

## **Developing Early Intervention Guideline for Parents to Improve Social Skills Among Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Jordan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There has been a rise in the number of young children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This study aims to develop a guide for early intervention for parents to improve the social and communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorder in Jordan. An experimental quantitative research design was chosen to achieve the study objectives. Using a random sampling method, 60 families who have children with autism spectrum disorder are chosen as a study sample. The children age ranged from 4 to 6 years. A self developed questionnaire was distributed to the sample to measure the family's need for early intervention in improving the social skills of the children. These families were provided with evidence through eight-week training sessions, followed by a questionnaire showing the extent to which some of their children's social skills had improved. The results showed that families of the children indicated a remarkable and clear progress in the behaviour of their children.*

**Keywords:** Early Intervention, Guideline, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Skills, Communication.

### **1. Introduction**

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a group of developmental disorders of unknown origin that affect children in many important areas, namely language, communication and social interaction. ASD affects children's ability to understand and interact with their environment. Therapists' mission is to recognize their difficulties in order to increase their communication and relationship skills. Therefore, it is essential to carefully observe the child. Parents are a key element in therapy, not only because they spend great amount of time with the child and can generalize the new skills taught, but also because a well informed and supportive environment warrants a better prognosis. Early Intervention programs can make a difference and produce

positive and permanent changes in the child. These specific programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in the containment and extinction of the core symptoms of autism, and in improving the social, communicative, attention, and cognitive skills of the child.

Social skills are an important element in developing an individual's personality. Social skills encompasses a range of play skills, conversation skills, emotional skills, problem solving skills and handling conflicts and decision making skills. Social skills pave way in making and having new friends, discovering and developing new skill set from others for personal enhancement. This social skill is naturally developed by the common population without any major supervision. Children develop these skills by observing and imitating parents peers and siblings (Christopher, Shakila, Suganya, & Selvaraj, 2020).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The estimated prevalence of ASD has continuously increased in recent decades with the most current prevalence rates estimating that 1 in 54 children under 8 years of age are diagnosed with ASD. There has been a rise in the number of young children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) discovered by the use of early screening methods and improvements in diagnostic tools. As a result, children are being diagnosed with ASD at an earlier time. Early intervention services that have been specifically designed and tested with this age group of children are imperative, considering the growing prevalence estimates of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the expensive costs associated with ASD treatments. Therefore, it is critical to identify ASD intervention approaches that are appropriate and effective for supporting young children and their families (Fuller, Oliver, Vejnaska, & Rogers, 2020). The field of special education generally includes groups of children with special needs and children with ASD in specific, and these groups may need to be examined.

There is no doubt that the emergence of this disorder at any family leaves a feeling of psychological and social imbalance, leading the family to feel that they are unable to face this situation alone. This condition prompts the family to seek support and assistance from others. Having a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be emotionally challenging for any family. Raising and educating a child with this disorder can lead to significant stress and disruptions in the family's life. This is due to the challenges faced and a lack of experience in dealing with the child and understanding their unique needs effectively. The disorder is characterized by specific behavioural patterns that hinder normal development, particularly in terms of social interaction and communication.

Many studies focused on various aspects to address the requirements of parents with ASD children. Most of these studies have utilised surveys to identify the specific needs of families.

These needs include the need for information, support from family and society, financial assistance, the need to educate and inform others, professional support, and access to community services. It was indicated that the treatment methods are the first step in providing information, informing parents about this disorder, the recovery opportunities, and the most important people who may help them cope with it, including parents themselves (Almandil et al., 2019). Furthermore, when examining the overall interaction patterns within the family, it was discovered that the disorder frequently causes the parents to become socially isolated. This is due to their limited availability for activities outside of the family, as well as the strategies employed by the family to cope with social stigma (Pancani, Gerosa, Gui, & Riva, 2021).

Family-focused support programs show that family-centered interventions that involve a collaborative relationship between professionals and families increase parents' sense of Research has shown that combining early family-centered intervention with a programme delivered by professionals is effective in supporting the needs of the entire family. This approach allows families to choose the type of therapeutic intervention that suits them best, while also providing support, monitoring, and assistance in accessing services (Kiami & Goodgold, 2017).

### **3. Objective of Study**

This study aims to develop early intervention guideline to improve social behaviour among children with autistic disorder (ASD) in Jordan.

### **4. Literature Review**

Early detection of this disorder is very important to ensure proper intervention in education and to improve the child's adaptability and inclusion into society. This group's vulnerability lies in the heterogeneity and complexity of the disorder, which makes early detection and accurate diagnosis difficult (Moreno, Morales, & Seller, 2017). With the use of a gaze-contingent paradigm, toddlers could animate one of two different videos through their gaze behaviour. Importantly, the current study manipulated the social content and the predictable nature of the simulated interaction using other social stimuli in three other conditions (Vernetti, Senju, Charman, Johnson, Gliga, & Team, 2018).

If this is the case, intervening in early sensory responsiveness may translate to improved social outcomes in children with ASD. This theory is intuitively appealing, given the precedence and possible foundational nature of early sensory development relative to the emergence of higher-level social and communication abilities (Elsabbagh, 2020). Developmental intervention procedures emphasize child-initiated social interaction, which provides a context for learning and focuses on improving social orienting and social communicative abilities (social engagement) (Parsons, Cordier, Munro, Joosten, & Speyer, 2017).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that one in 68 children in multiple communities in the United States has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Miyajima, Tateyama, Fuji, Nakaoka, Hirao, & Higaki, 2017). Appropriate treatment of ASD should begin with a careful assessment to determine the child's specific strengths and needs. There are no specific medical tests for diagnosing autism, although there are genetic tests for some disorders that may be associated with behaviours on the autism spectrum. An accurate diagnosis is based on systematic interviewing, observation, and assessment of the child's communication, social interaction, behaviour, and developmental level. A review of sleep, feeding, coordination problems, and sensory sensitivities are often recommended (Maw & Haga, 2018).

Early intervention improves understanding the language of the child effectively and reduces the severity of the autistic characteristics. It also reduces the stress of parents, increases the parents' confidence, and improves the quality of life. Early intervention helps on emotional regulation, increases response to child autistic, and reduces stress and depression of the family. Early intervention increases the communication skills of children, reduces inappropriate behaviour, and maintains skills with increasing time. This helps the community to accept the children with ASD and their integration into it. The intervention usually starts with proof-of-concept work to ascertain initial evidence to support the approach (Rojas-Torres, Alonso-Esteban, & Alcantud-Marín, 2020). Many studies focused on identifying ASD and early intervention in Jordan. Jabery, Arabiat, Khamra, Betawi, and Jabbar (2014) attempted to investigate the perceptions of parents of children with autism regarding the services provided in Jordan. The parents expressed the need for early intervention, family counselling, and community awareness services. The current study agrees with the mentioned study in identifying the needs of families of children with autism spectrum disorder, but not on early intervention, family counselling. Weshahi's (2018) aimed to identify the effectiveness of the early computer intervention program in improving social skills and its effects on reducing social withdrawal for children with autism. The study sample consisted of (40) children with ASD. The results showed that there is a statistical significant difference between the average scores of the pre-test and the post-assessment.

## **5. Methodology**

This study used quantitative experimental research design, as the purpose of the study is to intervene early and guide families of children with autism spectrum disorder in improving the social skills of their children in Jordan.

The samples of this study are children with ASD and their parents. The sample of the children included 19 girls (32%), and 41 boys (68%). There are 37 (62%) children from urban areas, and 23(38 %) children from rural areas. Their age is between four and six years old. The sample of the families is 60. All of them are native speakers of Arabic. They are staying in Amman, Jordan.

As for centers, there are three joint centers in the study. They are Al Ghaith Center for Early Intervention, Arada Center for Community Empowerment, Bedaya Charity Association. They are all located in the east of Amman - Jordan

The researcher developed a guide for early intervention for families of children with an ASD. This guide aimed to improve the social skills of ASD children. The basic framework is based on social theory, learning, modelling, imitation, and the use of reinforcement to increase desirable behaviour. The target groups in this unit are children who have been diagnosed with ASD. The time to complete this unit is three months. There were 15 training sessions. The duration of the program is eight weeks, with three sessions per week, the duration of each session is 35-40 minutes. Each session focused on a specific area related to the characteristics and behaviour of children with ASD. The first session was a welcome to the mothers, introduced them to each other, provided an introduction to the education program and provided general information about the three main areas of autism-related disability (i.e. communication, social relationships, and behaviour). It focused on communication difficulties in children with ASD, and social difficulties, such as making friends. It discussed behavioural repetition and sensory processing problems that many children with autism face (Dinora & Bogenschutz, 2018).

Each session has gone through a number of steps that contain the most important concepts to help parent implement activities such as (defining autism and its characteristics, early intervention and its goals), sessions implementation strategies and tools. These three steps are complementary to each other. The first step is to spread the spirit affection between the families of ASD and the researcher and to create an atmosphere of friendship. The researcher presented a summary of the process of conducting the intervention for families of ASD. The researcher determined the session's objectives and the tools needed for each session. The second step is the actual training that begins with visual communication, increasing the duration of attention, and following instructions and orders. The researcher performed the sessions in front of the mother and used role-playing to ensure the mother's ability to implement the session at home. The third step is training on some social skills and assesses the acquired social skills by submitting a questionnaire showing the extent of families' satisfaction with the program and its role in improving social skills in children with ASD. Each respondent in the treatment group received the desired reinforcer for the child after presenting the session.

## **6. Results**

The results of the training sessions revealed that parents need to understand the characteristics of ASD; hence they can practically accept the manifestations of the symptoms of a child with ASD. When the parents have a better understanding of their child's reality and can adapt their environment to the child's needs, the training will assure them in their parenting role and

improves their ability to actively participate in their child's development. Family intervention should provide guidelines for a structured environment for the child in order to encourage communication, enable his independence, improve family interactions, and perform daily activities to promote desired behaviour and emotion.

## **7. Discussion**

Early intervention for children also provides a solid foundation for learning in primary school and an effective role in improving the social behavior of children with autism through adherence to instructions, training schedules, and providing feedback. All children with autism can make significant progress if the intervention that they receive is appropriate, consistent, and autism-friendly. Families of children with autism spectrum disorder also showed improvement in some social skills in agreement with the study.

Exploiting the great importance of the first years of a child's life can help developing social skills faster, so that they are not years of deprivation, rejection, lost opportunities and developmental deterioration as well. In addition, early intervention is the basis of later learning and helps children to change behavior, and mitigate the effects of disability, and this is achieved faster than late intervention. The importance of early intervention in improving social communication skills can be inferred by providing counseling sessions.

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