

## **Speech Therapy to Overcome Language Disorders in Autistic Children**

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### **Abstract**

Some children with autism spectrum symptoms have impaired language skills, resulting in impaired communication skills. They tend to be challenging to develop according to their age, like other children, due to their limitations. But that doesn't mean there isn't anything we can't do. Continuous stimulation through speech and language skills therapy is one of the essential things they need to take so that they can reduce the disorders experienced by these children. This study focuses on describing the stimulation of language development in children with symptoms of autism disorders and knowing what activities can stimulate language skills in children with autism disorders. The approach used in this research is a descriptive qualitative approach. Data mining techniques included interviews and observations at a school for children with special needs. The results of this study indicate that the stimulation of language skills in children with autism disorders can be done with speech therapy to help them develop language skills.

**Keywords:** autism, language disorders, speech therapy

### **Abstrak**

Beberapa anak dengan gejala spektrum autisme mengalami gangguan kemampuan berbahasa yang mengakibatkan kemampuan komunikasinya terganggu. Ia cenderung sulit berkembang sesuai usianya seperti anak-anak lainnya disebabkan oleh keterbatasannya tersebut. Namun bukan berarti tidak ada hal yang bisa diupayakan. Stimulasi yang berkesinambungan melalui terapi kemampuan berbicara dan berbahasa merupakan salah satu hal penting yang perlu ditempuh agar gangguan yang dialami oleh anak-anak tersebut dapat berkurang. Tujuan penelitian ini berfokus untuk mendeskripsikan tentang stimulasi perkembangan bahasa pada anak dengan gejala gangguan autisme dan mengetahui kegiatan apa saja yang mampu menstimulasi kemampuan berbahasa pada anak dengan gangguan autisme. Pendekatan yang digunakan pada penelitian ini adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Teknik penggalan data yang dilakukan antara lain wawancara dan observasi pada sebuah sekolah anak berkebutuhan khusus. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa stimulasi kemampuan berbahasa pada anak dengan gangguan autisme dapat dilakukan dengan terapi wicara untuk membantu mereka dalam mengembangkan kemampuan berbahasa.

**Kata kunci:** autisme, gangguan berbahasa, terapi wicara

### **A. Introduction**

Language is one of human's most distinctive characteristics to distinguish them from other creatures. Animals also have a communication system that allows them to work together. However, this does not mean that we can call the animal's ability to communicate a language, although it does resemble language. Language is one of the more complex elements spoken by humans. Language is the process of expressing thoughts and feelings from the brain orally in the form of words or sentences.<sup>1</sup>

Humans from birth will learn language by themselves, even though he acquires it in any complicated way. The language acquisition process occurs naturally, not by memorizing vocabulary, social applications, or grammatical rules. Because the language dictionary in the child's brain is arranged automatically without theories, this is different from grammatical abilities that can hone from the sought acquisition.<sup>2</sup>

Language is one of the parameters in child development. Hartanto et al. suggested that language skills are closely related to cognitive, sensory-motor, psychological, emotional, and environmental outcomes around children and involve all these elements on an ongoing basis.<sup>3</sup> In line with

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<sup>1</sup> T Ballerina, "Meningkatkan Rentang Perhatian Anak Autis Dalam Pembelajaran Pengenalan Huruf," *INKLUSI: Journal of Disability Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 245-66, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14421/ijds.030205>.

<sup>2</sup> Rohmani Nur Indah, "Proses Pemerolehan Bahasa: Dari Kemampuan Hingga Kekurangmampuan Bahasa," *LiNGUA Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa Dan Sastra* 3, no. 1 (2008): 1-17, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18860/ling.v3i1.570>.

<sup>3</sup> Fitri Hartanto et al., "Pengaruh Perkembangan Bahasa Terhadap Perkembangan Kognitif Anak Usia 1-3 Tahun," *Sari Pediatri* 12, no. 6 (2011): 386-90.

this opinion, Piaget's theory cited by Elliot suggests that a child builds an understanding of his world mainly by his actions. Therefore, his abilities and intelligence are products of his environment and be supported by specific mental structures that are interrelated.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to get good language skills, it is necessary to have healthy psychological and emotional conditions, optimal cognitive and sensory-motor development, and be supported by a conducive surrounding environment.

The language a child learns and acquires is what the important people around him are saying as he gradually participates in social interaction. This stage is also known as the communicative competence learning stage.<sup>5</sup> According to Bruner, the acquisition of a child's language begins when the mother and baby undergo an interaction to communicate with each other and form a shared reality. The transactions that occur in the process are inputs that can help the child master grammar, how to refer and define, and how to realize his intentions communicatively.<sup>6</sup>

But what if language acquisition is impaired? Sometimes, certain situations in children can cause the acceptance and mastery of language to hamper. Among the types of language disorders, specifically in children, is the autism spectrum. Autism spectrum or pervasive developmental disorder, according to the DSM-5, refers to a disorder of immature brain development that can affect a person's ability to socialize, communicate verbally and nonverbally, and in symbolic interaction.<sup>7</sup>

According to Bucher, autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, or a group of related conditions, currently defined as a specific disorder of social interaction, communication, and behavioral flexibility.<sup>8</sup> As we know, the brain is the center of all human activities, including speaking and talking. Children with autism will have difficulty catching a language in the form of acquiring and learning language activities. Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder of the brain that affects a person's ability to communicate, behave, and interact socially. Autistic children tend to be engrossed in their world and spend more time only with the things they like. This deficiency in children with autism can eventually

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<sup>4</sup> Alison J. Elliot, *Child Language* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Courtney B. Cazden, "Child Language and Education," 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Bruner, "Child Language Teaching and Therapy," in *Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language*, 1985, 111–14, [https://doi.org/Bruner, J. \(1985\). Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 1\(1\), 111–114. doi:10.1177/026565908500100113](https://doi.org/Bruner, J. (1985). Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 1(1), 111–114. doi:10.1177/026565908500100113).

<sup>7</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*, 5th ed. (Arlington, Virginia: American Psychiatric Association, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> J. Bucher, "Language Development of Autism," *International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology* 67 (2003): S159–63, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.ijporl.2003.08.016>.

lead to disturbances in language skills and how they interact with the surrounding environment.

For this reason, stimulating language skills for children with the characteristics of the autism spectrum becomes very important. Various experts have also carried out multiple approaches and ways to encourage the development of language skills of autistic children. However, discussions regarding appropriate stimulation methods and procedures still need to be carried out. For this reason, it is still essential to carry out this research. This study aimed to describe the application of stimulation of speech development in children with the autism spectrum and to discuss the application of the stimulation method to a group of children with the autism spectrum.

## **B. Method**

This research uses a qualitative approach which intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subject holistically and in a descriptive way in the form of words and language, in a particular natural context, and by utilizing scientific methods.<sup>9</sup> Descriptive research helps describe and describe the experimental conditions as they are. The type of qualitative research used is the type of case study. This type of research helps to identify and describe the language skills of an autistic child carried out in a school for children with special needs.

Data collection techniques used include interviews and observations. The interview technique was conducted with the school teacher/therapist for children with special needs. While the observation technique aims mainly to observe the behavior of some children with special needs with autism spectrum cases and the conduct of giving stimulation to children with autism spectrum. A triangulation technique aims to test the data and information validity. In addition, this research also involved literature and documentation studies.

## **C. Result and Discussion**

### **1. Language Disorder**

According to the American Psychiatric Association, language disorders are one of the main features of autism.<sup>10</sup> Children with autism spectrum disorders are often preoccupied with themselves and their world. They seem to be in their world, but at the same time, they have a limited ability to communicate well and interact with others around them. Children with this disorder have difficulty developing language skills,

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<sup>9</sup> Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, 4th ed. (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

especially understanding what other people are saying to them. They also often have problems communicating nonverbally, using hand movements, eye contact, and facial expressions. That's why autism is closely related to language disorders.

In autism, there are unique and specific situations to understand that language is a means to interact with other people and to share information, thoughts, or feelings between speakers and listeners. People with autism at all ages generally have difficulty considering the listener's point of view, affecting their ability to engage in an ongoing interaction or meaningful conversation.<sup>11</sup>

However, Kjelgaard and Tager-Flusberg suggested that significant heterogeneity was found in the language skills of children with autism. Some autistic children have ordinary language skills, while others have language skills far below their expectations.<sup>12</sup> It means that language disabilities or disorders in children with the characteristics of the autism spectrum cannot be generalized because there may be different conditions.

The ability of children with autism spectrum disorders to communicate and use language depends on their intellectual and social development. Some children with autism spectrum disorders may not be able to communicate using speech or language at all. However, some have minimal speaking skills. While those other than the two may have a richer vocabulary and can talk about certain subjects in great detail

Experts distinguish language skills into receptive and expressive abilities. Receptive ability is a child's ability to acquire language starting from listening/listening and reading activities, then understanding. Then, as a result, he can speak and write, also known as expressive ability.<sup>13</sup> Symptoms of language disorders in children with autism may also vary based on these two aspects, both receptive and expressive, even both.

Early detection of language development disorders greatly determines the value of the intervention in affecting overall cognitive development. It is in line with what was conveyed by Dewanti that "the awareness of mothers taking their children to consult a doctor as early as possible is

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Tager-Flusberg, "Brief Report: Current Theory and Research on Language and Communication in Autism," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 26, no. 2 (1996): 169–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02172006>.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret M. Kjelgaard and Helen Tager-Flusberg, "An Investigation of Language Impairment in Autism: Implications for Genetic Subgroups," *Language and Cognitive Processes* 16, no. 2–3 (2001): 287–308, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01690960042000058>.

<sup>13</sup> Syah Khalif Alam and Ririn Hunafa Lestari, "Pengembangan Kemampuan Bahasa Reseptif Anak Usia Dini Dalam Memperkenalkan Bahasa Inggris Melalui Flash Card," *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 4, no. 1 (2020): 274–79, <https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v4i1.301>.

related to the level of education of mothers who are mostly highly educated".<sup>14</sup> There are still many cases where children's language development disorders are not detected early. Even though early detection will make it easier to carry out therapy

Language disorders can be influenced by several factors, namely medical factors and environmental factors. Medical aspects refer to speech disorders, language disorders, and thinking disorders. One example caused by medical factors is interference as a result of brain injury that causes damage to the nervous system, psychogenic disorders, and disturbances in the speech organ mechanism system. Meanwhile, language disorders are caused by environmental factors such as spoiled speech, kemayu talk, conversational speech, and stuttering, which is considered a psychogenic disorder.<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Autism**

According to Tager-Flusberg, autism is a complex disorder that is heterogeneous in defining expression and associated symptoms. Most of children with autism also have mental retardation, which can vary. However, several studies related to the disorder have finally revealed that there is no single language phenotype that can define autism.<sup>16</sup>

Autism or autism spectrum is a collection of syndromes caused by nerve damage. This disease interferes with the development of children. The diagnosis looks from the symptoms that appear, indicated by the presence of developmental deviations. Children with autism can grow optimal if supported by good handling. This promising treatment requires openness from parents to tell the truth about their child's condition to doctors (psychologist, pediatrician), and teachers at school.<sup>17</sup>

Children with the autism spectrum generally experience disorders caused by abnormalities in the digestive system that are closely related to neurological disorders in the brain. Therefore, autistic children cannot digest foods that are more difficult to digest, such as foods made from flour, milk, and foods that have complex bonds in the digestive process. If

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<sup>14</sup> Attila Dewanti et al., "Karakteristik Keterlambatan Bicara Di Klinik Khusus Tumbuh Kembang Rumah Sakit Anak Dan Bunda Harapan Kita Tahun 2008 - 2009," *Sari Pediatri* 14, no. 4 (2016): 230–34, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.14238/sp14.4.2012.230-4>.

<sup>15</sup> Novia Putri Fatmawati, "Gangguan Berbahasa Jenis Psikogenik Latah: Studi Kasus Di Desa Tropodo Kecamatan Waru Kabupaten Sidoarjo," *Jurnal Sapala* 5, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>16</sup> Helen Tager-Flusberg, "Strategies for Conducting Research on Language in Autism," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 34, no. 1 (2004): 74–80, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JADD.0000018077.64617.5a>.

<sup>17</sup> Festy Ladyani and Febri Veronika Silaban, "Analisis Peranan Terapis Terhadap Perkembangan Bahasa Pada Pasien Autisme Di Rumah Sakit Umum Daerah Dr. H. Abdul Moeloek Bandar Lampung," *Jurnal Ilmu Kedokteran Dan Kesehatan* 4, no. 2 (2017): 74–84.

these foods are not processed in the digestive tract and then carried into the blood and nerves, they can cause nervous disorders like morphine.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, people with autism become increasingly hyperactive, such as running around, hitting their heads, laughing excessively, and not responding to other people's calls. It then damages and disturbs the nerves that have to do with language skills. According to Rakhmanita, "people with autism also have several characteristics that look through impaired communication, social interaction, behavior, emotion, and sensory".<sup>19</sup> Symptoms of the autism spectrum can also be seen and found by the time the child is 3 to 6 months old. Although physically, there is no significant difference from other normal children, they have limitations regarding behavior, mentality, and mindset.

Based on the results of observations, children with autism spectrum disorders have several typical symptoms we can use as signs, including:

- 1) Failure to communicate. Regarding communicating normally, a child can smile at others and respond when bullied or invited to interact. But children with autism can not give a similar response. They only mumbled meaningless words, nor did they point or move their limbs in response, but grabbed their parents' hands. It makes it clear that the child's speech ability is not developing.
- 2) Weak in social interaction. Children on the autism spectrum do not respond to calls and are unresponsive to smiles or touch. They can also not make eye contact and prefer to play alone, so there is no social interaction with the surrounding environment.
- 3) Certain behavior. The behavior shown by people with autism is usually a blank stare without expression. In addition, the movements commonly seen in children with autism include sitting while swinging their bodies forward and backward and clapping their hands. Sometimes they can even get angry and throw a tantrum for no reason.

According to Winarno, one of the common factors that cause children to suffer from autism is genetic or hereditary factors.<sup>20</sup> Genetic factors occur when autism genes are found and passed down from parents to some autistic children. Some experts believe genes inherited from parents are one of the main factors that make a person more at risk of autism. In this case, autism is associated with genetic disorders such as fragile X syndrome. Another factor is environmental factors. This factor is caused by the environment contaminated by toxic substances, food, and

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<sup>18</sup> Dewanti et al., "Karakteristik Keterlambatan Bicara Di Klinik Khusus Tumbuh Kembang Rumah Sakit Anak Dan Bunda Harapan Kita Tahun 2008 - 2009."

<sup>19</sup> Elsa Rakhmanita, "Kajian Psikolinguistik Terhadap Gangguan Berbahasa Autisme," *INA-Rxiv*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.31227/osf.io/s8mu5>.

<sup>20</sup> F. G. Winarno, *Autisme Dan Peran Pangan* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2013).

nutrition. Some sources say that mercury can cause indirect effects that cause children to become hyperactive. Meanwhile, several other experts explain that this disorder occurs because the center in the brain that regulates input stimuli (sensor and processing) experiences disturbances, especially in language skills.<sup>21</sup>

### **3. Language Ability of Autistic Children**

Language acquisition in autistic people is different from other normal children. If a child usually acquires language within 3 to 6 months, they can say easy words, while people with autism have difficulty pronouncing these easy words.

For children with autism, saying words or learning a language is possible, even though they have to use the repetition method. Children with autism must continue to practice speaking regularly and more often than normal children and adjust to the level of nervous disorders. The more serious the neurological disorder, the more complex and more profound the effort the children need so that they can speak.

When an average baby child acquires his first language, he pronounces the "ma" or "pa" syllables easily and without stuttering. Meanwhile, babies with autism will tend to experience more difficulty pronouncing syllables. So the syllable "ma" becomes like "mamamam", or the syllable "pa" becomes "papapap". Even the child takes a lot of effort and stutters to get the words out. But there is also a case experienced by several people living with other autism who is in speech therapy or speech therapy, where they are slow in responding. Still, when presented with a stimulus such as playing music, television shows, or advertisements on television, they are easier to react and start pronouncing the word for word.

That is why determining language skills in children with autism must be seen first from all points of view. We also need to see how big children with autism gave the response to something. From here, we can determine the appropriate method of exercise and speech therapy based on the analysis of the reaction of the patient with the disorder and the symptoms that arise because every person with autism has symptoms that are not the same as each other in responding to something.<sup>22</sup>

### **4. Stimulation of the Language Development of Autistic Children**

Stimulation is a behavior that aims to provide stimulation to certain senses in humans. Stimulating behavior in children refers to body movements, repeated pronunciation of words or sentences, and moving

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<sup>21</sup> Winarno.

<sup>22</sup> S. A. Nugraheni, "Menguak Belantara Autisme," *Buletin Psikologi* 20, no. 1-2 (2012): 9-17, <https://doi.org/10.22146/bpsi.11944>.



objects.<sup>23</sup> Stimulation targets can include all senses such as sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, movement, and balance.

Children with autism spectrum disorder symptoms are unable to speak or speak not because they are mute but because they cannot respond to the environment, so they don't care and don't want to respond to anything. Children who are comfortable to silence for a long time will find it difficult to speak. Therefore, stimulation in the form of speech therapy is significant to support other treatments, such as occupational therapy and socialization therapy for children with autism. In stimulating, the role of parents and families is the primary thing needed to develop the abilities of children with autism and train their communication skills.

Stimulation structures in children with autism can be:

- 1) training with imitation patterns, in the concept of imitation, it is necessary to pay attention so that children imitate positive things. It is essential because it relates to controlling children's emotions and behavior;
- 2) Stimulation can do by giving gifts (rewards). Giving prizes is helpful so that children can learn to obey and understand that if their behavior is good, then they can get good feedback too (in the form of gifts);
- 3) Diligently invite children to communicate verbally or talk. It needs to do repeatedly and continuously, if necessary, coupled with physical touch (non-verbal);
- 4) Invite children to play and show pictures that attract attention. This technique can help steal the child's attention so that he will be interested in seeing objects or images he likes. They slowly followed their parents' words to name something;
- 5) Invite children to listen to songs. Children can try to follow the rhythm or imitate the song's lyrics even if the intonation and pronunciation are not precise.

Disorders in children with autism basically cannot be entirely cured like other ordinary people. But at least the symptoms of these disorders can be reduced and minimized. Thus we can reduce the abnormal impact, and the child's ability can increase like other normal children. It is in line with what was conveyed by Subyantoro, that "communication therapy does not require that children be able to speak, but rather stimulates their communication skills with other people".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Partiwı Ngayuningtyas Adi, "Upaya Meningkatkan Bicara Anak Autis Melalui Pendekatan Floortime," *JOEAI: Journal of Education and Instruction* 3, no. 1 (2020): 85–90, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31539/joeai.v3i1.1316>.

<sup>24</sup> Subyantoro, *Gangguan Berbahasa: Mengenalı Untuk Mengantisipasi Sejak Dini* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ombak, 2013).

Based on the results of research conducted at a particular school for children with autism, there are stages in speech therapy. The steps parents can take for the application of speech therapy are as follows:

- 1) Examine the organs of speech. Parents should meet a specialist to check the physical structure, such as the tongue's shape and the mouth's roof.
- 2) Check with the dentist to see the arrangement of the teeth. This examination is necessary because children with autism spectrum disorders generally have the type of tooth that is layered. Because of this condition, they tend to have difficulty pronouncing certain letters. So parents need to ask for advice and consult a dentist regarding possible solutions to improve the dental posture of children with autism.
- 3) After doing the previous two things, the child with autism will undergo pre-therapy. We should invite them to practice making eye contact, then imitate the therapist's mouth movements, starting with oral motor skills. Mouth motor stimulation is done, among others, by practicing opening and closing the mouth, sharpening the mouth, tilting the mouth, shaking the mouth, wiggling the tongue, and licking the upper and lower lips. If the child with autism can master it, then he will undergo the speech therapy stage or speech therapy. Children will get more complex stimulating skills, such as recognizing the pronunciation of letters, words, and sentences. All of this should be done gradually and regularly so that the nerves remain stimulated and the child can store the words, terms, and sentences in his memory.
- 4) Avoid food they can't eat. Therapy and stimulation must continue while paying attention to nutritional intake and environmental interactions.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that we can carry out the language skills of children with autism with speech therapy to help children with autism develop their language. Language disorders experienced by children with autism are difficult to avoid. Even so, children with autism can be stimulated and follow communication therapy to speak better than before. For this reason, it is necessary to have the role of people and the support of parents and the environment around children with autism spectrum disorders so that they can have the opportunity to overcome difficulties that arise due to their limitations and overcome problems in communicating with those around them. Furthermore, more in-depth research still needs to be carried out to uncover the problem of language difficulties in children with

autism disorders, the causal factors, variations in incidence according to gender, and the level of significance of the autism spectrum in children.

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