

Emotional Regulation In Children With Autism Through Play Therapy Using Traditional Games At Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Bhakti Karya Preschool

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Abstract

Early childhood refers to a young individual who is growing and developing rapidly physically, psychologically, and socially. The purpose of this study is to describe the emotional regulation of children with autism through play therapy using traditional game methods at the Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Bhakti Karya Kindergarten. This study is a qualitative research project conducted through field research. The subject of this study was one child diagnosed with autism at the Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Bhakti Karya Kindergarten. The object of research is the nature of a person that is, the target and focus of the study. The findings, derived from the interview, concluded that the child has not yet been able to stabilize their emotions; they frequently express anger when faced with situations they dislike, such as while playing with friends or with their siblings at home. The child will be guided through specific stages of play therapy using traditional games they enjoy, with the goal of helping them learn to control their emotions.

Keywords: *Emotion, Play Therapy, Traditional Games*

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Introduction

Young children are small individuals who are growing and developing rapidly physically, psychologically, and socially. During this period, children readily absorb whatever is conveyed to them by those around them. This period is often referred to as *the “golden age”* in every person’s life, as children’s development and growth are extremely rapid, and their brains are highly receptive to information (Veryawan et al., 2023). Any information a child receives becomes part of their memory, influencing their development in subsequent stages. Therefore, parents during this period must be careful in setting an example for their children, as parents serve as their first *role models* meaning children will emulate their parents’ behavior.

Not all children experience healthy levels of development and growth; we often encounter children in our communities who have developmental and growth disorders. These disorders vary widely and can be either physical or psychological. Each developmental disorder has a distinct impact on the individual experiencing it and will inevitably influence the child’s developmental and growth processes, potentially hindering certain aspects of their development and growth. One of the most common disorders in children is autism. The term “autism” is often used to describe unique and prominent psychotic symptoms in children, frequently referred to as “autism syndrome,” characterized by a blank, dreamy facial expression, a dazed state, and extreme difficulty for others to capture their attention or engage them in communication (Lubis, Harahap & Armanila, 2021). Furthermore, Mirza (2014) explains that autism occurs in 5 out of every 10,000 births. Of these five cases, the majority are among males. Autism spectrum disorder is easier to detect at an early age if parents are attentive to their child’s growth and development.

Autism spectrum disorder is more common in boys than in girls; in terms of ratio, the ratio is 4:1 (Veryawan et al., 2023). Symptoms of autism generally appear before a child reaches the age of 3. Generally, individuals with autism ignore sounds, sights, or events involving them, and they avoid or do not respond to social contact—such as eye contact, affectionate touch, or playing with other children (Rahayu, 2015). The exact cause of autism remains unknown to this day. Some studies suggest that autism occurs due to neurological dysfunction in children caused by structural abnormalities in the brain. Others suggest that the cause is a combination of poor dietary choices or an environment contaminated with toxic substances, leading to damage to the large intestine, which in turn causes behavioral and physical issues, including autism (Kurniawan, 2021).

Parents of children with autism have been found to experience higher levels of stress than parents of typically developing children. This is because they spend an excessive amount of time caring for their children and managing household responsibilities, leaving little free time for their own activities. Children with autism exhibit the following characteristics: (1) impairments in verbal and nonverbal communication; (2) impairments in social interaction; (3)

impairments in behavior and play; (4) impairments in feelings and emotions; and (5) impairments in sensory perception (Nurfadhillah et al., 2021).

Based on the previous explanation, one of the characteristics of children with autism is impairment in the area of feelings and emotions. A state considered crucial in a person's life is the emergence of feelings known as emotions. Emotions represent expressions of comfort and discomfort toward a situation or interaction being experienced, such as feelings of joy, fear, anger, and so on. According to Hurlock, the types of emotions include the following: (1) anger; (2) fear; (3) jealousy; (4) joy or happiness; (5) sadness. Emotions are not apparent without the presence or expression of facial expressions (Souisa & Widiastuti, 2019).

Certain events or objects in a child's surroundings can serve as stimuli to elicit a response from a child with autism. However, these stimuli can cause confusion and fear for the child because children with autism have processing difficulties that can lead to inappropriate—or even extreme—emotional reactions. Objects in the child's surroundings can act as stimuli that help the child express and even manage their emotions when the child's attention is redirected through play.

Play is an activity that every child engages in. Children spend most of their time playing, because play helps them express their emotions so that these feelings are not bottled up inside. Through play, children are also able to enhance their growth and development in accordance with their age (R. S. Ritonga et al., 2023). For this reason, play is a suitable method for addressing issues faced by young children. This is because through play, children feel comfortable and happy as they express and explore their feelings, allowing them to set aside their emotional state.

Play therapy can also help children overcome various issues such as anxiety, overcome internal limitations and barriers, manage frustration, and address emotional difficulties—all with the aim of transforming inappropriate behavior into appropriate and desired behavior, so that children can play more cooperatively and be more easily encouraged to cooperate during therapy (Pramardika et al., 2020). This is because play is not merely a fun activity for children; it also contains therapeutic value within every game (Rasimin & Yusra, 2022).

The research question for this study is “How is emotional regulation in children with autism facilitated through *play therapy* using traditional games at Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Bhakti Karya Preschool?” This study was conducted to describe emotional regulation in children with autism through *play therapy* using traditional games at Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal Bhakti Karya Preschool.

Early childhood refers to the period from birth to approximately six years of age, during which children experience rapid development and growth—a phase known as the “golden age” (Dewi, 2022). It is said that during this age, children undergo fundamental development; this is because human development during this period is so significant that it is often referred to as *the “golden age”* (R. S. Ritonga et al., 2024). In line with the previous explanation, Ardy (2016) argues that early childhood refers to children aged 0 to 6 years, who are in the early

stages of childhood development characterized by concrete thinking, realism, simplicity, animism, centration, and a rich imagination.

Early childhood refers to children who have not yet reached the age required to attend formal educational institutions such as elementary school (SD) and who typically play at home or participate in activities at informal educational institutions such as playgroups, kindergartens, and early childhood education programs. In essence, early childhood is a unique stage in which children exhibit specific patterns of growth and development in physical, cognitive, social-emotional, creative, language, and communication aspects that are appropriate for the stage they are currently going through (Purwo Hartanto et al., 2019).

Furthermore, young children have their own unique characteristics and live in their own world. Young children are individuals undergoing a process of rapid development that is fundamental to their future lives. The prominent characteristics of young children are that they are very active, dynamic, enthusiastic, and almost always curious about what they see and hear, as if they never stop learning (Chotim et al., 2014). It can therefore be concluded that children have their own world that cannot be restricted in terms of exploration; thus, as parents, we cannot limit them but can only guide them to stay on a positive path.

Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Regulation in Children with Autism

Emotions are intense experiences accompanied by comprehensive internal adjustments, during which mental and physiological states are in a state of intense fluctuation and can be observed through clear and tangible behaviors (Aisyah & Afrianingsih, 2021). Emotions differ from moods; a mood is a state of mind that lasts longer than an emotion. Emotions also refer to a person's psychological and physiological states and reactions, such as joy, sadness, tenderness, love, and anger (Rahmi, 2019).

Freud described the aspects of personality that manifest in emotions, including love, anger, being moved, surprise, and so on (R. S. Ritonga et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Atkinson categorized emotions into several types: joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, love, and hatred (Wulansari, 2015). Furthermore, emotions can be influenced by several factors, including family, maturity, social status, education, and mental capacity.

In the fields of child development, education, and medicine, we often hear the term "autistic child." Autism can affect children of any race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder that results in difficulties with social interaction, communication, and behavior (Rahayu, 2015). Children with autism have great difficulty controlling their emotions; this is because they are unable to regulate themselves, so they sometimes have more frequent tantrums when expressing their emotions. The emotions typically displayed by children with autism include the following:

- 1) Frequently getting angry for no apparent reason, laughing uncontrollably, or crying for no reason.

- 2) Throwing tantrums (uncontrollable outbursts) when they are denied what they want.
- 3) Sometimes they may lash out or destroy things.
- 4) Children may sometimes harm themselves.
- 5) Children lack empathy and sympathy for others (Banoet et al., 2016).

2.2. Play Therapy: Traditional Play Methods

Play is a good way to build a closer relationship with children. The games chosen should support the process of solving the problems they face. According to Baruth and Robinson III, one form of counseling that can be used with young children is *play therapy* (Patriana, 2018). *Play therapy* is a theory that states that childhood is a time for play; children engage in many activities that ultimately lead to play. This explains why *play therapy* can be used to address issues experienced by young children.

Various methods can be used in *play therapy*, such as drawing, modeling clay, role-playing, storytelling, writing, singing, sandbox play, origami, traditional games, and so on (Y. Ritonga & Ritonga, 2023). Through traditional games, children learn many things; for example, they may develop a desire to always win, refuse to join a group they do not want to be part of, insist on their own opinions, criticize peers who fail, or feel bored during a game. These experiences are part of the learning process that helps children learn to accept environments that may not align with their wishes.

This explanation aligns with the therapeutic benefits of play, as described by Schaefer & Stone (2020), which highlight its positive impact: through shared play, therapists and children can build relationships and foster cooperation; it helps develop moral values; serves as a means of self-expression for feelings, thoughts, or attitudes that are difficult to articulate; enhances mood through the joy and engagement sparked by play; boosts self-esteem; relieves stress; foster attachment in child-rearing, and help teach social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and effective cooperation. Additionally, it can serve as a tool for self-regulation, such as anger management and relaxation.

Traditional games are also a type of game, as they are activities with established rules and the necessary resources for practicing social skills, proper behavior, and agility in community life. Furthermore, they serve as a cultural product that holds value for children in terms of creativity and imagination. The therapeutic values inherent in traditional games can be used to encourage children to be physically active, enhance creativity and a sense of community, and foster positive communication, teach children to follow rules, encourage them to avoid cheating and act fairly, and foster mutual respect and care for their peers. Traditional play therapy allows children to freely express their thoughts and feelings through play rather than relying solely on words.

In addition, traditional games are also a means for children to play. In addition to supporting children's health, fitness, and growth, traditional games teach children values such as honesty, cooperation, sportsmanship, mutual aid, responsibility, discipline, and many others that help build their character. Furthermore, in terms of improving basic skills, object control, and motor skills, traditional games are more effective than everyday activities (Husein, 2021).

Methods

The research method is very important, as one of the characteristics of research is the presence of a systematically and appropriately structured research method that can serve as a guide toward the correct solution to a problem. This type of research is qualitative research that utilizes *field research*. This type of research is qualitative in nature, involving direct observation and participation within a small social unit, as well as observing the interactions within its surroundings. The study conducts direct observations to gather the information needed to compile the report. (Maleong, 2019) The subjects serve as the primary source of data for the researcher in addressing the research problem. Research subjects are informants who can provide information and data relevant to the research problem. The subjects of this study are children diagnosed with autism at Aisyiyah Bustanul Atfhal Bhakti Karya Kindergarten. The criteria for selecting research subjects in this study are as follows: early childhood, diagnosed with autism, and difficulty controlling emotions. The research object refers to the characteristics of a person or the target and focus of the research. Thus, the research object in this study is children with autism who experience difficulty controlling their emotions.

Result and Discussion

4.1. Clients' Emotional Control Before the Implementation of *Play Therapy* Using Traditional Games

Emotions are one way children express what they are currently feeling in their daily lives. Children's emotions can include happiness, sadness, anger, and even being moved. Children express their emotions in various ways. One such client, who also has autism; the client finds it difficult to distinguish what he is feeling, so he is unable to control his emotions. The daily routines of children with autism are significantly disrupted, both physically and mentally; in fact, children with autism are often isolated from their surroundings (Suteja, 2014). This is why most children with autism tend to express anger more easily, sometimes to the point of having tantrums. The child's emotional state before receiving therapy is as follows:

- a. Children get angry more easily when they do not get what they want.
- b. When angry, the child tends to hit people around them or throw objects nearby.
- c. Children find it difficult to be patient once they have had a tantrum.
- d. If the child is crying the child will roll around on floor regardless of where they are.
- e. The child becomes isolated, and many of his or her peers do not want to be friends with him or her.

Based on an interview with the client's parents, it can be concluded that the child has not yet been able to regulate his own emotions; he often vents his anger when he dislikes something while playing with friends or with his siblings at home. The parents have tried to persuade and advise the child to be more patient; when the child gets angry, the mother often tells the child to take a deep breath in the hope of calming the child's emotions. However, the child becomes even more agitated because their expectations are not met either. The client's

emotional development is strongly influenced by their family environment—such as imitating what they observe at home, witnessing daily competition, and the lack of close, personal relationships with peers.

Based on an interview with the client's parents, the child has difficulty fitting in when playing with peers in the neighborhood. As a result, the client spends more time at home, which limits the child's emotional experiences to that immediate environment. The client's parents also mentioned that when angry, their child sometimes reacts by crying so intensely that it leaves both parents confused and unsure of what to do. Once the child has calmed down, he or she tends to daydream more and does not interact with his or her parents. The researcher also conducted an interview with the child's teacher.

Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that the child has difficulty concentrating during the learning process, and if asked to focus, he becomes angry and throws the pencil he is holding. The child also rarely joins his peers during play because if he loses, he becomes angry and refuses to accept it, sometimes even acting aggressively toward his friends. As a result, the child feels isolated, and few are willing to play with him.

4.2. Implementation of *Play Therapy* Using Traditional Games with the Client

The implementation of therapy in this case is expected to help the child control his emotions. This will enable the child to manage his emotions while playing with friends and allow him to socialize again with his schoolmates. The therapy used to address this issue is play therapy. This type of therapy was chosen because young children enjoy playing and spend much of their time doing so. Playing is something children love very much, whether they are playing alone or with peers.

In the first session, the child will undergo therapy alone to assess the extent of their emotions. The child will be given a sheet of paper and several colors that represent their emotions: red, black, and yellow. These three colors each have specific meanings: red signifies anger, black signifies sadness, and yellow signifies happiness. When given a choice, the child selected red, indicating that the child was angry. As the child was coloring, the teacher asked why they chose that color for the picture of their mother, and the child simply replied, "Yes, Mom told me to take a bath even though I was still sleeping."

Based on the child's statement, it can be concluded that the child felt angry because their mother woke them up to take a bath. Since the child was already feeling angry that morning, the researcher conducted play therapy with the child. Thus, the play therapy process to be provided to the child is as follows:

- a. Conducting an initial observation based on the drawing the child made to serve as a starting point for understanding the child's emotions.
- b. Providing a game for the child playing marbles with the researcher to help with emotional regulation. It is known that playing marbles can help develop a child's emotional skills, particularly patience; thus, as the child becomes more patient, they will be better able to control their emotions.
- c. The child was asked how they were feeling today, and the child replied, "I'm okay."

- d. On the following day, the researcher also provided the marbles game to observe how the child practices patience; if the child begins to calm while playing, the activity can be transitioned to another game the following day, initially involving one friend.
- e. The next day, the researcher invited a friend over to play congklak to observe the child's emotions when he lost to his friend and when he won the game. The child still looked angry but was no longer throwing things around or being rough with his friend; the researcher simply needed to pat his chest and say, "It's okay—you don't need to get angry. If we lose, we can try again, okay?" The child just nodded and tried again until, eventually, when he lost, he wasn't too upset.
- f. Once the child began to control his emotions, he was encouraged to play hopscotch with several other children. He still got angry when he lost, but he didn't throw a tantrum.

Conclusion

Play is one of the activities that children love most, making it a fundamental need for young children. Therefore, the implementation of play therapy can serve as a tool for teachers to help children manage their emotions. This enables young children to regulate their emotions appropriately according to the environmental context in which they find themselves.

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