

# SOCIAL SKILLS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD) WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

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**Abstract:** This study examines the social skills of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) within early childhood settings, based on the perspectives of special education teachers. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected through a structured questionnaire involving 39 educators to assess social skill development in children with ASD. Five key elements influencing social interactions were identified: (1) Attention-Seeking Skills, (2) Sharing Abilities, (3) Skills of Asking and Requiring, (4) Skills of Giving Ideas, and (5) Skills of Accepting, Praising, and Appreciating. A total of 39 special education teachers participated in this study by responding to the questionnaire. Findings reveal that children with ASD face significant challenges in most areas, except for Request and Inquiry Skills, where they demonstrate relative proficiency. Despite these difficulties, varying levels of competence across the five categories indicate potential for targeted interventions. The study highlights the importance of structured social skills training, emphasizing peer modeling, role-playing, and explicit communication strategies. These results contribute to research on social development in ASD, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among educators, parents, and therapists. By recognizing the variations in competency across different skill categories, educators and practitioners can refine intervention strategies to better support social communication. Future research may explore longitudinal assessments of these interventions to determine their effectiveness in improving social outcomes for children with ASD.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorders (ASD), school environment, social skills, perspectives of special education teachers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental requirement in human life, playing a crucial role in shaping individuals and their societal contributions. Through education, individuals can elevate their social standing and gain respect within their communities. From a philosophical perspective, every human being has the right to education, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

To support students with special needs, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Malaysia, through the Special Education Division (BPK), has developed various educational services. These services cater to students with vision, hearing, and learning disabilities and are implemented through the Special Education Program (PPKI) and special education schools. The Special Education Integration Program is conducted in primary and secondary schools using semi-inclusive, inclusive, and isolated teaching and learning methods (MOE, 2020).

The Ministry of Education Malaysia asserts that all children with disabilities should have access to education and has taken proactive steps to provide educational services for these students. This aligns with international commitments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and the Education for All initiative pledged at the World Conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. Additionally, the implementation of the 169-173 Certificate of the Cabinet Committee (Mahathir Report) on June 30, 1991, marked a significant milestone in the development of Special Education in Malaysia (MOE, 2021).

Children with special needs differ from mainstream students both physically and cognitively, which directly affects their academic performance. Their abilities can be impacted in various ways, including sensory impairments (vision and hearing), communication difficulties (writing and speaking), behavioral challenges, impaired emotional regulation, and delayed motor skills development. These differences can hinder their ability to engage effectively in the teaching and learning process, often leading to marginalization and academic setbacks.

Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), in particular, struggle with social skills, making it difficult for them to interact with peers and integrate into their communities. They often experience delays in developing social interaction patterns. According to recent research, children with ASD exhibit significant difficulties in social communication, imagination, and adaptive behavior (Lord et al., 2022). Krasny et al. (2003) highlighted that individuals with ASD may not fully benefit from peer interactions due to their challenges in perceiving and responding to social cues. Furthermore, Rao, Beidel, and Murray (2008) noted that social skill deficits distinguish autistic children from their neurotypical peers, affecting their ability to build friendships and participate in group activities.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Children with ASD are characterized by challenges in three core domains: socialization, communication, and repetitive behaviors with restricted interests (Matson et al., 2019; White et al., 2020). Research indicates that nearly all children with autism struggle with social interactions, communication skills, and imagination (Trevanthen et al., 2018). However, the severity of these challenges varies among individuals with ASD (Wing, 2019). In Malaysia, studies by Hasnah Toran and Mohd Hanafi Mohd Yassin (2015) highlight the increasing awareness of ASD and the need for structured interventions to support social skill development. Additionally, Neik et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of culturally responsive approaches in addressing ASD-related challenges.

Social skill deficits are a major concern for children with ASD, as they often lack an understanding of social norms and expectations (Fodstad et al., 2021; Smith & Matson, 2020). White, Koenig, and Scahill (2021)

emphasized that social difficulties in children with autism are frequently linked to their limited knowledge of social rules and conventions. Malaysian researchers have also explored intervention strategies, advocating for early assessment and structured social skills training. These efforts align with global findings, reinforcing the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in ASD education.

Despite these challenges, children with ASD possess unique behavioral traits, emotional expressions, and sometimes extraordinary abilities. Research suggests that improving social skills enhances social adaptability, ultimately fostering meaningful relationships (Spence, 2019). Malaysian studies suggest that individualized interventions, including peer modeling and structured play-based learning, can significantly enhance social engagement. With proper support and interventions, autistic children can lead fulfilling lives and contribute meaningfully to their families, schools, and society at large.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this study which is to identify the social skills that children with ASD have mastered according to the perception of special education teachers.

### ***Method***

As this study is a survey-based research aimed at identifying the social skills of children with ASD, a quantitative approach has been selected as the research design. The study is conducted among special education teachers who teach children with ASD in specialized programs at the primary education level.

To gather relevant data, questionnaires are employed as the primary research instrument. These structured questionnaires provide insights into the teachers' perceptions of the mastery of social skills among children with ASD, based on their direct teaching experiences. Respondents include teachers responsible for ASD learners, as well as those who have previously worked with such students.

The collected data are analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Through frequency and percentage analyses, the study aims to identify common patterns and variations in teachers' observations regarding the social skills demonstrated by their ASD students.

The questionnaire is organized into five predefined themes, each representing key areas of social interaction:

i. Attention-Seeking Skills

This theme explores a child's ability to recognize, acknowledge, and engage with peers and adults in various social settings. It includes behaviors such as initiating greetings, maintaining eye contact, responding to social cues, and showing curiosity about others' activities. Children with ASD often have challenges in spontaneous social interactions, so understanding how they express interest in others can guide educators in fostering meaningful social connections.

ii. Sharing Skills

This theme involves both tangible exchanges, such as sharing toys or materials, and intangible aspects, like taking turns in conversations or group activities. This theme assesses the willingness of children with ASD to participate in cooperative play, follow social rules related to turn-taking, and exhibit reciprocity in interactions. Teachers' perceptions of these behaviors help identify strategies to encourage positive peer relationships and collaborative learning experiences.

iii. Skills of Asking and Requiring

This theme involves both verbal and non-verbal which are essential for children to convey thoughts, preferences, and emotions. This theme examines how children with ASD articulate their ideas, whether through speech, gestures, assistive communication devices, or alternative forms such as drawing or role-playing. Challenges in expressive communication may include difficulties in organizing thoughts coherently or adapting speech patterns to different social contexts, making this an important area for intervention.

iv. Skills of Giving Ideas

This theme reflects a child's ability to engage in conversations, seek clarification, and request assistance when needed. This theme includes behaviors such as asking relevant questions, showing curiosity about new topics, and responding appropriately to inquiries. Since children with ASD may struggle with framing questions or interpreting responses, structured interventions can help them develop confidence in navigating social exchanges.

v. Skills of Accepting, Praising, and Appreciating

This theme plays a crucial role in emotional development. This theme evaluates how children with ASD react to compliments, encouragement, and expressions of appreciation from peers and teachers. Some children may demonstrate positive acknowledgment, such as smiling or verbally responding, while others may exhibit minimal reactions due to difficulties in processing emotional feedback. Understanding these responses can guide educators in using reinforcement strategies that align with the child's comfort level and developmental needs.

By elaborating on these themes, educators can gain deeper insights into how children with ASD develop social competencies and identify effective strategies for fostering inclusion in early childhood settings.

### ***Research Samples***

Thirty-nine teachers who are teaching in the Special Education Integration Program for students with learning disabilities in Northeast Penang. The number of respondents selected for this study was based on the selection table as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) through purposive sampling technique. The chosen respondents were teachers who has teaching experience in a special education program for at least three years.

### ***Research Instrument***

This study used questionnaire that has been developed based on the checklist used by Vijayen Gopal (2002); Diane and Lilian (2001) to gather the research data. In this study, the questionnaire consisted of two-parts, which were Part A and Part B. Part A is about basic demographic information while Part B is related to the social skills of children with ASD. Part B is divided into five sub-sections namely Attractive Skills of Others; Sharing Skills; Ask Questions and Ask; Idea Skills; and Skills/Accepting Praise/Appreciation.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Teaching Experience***

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Respondents Based on Their Teaching Experience*

Teaching Experience	Frequency ( <i>f</i> )	Percentage (%)
3-5 years	17	43.6
5-10 years	13	33.3
More than 10 years	9	23.1
Total	39	100.0

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the respondents according to their teaching experience. A total of number of 17 respondents (43.6%) had between 3 to 5 years of teaching experiences teaching in the special education program, thirteen respondents (33.3%) had between 5 -10 years of teaching experiences teaching in the special education program, and nine respondents (23.1%) with more than 10 years of teaching experiences in the special education program.

### ***Social skills that have been mastered***

The findings presented below outline the social skills that children with ASD have successfully demonstrated.

**Attention-Seeking Skills**

The results indicate that children with ASD exhibit polite attention-seeking behaviors by touching or pulling the shirt of others as a way to greet, inform, or communicate. This skill is notably well-developed among the respondents, as reflected in the statistical data (M = 4.31, SD = 1.12).

**Table 2***Attention-Seeking Skill*

Statement	NS	A	SA	M	SP
Touch or pull the shirt of other people politely to greet or inform or communicate.	9 (23.1%)	9 (23.1%)	21 (53.8%)	4.31	1.12

(SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, NS=Not Sure, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)  
M = Mean, SP = Standard Deviation

**Sharing Abilities**

In contrast to other skill sets, responses indicate that children with ASD do not exhibit dominance in any particular sharing-related skill. This suggests that further targeted intervention may be necessary to enhance their ability to engage in sharing behaviors.

**Skills of Asking and Requiring**

Children with ASD demonstrate competence in requesting assistance through non-verbal gestures and structured communication. Specifically, they are able to stretch out their hands as a sign of asking for something (M = 4.28, SD = 1.28) and verbally ask for permission to go to the toilet (M = 4.23, SD = 1.15).

**Table 3***Skills of Asking and Requiring*

Statement	NS	A	SA	M	SP
Stretch hands as a sign asking for something.	4 (10.3%)	20 (51.2%)	15 (38.5%)	4.28	1.28
Ask the teacher for permission to go to the toilet.	4 (10.3%)	22 (56.4%)	13 (33.3%)	4.23	1.15

(SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, NS=Not Sure, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)  
M = Mean, SP = Standard Deviation

***Skills of Giving Ideas***

Children with ASD display the ability to express ideas, but only in areas of personal interest. This suggests a selective engagement in discussions, with their participation being driven by familiarity or strong personal connections to a subject (M = 4.41, SD = 1.13).

**Table 4*****Skills of Giving Ideas***

Statement	NS	A	SA	M	SP
Only give ideas regarding the things that they are interested in.	0	23 (59.0%)	16 (41.0%)	4.41	1.13

(SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, NS=Not Sure, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

M = Mean, SP = Standard Deviation

***Skills of Accepting, Praising, and Appreciating***

In contrast to other observed social skills, respondents indicate that children with ASD do not exhibit mastery of the listed skills related to accepting, praising, and appreciating. This suggests that interventions focusing on emotional recognition and response strategies may be beneficial in fostering these interactions.

**CONCLUSION**

Overall, the findings of this study showed that there are some social interaction skills that have not yet been mastered by the children with ASD. The lack of mastery in fundamental social interaction abilities among children with ASD emphasises the breadth and depth of the challenge. For Attention-Seeking Skills, the ASD children are limited to physical gestures which suggests a significant barrier to more nuanced or verbal forms of initiating social interaction. In Sharing Abilities, the findings indicate a complete absence of mastered skills, implying substantial difficulties in cooperative play, turn-taking, and reciprocity in interactions. This directly affects their ability to build friendships and participate in group activities.

Regarding Skills of Asking and Requiring, the mastered repertoire is restricted to simple physical cues and basic verbal requests. This highlights profound challenges in conveying more complex thoughts, preferences, or emotions verbally. When it comes to Skills of Giving Ideas, the ASD children are predominantly able to offer ideas only concerning topics they are inherently interested in. This limitation suggests difficulties in engaging in broader conversations or responding to inquiries outside their specific areas of interest, impacting their ability to engage in diverse social exchanges. Crucially, the Skills of Accepting, Praising, and Appreciating, the study found that children with ASD do not master any of the listed skills. This indicates a significant hurdle in processing emotional feedback and responding appropriately to positive social reinforcement, which is vital

for emotional development and fostering meaningful relationships. These findings highlight the critical responsibility of special education teachers in addressing the complex social and communicative challenges faced by children with ASD. It is essential that teachers demonstrate openness, heightened attentiveness, and pedagogical creativity in planning and implementing instructional strategies that are responsive to the distinct needs of the learners.

Teachers can act as facilitators to guide the children with ASD to follow instructions of the teacher and to receive the input given during the teaching and learning process. For children with ASD, the aspect of social interaction skills is crucial to training them to build self-confidence so that all the teaching and learning process while they are in the school environment becomes more effective and meaningful. This is due to the weakness of the social skills that they have which will affect the interaction of these children with ASD with their family members (Rao, Beidel & Murray, 2008) and can influence their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bellini et al., 2007).

Autism is an incurable disability, however, these children with ASD can be helped through organized education that involves various parties or disciplines. In addition, the collaboration between parents and teachers should always be tightly aligned in providing their child-related information to teachers so that appropriate education programs can be planned effectively.

As a conclusion, the findings of this study showed that children with ASD are still weak in all their social skills except for Skills to Request and Inquiry. Despite that, the children with ASD are also found to have the ability in some other social skills as listed in the five categories of social skills as listed in the questionnaire.

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