

The Art of Teaching to Develop Theory of Mind of Autistic Children

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Abstract: Theory of Mind is the concept contributing to the development of the mind-read ability of autistic children as it is required to allow autistic children to understand themselves and others' feelings, emotions, and behaviours. This research aims to study how parents teach their autistic children to develop the Theory of Mind and study how autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM). Five parents of autistic children and a special education teacher were recruited as major key informants. Moreover, five minor key informants, two fathers, one uncle, one aunt, and one babysitter, were included in this study. The major key informants were selected by purposive sampling with four criteria as well as the minor ones were selected by time spent with the autistic children (at least 10 hours a week). The methodology employed was qualitative research (Case Study), and empirical data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation, which required five months to complete. All data were analyzed by content analysis. From the demographic data, it can be concluded that most parents of autistic children were mostly mothers who weren't hired by any company and could spend the most time with autistic children. The average time taken to socialize autistic individuals was 10.8 hours daily. All major key informants were over 40 years old. The findings are divided into two sections; the process of teaching children with autism of their parents and how autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM). The first section indicated three factors contributing to the establishment of the approaches the parents used to teach their autistic children, including situations, environments, and attitudes. In addition, the second section illustrated eight steps of how autistic children develop the Theory of Mind, consisting of 1) Observing and Emulating 2) Memorizing and Expressing 3) Exploring different meaning from different people 4) Understanding extended actions 5) Comparing to intimate person 6) Connecting and reasoning 7) Indicating causes and consequences and 8) Pretending to be someone or something. This research is beneficial for several groups, including scholars, educators, special teachers, and parents of autistic children in aspects of further research, public awareness, child development, academic issue, and policy making.

Keywords: Autistic children, Theory of Mind, Parental involvement, Psychology

Introduction

There are various factors and related conditions leading to human development. Currently, the development of academic performance and learning outcomes has been primarily focused. Therefore, the question “How can people live their lives happily in this rapidly changing world?” arises. It is such a vital reason for people to get developed since they were in their young ages. With the obvious transformation of today society, rearing and teaching methods of socialization agents such as family and teachers ought to be accommodated to fit the actual needs of current social trends. Importantly, as human rights have become virtual issue, everyone should obtain the equal right to get access to the appropriate education and socialization especially, the handicapped, gifted persons, and those who have got physical or mental disabilities. In Thailand, the act for disabilities education focuses on private education plans, which include technological facilities, specialists, and institutes for special-need persons (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2008). In addition, there are various supports to strengthen the rights of the student with autism enacted in 1975 that aid about Free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment and Special education services. These reflect that most countries attempt to provide opportunities of learning for persons with special needs. Autistic children are classified into a group, which need to be developed properly, particularly in terms of learning, life skills, and social skill to live their life happily. However, the lesson planning and teaching process demand knowledge, ability, patience, a positive attitude, and experience. Teachers need to collaborate with specialists who have expertise in this field to

ensure suitable plans (Ministry of Education, 2000) Hence, a family is a basic social unit that should partake in these qualifications. Besides, to enhance autistic children's life and social skills, the theory of mind development is a prerequisite.

This research study aims to study the process of teaching children with autism of their parents to understand the routine lives of parents of autistic children. Additionally, this research is going to study how autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM). Generally, they delay and deficit in the Theory of Mind and social information processing (Flusberg, 2007). However, Baron-Cohen (1995) stated that some persons with autism live without almost all signs of a theory of mind which means others might have a chance to develop ToM signs. According to Happe's research study, his autistic subjects especially those who had passed second-order theory of mind tasks were able to comprehend similes, metaphors, and irony. Surprisingly, the autistic subjects who failed all the theory of mind tasks could complete the sentences with some similes (Happe, 1993). From the evidence, a theory of mind of autism even small signs can be developed, so it is challenging to study how autistic children can be developed their theory of mind. The major key must be how their parents socialize or teach them to achieve the theory.

In the dimension of social support, it can be divided differently into different terms. For instance, House & Kahn (1985) differentiate 3 types of social support resources. First is instrumental support, which is in a form of material such as money or tools. The second is informational support, which involves the relevant information provided in order to comfort recipients to handle with tough situations. It might be the form of advice or recommendation. The last one is emotional support that includes trust, care, empathy, and reassurance. The value each kind of support differs by the needs of subjects and cultures of each society. Being parents of autistic children needs social support since these parents have to participate in social activities to learn and experience appropriate lessons, which are useful for them to raise autistic children. Consequently, social support has the potential to strengthen their confidence, esteem, attitude, emotion, and patience. Obtaining social support is prone to be beneficial to autistic children's caregivers in terms of alleviating stress as well. According to Dyson (1997), parents found receiving support helpful in rearing children with a disability.

Developing autistic children sounds difficult but there are several types of research providing beneficial guidelines for those who are parents of autistic children. Parents of young with autism should produce responsiveness systematically and increase consistency in observing children's behaviour cues could help develop their social communication (Bernard, 1997). Likewise, there is a caution for parents who are caregivers of autistic children, which is that they ought not to forsake their primary role as a parent to be the full role of their children's teacher (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Since the development of ToM connects to human social interaction, autistic children who generally participate with a limited group of people without diverse social contexts might show minimal or no sign of ToM. According to Senju (2012), it is necessary to consider ToM as a foundation of human adaptation to complicated societies; therefore, parental involvement is an effective strategy to help improve ToM of autistic children since autism is related to an impairment of cognitive perspective-taking; however, they can still express empathy (Lockwood et al., 2013). At this point, parents should be responsible for guiding them to understand the process of other people's thoughts rather than emotions. Storytelling and social interaction are effective strategies to enhance the perspective-taking of autistic children. According to LeBlanc et al. (2003), video modelling and reinforcement are sophisticated tools to instruct autistic children on how to promote perspective-taking. Parents also guide their autistic

children to imitate what is on a video behaviour along with the application of any reinforcement like snacks or tokens.

In this research, parents who have taught their own autistic children effectively are the primary key informants. The effectiveness of their teaching is evaluated by the development of autistic children's academic performance, life skills, and interpersonal skills which are mostly involved in a theory of mind. These parents must be the person who has taught their autistic child themselves and have experience in lesson planning. Furthermore, they have to be then a role of teachers and parents for more than 6 years. There are also secondary key informants such as teachers who teach them at school or at home and siblings or relatives of these children with autism. With the help of secondary key informants, this research will be extended leading to data analysis, which must become more valid and reliable.

For the advantages of this research findings, families with autistic children or specialists even any instructors and general persons can apply the teaching techniques attained from the study to help utilized their lesson plans for autistic children. Moreover, teaching methods and strategies of parents of autistic children can be applied to the curricula of teaching children with other disabilities such as learning disorders or short attention spans. The results on the parents' daily routine have the potential to reflect what should be demanded to help fulfill family institutes, which are disadvantaged in order to support them to have a better quality of life. Eventually, the research findings would benefit not only autistic children or any other types of disabilities but also general children. To clarify, parents, school administrators, instructors, and educational specialists and utilize these to improve curricula, which suit current social situations. The objectives of this research were 1) to study how parents teach their autistic children to develop the Theory of Mind 2) to study how autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM).

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative research (Case Study) aiming to reveal the process of teaching children with autism of their parents. Also, the researcher would like to study the routine lives of parents of autistic children and how these autistic children can develop the theory of mind. Various ways to collect empirical data were employed such as in-depth interviews and observation. In order to obtain accurate and absolute answers, the research method had been planned systematically as follows:

The research instruments included a semi-structured interview protocol as well as an observation sheet to observe the environment, behaviors, relevant contexts, and relationships among those who participated with autistic children. All instruments have been verified by the experts and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University.

Key informants of this study were five parents with autistic children. The researcher addressed key informants by criterion-based selection. At the first place, the head of the special education department was asked about the cases' development of ToM. The age of the children with autism was between 10 to 16. To convince that the children with autism, who did not attend schools had developed some signs of the theory of mind, their parents were asked about the signs as well as the diagnosis from doctors in some cases. After screening autistic children's theory of mind, the selected parents were those who had spent time or major responsibility developing their autistic children. Furthermore,

in order to ensure they were rich cases, here were the criteria for selecting relevant parents for accurate information.

1. Firstly, those parents spent more than 6 hours a day fully with their children with autism.

2. Secondly, they played the role of a teacher and educator for their autistic children which means they must have professional knowledge, skills, techniques, and strategies to educate their children.

3. Thirdly, their autistic children must have a sign of development of the theory of mind (ToM). For example, they need to be with other people or have the ability to participate with surrounding people.

4. Lastly, every key informant must have more than 6-year experience rearing their autistic children as the study of Wilson et al. (2003), which represented the language development of children with autism was varied, for example, some autistic children could speak their first words before 18 months, whereas more than 5 per cent of his sample had not spoken any words when they reached 6 years old. Therefore, the 6-year experience might be enough for parents to enhance their children's language abilities.

Research results

There were five major key informants consisting of five mothers of five autistic children and one special education teacher. Others were minor ones comprising two fathers, one uncle, one aunt, and one babysitter. From the demographic data, it can be concluded that most parents of autistic children were mostly mothers who weren't hired by any company and could spend most time with autistic children. The average time taken to socialize autistic individuals was 10.8 hours daily. All major key informants were over 40 years old. However, all minor key informants were recruited as a part of the triangulation process. The majority of minor key informants were so close to the targeted autistic children and supported them to move further. In case of family revenue, most families earned more than 50,000 baht per month. Moreover, one special education teacher took care of autistic child development for 2 recruited families.

After the ToM test of Baron-Cohen & Frith (1995) which is called the false-belief test and the other four ToM tests (in appendix), the finding reveals that there were only five from seventeen of autistic children passed all tests. Therefore, five of them were recruited to be the major key informants. After obtaining consent from the contacted key informants, the first visit took place at each family. The observation and in-depth interviews were the pressing data-collecting methods which were used to explore the phenomena of certain contexts. The observation was started aiming to discover interrelated factors of ToM development; as well as, secondary key informants.

1. The process of teaching children with autism of their parents

To develop the Theory of Mind (ToM) of children with autism, families or parents play pivotal roles in initiating and researching how to develop this addressed part. Realizing it as one of the components of their social skills, the ToM can be perceived to be an element of reinforcing the competency of autistic children in participating with others. However, they need effective ways that their ToM can be strengthened. The findings of the process of teaching children with autism of their parents are demonstrated according to in-depth interviews and observations.

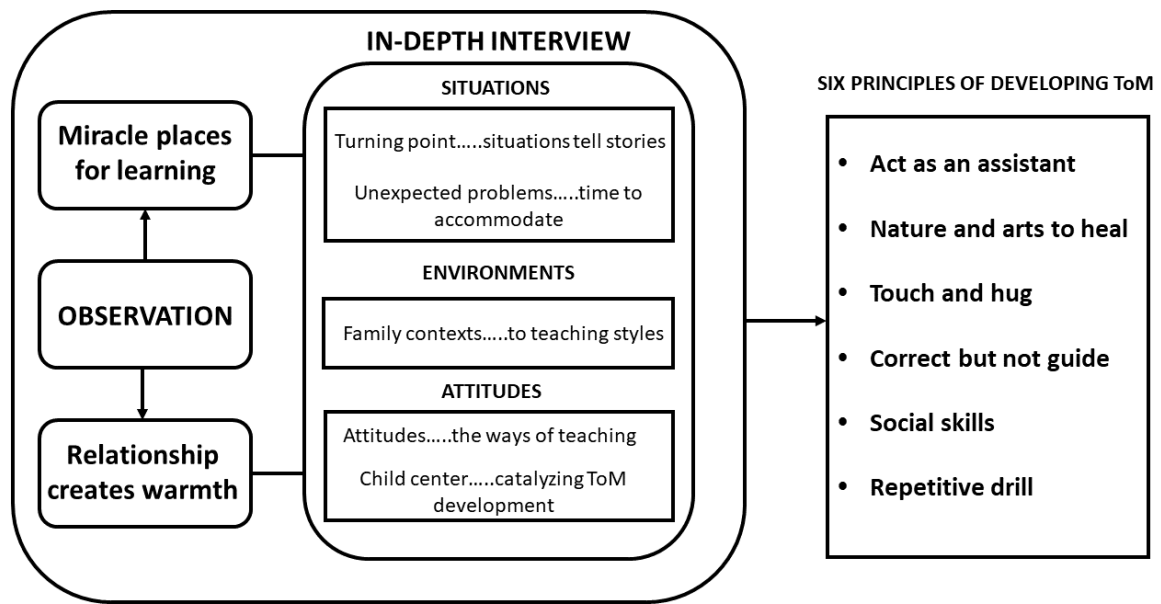


Figure 1 The process of teaching children with autism of their parents

1.1 From observation to a note for readers

Miracle places for learning....

After all autistic children passed the test mentioned, the appointment was made. The first journey was to the accommodations of all key informants. As initially stepping into most private places (houses of the key informants), some evidence was seen. Some families created the space for their child's physical development. The floor of that space was spread with soft pads like rubber pads and there were also some exercise machines that were quite colourful and seemed simple. However, for some houses without this mentioned space, there still was a spare room or area to be used as a study room, but it is not considered as academic sound. The area or space mostly consists of related stuff. To illustrate, some families had spared one room for their autistic children to run daily-related activities such as ironing and folding clothes, filling water into the jugs, constructing kinds of stuff with clay, and taking a photo and computers.

The relationship creates warmth...

Apart from the house surveyed, the home was another part to be observed. One prominent key found during the observation was "Tough Relationship". All families as the key informants had their family portraits hung on the wall or placed on the shelves as well as tables. This can be inferred that they had passed the difficulty of accepting the truth about the autism of their children. Additionally, most parents seemed to pay adequate and proper attention to their autistic children since they always motivated autistic children to have a conversation with them on daily topics. Not too much force is comforting for them to initiate a word. From the observation, questioning was the phenomenon being heard from parents or caretakers who were trying to develop the ability of speaking and social interaction. This phenomenon reflects the tough relationship between autistic children and caretakers.

1.2 From voices of parents to a note for readers

There are three major factors reflecting and demonstrating how parents taught their autistic children to achieve ToM; situations, environments, and attitudes. Consequently, six principles of teaching are proposed from those mentioned factors.

Situations

Situation 1: Turning point...situations tell stories

To discover effective ways for bringing up autistic children, one of the pressing elements is a turning point for families with autistic children. Most parents confessed that before they recognized different patterns of children's development, they never accepted some little points of slow learning improvement. Despite being unwilling to accept the guessed abnormal signs, most parents found themselves overwhelmed with the related information on child development as said;

"I was so sad as my family warned me about my son's muscles, and I thought it was just a simple knowledge and normal slow development for boys. However, during those days my husband and I were so super worried and started learning about child development."

Jay, 46 years old

Desperately, after the exact results from the medical diagnosis, the first three months were the most difficult time to relieve and recover from unexpected consequences. All of the key informants reported that they had accumulated a great deal of knowledge and information from a variety of resources such as books, research journals, and online materials due to the conscience of being a key person in taking care of his/her own child.

"I have taken around three months to recover from this suffer, and after this, I immediately began discovering the ways...the fastest ways to help develop my daughter."

Sarah, 49 years old

The turning point means preparing parents of autistic children to sacrifice their time, knowledge, resources, and soul. It can be said that the assured diagnosis from the hospital was the starting point of the story. Moreover, this was the restructuring part of their routines to become significant supporters and caretakers.

Situation 2: Unexpected problems...time to accommodate

After researching ways to develop autistic children, parents reported various unexpected circumstances like poisoning from milk, slow speaking, and others related to child development. They had spent such a harsh time in order to accommodate their emotion control and stress management. These skills were contributing to strengthening their mental well-being which helps them to move on to problem solvers as reported;

“When I realized my child could not speak any word, sure I was so stressed; however, this situation propelled me to be a stronger woman who could pass every crisis happening in the world.”

Reed, 54 years old

What’s more, the third person these key informants had to be associated with was an issue. The third person mentioned included caretakers, special teachers, and relatives. Some parents revealed that they had spent a large sum of money hiring caretakers, special teachers, and even on medical remedies like brain wave activation and stem cell injection. As a result, they all did not work so effectively, and most of them had a negative experience with these third persons as said;

“The special teacher I hired once held a lot of jobs so she paid inadequate attention to my child. One day I saw her taking my son to another class with her and she said this can help develop my son’s social skills, but without my permission.”

Helen, 42 years old

To make a decision on who and where were the effective agents to help improve the autistic children, all key informants had passed the same situation as their relatives tried to dominate the decision-making and pushed some mainstreamed beliefs into the process. This leads to conflict and fatigue feeling; however, in turn, it triggered their awareness of finding the right approaches to enhance their autistic children, especially the development of Theory of Mind as reported;

“When being insulted by my own family, it must be the force that helped empower me to study and choose the best practices for my daughter. The first thing that I want to help her with is to let her get through others’ minds which keeps her away from being a weirdo.”

Karen, 53 years old

From the unexpected problems and the conflicts with the third persons mentioned, there are some legitimate signs that have socialized all key informants to think of proper education and treatments as well as to educate themselves with buckets of information.

Environments

Family contexts...to teaching styles

Most parents with autistic children mentioned social support as one significant factor encouraging them to help promote autistic children’s theory of mind. There are six contexts including both tangible and intangible ones to explain family contexts and supports.

1. Surrounding emotions: With diverse feelings and emotions from surrounding people, particularly family, most key informants revealed these elements as the drives and encouragement to develop the Theory of Mind (ToM) of Autistic children. In the same word, propping up to express only positive feelings and emotions was a factor to promote initially their autistic children to understand others more effectively.

2. Low arousal: During most days, low-arousal settings or environments should be provided to autistic children, and this support must be from the help of all family members. Autistic children, according to all key informants, were able to develop well without too much arousal or with controlled environments at the first pace of ToM promotion.

3. Moderate expectation: To control parents' expectations, all of the key informants reported that "expectation" could be a "hindrance" somehow when they managed the ToM developmental resources. To clarify, the expectation was always the major cause of negative emotions and attitudes as well as excessive care given to their autistic children.

4. Without comparison: Once parents of children with autism had experienced the comparison to other children or other families from both surrounding people and themselves. It is strategic to get rid of comparison to others since it must interrupt the process of generating ToM.

5. Family participation: All key informants reported pushing their children to participate in any activities with the family member could boost their ToM, and with the support from family members, autistic children felt safe and cosy to learn what other people react, what those reactions mean, and how to react back to them. Family setting accounts for the development of ToM.

6. No "DEAD END" ideas: With support from family, friends, and social media, most parents reported that the ideas of establishing and developing ToM for autistic children would not be from only one source; therefore, to achieve ToM, autistic children must be educated and practised based on well-proven approaches. The parents said they had discovered and tried a lot of approaches to promote ToM for their children.

Attitudes

Attitude 1: Attitudes...the ways of teaching

The initial step of developing ToM for autistic children is the parent's attitude. Most parents believed education is an investment even though it is sometimes costly. They thought that if their children were normal, they still needed education as one mentioned;

"It doesn't matter how expensive each course is because the cost of education is still lower than putting children into conventional schools. I think I can control and choose the best kinds of stuff for them."

Paul, 55 years old

Another belief and value all key informants obsessed with were "Parents are the best teachers". Those who hadn't experienced educating children, reported that they were satisfied developing and preparing themselves to be the best teachers for their autistic children. However, one key informant stated;

"I never believe I can teach anyone. At first, I was so nervous since I was in the pitfall that I couldn't play the role of a teacher of my beloved son. However, I tried to shift my mindset and finally, it worked."

Jay, 46 years old

Other attitudes paving the way for educating autistic children on ToM include attitudes against the mainstream, avoiding cartoons, and being calm. Most parents held effective practices introduced by their connection and reading materials. To illustrate, “FLOOR TIME” is one important practice that most parents mentioned. Importantly, they indicated that the development of social skills had the potential to generate ToM of autistic children.

Attitude 2: Child centre...catalyzing ToM development

After researching effective approaches to promote ToM of autistic children, most parents found the principle of promoting this skill. Putting “Child centre” as the core concept of socializing them, the key informants reported the significance of “patience” as a key point of catalyzing ToM development. They believed being patient to step-by-step observe the physical development, as well as the cognitive one, would foster children to feel comfortable and safe. The desirable prize must be the outcome. Most parents stated holding a “Child centre” had socialized them to become resilient, adaptable, and creative as said;

“This has been fifteen years since I have become GURU in developing autistic kids. Along the way, I have learnt a lot, and focusing on child’s needs and learning styles has generated my creativity.”

Reed, 54 years old

Six principles of developing ToM

According to data analysis, six principles of teaching autistic children to develop ToM were synthesized based on routine activities.

1. Act as an assistant: ToM development requires huge assistance from a significant person like parents or special teachers. The potent assistances include playing, encouraging life skills like cooking and cleaning, SI, and facilitating them in learning and playing. Moreover, FLOORTIME therapy, or ABA therapies, is quite effective to promote autistic children’s ToM, and parents can be significant assistants in running the therapy.

2. Nature and arts to heal: To promote ToM of autistic children, the play takes part in the process. Playing or participating in nature can heal both parents and children. Nature can be used to teach autistic children to understand the rules of nature. Parents can combine nature with any type of art such as drawing, painting, moulding, playing a musical instrument, and acting. Parents can let them understand diverse emotions and feelings via the weight pushing onto the piano keys or the rhythms of the paintbrush dragging onto the canvas. This way can also strengthen their imagination.

3. Touch and hug: Touching and hugging are important ways to improve autistic children’s sensing. Slowly touch can make them learn to understand feelings and emotions as well. Due to the fact that autistic children might be commonly oversensitive or undersensitive; however, always being touched might help them somehow to understand the message from different sensory organs.

4. Correct but not guide: During participating with autistic children, parents should try not to guide them when questioning them to learn other’s feelings and emotions. To let them guess what other people think, open-ended questions should be

raised to stimulate them to make a connection and improve their reasoning. One important element is correcting but not guiding. This means parents should not guide them when asking autistic children to answer questions, but wait to hear the answer; however, the correction can be made at the right time.

5. Social skills: A lot of social activities can facilitate autistic children to development of their ToM. Horse riding is a special example to support their learning to enhance ToM as the rider must understand the horse by delicately touching and acting confidently while on its back. The rider not only learns to understand how a horse feels but also learns the feelings and thoughts of surrounding people in those areas. There are many ways to improve ToM via social activities like “PLAY and DO” such as camping, comparing opposite words, storytelling, baking for sales, and building LEGO all examples require autistic children to play with others.

6. Repetitive drill: This is an important principle of child development. The repetitive drill can strengthen every skill the autistic children try. Therefore, parents should constantly spend time with them; however, in case parents have inadequate time, they should hire a third person who is qualified in special and relevant fields to help develop in a proper way such as physical therapists in order to develop autistic children continuously.

The process of teaching

There are three main processes of daily teaching autistic children to develop their ToM. The first process is “preparation”.

The preparation process was a priority step which motivated and boosted the energy of autistic children before taking them into a lesson or activity. Most autistic children should pass the motivating step before their parents started the activity. Touching and soft embracing could ease their oversensitivity and calm them down for full learning. Another example technique of this step was the environmental setting. The parents considered the learning environment important since all key informants mentioned the positive surrounding emotions, low arousal, and family participation as key factors to promote initially their autistic children to understand others more effectively.

The second process is “driving ToM”, which includes well-planned activities. According to some key informants, time with parents was valuable no matter what activities are. After the preparation, the parents of the autistic slightly began warm-up activities simple questioning and body movement. FLOORTIME therapy and ABA therapies are relatively popular among parents since the approaches toughened the bond between the parents and their autistic children. However, the parents reported promoting ToM could be easily done using art and multimedia since there were a variety of real-world examples to be viewed. Sitting in front of the screen (TV or computer) and starting a conversation with situation-related on the media were daily tasks. The major approach in “driving ToM” was questioning and facilitating and parents played these roles. To question and facilitate autistic children, parents normally let them guess what other people think with open-ended questions. The parents did not guide them when asking autistic children to answer questions, but waited to hear the answer; however, the correction can be made at the right time.

The last process is called “revising” which means the parents and their autistic children reflect on what had been done on daily basis. This process included further planning, boosting motivation to move further, encouraging, and summarizing the

daily result. For example, some parents asked the autistic children to help plan the tasks for the following day and showed their tangible progress via the plotted graph and photos. The parents stated that tangible results showed could motivate autistic children well since they could understand easily and this objective progress encourages them to move further for the next day in order to achieve the set goal (weekly basis).

In the process of teaching the autistic to develop ToM, the most significant factors are agents, contents, and approaches. These are the construct of the socialization concept, so in the case of ToM promotion, teaching means socialization.

2. How autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM)

Most parents of children with autism had observed their children closely and recorded every pace of their life, which presented the evident development of ToM of their own children. How these autistic children developed their Theory of Mind (ToM) is still the secret. However, this research has got the key to unlock this secret.

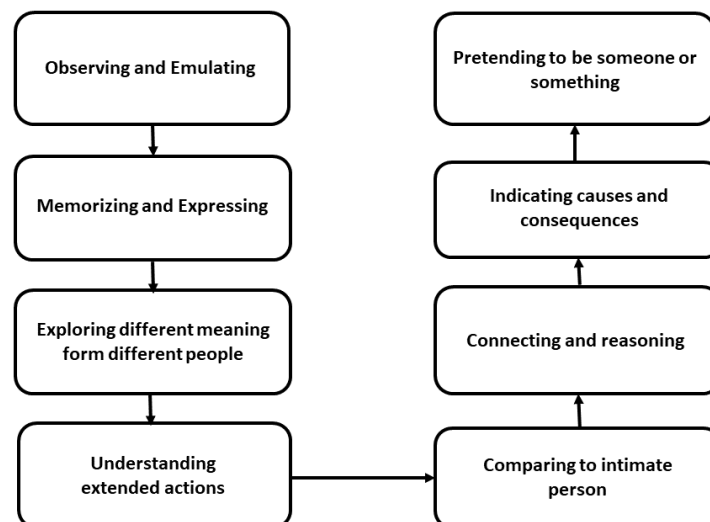


Figure 2 The development of ToM of autistic children

According to data analysis, there are 8 steps of how autistic children develop the Theory of Mind.

1. Observing and Emulating

During certain activities promoting ToM, autistic children present the sign of attention as they observe and try to emulate what they are observing as Donna and Sarah (alias) stated

" Our girl was trying to make an angry face as her dad did"

This sign represents the initial step of learning from others' emotions. This sounds like quite an external or physical imitation.

2. Memorizing and Expressing

After continual observing and emulating, autistic children keep what they have learnt in memory. The effort of expressing feeling learnt can be commonly seen even though it is still an external or physical action. According to Leo (58 years old),

“My niece is a wonderful kid who is such a quick learner. I remember not too long after I showed her how to act when receiving compliments, hitting the chest softly but strongly. She could remember and did it when I said that she was so great to help me put my kinds of stuff away. That’s amazing!”

3. Exploring different meanings from different people

After autistic children have learnt with intimate persons, mostly family members, they will start exploring to experience what other people do when they feel something. The way they learn is mostly by asking some questions to others as reported by Jay (46 years old);

“My son always asks questions that what other people (such as his piano teacher) feel when he touches her and what to do to make her love him. I think this is the possible sign he is willing to learn to understand others.”

4. Understanding extended actions

This amazing part of ToM development of autistic children, most of the parents reported learning diverse actions of one certain emotion (such as happiness) can help them understand extended actions as stated by Helen (42 years old);

“My son can understand that I am happy when I express something more than smiling. He understands I am so happy when I clap my hand and smile.”

5. Comparing to an intimate person

After experiencing others’ actions, feelings, and emotions (which can be learnt via various sources like movies, television programs, and storybooks), autistic children will take everything back home to work it out with their parents or intimate person as reported by Harry (61 years old);

“My kid came to me after I went back from work to ask why I frowned like a character in the story she read at school, then she padded my shoulder and amazed me.”

6. Connecting and reasoning

To develop an internal sense of compassion or understanding of others, most parents have to observe closely to ensure their autistic children can understand semi-abstract meanings of each feeling, emotion, and action of others. Reasoning skill is developed through comparing and making a connection with information and experiences; therefore, autistic children can be encouraged to achieve this through Q&A activity for example.

7. Indicating causes and consequences

If children with autism understand how people think, feel, and react and what they should do to be a part of society, this can be claimed they have the ability to indicate the causes of actions and their consequences as mentioned by Jay (46 years old);

“My son once showed the sign of cognitive development. He stopped me from scolding his little brother, so I think he would know the consequences of my anger.”

8. Pretending to be someone or something

If autistic children can express the pretence of being someone or something, it will be good news for parents who want their children’s ToM to be developed. It is commonly quite hard to see autistic children play the role of someone seriously. However, it does not mean impossible. To be someone else is another skill indicating that children understand others and understand what they should do to respond to each situation. On the other hand, it must be misunderstood whether autistic children develop ToM or just emulate someone they have just observed.

Discussion

Process of teaching children with autism of their parents

Theory of Mind (ToM) is involved with the ability of human beings to perceive thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs of themselves and others. From the study, parents have become the most significant people who have the potential to improve ToM of autistic children as stated by McCroskey & Meezan (1998) that family support and family preservation could be referred to as family-centred services since a family aid to support children. To be based on a family-centred approach, parents hold a significant role as specialists who design the lessons or routine tasks for their children therefore; they should be intensively trained. Family-centred practice helps provide families with knowledge and skills to manage the best alternatives for children. Most key informants utilized a family-centred approach with support from other agents like media, family, and other people.

From the process of teaching the autistic to develop ToM including “preparation”, “driving ToM”, and “revising”, the most significant factors are agents, contents, and approaches. These are the construct of the socialization concept, so in the case of ToM promotion, teaching means socialization. Most parents of autistic children reported they can be potent agents if receiving adequate and proper support. These would somehow relieve their stress, which is coincident with Tungmephon (2005), who revealed that the stress level of mothers with an autistic child would decrease if they are well prepared and have got social support. Without social support, parents of autistic children might feel unsafe and hopeless. Boyd (2002), who examined the relationship between stress and lack of social support in mothers of children with autism, found that mothers felt comfortable with informal support because they believe that it could be a more effective stress buffer than the formal one. Therefore, being supported is related to the positive emotions of parents who have a responsibility to rear children with disability.

To teach autistic children to achieve mind-read ability or ToM, one of the most significant elements is providing them with an opportunity to participate in any social activity. The study of Hermelin & O’Connor (1970) surprised many people that autistic children prefer to be with others. Consequently, they will have an opportunity to mentalize with someone via social participation. It might be possible for them to learn what others need and act. According to Happe (1993), some of his autistic children who were his research subjects could attribute mental states.

Teachers, and parents of autistic children, had accumulated knowledge and experiences, and family-centred practices coincided with Prizant (2009), who offered

principles of the approach, including building trust in a parent-professional relationship, helping children accomplish goals and flexible systems that serve children with ASD. In the same word, Dunst & Leet (1987) stated that family-centred services are the best service to enhance children's development and can help support families by addressing the needs they identify as most critical.

Play and floortime approaches are popularly mentioned by all parents. Taking time with autistic children such as playing, teaching, and talking can promote their ToM. Family plays a vital role in developing members, especially the young ones. However, family with autistic children needs to work harder on this task. Consequently, these parents always have abilities to have a high level of dependent-care agency than those who rear normal children (Khueanman, 2002).

To enhance the mind-read ability of autistic children, Howlin, Baron-Cohen & Hadwin (1999) developed the intervention guide, which is divided into three areas, emotion, informational states, and pretend play. All areas of the intervention consisted of relevant activities. These are areas the autistic parents were so concerned with as they provided their children with activities enhancing emotion and understanding of others.

How autistic children have developed their Theory of Mind (ToM)

There are eight steps of the autistic's development of ToM; Observing and Emulating, Memorizing and Expressing, Exploring different meaning from different people, Understanding extended actions, Comparing to an intimate person, Connecting and reasoning, Indicating causes and consequences, and Pretending to be someone or something.

Observing and Emulating, according to Contaldo et al. (2016), is significant behaviour of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These actions relate to social engagement. Children with ASD can develop social skills by engaging in society so that they can observe and emulate others. Their social cognition is involved which is intensively required to develop their ToM. Both observing and emulating are the first step for the autistic occurring when participating in society.

After getting involved in society, children with ASD have collected what they have observed and practised imitating others as experiences before keeping them in their memories. However, during continuous social engagement, children with autism are allowed to explore different individuals to find different meanings of the expression. With ToM approaches, meaning is created in the minds of those who participate in society (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009).

Pretending to be someone or something is the final step in determining the development of ToM in children with ASD. Parents who provide them with an opportunity to do a role-play activity. Due to the scarcity of pretend play in autistic children, it is very difficult for them to develop ToM; therefore, engaging in imaginative play as a social activity would help (Wolfberg et al. 2012). To develop the Theory of Mind (ToM) of children with autism, parents should be aware of the steps mentioned and apply the different approaches to achieve each step with patience.

Conclusion

The findings of this research are beneficial for several groups, including scholars, educators, special teachers, and parents of autistic children for example, and eligible suggestions are as follows;

1. The findings can be applied directly to assist parents of autistic children in order to promote their Theory of Mind.
2. The findings reveal the significant practices, which are effective and applicable to various fields like education, psychology, behavioural science, social sciences, humanities, and medical science for example.
3. Families with autistic children or specialists even any instructors and general persons can apply the teaching techniques attained from the study to help utilise their lesson plans for autistic children.
4. Teaching methods and strategies of parents of autistic children can be applied to the curricula of teaching children with other disabilities such as learning disorders or short attention spans.
5. The results on the parents' daily routine have the potential to reflect what should be demanded to help fulfil family institutes, which are disadvantaged in order to support them to have a better quality of life.
6. The research findings would benefit not only autistic children or any other types of disabilities but also general children.
7. Researchers in this field or related areas can conduct further studies based on these research findings.
8. Further research can be conducted by quantitative research, and Exploratory Factor Analysis can be conducted based on the qualitative findings from this study.
9. Based on this study, further research can expand the sample groups to study autistic children or other related groups such as special education teachers.
10. This topic of the research can trigger attention to the importance of the Theory of Mind development.
11. The research findings can be extended and be a foundation for establishing a development program relevant to the Theory of Mind.
12. The findings pave the way for planning public policies to promote citizens' awareness of minority groups.

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