

Sex Education to Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Children with Autism

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Abstract

Children with autism, like children in general, also have experienced sexual development. The unique condition of children with autism (ASD) sometimes makes them engage in inappropriate sexual behavior and become vulnerable to sexual violence. Therefore, sexual education for children with autism is crucial and urgent. A team conducted this community service in January 2020 to provide social stories and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) as alternative teaching materials for sex education to children with autism at *Rumah Autis* Depok. The methods used were pre-observation, unstructured discussion and interview, implementation preparation, implementation, and monitoring. They quickly understood the message intended from PECS and social stories. The sex education materials showed differences in male and female bodies, sexes, and reproductive functions. This material is the starting material in sex education. Continuity using the same learning tools, namely social stories and PECS, is therefore required. Our monitoring process shows that *Rumah Autis* Depok continues to use social stories and PECS in their sex education lessons.

Keywords

autism; children; sex education; sexual harassment; sexuality.



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1. INTRODUCTION

All humans need to receive sexual education. Idealistically, effective sex education should start at home. As people get older, their need for sex education increases. Sex education should be a continuous process adapted to humans' mental development. The objectives of sex education are to encourage healthy attitudes toward sexuality, convey essential information, and educate on skills necessary for sexual well-being (Ayuningtyas & Moekahar, 2022).

Sex education is needed and essential to prevent sexual harassment. Knowledge of the body and sexuality can help someone to self-regulate so that they can socialize safely. One of the critical concepts in sex education is 'consent,' that is, giving consent or refusing. 'Consent' lets us decide what can and cannot happen to our bodies (Rollston, 2020). Thus, acts of sexual harassment or violence can be prevented and anticipated. Sex education is critical to be given to teenagers, even since childhood. Children and adolescents are susceptible to misinformation about sex (Lumban Gaol & Stevanus, 2019).

Sexuality and sexual orientation are typically closely related when discussing a person's tendencies, preferences, habits, and interests in sexual conduct in a social setting. This isn't always the case, though. It can "allude to a wide variety of identities and behaviors as well," according to Meyer (2010, p. 48). The relationships between sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity are then highlighted by the author. Sexual attraction to someone or something is referred to as sexual orientation. Sexual behavior is a term used to describe the various forms of sexual engagement. Therefore, our gendered, religious, class, ethnic, and other identities are rooted in, impacted by, and connected with sexuality.

The term "sexology" first appeared in the late eighteenth century, and over the next two centuries, sexuality increasingly became a subject of study. The key figures in the development of sexology (the scientific study of human sexuality). While psychoanalysis had a broader impact, Kinsey's later work was built upon these and those of Masters and Johnson. During this time, the focus turned from practices to sexuality's relationship to identity. These concepts affected feminism's emergence, broader sociopolitical attempts toward sexual reform, and a relatively liberal transformation process in western civilization (Mottier, 2008) (Willoughby, 2018).

Talking about sex is still considered taboo, especially when teaching children. Based on the interviews with parents and teachers, it can be concluded that discussing and teaching sex with children is confusing because sex is sensitive (Ningsih, 2018). Meanwhile, Dini Oktaufik from ISADD foundation (Intervention Service for Autism

and Developmental Delay Indonesia), in the Q&A event about autism at the Graha Niaga Financial Hall, Jakarta (2010), stated that "Sex education is not all about sexual intercourse; it also includes other things like providing an understanding of a child's physical and hormonal development and understanding various social boundaries happening in society" (DetikHealth, 2010). It is natural to have sexual desires. In children with exceptional needs, puberty occasionally happens earlier than in typically growing youngsters, although it can also happen later or endure delays. In this situation, the child will undergo distinct physical and hormonal changes between boys and girls (DetikHealth, 2010).

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) sufferers have particular needs regarding sex education. Although sexuality in intellectual and developmental disabilities has obtained more attention, regrettably, in the case of ASD, the concern is relatively insufficient. This essay offers one viewpoint regarding sex education for kids and teenagers with ASD. To set the rights of people with ASD and to understand their sexuality in context, the nature of human sexuality is examined. This demographic's distinctive qualities are cited as grounds for giving sex education, along with the potential adverse effects of doing so. Last but not least, details about the selection of the sex education curriculum are provided, including the responsibilities of families and professionals providing sex education (Zucker & Hainline, 2020).

Children and adolescents with ASD need the same general sexuality education material as their classmates while also acknowledging that specific characteristics of ASD call for explicit teaching methods (Davies et al., 2021).

1.1. Problem

The number of children with autism in Indonesia is estimated at more than one million. Referring to the data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention America (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), the prevalence of children with autism is 1 per 44 children. It means there will be around 1.5 million children with autism in Indonesia in 2021 (referring to the data on the number of children 0-14 years old from the BPS). Meanwhile, WHO states that the prevalence of children with autism in 2022 is 1 per 100 children, which makes the estimated number of children with autism in Indonesia around 660 thousand. The two estimates are equally significant and require attention, especially those related to sex education. By doing so, the potential for social problems is expected to be minimized.

To bridge the gap between the need for therapy and schools for children with autism at low-cost or even free, *Rumah Autis* was founded in 2004 under the aegis of Cahaya Keluarga Fitrah Foundation (Cagar Foundation). The decision to start *Rumah*

Autis was inspired by the amount of information parents had to share about the challenges of raising children with autism, particularly the high costs involved, even for upper-middle-class families (Rumah Autis, 2019).

Based on National Commission on Violence against Women in 2021 Annual Records data, there were 45 complaints of sexual violence against persons with disabilities (Hutabarat et al., 2022). The actual and factual figure is likely higher than that, given that reporting sexual violence is not something victims easily choose. Although there is no definite data except those noted, the news about sexual violence in children with autism that appears on search engines shows a high threat (Hutabarat et al., 2022). The limitations of children with autism in communicating, acting, thinking independently and logically, and interacting socially make their position vulnerable to sexual violence. Especially girls with disabilities. This group experiences layered vulnerabilities because of their gender status and limitations as people with autism. Considering these conditions, sex education is urgent and non-negotiable (Bennett, 2007).

Apart from being an effort to prevent sexual violence, sex education is needed by children with autism to recognize, understand, and manage their biological changes and their sexual desires healthily (Aziz, 2014). Natural physical changes such as menstruation, wet dreams, breast growth, voice changes, and Adam's apple growth can cause confusion and frustration in children with autism (Nugraheni & Tsaniyah, 2020). Children with autism (disabilities) are also often found to be involved in inappropriate sexual behavior, such as touching their sexual organs in public (Tsuda et al., 2017). Thus, active assistance and intensive sex education are needed from parents, teachers, and therapists.

Unfortunately, sex education in Indonesia is not a common subject, although the ministry of education and culture has executed efforts to integrate it into the education curriculum. Sex education is still considered taboo because it equates to teaching sex. Teaching sex education is increasingly complicated for groups of children with special needs such as autism. Based on Tsuda's research, it was stated that the problem with teaching sex education to children with disabilities is the lack of references (inadequate curriculum) and learning tools (Tsuda et al., 2017).

1.2. Target Solution

The target solution of this program is to explain the importance of sex education and learning tools through images commonly referred to as social stories and PECS. A visual form of communication is a social story. Dr. Carol Gray, a teacher of children with special needs and an expert on children with autism, created this social story in 1991.

She holds a Doctorate in Education and researches the behavior and social skills of children with autism (Ayuningtyas et al., 2021; Yulianty, 2020).

Children with autism develop certain parts of the brain differently. Recent research from the University of Montreal has shown that in children with autism, the areas of the brain associated with visual information are highly developed. Therefore, the visual abilities of children with autism are very well developed. This explains why most people with autism have an extraordinary ability to remember and describe objects in detail. Meanwhile, other brain areas, namely the part of the brain associated with decision-making and planning, are less active (Detikhealth, 2011).

The PECS method encourages communication by using non-verbal symbols in the form of visuals as a medium. It also enables humans to express themselves more freely and helps them develop their speaking abilities. The goal of adopting PECS is to help humans express spontaneous communicative exchanges to comprehend how communication works and improve their communication abilities (Abidin, 2012). PECS was initially created by Andrew Bondy and Lori Frost in 1985 for children with autism. Children with autism who need to learn expressive communication can utilize the PECS method as a model (Goa & Derung, 2017). For children with autism, the PECS can help them develop organized speech abilities. Additionally, it was claimed that these participants' structured speaking abilities improved due to using picture cards and visual concepts relevant to their everyday lives to provide some stimulus (Khoiriyah, 2021).

2. METHODS

This community service was carried out by a team in January 2020 for four days to provide social stories and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) as alternative teaching materials for teaching sex education to children with autism at *Rumah Autis* Depok.

In efforts to comprehend solutions related to existing problems that are correlated with the target solution, the team conducted an activity method with the following stages:

1. Pre-observation. This stage is conducted to determine the location of activities and community service.
2. Unstructured discussions and interviews. This stage is to identify the problems that occur at *Rumah Autis* Depok and to discuss solutions that the team can do to overcome these existing problems. This stage is also to develop a plan and schedule of activities at *Rumah Autis* Depok.

3. Implementation preparation. This stage is an implementation preparation related to the activities to be executed. These activities are related to obtaining permits, preparing materials, and others.
4. Implementation. Before starting the counseling, a pre-test was held for children with autism who their teachers assisted.
5. Monitoring and evaluation. This stage is in the form of mentoring activities and assessment of the implementation of service activities that have been implemented.

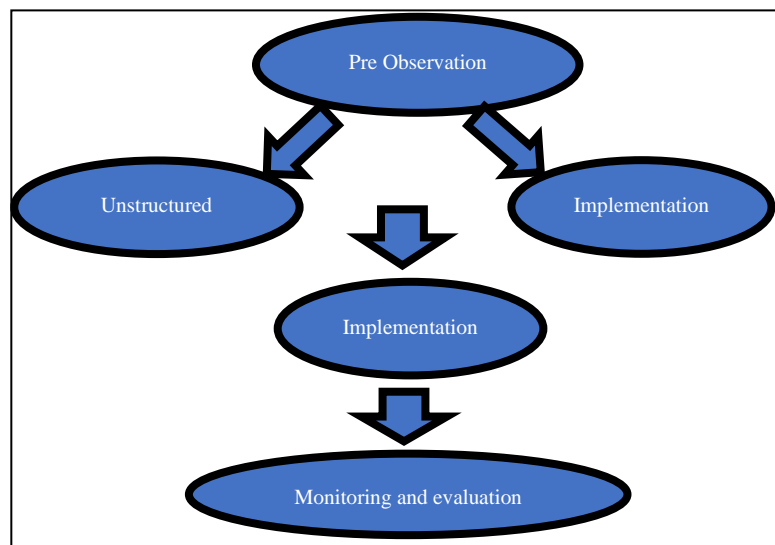


Figure 1. Activity Method

Source: Designed by team (2020)

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The fundamental rights of children are the right to survival, growth, and development, as well as the right to protection from violence and discrimination, according to Law No. 35 of 2014 Concerning Child Protection (Solina et al., 2022). Children and adolescents with ASD need the same general sexuality education material as their classmates while also acknowledging that specific characteristics of ASD call for explicit teaching methods (Davies et al., 2021).

Regarding the abovementioned, therefore, prepared community service about sex education. The sexual education counseling was conducted through social stories and PECS at *Rumah Autis* Depok on February 24-28, 2020, starting at 08.00-11.00 a.m. for SKF A-C Class. The stages conducted by the team were:

Pre-observation. This stage is to determine the location of activities and community service. One month earlier, the team had done a pre-observation of the area. The group surveyed several schools. Eventually, *Rumah Autis* Depok was chosen. *Rumah Autis* was founded in 2004 as a partner institution for parents to meet the needs of schools or therapy centers for children with autism. *Rumah Autis* also actively conducts campaigns and advocacy for autism-awareness movements in the community and assists families, schools, and communities in being friendly to children with autism.

Unstructured discussions and interviews. This stage is to identify the problems occurring at *Rumah Autis* Depok and to discuss solutions to overcome these existing problems. This stage is also to develop a plan and schedule of activities at *Rumah Autis* Depok. Before the sexual education counseling was conducted, the team interviewed the Management of *Rumah Autis* and *Rumah Autis* Depok. The discussion was held to learn more about sexual education for children with autism at *Rumah Autis* Depok.

Implementation preparation. This stage is an implementation preparation related to the activities to be conducted. These activities are related to administration permits and preparing materials. The team made a permission letter and designed materials related to sexual education for children with autism at *Rumah Autis*.

Implementation. Before starting the counseling, a pre-test was held for children with autism who were assisted by their teachers. The pre-test was conducted to understand the participants' views (the children with autism and the teachers) regarding primary sex education.

Monitoring and evaluation. This stage is in the form of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the activity that has been done. It is monitoring to find out the benefits of this activity by holding Focus Group Discussions (FGD) between the team, parents, teachers, and therapist.

As per the explanation abovementioned, this sexual education counseling used social stories and PECS. A visual form of communication is a social story. Dr. Carol Gray, a teacher of children with special needs and an expert on children with autism, created this social story in 1991. She holds a Doctorate in Education and researches the behavior and social skills of children with autism (Ayuningtyas et al., 2021; Yulianty, 2020). While PECS, which stands for Picture Exchange Communication System, is an intervention method to develop the communication skills of children with autism based on visual support and usually uses picture cards in counseling practice (Vistasari & Patria, 2019). PECS was first designed by Andy Bondy and Lory Frost (1994). Various websites offer unique images of commonplace tasks. To tailor them to their children, parents can even make their own. Since there are various autism spectrum disorders,

PECS can be a valuable method for helping certain people with these conditions. It is anticipated that PECS will help children with autism develop improved communication (Ayuningtyas et al., 2021).

As per the research result, Children with autism may benefit from the strategy, namely the Picture Exchange Communication System, to improve their speaking abilities (PECS). PECS was initially created to help children with autism improve their speech abilities. PECS is a reference technique that can be used to train expressive communication in children with autism. The findings demonstrated a considerable increase in each child's worth at each stage of the PECS approach. For children with autism, the PECS is a crucial technique for overcoming communicative and academic challenges (Khoiriyah, 2021).



Figure 2. Example of PECS on the wall of the classroom at *Rumah Autis Depok*

Source: Fieldwork documentation (2020)

Rumah Autis has utilized PECS and social stories as learning tools. It is found that several pictures in *Rumah Autis* can be categorized as PECS and social levels. Some pictures, such as how to avoid an influenza infection and keep the room clean, are examples of them. Those pictures help us to approach the participants since they are familiar with the learning tool, as per figure 1.

The material provided during the service is early sex education, namely the biological differences between male and female bodies. Apart from that, there are great topics of sex education that have not been conveyed. Referring to Tsuda et al. (2007), the issues of sex education range from the biological differences between male and female bodies, love relationships, sexual relations, sexually transmitted diseases, parenting, love in the family, gender equality, masturbation, reproduction, and birth, sexual harassment and violence, abortion, contraception, AIDS, and social ethics. We recommend using the PECS learning tools and social stories to explore other topics

related to sex education. Children with autism need those topics to blend into society and prevent sexual harassment and violence.

Using PECS and social stories for learning sex education for children with autism is relatively effective. The interest and enthusiasm of the children were maintained throughout the learning process. This is to the research of Vistasari & Patria (2019) and Ayuningtyas et al. (2020), which demonstrated the effectiveness of PECS in improving the communication skills of children with autism, including in understanding messages. The advantages of children with autism in absorbing visual information are very compatible with PECS learning tools and social stories, as per figure 2.



Figure 3. Learn about sexual education in classroom

Source: Fieldwork documentation (2020)

Social Stories, which are narratives designed to describe specific circumstances and challenges and how people deal with them, can help children with autism improve their social behavior. Figure 3 shows the example of social stories at *Rumah Autis* Depok.



Figure 4. Example of social stories at *Rumah Autis Depok*

Source: Fieldwork documentation (2020)

The team evaluated by asking questions and answers to determine the target's degree of awareness regarding the information delivered, as well as by urging participants to work together to avoid the occurrence of sexual abuse behavior in children and their friends nearby. If the incident takes place at home or school, report it right once to an adult, such as a parent or teacher.

4. CONCLUSION

Using PECS and social stories for learning sex education for children with autism is relatively effective. The interest and enthusiasm of the children were maintained throughout the learning process. The advantages of children with autism in absorbing visual information are very compatible with PECS learning tools and social stories. The material provided during the service is early sex education, namely the biological differences between male and female bodies. Apart from that, there are great topics of sex education that have not been conveyed. The issues of sex education range from the biological differences between male and female bodies, love relationships, sexual relations, sexually transmitted diseases, parenting, love in the family, gender equality, masturbation, reproduction, and birth, sexual harassment and violence, abortion, contraception, AIDS, and social ethics. We recommend using the PECS learning tools and social stories to explore other topics related to sex education. Children with autism need those topics to blend into society and prevent sexual harassment and violence.

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