approach of PT teachers who manage the learning environment with minimal disruption corroborates the findings [26], who explained that the application of the TEACCH method, which involves environmental regulation, can have a

positive effect on the development of autistic children, helping them in understanding the material and instructions.

### 5.4.1 Peer Dimension Intervention

A peer-based approach is effective in improving the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through hands-on interaction and a comfortable atmosphere. Teachers use play activities such as Lego and plasticine and involve friends in drawing activities and small competitions to practice children's social interactions. teachers organize structured activities that give children and friends the freedom to participate, creating a safe social space. teachers apply a peer approach and strive to maintain learning consistency between school and home despite experiencing communication challenges with parents. Teacher's Strategy is in accordance with [27] which states that group play is effective in increasing the social interaction of autistic children, supporting [28] who find playing Lego improves concentration and social interaction, as well as [29] which explains that plasticine helps the development of social interaction of autistic children. Teachers' non-directive approach corroborates findings [30] about the importance of the Among system in social inclusion, and [31] which affirms that peer social support is important for the social engagement of children with autism.

The collaborative approach of teachers and is in line with [5] that highlight the involvement of parents and peers in cooperative play activities, as well as [14] which emphasizes the cooperation of teachers and parents for the success of learning for children with special needs in an inclusive environment.

### 5.4.2 Comprehensive intervention

Comprehensive Interventions combine social skills training, positive reinforcement, and learning environment adaptation to improve children's overall social interaction. Teachers provide freedom of exploration according to children's interests, with a holistic approach that includes intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects, creating an atmosphere that supports confidence and natural social understanding. Teachers teach social norms patiently and consistently, providing reinforcement to positive behaviors, so that children adjust their behavior gradually. Teachers use observation and motivation reinforcement with direct guidance, provide safe play spaces to build social connections, and supervise classmates to understand the condition of autistic children.

Teacher's Approach Is Appropriate [32] who find a holistic approach to increase the confidence and social adaptation of children with special needs [33] emphasized the importance of social understanding in improving the interaction of autistic children, in line with the efforts of teacher. The results of the study also support [34] who stated that the gradual strengthening technique (shaping) applied by teacher. The PT Teacher Strategy is supported by [35] who stated that playing directed with teacher supervision improves social skills, and [4] which emphasizes learning through observation and modeling helps children build social interactions gradually.

### 5.4.3 Assessment of functional behavior

Functional behavior assessments are essential for understanding the purpose behind the behavior of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This strategy helps teachers replace negative behaviors with positive alternatives, such as the use of physical cues or assistive devices. Teachers use this strategy to understand the meaning of children's behaviors and

replace them with better behaviors, as well as provide structured educational options to support children's independence with cooperation between teachers in monitoring children's activities. Teachers combine independent encouragement and consistent social consequences through repeated explanations so that children understand responsibilities and needs gradually, as well as provide positive reinforcement. Teachers focus on building emotional closeness through physical contact and visual communication that are tailored to the child's response patterns, helping to create a sense of security and encourage positive behavior.

These findings are supported by research [36] which emphasizes the importance of collaboration between teachers and homeroom teachers in inclusive learning, according to the practice of teachers [37] emphasizing the need for an adaptive and collaborative approach, in line with the Teacher's strategy that is flexible and structured.

In line with the results of the research [38], which states that the Teacher approach that uses simple instruction and social reinforcement to increase children's confidence [39] supported by the approach of teachers with visual communication that improves the verbal ability and sense of security of autistic children. found that flexible learning strategies and adaptive curricula were effective in supporting the development of independence and social skills of children with ASD, in accordance with the overall approach of the three teachers.

## 6 Conclusions

This study shows that accompanying teachers have a significant role in supporting the development of social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in inclusive schools. The strategies implemented include an individualized approach according to the needs of the child, structured habituation, and the creation of a safe and supportive environment, so as to reduce children's stress and anxiety.

Collaboration between the accompanying teacher, classroom teacher, parents, and peers is also an important factor in the success of mentoring. This strategy helps children adapt, build positive relationships, and improve social interaction skills. Consistent and responsive mentoring to the individual characteristics of children helps create an inclusive learning environment that supports the social and emotional development of children with ASD.

Based on the findings of the study, there are several suggestions that can be considered. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct similar studies in various inclusion schools with different types of special needs so that the results are more comprehensive. In addition, it is important to explore the perspectives of children and parents regarding social skills assistance. The use of longitudinal methods is also recommended to look at the social development of children with ASD in the long term. Subsequent research should also consider external factors such as education policies and external interventions.

Meanwhile, for practice in schools, it is recommended that inclusion schools hold training for accompanying teachers so that they can understand and implement the right mentoring strategies. Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the social environment also needs to be strengthened to create a comprehensive support system. In addition, regular evaluation of the assistance strategies implemented is important to increase the effectiveness of the program in an ongoing manner.

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