

Character Education Assistance for Autism at the Non-Profit Foundation

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is Character Education Assistance for Autism at the Non-Profit Foundation Cinta Harapan Indonesia (YCHI) Madiun. This type of research method is qualitative. Data collection using interviews, observation and documentation. Data analysis using triangulation. Character education assistance for autistic children at the Non-Profit Cinta Harapan Indonesia Foundation (YCHI) Madiun has had a significant impact in forming their positive character. The program includes a structured and caring approach, with a focus on developing social, emotional and moral skills through a variety of activities tailored to each individual's needs. Accompaniment that is carried out consistently and with a participation-based approach allows autistic children to increase their self-understanding, socialize better, and develop positive values that can support them in interacting in social environments. In this way, this program not only benefits children's personal development, but also creates an inclusive environment and supports them to reach their best potential.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education is the main foundation in forming individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also have a noble personality. In the context of the education of children with special needs, especially children with autism, character education has unique challenges. Children with autism often face difficulties in communicating, socializing, and understanding social norms. This condition requires a different, directed, and needs-based approach to support their character development. One of the institutions that is committed in this regard is the Non-Profit Foundation of Cinta Harapan Indonesia (YCHI) in Madiun, which has a focus on empowering children with autism through character-based education and training (Sulingan & Wiyono, 2021.).

In Indonesia, the number of children with autism continues to increase, but access to inclusive and character development-oriented educational services is still limited. Many educational institutions only focus on the academic aspect, without paying special attention to character building. In fact, character is a fundamental aspect that determines an individual's ability to adapt, empathize, and play an active role in society. Yayasan Cinta Harapan Indonesia (YCHI) is here to bridge this gap, offering mentoring programs specifically designed for children with autism. The program aims to help them recognize moral values, develop social skills, and increase their self-confidence (Anisah Asyhari, 2020).

Character education assistance at YCHI Madiun is based on a humanistic approach, where each child is seen as a unique individual with extraordinary potential. This approach involves the active participation of children, families, and educators in the learning process. The methods used include play therapy, activity-based

learning, and intensive mentoring to ensure that each child gets the attention they need. In addition, a participatory approach is also used to involve parents and families in the formation of children's character, because the support of the family environment is a key factor in the success of character education (Purwaningsih & Utami, 2018).

The main challenge faced in assisting character education in children with autism is limited resources, both in terms of experts and facilities. As a non-profit foundation, YCHI Madiun also faces funding limitations that can affect the sustainability of mentoring programs. However, this does not dampen the foundation's enthusiasm to continue to provide the best service. By optimizing collaboration with relevant parties, such as local communities, governments, and other social organizations, YCHI has succeeded in creating an environment that is conducive to the development of children with autism (Buspaninger, 2023).

The strategic role carried out by YCHI also lies in the innovation of its mentoring program. One of them is the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the character education process. This approach allows for the adjustment of learning methods according to the specific needs of each child, and encourages continuous feedback to improve the effectiveness of the program. Through PAR, YCHI is able to identify the obstacles faced, both by children and families, so that they can provide more targeted solutions (Sari, 2020).

In the long term, character education assistance for children with autism at YCHI is expected to not only have an impact on the individuals fostered, but also make a positive contribution to society. Children with autism who receive a good character education will have a greater chance of contributing to various aspects of social life. They can be independent individuals, have a sense of self-confidence, and are able to build harmonious relationships with those around them. In addition, this program also aims to increase public awareness about the importance of inclusion and recognition of the diversity of individual needs (Pradista, 2020).

With all the challenges and potentials that exist, character education assistance for children with autism at YCHI Madiun is an exemplary inclusive education model. The success of this program not only depends on the hard work of the foundation, but also requires support from various parties, including the government, the community, and the business world. With a strong synergy, it is hoped that children with autism can grow up to be individuals who are not only able to compete, but also able to provide positive colors for society in the future.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to describe and analyze the process of character education assistance for children with autism at the Non-Profit Foundation of Cinta Harapan Indonesia (YCHI) Madiun. Data was collected through three main techniques, namely observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was carried out directly on mentoring activities at the foundation, including interactions between mentors and children, as well as the implementation of character education strategies. In-depth interviews were conducted with companions, parents, and foundation managers to obtain information about the methods, challenges, and impact of the program on child development. Documentation in the form of activity notes, learning modules, and photos supports the data from observations and interviews (Miftah & Widiani, n.d.).

Data analysis was carried out using the triangulation technique, which aims to validate the results of the study by comparing data from the three sources. The results of observations, interviews, and documentation were analyzed thematically to identify effective mentoring patterns (Yanuar, n.d.). With data triangulation, this study seeks to ensure the accuracy of information and produce a comprehensive picture of the process and success of character education for children with autism in YCHI Madiun. This research is expected to contribute to the development of character-based mentoring strategies that are in accordance with the needs of children with autism.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Formation of Values and Ethics.

The formation of values and ethics in autistic children can be done through activities specifically designed to train social skills and independence. One of the effective activities is to create LEGO buildings with peers or therapists. This activity not only sharpens creativity, but also becomes a means of training autistic children to collaborate, share, and communicate. Through this interaction, children are taught the importance of cooperation in achieving common goals. Children also learn to respect the opinions of others and develop empathy by understanding the needs and emotions of the friends involved. Values such as honesty and appreciation for the results of joint work are slowly being built in a positive and supportive environment.

In addition, the activity of cleaning up toys after use is a form of concrete responsibility learning. This simple task teaches children to finish what has started and keep the surrounding environment tidy. Children are taught to understand that every action has consequences, including the obligation to tidy up after playing. This activity reinforces the concept of ownership and management of personal goods, which is also related to the formation of a disciplined character.

This process is carried out gradually with a consistent approach, involving positive reinforcement for each expected behavior. The concepts of honesty, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility are introduced naturally through first-hand experience. Thus, children not only understand these values theoretically, but also apply them in daily life. This approach helps autistic children develop social skills, build positive relationships, and become more independent in their community (Buspaninger, 2023)

The formation of values and ethics in autistic children can be done through an approach that involves social activities and experiential learning. One effective way is through play activities designed to practice social skills and independence, such as building LEGO buildings with peers or therapists. This activity not only stimulates creativity, but also provides opportunities for autistic children to learn to collaborate, share, and communicate. Through this process, they are taught about the importance of cooperation in achieving common goals, as well as how to respect the opinions of others. It is also an opportunity to develop empathy, as the child is taught to understand the needs and feelings of his peers.

In addition, simpler activities such as cleaning up toys after use can serve as concrete learning about responsibility. This task helps children understand that every action has consequences, and that tidying up after play is part of a personal responsibility that must be fulfilled. This process reinforces the concept of ownership and management of personal belongings, which indirectly contributes to the formation of discipline character in autistic children.

According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, children learn not only through hands-on teaching, but also through observation and hands-on experience in their social environment. This approach utilizes positive reinforcement for any expected behavior, with the goal of internalizing values such as honesty, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility. Through structured and consistent interactions, autistic children not only understand these values theoretically, but also apply them in everyday life. Thus, this approach not only helps children develop social skills, but also builds positive relationships, increases independence, and facilitates their integration into the social community (Shah, 2019)

3.2. Discussion

Skill Development

Social skills development involves a structured approach to practicing communication, sharing, and understanding emotions. One method used is gradual commands, where children are trained to communicate verbally or through gestures according to their abilities. This approach helps children understand and respond to simple instructions, thereby improving effective interaction skills with others.

Throwing and catching balls is an educational means of play, where children are taught to share balls with others, including their peers. This activity not only involves physical coordination, but also builds the concept of sharing and cooperation. Through this game, children learn to recognize social roles and mutual interactions, which are an important basis in social relationships.

In addition, the activity of imitating and enveloping facial expressions using cards is designed to improve children's understanding of emotions. By learning the various facial expressions through cards, children are trained to identify, imitate, and express feelings such as happy, sad, or angry. This activity helps children to be more sensitive to the feelings of others and be able to respond appropriately in their social interactions.

The entire program aims to train autistic children in three main aspects: communication skills, sharing skills, and understanding and responding to emotions. With this approach, children are expected to be able to adapt better in the social environment and expand their ability to build positive relationships with others.

The formation of values and ethics in autistic children can be analyzed through the perspective of Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and interaction with the social environment. Activities such as building LEGO with a friend or therapist create a significant social learning experience. In this context, autistic children observe collaborative behaviors, such as sharing and listening to opinions, which can then be replicated through positive reinforcement. This process also supports the development of Martin Hoffman's theory of empathy, in which children learn to understand the feelings of others by feeling similar emotions in those interactions (Wijayanti & Mutalazimah, 2018).

Toy cleaning activities can be analyzed through the theory of moral responsibility which emphasizes the importance of recognizing the consequences of each action. Children are trained to understand the cause-and-effect relationship, such as the benefits of maintaining neatness to mutual comfort. This theory is also

aligned with the behavioristic approach, where responsible behavior is consistently reinforced through rewards for expected actions.

A gradual approach with positive reinforcement according to the operant conditioning theory of B.F. Skinner ensures that learning takes place effectively. Values such as honesty, cooperation, and empathy are introduced gradually through hands-on experience, making children better equipped to apply these values in real life.

The development of social skills in autistic children can be analyzed using the zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory from Lev Vygotsky. In activities such as gradual command and play of fetch throw, the child is trained at a skill level slightly above his current ability, with the help of a peer or therapist as a "scaffold". This interaction accelerates the child's ability to adapt to social demands through repetitive practices (Panggabean, 2019).

The use of facial expression cards can be explained through the theory of emotional development from Daniel Goleman, who emphasized the importance of recognizing and managing emotions in the formation of emotional intelligence. By studying facial expressions, autistic children begin to understand how to interpret other people's emotions, which supports the development of responsive skills in social interactions.

Independence and Confidence

Independence and self-confidence are important aspects that need to be trained early in autistic children to prepare them for future challenges. One way to practice independence is through simple activities such as putting on and taking off your own shoes. This activity not only helps autistic children develop fine motor skills but also gives them a sense of confidence because they are able to do things without the help of others. This ability is an important provision for autistic children to be independent in their daily lives, especially when they begin to interact in a wider environment.

In addition, training autistic children to choose play activities and complete them is also an effective effort in building their confidence. This process teaches children to make decisions independently and be responsible for their choices. By completing the chosen play activity, autistic children learn to appreciate the results of their own efforts, which can increase their confidence in facing other challenges.

This learning is carried out through the teaching of structured daily life skills, such as taking care of yourself, managing time, and making the right decisions. With a consistent and patient approach, autistic children can understand the importance of independence and confidence in their lives. This activity also helps them develop a sense of control over their surroundings, which is essential for successful social adaptation in the future. This process not only supports the personal development of autistic children but also opens up opportunities for them to become independent and confident individuals in life (Tawakal & Kholilurrohman, 2019)

Emotion Management

Managing emotions in autistic children requires an empathetic and structured approach to help them cope with difficult emotional situations. One effective way is to distract your child from crying about something. When children start crying, their attention can be diverted to other things, such as showing interesting objects or activities that can spark their curiosity. This strategy helps to relieve negative emotions by providing a new, more positive focus. In addition, when children have tantrums, hugging them gently can provide a sense of security and comfort. Once the tantrum has subsided, it is important to explain what happened in a simple way, helping the child recognize his emotions and slowly release tension.

Mentoring autistic children also requires relaxation measures, emotional identification, and the development of the ability to cope with stress or anxiety. Relaxation can be done through deep breathing exercises or calming activities, such as playing with sensory toys. This step helps the child feel calmer in dealing with situations that trigger anxiety. The process of identifying emotions involves teaching children to recognize the feelings they are experiencing, for example through the use of pictures of facial expressions or simple stories that illustrate emotions. Furthermore, developing the ability to cope with stress or anxiety is important so that children can learn to handle stress independently. This approach can include role-playing, storytelling, or involving the child in structured physical activity to channel their energy.

With a consistent and compassionate approach, this emotional management not only helps autistic children respond better to emotions, but also improves their social skills and overall emotional well-being. Managing emotions in autistic children requires an empathetic, structured, and consistent approach to help them cope with difficult emotional situations. One of the main challenges is dealing with intense emotional reactions, such as crying or tantrums, which often arise due to the child's difficulty understanding and expressing his feelings. Strategies such as distracting your child when crying or giving a gentle hug when a tantrum occurs aim to provide a sense of security while shifting focus to more positive activities. This technique reflects the theory of emotion regulation, which emphasizes the importance of helping individuals manage their emotional responses through supportive external interventions.

Another theory underlying this approach is the theory of emotional development by Greenspan, which highlights the importance of emotional connection in helping children understand and manage their emotions. By providing a simple explanation after the child's emotions have subsided, the parent or companion provides an understanding of the feelings experienced, in accordance with the principle of emotional identification in social learning theory. This process helps children recognize and name their emotions, an important step in building emotional regulation skills.

Relaxation approaches, such as deep breathing exercises or playing with sensory toys, are supported by the adaptive coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman. This theory emphasizes that strategies to reduce stress must be tailored to the needs and abilities of the individual. Activities such as role-playing or storytelling also reflect the approach in play therapy theory used to channel children's energy and help them understand situations through simulated experiences (Safitri, 2015).

Forming Healthy Relationships

Building healthy relationships early on is essential to support a person's social and emotional development. In this process, there are several approaches that can be taken, especially for children with special needs or who are learning to recognize social ethics. First, simple actions such as greeting the therapist when coming and going are fundamental forms of respect and appreciation. This habit teaches children to respect others and establish positive interactions with their environment. In addition, the habit of apologizing to peers when making mistakes is very important. This step helps children understand the importance of taking responsibility for their actions and repairing relationships that have been disrupted, thus building empathy and trust.

Non-verbal communication exercises also play an important role in the formation of healthy relationships. Children are taught to nod their heads to say "I want," to shake their heads to say "no," and to raise their hands to indicate "ask." These three exercises help children understand how to convey their wishes or rejections in a polite and socially acceptable way. This communication pattern provides a basic foundation for them to interact more confidently in various social situations.

Assistance in how to greet, speak, and get along is also a key element in the formation of healthy relationships. Children need to be trained to greet politely to peers, teachers, and family members. Gentle and situational speaking is taught to build effective communication without hurting the feelings of others. In addition, the mentoring process also includes guidance in getting along, such as how to respect differences, work together in groups, and express yourself positively.

Through this approach, children not only learn good ethics and communication but also get the opportunity to build respectful and empathetic relationships with those around them. This habituation will have an impact on their character development in the long run, making them more mature, empathetic individuals, and able to build harmonious relationships in various environments. This process not only strengthens relationships between individuals but also creates a more inclusive and mutually supportive society.

The formation of healthy relationships plays a vital role in the social and emotional development of individuals, especially in children. The analysis shows that basic social interactions, such as the habit of giving greetings or apologizing, are the basis for the formation of harmonious relationships. This action not only builds respect for others but also strengthens the child's ability to take responsibility for his or her actions. This approach is in line with Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in shaping individual consciousness and skills. Vygotsky argues that social learning and development occur through collaboration and communication, which is relevant to the child's habit of respecting and improving social relationships (Aprida, 2018).

Non-verbal communication exercises, such as nodding to express approval or raising your hand to ask for something, support a child's communication skills in understanding social norms. This is relevant to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, where individuals learn through observation and imitation. Children who are trained to use non-verbal communication learn to convey intentions in a way that is acceptable in social interactions. This exercise forms a pattern of positive behavior that can increase their confidence in various situations.

Assistance in greeting, speaking, and getting along also reflects the application of Abraham Maslow's Basic Needs Theory, especially on the need for love and belonging. Through this training, children gain a sense of acceptance and appreciation by their environment. Teaching gentle speech and respecting differences helps children build respectful and supportive relationships. In addition, this process develops empathy, which, according to Martin Hoffman's Theory of Empathy, is the foundation of healthy interpersonal relationships (Khaerudin et al., 2021).

By integrating these practices in everyday life, children not only develop social skills but also build mature and inclusive character. The establishment of these healthy relationships has a long-term impact, creating individuals who are able to work together, understand the perspectives of others, and contribute to social harmony. It also supports the creation of a more inclusive society, in line with the concept of social

cohesion, where positive interactions between individuals strengthen social structures and create a mutually supportive environment

Academic Skills Development

The development of academic skills for autistic children is an important step in supporting their ability to learn and adapt to the social environment. This process involves a variety of activities specifically designed to meet their unique needs. One of the basic skills developed is counting practice, where children are taught to recognize numbers and simple mathematical concepts gradually. This activity can be done through visual media, games, or manipulative aids that attract children's attention. In addition, reading practice is also the main focus, with a phonetic and visual approach to help children recognize simple letters, words, and sentences. This process often involves the use of picture cards or interactive storybooks tailored to the child's interests.

Coloring practice is a creative activity that not only trains fine motor skills, but also helps children understand colors and improve concentration. In this exercise, children are given simple pictures to color according to the instructions or according to their own creativity. To introduce visual concepts, children are also taught to recognize various shapes, such as circles, triangles, and squares, through puzzle games, shape cards, or three-dimensional objects. This activity strengthens children's visual recognition and logic skills.

In addition to academic skills, the development of spiritual values is also important, such as learning to pray which is taught through the repetition of short daily prayers, such as prayer before meals or before bed. Children are invited to understand the simple meaning of the prayer through stories or illustrations. Furthermore, they were also invited to memorize short letters, especially letters from Juz Amma, with the method of repetition and songs. This activity not only strengthens children's memory, but also instills Islamic values from an early age.

As part of spiritual learning and gross motor development, children are also taught to learn to pray. This process begins by introducing the basic movements of prayer gradually, such as takbir, rukuk, and prostration, accompanied by a simple explanation of the purpose and importance of prayer. All of these activities are designed with a fun, structured, and consistent approach to ensure autistic children can learn according to their abilities and pace. Support from families, teachers, and therapists is essential to creating a positive and adaptive learning environment (Nurul, 2023)

The development of academic skills in autistic children is an integral effort that includes various aspects of learning to support their ability to understand, adapt, and interact with the environment. Autistic children often have challenges in communication, concentration, and social skills, so a structured, individualized, and needs-based approach is essential. This process focuses not only on basic cognitive skills such as counting and reading, but also on aspects of creativity, visual recognition, and spiritual values that build a holistic foundation.

The theory underlying this development can be linked to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that children learn through interaction with the environment through the process of assimilation and accommodation. In the context of autistic children, the learning process must be adapted to their learning style, often through visual media or hands-on experience. Counting and reading exercises, for example, involve the use of manipulative aids or interactive books that support the development of a child's cognitive schema.

Behavioristic learning theory is also relevant in the development of these skills. By providing positive reinforcement, such as praise or rewards, every time a child successfully completes a certain task, they will be more motivated to repeat the positive behavior. Coloring or recognizing shapes through puzzle games not only hone fine motor skills but also improve problem-solving skills designed in the framework of reward-based learning (Pradista, 2020).

From the spiritual side, the theory of character education emphasizes the importance of instilling moral and religious values from an early age. Through activities such as memorizing prayers and short letters, children not only strengthen memory skills but also begin to understand simple moral concepts that help them develop positive behaviors in a social environment. Activities such as learning to pray are also in line with the kinesthetic learning approach, where children learn through practical movements and repetitions (Miftah & Widiani, n.d.).

In practice, the development of academic skills in autistic children requires close collaboration between families, teachers, and therapists. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory suggests that children's interactions with nearby environments (microsystems), such as family and school, play an important role in supporting their development. A supportive, consistent, and structured environment allows children to learn at their own pace and ability, while addressing the individual challenges they face

4. CONCLUSION



Character education assistance for children with autism at the Non-Profit Foundation of Cinta Harapan Indonesia (YCHI) Madiun has a significant impact on the formation of their positive character. The program involves a structured and thoughtful approach, focusing on the development of social, emotional, and moral

skills through a variety of activities tailored to the needs of each individual. Mentoring that is carried out consistently and with a participation-based approach allows children with autism to improve self-understanding, socialize better, and develop positive values that can support them in interacting in a social environment. Thus, the program not only benefits children's personal development, but also creates an inclusive and supportive environment for them to reach their full potential.

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