

## Extended Abstract

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## Research paper

### The effectiveness of story therapy on the communication skills of children with high-functioning autism Spectrum Disorder

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## Introduction

Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by abnormal communicative and verbal behaviors. Symptoms typically appear before the age of three, and their main cause remains unknown. Difficulties in natural language and speech learning (Corbett & Prelock, 2006) and problems in imitating others are observed in these children. Children with autism spectrum disorder show significant limitations in the development of verbal language and conventional forms of nonverbal communication such as eye contact and body language (David et al., 2018). Story therapy is a psychotherapeutic method that, alongside other therapeutic approaches, prepares children to face loss, fear, and anxiety by using an indirect and engaging approach, fostering hope, energy, and change in them (Zabih Ghāsemi et al., 2019). In story therapy, various social issues are described using unique phrases or stories that indicate how an individual should act in different contexts or scenarios. Moreover, story therapy employs visual learning strategies that are very beneficial for children with autism spectrum disorder, and stories can be easily utilized across different contexts and implementers (Cashin et al., 2013). Therefore, this research aims to examine the effectiveness of story therapy in improving the communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorders.

## Method

This study was a semi-experimental research with a pretest-posttest design including a control group. The research population consisted of children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder in eastern Gilan (cities of Langarud, Lāhijān, and Rudsar) in the year 1403 (Iranian calendar). Using purposive sampling and by referring to clinics and centers, 30 students from second to sixth grade, who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (level 1 or high functioning) based on psychiatric records and psychiatrist diagnosis, were selected and divided

into two groups: experimental (15 participants) and control (15 participants). Inclusion criteria were: diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder level 1, age range between 8 to 12 years, and high scores on communication skill problems in the autism rating scale. Exclusion criteria included comorbidity with other neurodevelopmental disorders (based on psychiatric records) and age below 8 years or above 12 years. It is worth mentioning that to reduce confounding variables, the two groups were matched in terms of age and gender.

## Results

**Table 1. Results of ANCOVA for Posttest Scores of Communication Skills in Experimental and Control Groups**

Source	Index	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$	OP
Social interaction	Pretest	167.39	1	167.39	2.39	.08	.09	.11
	Group	3958.37	1	3958.37	130.32	.001	.464	.88
	Error	4190.13	28					
Social communication	Pretest	674.91	1	674.91	2.56	.13	.14	.21
	Group	4157.86	1	4157.86	131.56	.001	.790	.73
	Error	4231.50	28					

As shown in Table 1, the ANCOVA analysis of posttest scores for communication skills (social interaction and social communication), after adjusting for the pretest scores, indicates that after controlling for the effect of the pretest score, the intervention effect on the posttest scores is significant (social communication:  $F=131.558, p<0.001$ ; social interaction:  $F=130.324, p<0.001$ ). The effect sizes, 0.790 and 0.464 respectively, indicate a large difference in the sample. Therefore, story therapy is effective in improving the communication skills of children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder ( $p\leq 0.01$ ).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Children with autism may have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, but stories can easily convey social and emotional meanings through images, characters, and situations. Story therapy allows children to reflect their own experiences through characters and narratives. This method helps them better understand and express the feelings and challenges they experience. Stories can aid in developing empathy in children. By placing children in various story scenarios and observing how characters behave, they can understand others' emotions and respond accordingly. Story therapy can specifically focus on social skills such as how to communicate with others, honesty, empathy, and problem-solving. This approach can present concepts visually and tangibly, which is easier for children to grasp (Jabbāry Dāneshvar et al., 2022).

The most significant limitation of the current study was the absence of a follow-up test. It is recommended that future research include follow-up assessments. In this study, efforts were made to control conditions and confounding variables as much as possible, but since human participants,

especially children, are strongly influenced by the environment, context, and family behavior and culture, one of the main limitations was the inability to control such variables. The present research examined the effect of story therapy on improving communication skills of children with high-functioning autism within a limited time frame; therefore, long-term follow-up of the treatments was not possible. It is recommended that psychologists, counselors, and school teachers use story therapy to enhance the communication and social skills of these children.

### **Ethical Considerations**

#### **Ethical Code**

This research was registered with the Vice-Chancellor of Education and Postgraduate Studies of Rahman Institute of Higher Education in Rāmsar on 2024/06/24.

### **Financial Support**

This study did not receive any financial support.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Ghazal Sādāt Pournsaie (first author): Management of the research process, editing and revision of the article; Ma'soume Tālebi Daryāsari (second author): Data collection, training, statistical analysis and preparation of the main draft of the article; Milād Sabze<sup>h</sup> Ārā Langaroudi (third author): Editing and reviewing the article's amendments.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors of the article declare that there are no conflicts of interest in conducting this research.

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