

Buddy Programs as Inclusive Support for Individuals with Autism in the Puberity to Adulthood Transition

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Abstract: Many people continue to question whether individuals with autism can live a “normal” life within society. The concept of “normality,” often linked to independence and social conformity, presents a complex challenge for adults on the autism spectrum. The ability of individuals with ASD to achieve such a life depends not only on personal capacity but also on community support and social acceptance. In reality, adults with autism still experience stigma and discrimination that limit their participation in social life. This study aims to raise public awareness of the existence and developmental needs of adults with autism by examining the role of the buddy program as an inclusive community-based support model. This research employs a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document review involving adults with ASD, volunteers, and community organizers. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, with triangulation across sources and methods to ensure validity. The findings indicate that the buddy program within an inclusive social community plays a crucial role in supporting adults with ASD during puberty and the transition to adulthood. The program fosters social interaction, emotional adaptation, and self-actualization through active engagement and tailored activities. These inclusive initiatives improve quality of life and empower individuals with ASD and their families. The study concludes that the buddy program represents a sustainable and replicable model for promoting inclusion and equity in community-based autism support.

Keywords: Autism, Buddy program, Inclusive education, Community, Transition to adulthood

Abstrak: Banyak orang masih mempertanyakan apakah individu dengan autisme dapat menjalani kehidupan yang “normal” di tengah masyarakat. Konsep “normalitas” yang sering dikaitkan dengan kemandirian dan kemampuan beradaptasi sosial menjadi tantangan yang kompleks bagi individu autisme dewasa. Keberhasilan individu dengan ASD untuk mencapai kehidupan yang dianggap “normal” tidak hanya ditentukan oleh kemampuan pribadinya, tetapi juga dukungan komunitas dan penerimaan masyarakat secara luas. Dalam kenyataannya, individu autisme dewasa masih menghadapi stigma dan diskriminasi yang membatasi partisipasi mereka dalam kehidupan sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan meningkatkan kesadaran publik tentang keberadaan dan kebutuhan perkembangan individu autisme dewasa dengan menelaah peran *buddy program* sebagai model dukungan berbasis komunitas yang inklusif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan telaah dokumen yang melibatkan individu dengan ASD, relawan, dan penyelenggara komunitas. Analisis data menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman dengan triangulasi sumber dan metode untuk memperkuat validitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *buddy program* dalam komunitas sosial inklusif berperan penting dalam mendukung individu autisme dewasa selama masa pubertas dan transisi menuju kedewasaan. Program ini memfasilitasi interaksi sosial, adaptasi emosional, dan aktualisasi diri melalui keterlibatan aktif dan kegiatan yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan peserta. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *buddy program* merupakan model dukungan komunitas yang berkelanjutan dan dapat direplikasi untuk mendorong inklusi dan kesetaraan bagi individu dengan autisme.

Kata kunci: Autism, Buddy program, Pendidikan inklusif, Komunitas, Transisi menuju dewasa

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 51). These symptoms affect an individual’s ability to interact, communicate, and perform daily activities. By identifying and addressing these symptoms,

effective interventions and support strategies can be developed to improve outcomes for individuals with ASD. An overview of the core symptoms of ASD is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

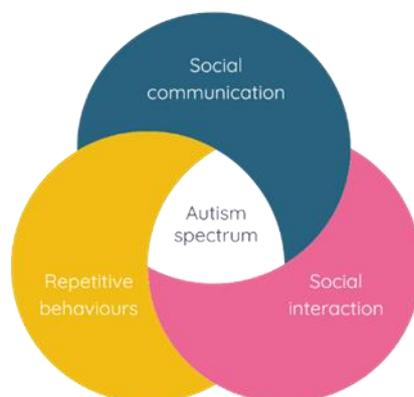


Figure 1. ASD core symptoms

Based on Figure 1.1, social deficits are a core component experienced by individuals with ASD, including difficulties in social interaction and dependency on others such as parents or caregivers. This dependency often persists into adulthood, hindering independence and the ability to collaborate within society. The National Institute of Mental Health (2024) states that one of the main characteristics of ASD is social deficits, which encompass difficulties in social interaction and reliance on caregivers. Low independence results in challenges in building peer relationships, group interactions, and participation in community or competitive work settings. These barriers negatively affect quality of life, increasing social isolation and the risk of unemployment. In addition, individuals with ASD often face bullying and discrimination, which prevent them from participating in the same activities as non-disabled individuals.

In recent decades, the prevalence of ASD has increased significantly, with current estimates indicating that one in thirty-six children is diagnosed with the condition (Maenner et al., 2023, p. 2). Consequently, the number of individuals with autism entering adulthood continues to rise each year. However, the transition to adulthood remains one of the most challenging phases, as many adults with ASD still face numerous barriers to social participation, employment, and independent living (Howlin & Magiati, 2017, p. 72). Misconceptions about autism—reinforced by social stigma—continue to shape the belief that individuals with ASD cannot live a “normal” life within society (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2018, p. 475).

The urgency of discussing inclusion for autistic adults lies in the gap between the increasing number of diagnoses and the lack of sustainable support systems. While interventions for children have been widely developed, services for autistic adults are often fragmented or even unavailable, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (de Leeuw, Happé, & Hoekstra, 2020, p. 1032). Many autistic adults lose structured support after leaving educational or therapeutic environments, ultimately reducing their opportunities to engage in social activities (Shattuck et al., 2012, p. 1045). In this context, inclusion and a sense of belonging within communities are crucial for emotional well-being and self-actualization (Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2019, p. 1250). In Indonesia, public understanding of autism in adulthood remains limited, and community-based initiatives rarely involve them. Therefore, it is essential to explore inclusive models that integrate social interaction, peer support, and empowerment.

Previous studies have emphasized that inclusive education and social participation positively influence the adaptive abilities of individuals with ASD (Kuo, Orsmond, Cohn, & Coster, 2013, p. 486; Odom et al., 2018, p. 97). One promising approach is the buddy program, a peer-based model in which neurotypical individuals build mutually supportive and equal relationships with autistic individuals. Such programs have been shown to foster empathy, reduce stigma, and enhance communication skills for both parties (Locke, Rotheram-Fuller, & Kasari, 2019, p. 724). Theoretically, this model aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979, p. 18), which emphasizes the interconnectedness

between individuals and their social environments. However, most research on buddy systems has focused on children or adolescents within educational contexts (Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Locke, & Gulsrud, 2016, p. 1028), leaving a research gap in understanding how this approach functions for adults within broader community settings (Morrison et al., 2020, p. 47).

This research gap lies in the limited exploration of community-based peer support for autistic individuals. Social inclusion in Southeast Asia is influenced by cultural norms of collectivism, family dependence, and persistent stigma (Lai, Lombardo, & Baron-Cohen, 2020, p. 455). Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of the buddy program as an inclusive, community-based model in supporting autistic adults in Indonesia. It focuses on how the program facilitates social interaction, emotional adaptation, and self-actualization during the transition to adulthood. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence to inform inclusive practices and policies while promoting social justice and community empowerment for individuals with ASD and their families.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative method was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, meanings, and interactions of autistic adults within an inclusive community context (Creswell, 2014, p. 65). The case study design enabled the researcher to explore the role of the **buddy program** as a community-based inclusion model that supports social and emotional adaptation during the transition to adulthood. This research focused on one inclusive community that systematically implements the buddy program, making it a bounded system suitable for an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995, p. 3).

The study was conducted over six months, from February to July 2024, at a community-based activity centre for individuals with special needs in South Tangerang, Indonesia. This community organizes various inclusive activities involving volunteers, autistic adults, and their families. The location was selected because it actively implements a buddy program that pairs autistic adults with neurotypical volunteers in specially designed activities as a form of social interaction.

The participants of this study consisted of eight autistic adults formally diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, five volunteer buddies, and five community organizers. Adult participants were selected based on their active involvement in the buddy program for at least six months. The inclusion criteria required participants to be over 16 years old, able to communicate either verbally or in writing, and willing to take part in a series of activities that included an overnight program, interviews, and observations. Volunteers were chosen based on their understanding of adults with autism, while community organizers were selected according to their responsibility for coordinating and supervising the program's implementation.

Participant selection was carried out using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2015, p. 53), as the researcher aimed to obtain rich and relevant information from individuals directly involved in the program. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms in the presentation of research findings. Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document review.

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the implementation of the buddy program. Each interview session lasted approximately **10–15 minutes** for autistic adult participants and was flexibly adjusted for volunteers and community organizers. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, as well as with the approval of parents or representatives of the autistic adult participants.

2. Participatory Observation

The researcher was actively involved in community activities as a **participant observer** for six months. This technique enabled the researcher to naturally observe social interactions, emotional adaptation, and the engagement of participants within their buddy pairs.

3. Document

Supporting documents such as program guidelines, activity journals, and event reports were reviewed to strengthen contextual understanding and to **triangulate** data obtained from interviews and observations.

Review

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher, as is customary in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). The researcher developed an interview guide containing open-ended questions focused on social interactions, emotional experiences, and personal development of participants. Additionally, an observation checklist was prepared to record behavioural patterns, levels of participation, and communication dynamics among participants. Field notes were also consistently maintained to capture contextual nuances and the researcher's reflections throughout the research process. Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10), which consists of three concurrent stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

1. Data Reduction: Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded and categorized according to emerging themes.
2. Data Display: Data were organized into thematic matrices and descriptive summaries to identify relationships among variables such as social adaptation, emotional expression, and self-actualization.
3. Conclusion Drawing: Conclusions were derived through constant comparison and verified using triangulation across sources and methods.

Triangulation was applied to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings (Denzin, 2012, p. 82). In addition, member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to key participants for confirmation and feedback. This study adhered to the ethical principles of qualitative research, including informed consent, data confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' well-being (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001, p. 95). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored. The study received ethical clearance from the institutional research ethics committee prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significance of the buddy program as a community-based inclusive support system for autistic adults. The results reveal three main themes:

1. The role of the buddy program in facilitating social interaction,
2. Its impact on emotional adaptation, and
3. Its contribution to self-actualization.

These findings are interpreted within the framework of social inclusion theory and developmental psychology.

Tabel 1. Summary of Key Research Findings

No	Aspect	Findings
1.	Social Interaction	The buddy program promotes social participation through joint activities and peer modeling (learning through peer examples).
2.	Emotional Adaptation	Participants demonstrated improved emotional regulation and self-confidence in social contexts.
3.	Self-Actualization	Autistic adults showed progress toward independence and self-expression.

These findings affirm that inclusive social communities play a crucial role in supporting adults with ASD. The peer-based structure of the buddy program fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect among participants. This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of inclusive environments in promoting independence and social development (Anderson et al., 2020; Brown & Larson, 2018). The results also support the social model of disability, which posits that barriers are not inherent within individuals but are socially constructed (Oliver, 2013).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that emotional adaptation is a central process in the transition to adulthood for individuals with ASD. Through consistent interaction with trained volunteers, participants developed emotional resilience and improved coping strategies (Smith & Perry, 2021). This is consistent with findings in community psychology, which emphasize empowerment and relational support as

mediators of adaptive behaviour (Zimmerman, 2017). The observed self-actualization among participants suggests that personal growth can be achieved when social inclusion and support systems are sustained over time.

In a comparative context, this study extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence that community-based programs can be replicated across diverse contexts. While most prior studies have focused on children with ASD, this research demonstrates the importance of continuing inclusive interventions into adulthood (White et al., 2019).

The sustainability of the buddy program presents a model of inclusive practice that bridges the gap between theory and real-world implementation. In conclusion, the findings reinforce the potential of community-based programs to promote lifelong inclusion, equality, and empowerment for individuals with ASD and their families.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the buddy program is an effective community-based inclusive support model that facilitates social interaction, emotional adaptation, and self-actualization among autistic adults. The program serves not only as a form of companionship but also as an empowerment mechanism that promotes equal social participation for individuals with autism. Through structured peer interactions, the buddy program reinforces the principles of social inclusion and expands the application of community-based approaches in supporting individuals with ASD in Indonesia.

The main innovation of this research lies in its application of the buddy program model to autistic adults—a group that has long received limited attention in both research and inclusive practice. The findings contribute to the advancement of social psychology and inclusive education by emphasizing that community-based peer support can serve as a sustainable and contextually relevant intervention.

As a recommendation, the development of similar programs should involve systematic training for volunteers and policy support from governmental and community institutions. Future research is encouraged to evaluate the long-term impact of the buddy program on the independence and quality of life of individuals with ASD across diverse social and cultural contexts.

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