

## Social Skills of Children with Autism During Independent Play Activities

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### Abstract

The social skills of children with autism are important for their learning process. This study aims to observe and identify independent play through the communication, verbal and learning style components and learning facilitation towards improving the social skills of children with autism. The study sample was three children and three teachers in three special education primary schools in Kuala Lumpur integration. The design of this study uses a qualitative approach with structured observation and interviews. Data collection through questionnaires and observations using a four-point likert scale to obtain information on the teacher's teaching approach style (A1), student social skills (A2) and student social skills during free play (B). Overall, the findings of the study for the approach style (A1) of three teachers used teacher lesson plans and teaching aids 100 percent very often. The teacher's strategy showed that 66.66 percent of the respondents stated that they always and 33.33 percent of the respondents said that they were very often. While the teacher's teaching strategy states that frequency always exceeds very often. Student social skills (A2) which is an interview with three teachers and three children showed different results from the three children involved in terms of behavior, socializing and sharing goods. Next, for the social skills of the three children during free play (B) was conducted, showing that the three activities carried out, namely the bragging game, snake checkers and long pole can have a positive effect and attract the interest of the three children involved based on the total percentage and total mean score studied. Finally, this study provides implications for educational institutions in addition to raising awareness for teachers and parents about the importance of free play and learning styles and facilitation of social skills among children with autism.

**Keywords:** Children with Autism, Free Play, Social Skills, Special Education Teachers

### Introduction

Play is a creative self-expression and its development is most obvious at the children's level. Playing is also not a forced activity but rather a natural desire of children to be directed by themselves regardless of the purpose of playing and free from all rules. Through games, children will gain new behaviors and be able to motivate themselves. Playing can be used as

a very effective therapy in improving social skills in children with autism (Suryati & Rahmavali, 2016). Playing is an experience that gives children the opportunity to express negative emotions. Play gives children the opportunity to explore and understand the environment and try an activity. Games are often associated with activities and behaviors that are not literal, voluntary and enjoyable or rewarding (Miller, 2017). In the process of trying, they discover new knowledge.

Game methods are often described as activities that fit children's functions. It teaches children to interact with one and two (or more) objects, interact with themselves and interact with their environment (Hancock, 2020). Children with autism have a neuro-biological condition that affects communication, motor, social and attention functions. In addition, children with autism often repeat actions such as clapping, moving and sprinting. Like their peers, children with autism enjoy playing, despite their clumsy movements. When children with autism play, one of their movements is throwing and catching. Some children with autism have good motor coordination, while others do not, as in the case of catch-throw games (Handayani, 2018). This child's movement affects the development of other domain-specific skills such as cognitive, social and communication.

There have been many studies conducted to identify appropriate techniques and methods to overcome the problem of social interaction skills. In this study, the researcher will evaluate the use of independent games to improve the social interaction skills of children with autism. The uniqueness of the nature and character of children with autism demands the efforts of teachers to identify the types of activities that are suitable for use in learning. The assertion of the need for teachers or professional groups to understand the learning style of children with autism and appropriate teaching methods is stated by Fleury, Thompson and Wong (2014) in an article related to the implications of school readiness on the development of academic skills of children with autism. A child's natural instinct is to play, just like sleeping and eating. Preschool children can be nurtured directly and indirectly to develop comprehensive and balanced self-fertility from intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects. When playing, children use all their senses such as their eyes, ears, nose and skin. Therefore, when children play using outdoor toys in particular, they can explore, investigate things in their environment while creating, exploring, building and so on.

Children can stimulate curiosity, strengthen gross motor and fine motor coordination, use creativity, improve social skills and discipline when they play. In addition, can help children express their feelings when playing. The balance of playing and learning or doing work is an important framework for shaping the curriculum and learning environment of children. The teacher's understanding of developmental theories and children's interactions with teachers and friends can help teachers plan learning through play more efficiently. Various interventions that have been used in previous studies such as social storytelling techniques, computer-based interventions, video modeling techniques and so on have proven to be effective in improving the social communication skills of children with autism, however these techniques are only able to improve one aspect of the weakness of children with autism and do not act in modifying the behavior of these children. Therefore, this study is proposed to be carried out to find out the level of effectiveness of the free play approach in improving the social interaction skills of children with autism

The purpose of this study was to identify the use of free play in improving social interaction skills among children with autism. The main subjects in this study are 3 children with autism who attend schools around Kuala Lumpur who have been identified as having problems with social interaction skills. The objective of the study is to observe the effect of

applying independent games through the communication component in improving the social interaction skills of children with autism. To identify the effect of applying free play through the oral component in improving the social skills of children with autism. To identify the teaching and learning style of children with autism.

The research questions for this study are:

1. How application of independent games through the communication component can improve the social interaction skills of children with autism?
2. How can the application of independent play through the oral component improve the social skills of children with autism?
3. What types of teaching and learning style are used by teachers in improving the social skills of children with autism?

### **Literature Review**

Piaget's philosophy of cognitive development theory is that children learn through the construction of knowledge with the help of teachers in child-centered activities. According to Piaget (1962), play is a bridge between concrete experience and abstract thinking. According to Piaget formulated by Portman (2006) play is a way in which children use their senses to use concrete objects as symbols to express abstract experiences. Piaget also saw play activities provided in the children's environment as an exploration of nature. Playing is said to bridge the gap between concrete experience and abstract thought. This is because children's abilities are limited to make assumptions about abstract things around them. Therefore, children who are given the opportunity to play will combine their experience, knowledge and understanding (Bruce, 1992). According to Piaget and Vygotsky, knowledge is built through an interconnected process between previous learning and current learning. In the learning process, children build knowledge by actively involving themselves, using a way of comparing new information with existing experience in order to resolve any disagreements that arise with the aim of achieving an understanding of new information.

Vygotsky's contextual theory emphasizes the role of the environment in children's cognitive development, which happens from external aspects to internal aspects through internalization (receiving knowledge from the context). Vygotsky thinks that the cognitive level of children is difficult to understand without taking into account the level of actual development and the level of potential development of children (Gober, 2008). According to Vygotsky, the development of children's concepts develops systematically, logically and rationally with the help and guidance of others. The social context plays a central role in learning and children share and build new knowledge with each other. Engagement with others provides opportunities for children to evaluate and improve self-knowledge. Vygotsky believed that learning can occur through play, formal presentations or collaboration between children and more experienced children.

The Integrated Play Group (IPG) model was designed by Pamela Wolfberg in 1980 while working with an autistic program in a San Francisco public elementary school. He takes very seriously the development of children with autism who do not get equal access to important play and social experiences with peers. The framework of the IPG model has successfully helped children with autism and neurotypical children together to create a play culture that fosters socialization, play and imagination and can accept the diversity of each individual.

Integrated Play Group (IPG) is also an evidence-based practice model or evidence-based practice (EBP), which is based on Lee Vygotsky's theory of social culture. It is designed to guide children with autism and neurotypical peers in engaging experiences to foster natural

socialization, play and imagination in an inclusive setting. The IPG model originally used for pre-school and primary school children has been expanded to various age groups by combining different therapies and extended to forms of culturally valuable activities. Studies show that social participation, play and creative expression are important human rights for children's development and their involvement in socio-culture. Unique differences in social interaction, communication and imagination put children with autism at risk of being excluded by their peers. Thus, the IPG model can maximize the development of capacity and intrinsic motivation to play, socialize and establish friendships between children with autism and their peers.

Social play is meant to train children with autism to relate to others. Children with autism can get to know other people and various activities with various activities with other people as their partner. Social games revolve around social interaction with peers. Basically, if it involves other children, it is a social toy. Various games can be associated with social games. This type of game will help children learn how to interact with other people. If someone gets hurt during this game, it can also teach a very valuable lesson, empathy. Social games are important for children's development because they give children the opportunity to get to know other people, develop children's ability to communicate, train children to socialize and help children make friends. In particular, social games contribute to the social development of children with autism such as cooperating, helping, sharing things, playing with friends and teachers, serving others and contributing.

Outdoor play is important for children to allow them to explore, fine motor and gross motor development and gain effective basic knowledge. Outdoor activities bring fun, get fresh air and reduce stress in the classroom. Outdoor play activities that can encourage children to communicate are sports, role playing, games outside the classroom and many more (Zainiah et al., 2021). Outdoor play also helps to keep children mentally and physically healthy. Outdoor play can motivate and support children with social interaction problems. Like social play, outdoor play gives children with autism an opportunity to socialize, make friends, take turns and cooperate with other friends while improving their social interaction skills.

Based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder IV (DSMV, 2012), one of the attitudes often shown by people with autism is that they always isolate themselves and find it difficult to accept change because they are too focused on routine matters. Furthermore, they also do not show counter-reactions to other people, have problems in communication, whether in speech or socializing and limitations in socializing (Wijayaptri, 2017). Children learn and develop through play which is related to various emotional, social, cognitive and academic achievements (Bonfield and Horgon, 2016). The approach of learning through play is in tune with children's nature and can help their development.

The method of playing while learning means that children learn while carrying out play activities (Erica et al., 2018). Zaharah and Suziyani (2019), on the other hand, stated that teachers need to use appropriate teaching and learning methods to attract the interest and unearth the potential of children. Children play and interact with each other through questions asked sharing materials and tools but not playing together. The game is the result of the teacher's planning. This method is a teaching method that is carried out for children with play activities and at the same time they process information and material skills and hone their abilities and skills (Darmadi, 2018). Fariza et al (2017) explained the disability of children's social interaction includes reluctance to make eye contact and express facial expressions, no will to share joy and happiness and then fail to establish relationships with

peers, disability in language and communication. They rely heavily on rote memory and are less adept at forming phrases creatively. Topics of conversation are limited and cause social problems and poor cognitive development.

The study conducted by Yang & Wang (2017), also stated that social interaction has a positive impact on children's development and encourages cognitive development which is indirectly needed in learning. Another study explained that children with autism who received two years of the 3i play therapy method, which is an interactive, intensive and individual play therapy, showed a significant improvement in behavioral and developmental skills, as well as a significant decrease in the severity of autism. Method 3i also focuses on children's sensory characteristics, ii) provides participants with a developmental roadmap that assists in their understanding of their current abilities and difficulties along their developmental path, and iii) distinguishes three developmental ages in their corresponding agenda Findings this shows that the 3i technique can benefit these children by improving their daily interactions with their social environment (Pitalla, 2019). Teachers can use the main dynamics of this game in various ways to help children in developing, refining, expanding, and expanding both their semiotic talents and their active integration into social life (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). A study from Flores Jamero, 2019 also supports children with autism engaging in various play interactions. The interaction is complex, imitative and creative, central tendency, has various functional effects on the social and cognitive development of children. The findings emphasize the importance of social constructivism as an important component of children's learning.

Some intervention studies using play methods to improve the social interaction of children with autism whether in the form of playing games have been done by previous researchers. Parson, 2019 performed a randomized control trial on a sample of 71 children with autism. The children were randomly divided into an intervention-first group (n = 28 analyzed) or a wait-list group (n= 34 analyzed). Children are asked to attend ten weekly play clinic sessions with a typically developing peer and parent practice component mediated at home. The Observational Measure (POM-2) and the Social Emotional Evaluation (SEE) were assessed pragmatically before, after and 3 months after the intervention. The results support a combination of games, peer mediation, video feedback and parent training to improve pragmatic language in children with autism. Pragmatic language is the appropriate use of communication in social affairs.

### **Methodology**

This section will explain about the study design, study sample, study instrument and the method of data collection and data analysis. The study uses qualitative approach involving observation methods, namely structured observation and interviews. This study was conducted in three Primary Schools in Kuala Lumpur, namely Anggerik School, Kemboja School and Nagasari School, taking into account several factors such as the size of the classroom, the equipment of games inside and outside the classroom and also the social skills of the study sample. The design of this study was chosen because it can provide information about the social skills difficulties of the children with autism being studied.

This study was carried out with a qualitative design using structured observation and interview methods. The qualitative study used is a plan where the researcher relies on the participants' views, asks general questions, collects data in the form of words or text from the participants, analyzes and conducts inquiries in a subjective and biased manner. This method is also chosen to provide an explanation of human nature and condition by using a general

view of any social action. According to Cresswell (1994), qualitative research is a process of inquiry towards the understanding of data based on the conditions of data collection that are commonly used when surveying a social problem. Qualitative research involves a variety of focused methods, including the use of a naturalistic approach to research an object (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The population of this study is three children with autism between 8 - 12 years old who are studying at the Special Integration Education Program (PPKI) school in Kuala Lumpur. They have been identified as facing social interaction problems after the researcher conducted a survey on their situation and also obtained information from the teacher. All subjects are also only able to interact socially with friends and teachers at a minimal level. According to (Yusuf, 2004), each individual or object in a population may vary in many ways, but it must have no less than one characteristic in common. The teachers who were selected by sampling are intended to be interviewed because they have a close relationship and know the subject of the study in depth in terms of the social interaction skills of these children.

The location of the study was conducted in three schools that have a Special Integration Education Program (PPKI) for primary schools in Kuala Lumpur. The location of this school is very strategic considering that it is in a densely populated place and has a lot of transport access. The school meets the purpose of this study because it has a Special Education Program for Integration (PPKI). According to Spradley (1980), there are four main characteristics of the selection of the study location, namely (i) depending on the nature and purpose of the study, (ii) the study location is convenient in terms of transportation and communication facilities, (iii) permission to conduct the study at the location said, (iv) the location of the study must have individuals to be studied and the size of the population in the place in question must also be taken into account. The researcher has received permission from the Education Research Planning Division (EPRD) at the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) to obtain permission to conduct this study. This study were carried out specifically in the location of a specific area of the school, which is inside and outside the classrooms involved.

Before conducting this study, the researcher obtained permission from the parents and the school of the autistic student. This situation is a step to comply with ethics in a research so that research participants are not burdened with any problems as a result of the research produced. (Ruhaizan and Maizam, 2010; Idris, 2010). After obtaining permission, the researcher's first focus is to obtain information and conduct interview sessions with teachers to find out and obtain detailed information about the problems of social interaction skills that are often exhibited by children with autism. Second, is to explain to the class teachers about the purpose of the study, the observation rules, the daily skills to be studied and the free play method to be implemented. The questionnaire was conducted 3 times for each student, which is every different week. After each observation session, the checklist were recorded and analyzed.

The research instrument has three parts, which is part A1 for the approach style instrument of teachers towards improving the social skills of children with autism, part A2 for the student social skills interview instrument for teachers and part B is for the student social skills instrument during free play for teachers. Teachers need to answer all questions related to self-management, social, behavioral, routine teaching and learning skills of children with autism by using the provided Likert scale. Cohen et al (2018) emphasized the importance of expert agreement on the built measuring instrument because experts are the interactors who play a role in making agreement between evaluators and verifying the construction of the instrument. Therefore, each instrument designed by the researcher was reviewed by a

supervisor in the field of special education before the instrument was used. A validation form has also been prepared to record reviews and comments after making an assessment of the appropriateness of the instrument.

The Likert scale in this study were used when making observations based on the teaching and learning activity schedule. The Likert scale used is a four-point scale. The sample were be evaluated depending on the extent to which the development of social interaction is exhibited. A set of questionnaires was used as a research tool. This study set was taken and modified from the researcher's study according to the Likert Scale study model. This descriptive study uses questionnaires and interviews that are consistent with the research concept and survey of this study. The questionnaire contains several sections and each section consists of a group of statements related to certain aspects. This checklist was also built by adapting basic social skills behaviors from the checklists of (McClellan and Katz, 2001; Artwood and Gray, 1999; Strain et al., 1998). The purpose of the interview process is to obtain information related to the social problems of children with autism from the teacher. A brief explanation were done by the researcher and state that all personal information is confidential.

The study samples were conducted at different times and times since they could not be present at the same time. They were also given thirty minutes to answer the question. The interview questions were more focused on obtaining data about the social skills problems of the study sample. Observation is a research technique that is often used. Observation is a way of collecting data by studying directly about the study sample and the research done. In this study, researchers made observations during teaching and learning carried out inside and outside the classroom to obtain data on the social skills of children with autism. This qualitative data was obtained through observation during the teaching and learning sessions of independent play. This activity is based on an independent game taught by the teacher and researcher by marking on thirty items that have a score of 1 to 4. The total score is 100%. The score obtained from each sample were recorded by the researcher to find out and make a comparison between the three study samples. The free games are bragging rights, giant snake checkers and long pole games. Through this free play, the researcher can assess the improvement of the student's social skills.

Before the data collection procedure, the researcher determined the title of the study to be conducted. The objectives and research questions set were based on the purpose of the study. The researcher then examined the research method that will be used. After being presented in front of the lecturer and making improvements, the data collection procedure began by finding a suitable location and school. The location involved was a Primary School in Kuala Lumpur that has a Special Education Program for Integration (PPKI). Before the study was carried out, a letter of permission was proposed to the school and parents. After getting permission, the researcher visited the school to observe free-play activities that are often used in teaching and learning. This visit was also done to get information from the teacher about the teaching and learning methods used, besides setting a schedule that is suitable for the researcher to conduct the study. This study was conducted in three sessions and during the study, the social skills that occurred among the sample were evaluated more carefully and all information was recorded in the study instrument provided. The three free game themes that were used included: the game of pride, the game of giant checkers and the game of long pole.

The research data for each observation was analyzed based on the checklist records used. On the other hand, the data obtained through interviews were analyzed after being

transcribed through a manual and comprehensive transcription process to find out the factors that influence the development of social interaction of children with autism and the methods used by teachers. The results of observational data on the social interaction skills of children with autism were transcribed, i.e. all behavioral changes and social interactions that occur were studied and reported in the form of line graphs. Findings of data and total scores show improvement in the first week until the sixth week when the daily lesson plan is implemented. The frequency of problematic behavior and the rate of improvement in the social interaction skills of children with autism determine which methods are effective and less effective in improving social interaction skills and reducing the problematic behavior of the children with autism being studied. The reporting method in the form of line graphs and total scores is able to help researchers measure the rate of increase in the frequency of social interaction among children after the free play method is carried out. The analysis was conducted according to qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are in the form of percentage, descriptive and frequency of occurrence. Qualitative data analysis can be done in various forms according to the suitability of the study and the objectives of the study. The form of analysis is based on attributes in terms of differences in activity schedules, interview information such as gender, school type and observation attributes. After the data results have been obtained, the obtained result information is arranged in the form of a matrix table in the form of a diagram or model to obtain a pattern of research findings. In this study, we report data in the form of line graphs and total mean scores.

### **Findings**

#### **Teacher Teaching Approach Style (Part A1)**

This section presents information about the teacher's teaching style. In this section, the question to be clarified is to get the views of three special education teachers on the use of daily lesson plans (RPH), teaching aids (ABM), methods and strategies in the teaching and learning process. A total of 15 questions were prepared where the first question is related to RPH, the second question is about ABM, the third to sixth questions are related to the method used. Next, the seventh question to the fifteenth question is about the teacher's strategy in delivering teaching and learning to improve the social skills of children with autism. Respondents were asked to circle their preferred answers based on the Likert Scale used. The descriptions of the indicators for the Likert Scale are: Never (TP), Sometimes (KK), Always (S) and Very Often (SK).



Table 1

*Distribution of answers for Teacher's approach style (Part A1)*

Bil	Item	N	TP	KK	S	SK
			%	%	%	%
1	I always plan creative and interesting lesson plans to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	-	100%
2	I always use interesting teaching aids to help children with autism understand my teaching in improving their social skills.	3	-	-	-	100%
3	I use group learning methods to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
4	I use the hands on method in my teaching to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
5	I use the play method in my teaching to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
6	I use teaching methods in and out of class to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	100%	
7	I encourage my students to engage in learning activities to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
8	I always make sure the children with autism are focused before giving instructions or asking questions to improve their social skills.	3	-	-	100%	
9	I encourage students to tell me if they don't understand something I teach to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
10	I do student-centered activities to improve the social skills of children with autism.	3	-	-	100%	
11	I always encourage children with autism to communicate, interact and socialize	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%

	with friends to improve their social skills.					
12	I always give opportunities for children with autism to show their interest in improving social skills	3	-	-	6.66%	33.33%
13	I always maintain a positive relationship with children with autism to improve their social skills.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
14	I always give praise or tokens to children with autism who cooperate to improve their social skills.	3	-	-	66.66%	33.33%
15	I always discuss with colleagues about the social skills that children with autism need to improve their social skills.	3	-	-	100%	

#### Teacher's Lesson Plan (Question 1)

In terms of teacher lesson plans, it was found that 100% of teachers are very often producing good daily lesson plans in improving the social skills of children with autism. This situation clearly shows that in terms of psychology teachers always try to deliver effective teaching and learning. The teacher's teaching plan should be based on the achievement of children with autism and teachers play an important role in thinking about the achievement of children with autism in a planned and objective lesson.

#### Teaching Aids (Questions 1 and 2)

In terms of teacher teaching and learning, it was found that 100% of teachers very often use teaching aids to attract the attention of children with autism so that they are more interested in socializing better. The teaching aids used are usually provided by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) or built by the teacher themselves so that the tools used can meet the needs of children with autism and further assist in achieving the targeted objectives.

#### Teacher Teaching Methods (Questions 3 to 6)

In terms of teaching methods, all respondents who recorded reading (66.66% always and 33.33% very often) stated that they always use group teaching and learning methods to improve the social skills of children with autism. In addition, the same findings also show that 33% of respondents very often and 66.66% of respondents always use the hands-on method as well as the play method. A total of 100% of respondents always use teaching methods in and out of class.

#### Teacher's Teaching Strategies (Questions 7 to 15)

Studies related to the teaching and learning strategies used show that 100% of respondents always ensure that children with autism focus before giving instructions or asking questions, do student-centered activities and always discuss with colleagues about the social skills

required by children with autism. While 66.66% of respondents stated that they always and 33.33% of respondents who very often encouraged children with autism to engage in any form of learning. Next, as many as 66.00% of respondents always encourage children with autism to tell the teacher if they do not understand a topic being taught while as many as 33.00% of respondents very often do the same thing. The results of the study found that as many as 66.00% of respondents stated that they always and 33% of respondents stated that they very often implement strategies that encourage children with autism to communicate, interact and socialize with other friends, always give children opportunities to show their interests and that teachers maintain positive relationships with children by giving praise and tokens.

### Student Social Skills (Part A2)

This section is an interview section with three teachers who have been selected as respondents and are teachers who teach the study subject class to obtain preliminary information related to the social skills of the children with autism being studied. This section contains 10 questions to get the teacher's response.

Based on the interview with teacher A, student A is a male, aged 8 years and has autism at a moderate level and is found to be experiencing emotional instability. Nevertheless, he shows a positive behavior that is fond of drawing. He is quite passive, less interacting with other friends but has eye contact when invited to chat. Pupil A was found to be able to communicate with friends in some specific matters. According to the teacher again, student A is a person who is less friendly, lacks smiles and laughs but can respond when questioned and can focus when the teacher is teaching. Although the student is a quiet person, he can share toys with his friends during game activities. The development process of the student's social skills is quite good and he has no problem involving himself in teaching and learning activities and even has a high self-confidence attitude compared to before. According to the teacher again, student A is very polite. He will apologize if he makes a mistake but does not like to be touched by others.

Student B is an 8-year-old boy with low-level autism. Through an interview with teacher B, it was found that the student still needs encouragement from the teacher because he is often alone and makes friends at certain times. Nevertheless, children can interact in a simple way and show eye contact while chatting. The teacher also explains that the children lack communication skills, find it difficult to make good friends and often talk to themselves. However, his social skills were found to improve when he was involved in interesting activities such as playing, watching stories and mobility programs. In addition, the student was found to have the ability to learn at a moderate level because he did not respond when asked by the teacher. To increase children's concentration, teachers often use interesting ABM so as not to cause boredom to him and other children. During game activities, children show a less friendly attitude because they do not like to share toys and apologize when they make mistakes. In general, children are found to have social skills problems that are related to emotions, situations and things they do.

As a result of the interview with teacher C, student C is an 8-year-old male and has autism at a moderate level with behavior that is passive, solitary and less sociable. Pupils sometimes behave aggressively and find it difficult to focus and even find that they can only interact but only with the teacher's guidance. Although children do not show eye contact, children can communicate well and only make friends in certain situations. The teacher found that the

student's development was quite slow because he lacked interest in learning but could give a response when questioned. Pupils also like to play and can share toys with other friends. According to the teacher, the student's social skills are quite weak because his confidence level is low. Pupils rarely apologize when they make mistakes and are insensitive to other people's feelings. He only does those things when asked by teachers or peers. Until now, student involvement in teaching and learning activities still requires help and guidance from teachers.

#### Social skills of children during free play (Part B)

The following is an interpretation table of mean scores for children' social skills during free play.

Table 2

Mean Score Value	Interpretation
1.00-1.80	Very Low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Moderate
3.41-4.20	High

*Mean Value According to a Four Likert Scale: Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2004)*

Table 3

#### *Student's social skills during Student A free play*

Activity	1 Oral (Congkak)			2 Comunication (Dam Ular)			3 Interactions (Galah Panjang)		
	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3
Percent %	35	50	65	43	55	55	38	50	48
Total Percent%	50.00			50.83			45.00		
Score mean	1.40	2.00	2.60	1.40	2.20	2.20	1.50	2.20	2.20
Total score mean	2.00			1.93			1.97		
Interpretation of Mean score	Low			Low			Low		

Student A was also interviewed. Based on the children's social skills table during the free play activity 1 (congkak) it was found that there was an increase in the percentage and mean score based on the 3 sessions conducted. Activity 2 shows that the free game of snake checkers has a percentage increase and the mean score for session 1, session 2 and session 3 has no increase. While the activities of 3 long pole free games showed a percentage increase and the mean score of session 1 and session 2 and session 3 did not increase. Based on the level of interpretation of the mean score, the level of tendency is still at a low level for each activity carried out.

Table 4

*Social skills of children during Student B free play*

Activity	1 Oral (Congkak)			2 Comunication (Dam Ular)			3 Interactions (Galah Panjang)		
	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3
Percent %	35	38	48	43	48	50	38	43	48
Total Percent%	40.17			47.00			43.00		
Score mean	1.40	1.50	2.00	1.70	1.80	2.00	1.50	1.70	1.90
Total score mean	1.63			1.83			1.70		
Interpretation of Mean score	Low			Low			Low		

Based on the social skills table of student B during free play activity 1 (congkak) it was found that there was an increase in the percentage and mean score based on the 3 sessions performed. Activity 2 shows that the snake check free game has an increase in percentage and mean score for session 1, session 2 and session 3. While activity 3, the long pole free game shows that there is an increase in percentage and mean score in session 1, session 2 and session 3. Level of total interpretation the mean score shows that the level of tendency is still at a low level for each activity carried out.

Table 5

*Student's social skills during Student C free play*

Activity	1 Oral (Congkak)			2 Comunication (Dam Ular)			3 Interactions (Galah Panjang)		
	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3	Sesi 1	Sesi 2	Sesi 3
Percent %	32.5	35	35	30	32.5	30	25	35	30
Total Percent%	34.17			30.83			30.00		
Score mean	1.30	1.20	1.40	1.60	2.20	2.20	1.00	1.30	1.20
Total score mean	1.30			2.00			1.17		
Interpretation of Mean score	Low			Low			Low		

Based on the social skills table of student C during free play activity 1 (congkak) it was found that there was a decrease in session 1 and session 2 in percentage and there was an increase in session 3. Activity 2 showed that the free game of snakes had an increase in percentage and mean score for session 1, session 2 and session 3 there is a decrease. While the activities of the 3 long pole free games show an increase in percentage and mean score of session 1, session 2, and session 3 there is a decrease in terms of percentage and mean score. Based on the total level of mean score interpretation, the tendency level is still at a low level for each activity carried out.

**Discussion**

The role of teachers in implementing creative and interesting teaching and learning can be seen in the social aspect, the use of creative and innovative play methods, teachers are able to change anti-social children into children who can socialize (Manisah & Norizza, 2016; Fahime & Abhas, 2019). In addition, the use of teaching aids was found to be able to help attract children's interest in understanding the lessons being taught. The educational curriculum can incorporate Piaget's cognitive theory by using teaching aids to aid learning (Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020). Through this study, it was found that teachers also implement their teaching using methods such as learning in groups, hands-on methods, playing methods and teaching methods outside the classroom to improve the social skills of children with autism. Outdoor play activities play a role that can encourage children to communicate such as sports and games outside the classroom (Zainiah et al., 2021).

Next, the free play approach in improving the social skills of children with autism motivates and encourages teachers to use a variety of strategies in effectively delivering teaching and learning. Pupils are easily attracted, focus, question, interact and involve themselves in activities. According to a study conducted by Chan et al (2016), games linked to the theory of emotional and social development by Vygotsky, the results of the study on pretend play (pretend play) and fun games (playfulness) are also affected by the severity of autism, especially fun games play

Teachers also always make sure that children with autism are focused before giving instructions or asking questions in order to improve their social skills. Further encourage children to tell something that is not understood about what is being taught and implement strategies such as doing student-centered activities. Through this strategy, children with autism can focus and even involve themselves in group activities. According to a study from Flores Jamero, 2019 also supports children with autism to engage in various play interactions. The interaction is complex, imitative and creative, central tendency, has various functional effects on the social and cognitive development of children. The findings emphasize the importance of social constructivism as an important component of children's learning.

Through the research conducted, it was found that teachers always involve other children to communicate, interact and socialize with children with autism. The teacher's role is very important in controlling and managing student behavior so that they are more confident in socializing. Children with autism should be given the opportunity to show their interest in something they are interested in

Maintaining a positive relationship between teachers and children with autism also plays an important role in improving their social skills. Vygotsky (1978) also argued that effective teaching is when children work together to engage in activities in an environment that supports learning and receives proper guidance from the teacher.

Next, the findings found that teachers use strategies such as giving praise and tokens to children with autism who successfully cooperate and engage in activities to improve their social skills. The teacher's role is also important in providing teaching and learning strategies aimed at improving the social skills of children with autism. A discussion session with other teachers can provide effective input to help children with autism to socialize. Referring to the social aspect, the use of creative and innovative play methods, teachers are able to transform anti-social children into children who can socialize (Manisah & Norizza 2016; Fahime & Abhas, 2019).

**Conclusion**

Overall, observation of free play through communication and oral components can be improved in terms of social interaction skills for 3 autistic students who carry out this activity. This can be seen in the total percentage and total mean score studied. In this situation, it clearly shows that the free play approach plays an important role in providing information to teachers to plan RPH in implementing free play activities in order to improve oral skills, communication skills and interaction skills of autistic students. In addition, the use of teaching aids was found to be able to help attract students' interest in understanding the lessons being taught. Through this study, it was found that teachers also implement their teaching using methods such as learning in groups, hands-on methods, playing methods and teaching methods outside the classroom to improve the social skills of autistic students. The three activities that are carried out, namely the game of swagger, snake checkers and the long pole game can have a positive effect and attract interest for the 3 autistic students involved. Next, the free play approach in improving the social skills of autistic students motivates and encourages teachers to use a variety of strategies in effectively delivering teaching and learning. Pupils are easily attracted, focus, question, interact and involve themselves in activities.

The teacher's role is very important in controlling and managing student behavior so that they are more confident in socializing. Autistic students should be given the opportunity to show their interest in something they are interested in. Maintaining a positive relationship between teachers and students with autism also plays an important role in improving their social skills. Next, the findings found that teachers use strategies such as giving praise and tokens to autistic students who successfully cooperate and engage in activities to improve their social skills. The teacher's role is also important in providing teaching and learning strategies aimed at improving the social skills of autistic students. A discussion session with other teachers can provide effective input to help autistic students to socialize.

Therefore, free play through communication and verbal components for autistic students needs to be further increased with various ways of activities and needs to be exposed to all categories of MBPK which are low, medium and high categories.

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