

Evaluating the Level of Social Functioning Skills of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The current study aimed to assess the level of social functioning skills of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates. The sample included 103 cases of children with autism spectrum disorder (69 males and 34 females) enrolled in government and private special education centers in the United Arab Emirates. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher constructed a scales of the social functioning skills, and the validity and reliability of them were verified. In order to answer the questions of the study, the descriptive survey methodology was used, and the means, standard deviations, and one-way analysis of variance were used in data processing and reaching results. The results indicated low levels of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder on the scales used by the study. The study recommended the necessity of including social functioning skills in treatment programs, and targeting the age variable and gender.

Key words: Social functioning skills; Children with autism spectrum disorder; The United Arab Emirates

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder is known as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by two basic

characteristics: persistent deficits in communication and social interaction and repetitive behaviors, and it is diagnosed in early childhood (APA, 2022). This disorder is characterized by a continuous increase in prevalence rates, with the latest prevalence rate reaching 1 in 36 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2023). This continuous increase imposes on us the importance of accurate diagnosis and early intervention with the aim of developing the skills of a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (El-Zraigat, 2016).

The precise definition of social skills indicates that a person with appropriate social skills is a person who is able to adapt to the environment and is able to avoid interpersonal conflicts by displaying appropriate motor behaviors. Conversely, a person with social impairments tends to show behavioral problems such as communicating with Others, maintaining friends, and so forth. The general definition of social skills includes behavioral, motor, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral applications depending on the situation, and person. In general, social skills refer to specific cognitive and behavioral skills that form the basis or lead to social behavior (Matson & Swiezy, 1994). Thus, social functioning describes an person's interactions with his environment and his ability to perform his role in social activity such as establishing relationships with others and participating in family social events (Bosc, 2000).

In the case of persons with autism spectrum disorder, deficits in social functioning are seen as one of the main features by which autism spectrum disorder is diagnosed. This deficit is represented by a noticeable lack of ability to develop types of social relationships according to age. Social deficits include clear problems in using many non-verbal behaviors including eye contact and the use of gestures and facial expressions used to organize various forms of social and communicative interactions. In addition, persons diagnosed with this disorder have problems making friends, or establishing and maintaining social relationships (APA, 2022).

The social behavior of children with autism spectrum disorder is characterized by being unusual, as they sit closer to their mothers than to strangers after being left alone for a short period of time. Although these children do not look at their mothers and smile as is the case with normal children, they distinguish the difference between their mothers and strangers, and prefer being close to their mothers in circumstances that cause stress. Persons with autism spectrum disorder do not enjoy or have the ability to form meaningful relationships with others (Barlow & Durand, 1994, Durand & Barlow, 2000). In this direction, deficits in social performance in a person with autism spectrum disorder appear in noticeable difficulties in joint attention that appear in reciprocal social interaction contexts, and challenges in using communicative symbols in social contexts (Marans, Rubin, & Launent, 2005).

Studies have indicated that children with autism spectrum disorder display a wide range of behavioral traits that require therapeutic intervention (Stevens, Dixon, Novack, Granpeesheh, Smith, & Linstead, 2019). As indicated by the study of Reichow and his colleagues (Reichow, Salamack, Paul, Volkmar, & Klin, 2008) persons with autism spectrum disorder face difficulties in using language for communication.

Evaluation is seen as the essential first step necessary for comprehensive planning of remedial programs. Through evaluation, we can determine the nature of the problem in terms of its type and severity and then plan appropriate remedial programs (Klin, Saulnier, Tsatsanis & Volkmar, 2014). In fact, the assessment provides us with information about persons with autism spectrum disorder, information about how the person's development compares to other children his age, and the specific symptoms, strengths, and challenges that the child displays. Furthermore, changes in a person's development over time, including skill mastery, rate of skill acquisition, and maintenance and generalization of mastered skills, must be documented (El-Zraigat, 2016; Ozonoff et al., 2005; Partington, 2006).

Many studies have targeted the social skills of persons with autism spectrum disorder. Kerr-Gaffney, Jones, Mason, Hayward, Murphy, Loth, and Tchaturia (2022) indicated that attention to faces showed the largest deviation from normative data compared to the body or non-social regions of interest in both autism spectrum disorder and anorexia nervosa. The results confirmed that differences in social motivation underlie decreased social interest in both anorexia nervosa and autism spectrum disorder. In addition, Martínez-González, Cervin, & Piqueras (2022) showed that poor emotion regulation was uniquely associated with self-harm while social communication difficulties were uniquely associated with stereotyped behaviors. They also indicated that emotion regulation and social communication were strongly linked, and self-harm and stereotyped behaviors were moderately linked. While the study (Silveira-Zaldivar,

Özerk, and Özerk, 2021) was concerned with developing social skills and social competence in children with autism spectrum disorder. The study showed that persons with autism spectrum disorder suffer from a basic deficit in social skills. They emphasized that through effective interventions, children with autism spectrum disorder can learn basic social skills that can help alleviate deficits and strengthen social competence.

Thus, the importance of the current study is highlighted in assessing the level of social functioning of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates. This evaluation will contribute to understanding the social behavior of persons with autism spectrum disorder and help in planning targeted treatment programs.

1.1 The study problem and its questions

The severity and type of symptoms for children with autism spectrum disorder often vary according to their severity, and affect their methods of communication and social interaction. Evaluation is seen as the first step to providing the best appropriate educational programs (Persicke, Bishop, Coffman, Najdowski, Tarbox, Chi, Dixon, Granpeesheh, Adams, Jang, Ranick, Clair, Kenzer, Sharaf, & Deering, 2104). Through evaluation we can identify areas that need training and provide the best services necessary to reduce symptoms and encourage learning (Prince, 2012). Thus, assessing the level of performance provides baseline data, which in turn helps determine the types of support and basic services that the child needs (NYC, 2022). In the United Arab Emirates, children with autism spectrum disorder are evaluated according to different procedures depending on the center the child attends. Therefore, the procedures for evaluating the current level of performance of children with autism spectrum disorder differ depending on the center, and there is no agreement on them. Hence, the current study aims to evaluate the current level of social functioning of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates in accordance with international standards.

The current study sought to answer the following two study questions:

1. What is the level of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates according to the variable of the center the child attends?
2. What is the impact of the center the child attends on the areas of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder?

1.2 Objectives of the study

The current study aimed to:

- Evaluating and describing the level of social functioning of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates in light of international

standards.

- Providing special recommendations in light of the evaluation results for children with autism spectrum disorder.

1.3 Limitations and delimitations of the study

The limits represented the characteristics of this study sample, in addition to the time and place of its application, which is the United Arab Emirates. Its results are also challenged by what is measured by the content of the scale that the study used to evaluate the level of current social functioning of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates, and are also challenged by the accuracy of the response on the study scale.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The sample included 103 cases of persons with autism spectrum disorder enrolled in governmental and private education centers in the United Arab Emirates. The cooperating centers included Al Ghaith Center for Training and Rehabilitation, Hemma Clinic, and Al Hanan Center for Rehabilitation of Persons of Determination. Teachers of children with autism spectrum disorder in these centers evaluated the cases targeted for the study by applying the scales that the researchers built in this study.

2.2 Social Functioning Skills Scale

This scale measures the dimensions of forming social relationships, maintaining friendships, and appropriate behaviors in social situations. It was built by referring to relevant literature such as: (Bellini, 2006; Brian, Zwaigenbaum, & Ip, 2019; The British Columbia Ministry of Health Planning, 2003; The Irish Society For Autism, 2014; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2022; & Erin Lamblez, 2017).

The scale consists of 52 items divided into the following dimensions:

- Participate in social activities
- Social competence
- Playing skills

2.2.1 Construct validity of the social functioning skills scale

To extract the significance of the construct validity indicators in terms of the item's correlation with the dimension of the scale, we extracted the correlation coefficients for each item and the total score, and between each item and its connection to the field to which it belongs, and between the fields to each other and the total score, in an exploratory sample from outside the study sample that consisted of (30) participants from outside the country. The correlation coefficients of the items with the tool as a whole ranged between (0.44-0.92) and with the field (0.51-0.93).

2.2.2 Reliability of the social functioning skills scale

To ensure the reliability of the study tool, it was verified using the test-retest method by applying the scale, and re-applying it after two weeks to a group outside the study sample consisting of (30), and then the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between their estimates the two times and it ranged between 0.80 and 0.85.

The reliability coefficient was also calculated by using the internal consistency method according to the Cronbach Alpha equation. Cronbach Alpha equation and the repeat reliability of the domains and the total score, which amounted to between 0.71 and 0.82. These values were considered appropriate for the purposes of this study.

2.3 Study methodology

To answer the study questions, the current study used the descriptive survey method. The study included the variable of the center the child attends. Arithmetic means, standard deviations, one-way analysis of variance, and one-way multiple analysis of variance were used to answer the study questions.

3. THE RESULTS

This section presents the results and is organized according to its questions:

1. What is the level of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates according to the variable of the center the child attends?

To answer this question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the level of social skills of children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates were extracted according to the variable of the center in which the child attends, and the table below shows this.

Table 1
Arithmetic means and standard deviations for the level of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates according to the variable of the center the child attends

Centers		Participate in social activities	Social competence	Playing skill
Al Ghaith Center for Training and Rehabilitation	M	1.94	1.80	1.96
	S.D	0.795	0.666	0.733
Hemma Clinic	M	1.88	1.73	1.87
	S.D	0.674	0.570	0.746
Al Hanan Center for Rehabilitation	M	1.89	1.76	1.90
	S.D	0.696	0.556	0.739

Table (1) shows an apparent variation in the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the level of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates according to the

variable of the center in which the child attends.

2. What is the impact of the center the child attends on the areas of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder?

To demonstrate the significance of the statistical differences between the arithmetic means, a one-way multiple analysis of variance was used on the domains, Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2
One-way analysis of variance of the effect of the center the child attends on the level of social functioning skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates

Source of variance	Sum of square	Freedom degree	M. of square	F	Sig.	Size effect
Centers	0.049	2	0.024	0.065	0.937	0.001
Error	37.365	100	0.374			
Total	37.414	102				

It is clear from Table (2) that there are no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) due to the effect of the center in which the child attends, as the P value reached 0.065 and the statistical significance reached 0.937.

4. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATION

This section presents a discussion of the findings of the study:

The results indicated that there was an apparent non-statistically significant difference in the arithmetic averages of the level of social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in the United Arab Emirates according to the variable of the center in which the child attends. This result is explained by the fact that children with autism spectrum disorder face noticeable difficulties in social functioning skills, and this is a basic feature of this disorder. The scale aimed to evaluate participation in social functioning activities, social competence, and playing skills, and these are skills that are considered a challenge for this group of children. Despite therapeutic interventions, they improve performance depending on the type of intervention he is exposed to and the amount of support he receives. Therefore, they often show challenges in social skills. This result is consistent with the results of the study of Reichow, Salamack, Paul, Volkmar, and Klin (2008), which showed weak communication and social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder. Also, consistent with the results of the study by Kerr-Gaffney, Jones, Mason, Hayward, Murphy, Loth, and Tchanturia (2022), their results confirmed that differences in social motivation underlie decreased social interest in both anorexia and autism spectrum disorder. As the study by Martínez-González, Cervin, and Piqueras (2022) confirmed, the relationships

between emotion regulation, social communication, and repetitive behaviors in autism spectrum disorder. It also showed that the types of behaviors are often expressions of broader negative emotional states in autism spectrum disorder. In addition, it is consistent with the results of the study by Silveira-Zaldivar, Özerk, and Özerk (2021), the study showed that persons with autism spectrum disorder suffer from a basic deficit in social skills. Without effective support and interventions to enhance social skills, children with autism spectrum disorder often struggle to achieve social competence, and may face challenges at school, home, and in the community.

Based on the results, the researcher recommends the following:

- The necessity of conducting a comprehensive assessment for persons with autism spectrum disorder to include all the skills that affect their performance in daily life.
- Developing programs that meet the needs in social functioning skills for persons with autism spectrum disorder.
- Targeting other variables such as age and gender.

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