

Positive *Self-Talk* Intervention to Decrease Stress in Parents of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract:

The caregiving experience of parents of children with special needs (CSN) can be challenging and can lead to significant stress and negative impacts on mental health. To address this issue, a community service activity was implemented to provide positive self-talk training to 25 parents of CSN who are members of the Indonesian Special Family Forum (FORKESI) in South Sumatra. The training was conducted online using the Zoom Meeting platform and employed the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) method. The results of the community service indicated that the average stress levels of the participants decreased after participating in the training. Additionally, participants reported feeling more grateful for the condition of their children, more accepting of their children's condition, and having more open minds. These findings suggest that positive self-talk training is an effective strategy for reducing stress in parents of children with special needs and may have broader implications for supporting caregivers in the community.

Keywords: *Positive self-talk; parent; children with special needs; stress*

Introduction

As a universal desire, all parents wish for their children to be healthy in both body and mind. However, some families are faced with the challenge of raising children with special needs (CSN), who may exhibit physical, psycho-intellectual, social, and emotional limitations that differ from those of typically developing children. These

limitations can impact the growth and development of CSNs and may not align with their chronological age (Eky Vikawati et al., 2018). According to Darmawanti and Jannah, children with special needs are individuals who exhibit physical, mental, intellectual, social, or emotional abnormalities or deviations in their growth or development compared to their peers of the same age. As a result, they may require specialized services to address their unique needs and support their overall development (Sari et al., 2017).

It is important to recognize that every child has distinct potential, intelligence, and talent. However, it is common for members of society to compare children to one another, which can lead to a lack of appreciation for the unique strengths and abilities of each individual. In the case of children with limitations or shortcomings in certain areas of development, it is particularly crucial for parents to understand and acknowledge these limitations and to focus on promoting and nurturing the unique potential and talents of their child. By doing so, parents can support the overall development and well-being of their children (Sugiarto, 2021).

Most parents who have children with special needs tend to deny, become angry, feel guilty and are not ready to accept their child's condition (Amelasaki, 2018). The experiences of parents in caring for their CSN often affect the overall functioning level of the family (McConnell & Savage, 2015). Changes in function and excessive burden in the care process of CSN can be one factor of stress.

The presence of CSN tends to give more complex pressure and responsibility to parents. Depression, stress, and anxiety are prone to occur in parents with CSN (Bazzano et al., 2015; Muniroh, 2012; Peer & Hillman, 2014). Previous research has found that families often experience physical, social, and emotional stress in the process of living and caring for children with special needs (Whiting et al., 2019).

Almost all parents who have children with special needs experience stress due to the extremely difficult parenting pattern, and some parents even state that they reach a level of stress and depression.

Stress is an external demand related to an individual, such as objects in the environment or stimuli that can be dangerous (Wulandari, 2014). Stress is also defined as pressure, feeling tense, and unpleasant disturbance that comes from others (Muslim, 2020). Lazarus and Folkman (in Sarafino & Smith, 2014) also provide a definition of stress, which is the discrepancy between the physical and psychological state of an individual in the process of interacting with the environment.

The stress experienced by parents in caring for children with special needs is called parenting stress. In this process, parents feel excessively anxious and tense when interacting with their children (Ahern, 2005). To cope with parenting stress, parents need to learn teaching methods, parenting, protection, and other aspects of parenting that affect personal and family life (Dabrowska & Pisula, 2010). In addition, some factors that affect the resilience of parents in accompanying children with special needs include the ability of parents, the child's condition, the environment, and religious values (Hidayati & Aisha, 2022).

Children with special needs (CSN) often face physical, mental, intellectual, social, or emotional abnormalities or deviations in their growth and development compared to their typically developing peers. These limitations may require specialized services to support their overall development. Initial data from therapists at the Palembang Therapy Center (PTC) who work with parents of CSN suggest that many parents experience a period of denial when first learning of their child's special needs diagnosis. Acceptance of the child's condition can vary in length for each parent.

Interviews with parents who are members of the Indonesian Special Family Forum (FORKESI) and receive therapy at the PTC revealed that caring for children with special needs can be challenging. Four parents of CSN shared their experiences and noted that their greatest difficulty was when their child's development did not align with their age and the child resisted participating in learning or therapy sessions. This aspect of caring for a child with special needs was

identified as a significant source of parenting stress. It is crucial for parents to have access to resources and support to effectively manage the challenges of caring for a child with special needs and promote their overall well-being.

One strategy that can be applied to prevent stress is by engaging in positive self-talk (Effendi et al., 2022; Sadri Damirchi et al., 2020). Self-talk is a dialogue that an individual has with themselves that involves self-reflection and aims to build a good mental condition (Majdi et al., 2019). The results of Bruehlman-Senecal's research (in Majdi et al., 2019) explain that the application of positive self-talk techniques can improve the self-esteem of individuals with low self-esteem, change attitudes for the better, and reduce social stress. In addition, research on 351 adults in Iran showed that positive self-talk has a significant relationship with problem-focused coping style and a negative relationship with anxiety (Sadri Damirchi et al., 2020).

Based on the findings described above, the community service team conducted a training activity to address the stress experienced by parents of children with special needs. The goal of this training was to support parents in better accepting their child's condition, cultivating gratitude, and adopting a positive mindset when facing challenges. It was also expected that the training would enable parents to more readily accept their child's condition.

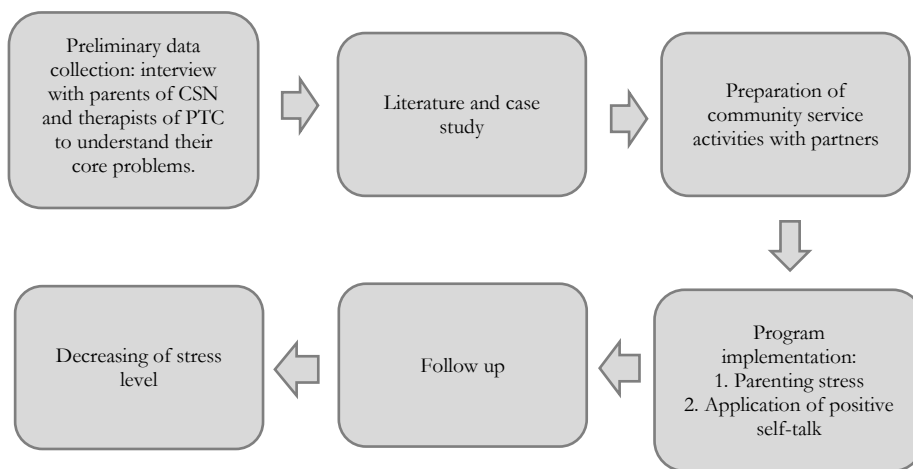
Implementation Method

The community service team conducted a training activity focused on the use of positive self-talk to reduce stress in parents of children with special needs. The training was attended by parents who are members of the Indonesian Special Family Forum (FORKESI) in South Sumatra and receive therapy at the Palembang Therapy Center (PTC). To optimize the effectiveness of the training, the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) method was utilized. The training was conducted online using the Zoom meeting platform.

The stages of community service that have been carried out are as follows:

Figure 1.

Community Service Program Flow



The community service activity was structured in a series of stages as depicted in Figure 1. The initial stage involved conducting interviews with several parents of children with special needs who are leaders in the Indonesian Special Family Forum (FORKESI) and therapists from the Palembang Therapy Center (PTC) via Zoom to gather information on the conditions of the partners and to identify the challenges they commonly face in caring for children with special needs. The data from these interviews were analyzed and compared to relevant literature to inform the development of a program of activities addressing these issues. Based on this analysis and review, the community service team designed a program of interactive positive self-talk training delivered via Zoom.

The goal of this training was to reduce stress in parents of children with special needs and promote acceptance of the child's condition, gratitude, and a positive mindset when facing challenges. To optimize the effectiveness of the training, the Asset Based Community

Development (ABCD) method was utilized. The training was structured to be interactive and engaging to facilitate participant involvement and enthusiasm.

This activity employed a training method that incorporated lectures, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions. The activity took place over the course of two days. The first day focused on an overview of parenting stress in parents of children with special needs, while the second day addressed the application of positive self-talk. A total of 25 participants, comprising 23 mothers and 2 fathers aged 27 to 43 years, attended the training.

On the second day, prior to the presentation on positive self-talk, the participants were asked to document examples of negative self-talk that they frequently encounter in their daily lives. The following are examples of negative self-talk commonly reported by parents of children with special needs:

Tabel 1.

Negative Self-Talk of Parents of Children with Special Needs

No	<i>Negative Self-talk</i>
1	Worried about child development
2	Worried about the future of children
3	Thinking that other people can't accept their children
4	Feeling ashamed of the child's condition
5	Worried that the child has no friends
6	Feelings of being compared to normal children
7	Worried about the children's abilities
8	It's hard to accept the children's condition
9	Feeling that the child has no developmental progress
10	Always ridiculed by society
11	Thought of failure as a parent
12	Feeling the world is unfair

To follow up on a community service activity, the community service team established a WhatsApp group for participants in a training

program. This group provided a platform for individuals to share their experiences in caring for children with special needs and practicing positive self-talk. The team also offered solutions to any problems that the participants encountered during this time. This practice aimed to alter participants' perception of adversity and the stress that it can bring, ultimately encouraging the development of a routine of positive self-talk.

To assess the impact of the training, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was administered to participants before and after the program. The PSS was used to measure the stress levels of parents who have children with special needs. The data were analyzed using paired sample T-test statistics in SPSS software. This analysis allowed the team to determine whether there was a decrease in stress among the participants after the training program.

Results and Discussion

The following are the results and achievements of the positive self-talk training to reduce the stress levels experienced by parents of children with special needs.

1. Implementation of Community Service Activities

The community service activity through positive self-talk training to reduce stress levels in parents of children with special needs took place for two days July 21, 2022, to July 22, 2022, with a duration of 5 hours. The activity was conducted online through the Zoom meeting application. The participants present in this activity numbered 25 parents of children with special needs, consisting of 23 mothers and 2 fathers with an age range of 27 to 43 years. Before this training activity was carried out, the community service team provided instructions regarding the activities that would be carried out through a WhatsApp group that was created after registration. The community service team explained the general outline of the activity and the materials that would be presented to the participants as well as the positive self-talk practices

that would be carried out at the end of the activity as a follow-up to the training.

Figure 2.

Flyer of the Training Program



Before the training activity, the head of FORKESI provided instructions regarding the activity to be held to gain new experiences and knowledge so that they can more readily accept their circumstances and be more grateful and more positive in facing any problems in life.

Figure 3.

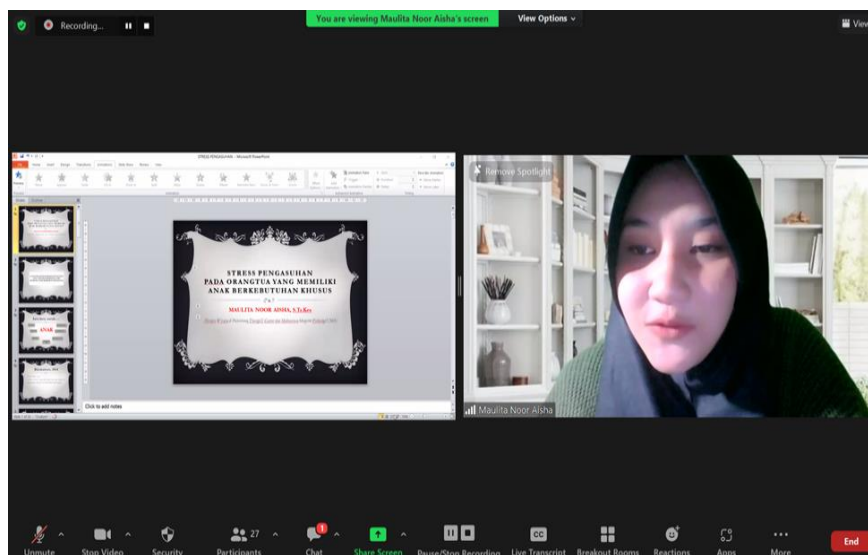
Briefing participants regarding Community Service Activities



In the first session of the training program, the participants were provided with information on the topic of "Stress of Parenting Children with Special Needs." This material included definitions of children with special needs, parenting patterns for these children, the stress associated with parenting them, stages of accepting children with special needs, and the concept of hardiness and its components. Through the use of lectures, discussion, and question-and-answer sessions, the participants were able to gain a more in-depth and clear understanding of children with special needs and how this knowledge can assist in the care and acceptance of these children. Additionally, the participants shared their own experiences in parenting children with special needs, which served as a source of knowledge and support for others facing similar challenges.

Figure 4.

Lecture on parenting stress



In the second session, the participants learned about strategies to reduce stress, specifically through the use of positive self-talk. Prior to this, the presenter asked the participants to write down examples of negative self-talk that they frequently experience in their daily lives. By analyzing these negative thoughts and replacing them with positive self-talk, the participants were able to become more aware of stress triggers and adopt techniques to better manage stress in the process of parenting children with special needs. The use of positive self-talk as a stress reduction strategy was designed to help the participants develop a new habit of positive thinking, ultimately leading to a more positive mindset and a better ability to cope with the challenges of parenting children with special needs.

Figure 4.

Lecture on Implementation of Positive Self-Talk



2. Follow-Up

Before attending the training, the participants were asked to fill out a pre-test to determine the stress levels of parents of children with special needs. The pre-test in this activity used the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Subsequently, after receiving the material on the first and second days, the follow-up or Follow-Up was carried out by creating a WhatsApp group where each training participant was facilitated to share information about parenting children with special needs and the application of positive self-talk. Each participant expressed problems in parenting children with special needs, and the community service team provided solutions to the problems experienced by the participants. The Follow-Up took place for one week.

After receiving the training, the participants also received a task to write a gratitude note every day. In the gratitude note, the participants

were asked to write down the things they were grateful for about their child. By writing a gratitude note every day, the participants indirectly practiced positive self-talk by being more grateful, feeling God's love, feeling grateful for God's extraordinary gift, believing in the blessings of every event, and feeling more peaceful and comfortable in daily life. With these feelings, the parents can increase their closeness to God, thereby enabling them to deal with the problems in their life better (Hidayanti, 2013).

Here are the changes experienced by the participants after attending the training:

Tabel 2.

Changes experienced by participants

Problems	Post-training changes
Often feel anxious	Don't feel anxious
Easily offended	Feel more able to think clearly
Not able to control emotions	Feel more patient with problems
Feeling uneasy	The heart feels calm and comfortable
Stressed	Feel happiness
Too much burden	Feel more grateful in every condition
Feeling heavy with the difficulties encountered	Believing that Allah will give wisdom behind the trials faced

After the participants practiced positive self-talk for one week, the community service team also provided a post-test with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to re-measure the stress levels experienced by parents of children with special needs after they completed the training. This was done to measure the effectiveness of the positive self-talk method applied to the participants and to see if there was a change before and after the training. The stress level measurement scale data were analyzed

using the SPSS application with paired sample T-test as explained in the following table.

Table 3.

Result of mean stress levels

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre	22.56	25	3.754	.751
	post	17.92	25	3.068	.614

Based on the results presented in Table 3 above, it can be seen that the average value (mean) at the initial measurement was 22.56, then the average value (mean) at the final measurement was 17.92, thus it can be concluded that this training is effective in reducing the stress levels of parents of children with special needs.

Tabel 4.

Results of the significance of positive self-talk training

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pre - post	4.640	4.377	.875	2.833	6.447	5.301	24	.000

Based on the data in Table 4 presented above, it is known that the significance value is 0.000 at the initial measurement - final measurement. The significance value of $0.000 < 0.05$. explains that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest, where the training was successful in decreasing the average score of the stress levels of the training participants.

People have different capability regarding how they respond to particular situations. Individuals' distinct capability leads to different ways in responding to situation perceived to be causing stress. Psychologists explain that self-talk plays important roles in determining how people behave in certain situations. It means that positive self-talk

relates to individuals' performance (Lauria et al., 2017). People who implement positive self-talk tend to be more successful in regulating anxiety compared to those who don't and are more likely to remain calm in stressful situation (Shadinger et al., 2020).

Various efforts can be made to reduce the stress levels of parents of children with special needs. One of them is by applying positive self-talk. Through positive self-talk, participants will talk to themselves using positive sentences. The words spoken to oneself will indirectly affect the minds of parents with children with special needs.

Positive words or statements will evoke an optimistic attitude in oneself and will have a great influence on a person's mind and overcome worries in life (Nugroho et al., 2022). Therefore, parents of children with special needs will think more positively when dealing with all the problems they face. They will feel more grateful and be more able to accept their child's condition. In efforts to prevent the stress experienced by parents, support from the family, social environment, and related parties (doctors/therapists) are needed so that when parents of children with special needs apply positive self-talk, they can achieve maximum results.

Previous research also explains that the application of positive self-talk can reduce anxiety levels (Hidayah, 2014; Kesuma & Jannah, 2015; Kirana & Litaqia, 2022). In addition, by applying positive self-talk, a person can be more confident, more optimistic, and always evoke positive thoughts (Saleh & Karneli, 2020). Davis in Kesuma explains that negative self-talk can cause substantial physiological stimulation. When negative self-talk appears, a person will tend to experience guilty emotions, anger, anxiety, depression, and feeling worthless. Therefore, the application of positive self-talk in daily life needs to be done to reduce the stress levels of individuals (Kesuma & Jannah, 2015).

In line with the research conducted by Deater-Deckard and Panneton (2017) explains that stress will greatly affect the quality of life of an individual. Stress in parenting involves and connects various things such as the physiological reactions to parenting demands, child

behavior, the quality of parent-parent relationships, parent-child relationships, parent relationships with extended families, and parent relationships with the surrounding environment. Therefore, this training contributes to parents, especially parents of children with special needs, to help them overcome problems in reducing stress levels while caring for children with special needs.

The training in the use of positive self-talk has had a significant impact on the participants, resulting in various positive changes. These changes include increased gratitude, increased acceptance of their child's condition, increased gratitude towards God, and a more positive outlook on fate. Following the training, participants reported a better understanding of strategies for managing caregiver stress and began incorporating positive self-talk into their daily lives. These findings indicate that the practice of positive self-talk can effectively reduce stress levels in parents of children with special needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The community service activity of positive self-talk training for parents of children with special needs progressed as intended and resulted in the achievement of its training goals. The participants were able to effectively implement positive self-talk in their daily lives, leading to a decrease in stress levels. Upon completing the training, all participants reported feeling more grateful, accepting of their child's condition and development, and having more open-minded thoughts. These findings suggest that positive self-talk training effectively reduced caregiver stress in parents of children with special needs.

Recommendations

To fully realize the benefits of positive self-talk in reducing stress related to caring for children with special needs, it is crucial for participants to receive support from various external sources. This may

include support from the participants' immediate family, as well as social support from the broader community, including extended family, neighbors, and community organizations. Such support can greatly aid in the successful implementation of positive self-talk practices.

It is also important for the participants to have access to resources and information related to caring for children with special needs. This may include resources for managing stress, such as relaxation techniques or counseling services, as well as information on available support services and community resources. Having access to such resources can help to further alleviate the stress and challenges faced by parents of children with special needs, and can aid in the success of positive self-talk practices. Additionally, parents must have a strong network of support and understanding, as this can greatly contribute to their overall well-being and ability to care for their child effectively.

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