

Communication Clashes Between Autistic Children and Parents in Non-Verbal Behavior

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Abstrak

Komunikasi yang terdapat di dalam sebuah keluarga secara tidak langsung akan mewujudkan keharmonisan dan juga ikatan yang erat diantara orang tua maupun anak. Akan tetapi, tidak seluruh keluarga dapat mewujudkan keharmonisan. Hal tersebut dikarenakan adanya sebuah keluarga yang diberikan anak spesial atau anak berkebutuhan khusus salah satunya adalah anak pengidap autisme. Adapun tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami hubungan interpersonal antara orang tua dan anak autisme yang mempunyai keterbatasan dalam melakukan komunikasi dengan menggunakan pendekatan Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT). Penelitian ini menerapkan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif. Hasil pada penelitian yang dilakukan mengindikasikan bahwa relasional dialektika hubungan interpersonal antara orang tua dan anak pengidap autisme pada saat membangun sebuah komunikasi memunculkan sebuah ketegangan atau tension didalamnya. Tentunya hal tersebut akan membentuk tantangan bagi orang tua terkait bagaimana cara menyikapi sebuah ketegangan pada saat membangun komunikasi dengan anak autisme agar menciptakan komunikasi yang dapat dimengerti satu sama lainnya.

Kata Kunci: Teori Relasional Dialektika; Autisme; Keluarga.

Abstract

Communication within a family will indirectly create harmony and a close bond between parents and children. However, not all families can realize harmony. This is because there is a family given a particular child or a child with special needs, one of which is a child with autism. The purpose of this study is to understand the interpersonal relationship between parents and children with autism who have limitations in communication using the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) approach. This research applied a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. The research results indicated that the relational dialectics of interpersonal relationships between parents and children with autism raise tension or tension when building communication. Of course, this will challenge parents to address tension when building communication with children with autism to create communication that can be understood by each other.

Keyword: Relational Dialectics Theory; Autism; Family.

1. Introduction

A family is a small group with several members: the father, mother, brother, and sister. According to (Regional, 2018), a family can usually be used as the first medium to develop love and affection for other members. This can be done by giving full attention to family members. Not only that, a family will undoubtedly be a place for a child to grow and develop, especially in terms of building good communication, because it will affect the process of a child in carrying out the process of interaction and socialization with other family members (Waangsir, 2023). A family needs to create and develop good communication within the family itself (Sukarno, 2021). The interaction process will affect how a family develops communication within it. Communication in the family is a process of conveying a message, opinion, feeling, or thought that family members can convey. Family communication will undoubtedly focus on how each member interacts or communicates verbally or non-verbally. In family communication, there will undoubtedly be a desire for the family to exchange ideas or communicate efficiently to understand a message conveyed by one another (Mohamad *et al.*, 2023).

However, not all families can communicate efficiently with other family members. In some cases, some families are given trials through the presence of a child with special needs, one of which is a child with autism. According to the results of research conducted by Achmad & Jeremy (2019) Communication Patterns of Teachers in Autistic Children at Special School Spectrum, children with autism tend to have obstacles in terms of speaking, which will undoubtedly affect the process of communicating with people around them. According to Zickuhr (2016) children with autism have developmental disorders that can be seen since the child is three years old. The characteristics of autistic children can be characterized by a lack of interaction with people around them and no ability to regulate their own emotions. Not only that, generally, but children with autism also tend to find it difficult to express their own emotions, even in non-verbal forms (Klaten, 2022). Of course, this will further justify that children with autism have a lack of communication with the environment around them, one of which is their parents. With the weaknesses that autistic children have, of course, it will also be related to how the child can communicate with their parents. Generally, children with autism will use more non-verbal communication forms to express their desires (Noach *et al.*, 2021). The communication carried out by the child can certainly be seen from the body language that he shows to the people around him.

The existence of weaknesses in children with autism will indirectly have an impact, namely difficulties in communicating effectively with people around them. This is because children with autism have disorders in the nervous system that will make it difficult for them to socialize with people around them (Daulay, 2017). In addition, children with autism find it difficult to understand the meaning of communication carried out in the surrounding environment, so these children are often considered happy to be alone and absorbed in their world (Riau *et al.*, 2021).

Based on this, parents may struggle to build efficient communication within the family. Parents have not been able to understand how they can build efficient communication with other family members, especially those with autism (Rani *et al.*, 2018). This is also sustainable in a case reported by [kompas.com](https://www.kompas.com), where the news conveyed that there was a child with special needs, especially autism, who had to get and feel violence obtained by his biological mother, which resulted in the child's death. This case was caused because the child often defecated out of place, which made the mother of the child feel angry and embarrassed in front of the surrounding people.

In these cases, it can be concluded that children with autism tend to act as they please due to the condition of the child who is unable or incapable of understanding messages or communication conveyed by people around them, especially parents who are the closest people to them. Vice versa, the difficulty children with autism have in understanding the content of communication messages and conveying a message well will also affect parents who cannot understand or understand what communication is conveyed by their children even though the message is conveyed with a simple meaning.

In response to these problems, parents can build efficient communication with their children by creating a comfortable family environment and building intimacy with them. Because of this, a child with autism will indeed always rely on his parents as the closest person to him (Driver *et al.*, 2023). Not only that, but what is needed by parents to build efficient communication is to be open with the child himself. Openness here will create trust in a child towards his parents, making it possible for a child to understand what is conveyed by his parents (Parasian & Ramadhana, 2021).

Coinciding with the communication of autistic children with their parents, data on autistic children according to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia (KPPARI) is found that people with autism in the world are increasing every year. It was found that in 2000, the population of people with autism reached 15-20 per 1,000 births, which means that the data shows that there are 1-2 per 1,000 people in the world who give birth to children with autism disorders. According to data from the Autism Society of America (ASA), in 2000, the ratio reached a point of 1:250 people in the world with a value of 60:10,000 people who gave birth to children with autism. Different data is shown by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (CDC) USA, which shows data that there are children who have autism by 1:88. This continued in 2014, which showed an increase of 30% for the birth of someone with autism. Meanwhile, Indonesia, especially in the West Java region, is included in the most significant area with autism recorded in the Social Service of 1,524 children (Ikeu *et al.*, 2020).

Based on the data previously presented, researchers found an opportunity to examine the communication clashes experienced by children toward their parents. Researchers use interpersonal communication theory to strengthen this research: communication between one person and another. Interpersonal communication requires at least two or more people who aim to provide feedback on messages conveyed by both the communicant and the communicator (Nath & Meena, 2019). Interpersonal communication can be done in two ways: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication involves speech and voice intonation and is generally done face-to-face. Meanwhile, non-verbal communication can be done by providing common sign language that is already known by the community (Sunarto & Caropeboka, 2020).

Furthermore, another theory, namely the RDT theory (Relational *et al.*), is used to strengthen the theoretical basis of this research. RDT itself is someone who can understand or understand communication around him Sahlstein Parcell & Baker, 2018 in Miller-Ott *et al.*, 2023. The purpose of RDT itself is to be used as a forum to examine communication that experiences tension due to a different understanding between children with autism and their parents. There is data from research conducted by Abidin (2019) where the research uses Interpersonal communication theory with the intention that the theory can overcome problems in communication disorders experienced by children with autism with their parents. At the same time, this research focuses on RDT theory, which aims to see communication clashes in autistic children with parents in non-verbal behavior and examine the tensions and challenges parents face when communicating with children more deeply.

Other research conducted by Fadilla, 2020 with the title "Interpersonal Communication Patterns of Parents in Handling Autistic Children" uses symbolic interactionism theory as a forum for research because this theory is used to understand a message or meaning that has been agreed upon. This study, of course, focuses on RDT theory, which aims to see communication clashes in autistic children with parents in non-verbal behavior and examine more deeply the tensions and challenges parents face when communicating with children.

This research is also supported by family communication between parents and children with autism. Family communication is a process of conveying messages, opinions, feelings, or thoughts that family members can convey in it. In family communication, of course, there will be a desire for the family to exchange ideas or communicate efficiently to understand a message conveyed to each other (Mohamad *et al.*, 2023). If communication in a family does not go well, it will cause misunderstandings among members because each member does not convey the message correctly (Mohamad *et al.*, 2023).

From this explanation, there is a continuity between research on interpersonal communication

theory and dialectical relational theory and family communication. A family needs to create communication, which is expected so each family member can communicate and exchange ideas. In family communication, interpersonal communication is also needed, which can be carried out by parents with children and will indirectly create safe and comfortable communication between the two, even though there are communication clashes.

Based on the research background, the researcher researched relational dialectics to see the clash in establishing communication in children with autism with parents who form non-verbal behavior in the child himself. The gap that can be seen is the limitation of a child with autism in communicating with his parents due to the difficulty of children with autism to be able to express or convey a message to their parents and vice versa. Parents sometimes need help understanding what messages their children communicate or convey. So, the communication resulted in the need for more effectiveness in the delivery or receipt of a message between the two. In this gap researchers see an opportunity in this study to analyze the gap with the findings in the field. Effective communication between children with autism and their parents can be seen in the level of understanding of a message conveyed by both, even though there are obstacles when communicating in person. Therefore, the researcher examines based on field results, which combine communication clashes and non-verbal behavior. In this description, the researcher conducted a study Communication Clashes between Autistic Children and Parents in Non-Verbal Behavior.

2. Research Methods

This research employs qualitative methods to deeply understand how subjects respond to specific problems. Kick and Miller, as cited in Guita (2019), describe qualitative research as a process where researchers must grasp the underlying dynamics of their focus indirectly. According to KE (2016) in "Qualitative Research," this approach seeks to address pre-formulated research questions through systematic investigation. The process typically involves formulating research questions, conducting interviews with selected participants, and analyzing the collected data to draw conclusions. Supporting this study is a descriptive approach that emphasizes exploring the "what," "who," "where," and "how" of events, as described by Nurmalasari and Erdiantoro (2020). Zellaifanny and Mudjiyanto (2018) explain that this approach gathers information to evaluate hypotheses based on how subjects address research problems. Additionally, this research adopts a constructive paradigm, which Helmi (2020) states posits that reality is shaped not just by scientific knowledge but also by individuals' unique problem-solving abilities. This paradigm aims to uncover truths expressed by subjects, particularly in understanding how parents of children with autism navigate communication challenges. These challenges often stem from parents' difficulties in interpreting their children's messages, leading to tension and misunderstandings. This research uses a qualitative methodology, supported by a descriptive approach and a constructive paradigm, to explore and understand the communication challenges faced by parents of children with autism. The goal is to reveal how these parents interpret and respond to their children's communicative behaviors, providing valuable insights into the studied phenomenon.

3. Results and Discussion

This research explores more deeply the totality element which is a derivative element of relational dialectics. According to Rawlins in West & Turner 2017 in Guarango, 2022 the totality element is an element that explains that everyone connected in a relationship will create a sense of dependence on each other. In simple terms, if in a relationship there is a problem that arises, other members in the relationship will be affected by the problems that occur in it.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher explained in more depth the results of the statements obtained from the interview, namely if in a communication relationship there is a clash or tension whether a child with autism shows emotions both verbally and non-verbally. There are findings in the results of statements by 8 informants, it was found that 2 informants from key informants with initials B and A stated the same thing where the emotions shown by their children when experiencing tension in communication are by showing their emotions non-verbally, namely by screaming and experiencing tantrums which are certainly difficult to control either from the child himself or controlled by his parents. The reason for this is because a child with autism is difficult to communicate what he thinks to his parents, and in the end if the message is not conveyed properly, it will bring up emotions that cannot be controlled by the child himself such as screaming or tantrums. This is as expressed by the informant, as follows:

"Non-verbal, dia tantrum dan tantrumnya hanya teriak saja." (Wawancara dengan B pada Januari 2024).

"Non-verbal, he tantrums and his tantrums are just screaming." (Interview with B in January 2024).

"Non-verbal, karena kalau diajakin ngobrol dia tidak fokus." (Wawancara dengan A pada Januari 2024).

"Non-verbal, because if he is invited to chat he does not focus." (Interview with A on January 2024).

From the 2 key informants who stated the same thing, researchers of course also got the results of statements from 4 other informants who came from keys as well as supporters where the informants stated the same thing but in different cases. Informant S, who has a child named NU, stated that NU often shows his emotions non-verbally if the communication between the two is not channeled properly. One example of the action taken by NU is by shouting. Not only that, according to S, her son with the initials NU also often takes his own actions even though it is prohibited or not allowed by NU. This is as said by informant S with the following presentation:

"Iya, suka teriak "aaaa" gitu haha atau kadang suka bertindak sendiri, misalkan kalau dilarang yang tetap di lakukan." (Wawancara dengan S pada Januari 2024).

"Yes, he likes to shout "aaaa" like that haha or sometimes he likes to act on his own, for example if it is prohibited, he still does it." (Interview with S in January 2024).

The second informant with the initials SF, who is the key informant in the study, stated that his son AR shows his emotions non-verbally by throwing tantrums. when AR was young, he often experienced tantrums and also hurt himself. But as he got older, AR was able to learn to control his own emotions. This is as said by informant SF with the following presentation:

"Tantrum, dulu dia suka nyakitin diri sendiri. Umur 3-4 tahun itu. Pas terapi mulai bisa mengontrol emosi, udah jarang banget mukul. Tapi ada. Sesekali ada lah kaya pas dia kesel. Saya lebih mengarabkan untuk memberinya distraksi kaya lihat smartphone (ponsel) dan yang lainnya." (Wawancara dengan SF pada Januari 2024).

"Tantrums, he used to hurt himself. He was 3-4 years old. When therapy starts to be able to control emotions, it's very rare to hit. But there is. Every now and then there is something like when he is upset. I'm more directing to give him distractions like looking at smartphones (cellphones) and others." (Interview with SF in January 2024).

The third informant YS, who is a supporting informant in the study, stated that children with autism often show their emotions non-verbally if the communication between the child and the teacher is not well channeled. One of the emotions shown by the child is screaming. However, it also depends on the condition of the child's heart. If the child's heart condition is good, then when there is a clash in communication the child will not show emotions as usual. This is as said by YS with the following presentation:

"Sometimes, if he's in a good mood and we don't understand, he's just ignorant. But if he is in a bad mood, he shouts." (Interview with YS in January 2024).

"Sometimes, if he is in a good mood and we don't understand, he is just ignorant. But if he is in a bad mood, he screams." (Interview with YS in January 2024).

In contrast to the statement conveyed by the previous informant, the researcher found a fourth informant with the initials G who is a supporting informant in the study who stated that if the communication built between himself and also a child with autism experiences tension or is not channeled properly, the child often shows his emotions non-verbally by hitting or hurting himself or the people around him. This is as said by G with the following presentation:

"Biasanya kalau non-verbal suka mukul temen, ke guru juga berani" (Wawancara dengan G pada Januari 2024).

"Usually, non-verbally, I like to hit my friends, I also dare to hit the teacher" (Interview with G in January 2024).

Looking at the results of the informants' statements, the researcher found different things from the statements obtained by one of the other informants, namely the key informant who had a different view regarding the desire of children with autism to harm themselves or people around them. According to him, children with autism do not have the desire to hurt themselves, *let alone* the people around them. The reason this can happen is because children with autism do not have the ability to control their nerves, so this can give the impression that children with autism have a tendency to hurt themselves or people around them if there is a conflict in communication. This is as expressed by the informant, as follows:

"Kebanyakan sih gak punya keinginan untuk menyakiti sekitar, lebih tepatnya ke reflek saraf seperti mukul kepala atau kaki. Makanya anak ASD ada terapi okupasi, untuk motorik dia, agar lebih bisa untuk controlling." (Wawancara dengan N pada Februari 2024).

"Most of them don't have the desire to hurt their surroundings, more precisely to nerve reflexes such as hitting the head or feet. That's why ASD children have occupational therapy, for their motor skills, so they can be more controlling." (Interview with N in February 2024).

On the other hand, the researcher tries to explain the results of the informants' own statements regarding whether the same thing is shown by them when they find that the child experiences non-verbal behavior when there is a clash in communication. Different findings were found from informants who had conducted previous interviews. There were informants who stated that they would act the same way if the child showed non-verbal emotions by trying to take a harder stance towards the child. In line with this statement, it was also found that parents would indirectly be spontaneous or speak directly to the child without paying attention to the loudness or softness of voice intonation. While other results found that the informant tried to take a silent attitude or silent treatment. Because according to him, by taking a silent attitude it indirectly shows the child that he is angry. This is as expressed by the informant, as follows:

"Iya haha, saya lumayan keras juga, soalnya N enggak takut orang nya hahaha karena ya dia suka menentang." (Wawancara dengan S pada Januari 2024).

"Yes haha, I am quite loud too, because N is not afraid of people hahaha because yes he likes to oppose." (Interview with S in January 2024).

"Kalau itu dia lempeng (lurus), justru saya saya yang spontan." (Wawancara dengan FA pada Januari 2024).

"In that case he is straight, I am the one who is spontaneous." (Interview with FA on January 2024).

"Tidak, kalau itu tidak mungkin sampai begitu. Paling cenderung diam. Kalau saya diam, dia tau kalo saya marah." (Wawancara dengan B pada Januari 2024).

"No, that would not be possible. Most tend to be silent. If I'm quiet, he knows that I'm angry." (Interview with B in January 2024).

In line with what was expressed by one of the previous informants, there are other informants who have the opinion that when a child with autism and parents have a communication clash and show non-verbal behavior, especially in the child, what parents can do is to try to give time to the child to be able to reduce their own emotions. This is as expressed by the informant as follows:

"Kita menyarankan untuk lebih baik diam dulu, kasih waktu." (Wawancara dengan N pada Februari 2024).
"We suggest that it is better to be quiet first, give time." (Interview with N in February 2024).

Based on the explanation above, the researcher found the core of the discussion that gave rise to themes in the totality element, especially the attitudes shown by children to their parents, namely tantrums, screaming, acting alone, or hurting themselves. Conversely, the themes that emerged in the attitudes shown by parents when there was a communication clash with children with autism were being loud, spontaneous, and trying to be silent or silent treatment which was certainly in line with the opinions expressed by expert informants or clinical psychologists who were accustomed to dealing with children with special needs.

In the totality element which explains that someone is in a relationship, the people in the relationship will indirectly depend on each other. If there is a problem in a relationship, it will indirectly affect the relationship of other members. This element also explains that social life can indirectly affect a relationship in it. In this case, researchers try to explore and describe more deeply the totality element where if there is tension in communication caused by differences in understanding or differences in interpreting a message in communication between parents and children. In line with this, the researcher tried to ask questions to informants containing questions in the form of: "Do children with autism often show their emotions either verbally or non-verbally when there is a clash in communication?". In this question, the researcher found that the findings show that it is true that children with autism often show their emotions non-verbally, such as screaming, tantrums, hurting themselves, and hurting people around them. However, there are different findings found by researchers, namely that there is no desire for children with autism to hurt themselves or even hurt others when experiencing a conflict in communication.

Not only that, researchers also tried to explore more deeply about totality which refers to how parents show their emotions when facing contradictions or differences in meaning in a communication message with their children. The researcher gave a question to the informant in conducting research in the form of "do parents do the same thing as children, when experiencing a clash in communication?". In this question, the researcher found that the findings show that parents tend to do the same thing even though with verbal behavior, namely being loud or spontaneous when a clash in communication occurs, which aims to make the child understand that with a loud attitude and also speaking spontaneously it indicates that parents are upset and also emotional to their children.

In contrast to the previous statement, researchers found differences in the findings obtained from other subjects or informants who stated that the way shown or shown by other informants to deal with contradictions or differences in meaning in a communication message with their children is by being silent or silent treatment. Silent treatment itself is an action taken by someone not to give any response temporarily to the party involved, for example, children with autism themselves. Being silent or silent treatment itself shows that the informant shows his emotions non-verbally. Of course, this method or finding is in line with the attitude taken by parents when facing conflicts in communicating with children with autism. By trying to be silent or showing behavior non-verbally, parents will indirectly support the child to provide an opportunity for the child to express their own emotions.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion obtained from the research results on the findings in the totality element is in line with the meaning or explanation that the totality element explains that in a relationship, each member will depend on each other and will have the same influence on other members. As can be seen, when in a relationship it is found that there is a communication clash, especially between a child with autism and his parents and then shows non-verbal behavior from the child, the parents will indirectly be affected and show the same emotions to the child even though there are parents who show their emotions verbally and there are other parents who show non-verbal attitudes when there is tension in communicating with a child with autism.

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