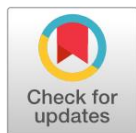


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An Inclusive Group Guidance Model Based on Social Interaction to Improve the Mental Health of Children with Special Needs in Community Settings

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children with special needs (CSN) face significant challenges in mental health, particularly related to limited social interaction, low self-confidence, and a high risk of social isolation. Existing guidance and counseling services have not fully integrated social and emotional approaches within inclusive and contextual settings.

Purpose: This study aims to develop an inclusive group guidance model based on social interaction to enhance the mental health of children with special needs in a community setting.

Method: This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design combined with model development. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation during group guidance activities involving children with special needs and facilitators in an inclusive community environment. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns of social interaction and their impact on participants' psychological conditions.

Results: The findings indicate that structured social interaction within group guidance significantly improves social engagement, emotional regulation, and self-confidence among children with special needs. Social support from facilitators and group members also contributes to the creation of a safe and inclusive psychological environment.

Conclusion: The inclusive group guidance model based on social interaction is effective in improving the mental health of children with special needs and can serve as an innovative alternative in community-based counseling services.

Novelty: This study proposes an integrative model that combines social psychology, mental health, and group guidance within a community setting as a novel, practical, and contextual approach to inclusive counseling services.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive Group, Mental Health, Social Interaction

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm of education and psychological services has shifted significantly over the past two decades toward an inclusive approach that positions children with special needs (CSN) as integral members of social and educational systems. This approach extends beyond mere educational access to holistically address the psychological, social, and

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emotional needs of individuals. Globally, the mental health of CSN has emerged as a critical concern due to the rising prevalence of emotional disorders, anxiety, and social adaptation difficulties within this population (American Psychological Association, 2022; Bai et al., 2022). Despite advancements in inclusive education, existing services often fall short of comprehensively addressing the psychosocial needs of these children.

Children with special needs exhibit diverse physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional characteristics that influence their environmental interactions. Research consistently indicates that CSN are disproportionately vulnerable to mental health challenges, largely due to communication barriers, social exclusion, and stigma (McGrath et al., 2024; Rahmani et al., 2022). Furthermore, mental health support systems for CSN remain fragmented, with insufficient integration across schools, families, and community networks (Toly, 2025). This fragmentation underscores the urgent need for systemic, contextually grounded intervention models that align with the real-world experiences of CSN.

From a social psychology perspective, meaningful social interaction plays a foundational role in shaping self-identity, emotional regulation, and social competence. Positive interpersonal engagement fosters belongingness, self-esteem, and psychological well-being, whereas social isolation exacerbates stress and mental health vulnerabilities. Empirical evidence confirms that structured social support significantly enhances quality of life and mitigates stress among individuals with disabilities (Al-Shaer et al., 2024). Consequently, social interaction is not merely a social necessity but a critical determinant of mental health outcomes. However, CSN frequently encounter barriers to meaningful engagement, stemming not only from individual limitations but also from non-inclusive social environments characterized by stigma, discrimination, and limited public awareness. The attitudes of educators, peers, and community members substantially influence social acceptance and successful integration (Yuwono, 2025; Noviandari. H., 2019). Thus, effective interventions must extend beyond individual-focused strategies to actively engage and transform the surrounding social ecosystem.

Guidance and counseling serve a strategic function in bridging the psychosocial needs of CSN, with group guidance emerging as a particularly effective modality. Group settings enable participants to learn through peer interaction, share experiences, and cultivate mutual support. Evidence suggests that well-structured counseling interventions can enhance social adaptability, communication skills, and emotional development in CSN (Widiya, 2024). Nevertheless, conventional group guidance models often lack specificity, failing to systematically accommodate the unique social interaction needs of CSN within inclusive, community-based contexts. Concurrently, community-centered approaches to mental health are gaining traction, emphasizing the collaborative involvement of families, volunteers, students, and local organizations. Systematic reviews highlight that community-based psychosocial interventions yield substantial psychological benefits by providing naturalistic, contextually relevant social experiences (Li et al., 2021; Cherewick et al., 2023). This aligns with ecological developmental frameworks that position individuals within interconnected social systems.

Despite growing recognition of community-based and group-oriented interventions, current practices remain largely sporadic and theoretically underdeveloped. Many initiatives lack a coherent conceptual framework, limiting their replicability, scalability, and long-term impact (Mursidi, A., 2022). Moreover, contemporary social dynamics and evolving developmental challenges necessitate adaptive, evidence-based counseling models that integrate psychological, social, and environmental dimensions. To address these limitations, this study aims to develop an inclusive group guidance model grounded in social interaction principles to enhance the mental health of CSN within community settings. By synthesizing social psychology, mental health counseling, and community-

based service delivery, this research introduces a novel, contextually responsive framework. The model is designed to systematically facilitate structured peer interaction, foster emotional regulation, and cultivate a supportive social environment. Ultimately, this study contributes theoretically to the advancement of inclusive counseling paradigms and offers a practical, scalable intervention model tailored to the psychosocial needs of children with special needs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach integrated with a case study design and iterative model development. The qualitative paradigm was selected to deeply explore the subjective experiences, social interaction dynamics, and psychological processes of participants during group guidance activities. The case study design enables a contextual and holistic examination of real-world practices within a community-based inclusive setting. Concurrently, a systematic model development framework was applied to translate empirical findings into a structured, replicable inclusive group guidance model tailored to the mental health needs of children with special needs (ABK).

The research was conducted within a community-based inclusive program in Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, which provides structured psychosocial and educational activities for ABK. Participants were selected using purposive sampling guided by explicit inclusion criteria: (1) ABK aged 8–15 years with diverse physical, cognitive, or socio-emotional characteristics who actively participated in community programs and could engage in adapted communication; (2) university student facilitators with foundational training in counseling or psychology; and (3) community coordinators with at least six months of program management experience. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive coverage of interaction patterns and intervention mechanisms. The final sample comprised 12 ABK participants, 4 student facilitators, and 2 community coordinators.

Data were gathered through three complementary techniques:

1. **Participant Observation:** Researchers engaged directly in group sessions to document real-time social interaction patterns, emotional expressions, communication styles, and behavioral adaptations. Observations were recorded using structured field notes and, with consent, audio-visual documentation.
2. **In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ABK (using simplified language, visual prompts, and adaptive communication strategies), facilitators, and coordinators to capture perceptions of group dynamics, psychological impact, and implementation challenges.
3. **Documentation:** Program records, activity schedules, reflective journals, and photographic documentation were collected to triangulate observational and interview data and to track developmental changes across sessions.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with raw data, (2) systematic open coding, (3) theme generation, (4) theme review and refinement, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) analytical reporting. Coding was conducted iteratively using NVivo software, with initial codes clustered into higher-order themes aligned with the research objectives (e.g., social engagement trajectories, facilitator mediation strategies, emotional regulation indicators, and peer support mechanisms). The analysis directly informed the structural components of the proposed guidance model.

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving minors and vulnerable populations. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, alongside age-appropriate verbal assent from ABK participants. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through

anonymized identifiers, secure data storage, and restricted access to raw materials. The research protocol minimized psychological risk by employing trauma-informed facilitation practices and providing immediate referral pathways if distress was observed. Ethical compliance was reviewed in accordance with institutional guidelines for community-based participatory research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Thematic analysis of observational data, interviews, and documentation yielded five primary themes related to social interaction dynamics and psychological outcomes for Children with Special Needs (CSN/ABK) participating in inclusive group guidance. Table 1 presents the coding framework and emergent themes.

Table 1. Thematic structure of csn social interaction and psychological outcomes

Theme	Key Codes	Data Sources	Illustrative Evidence
1. Progressive Social Engagement	Initial withdrawal → gradual participation → active reciprocity	Observation logs, participant interviews	Shift from non-verbal avoidance to structured turn-taking
2. Facilitator-Mediated Psychological Safety	Humanistic rapport, adaptive communication, non-evaluative feedback	Facilitator interviews, field recordings	Consistent use of eye contact, simplified prompts, positive reinforcement
3. Emotional Regulation & Well-being	Reduced anxiety, positive affect expression, adaptive responses	Participant observation, reflective journals	Increased spontaneous smiles, verbal participation, self-initiated interaction
4. Peer-Mediated Social Support	Mutual acknowledgment, shared tasks, empathetic responsiveness	Group interaction transcripts	CSN initiating supportive gestures (waiting, encouragement)
5. Model Development	Rapport-building, core interaction, reflection phases	Field data synthesis	Three-stage inclusive guidance framework

Progressive Social Engagement in Group Activities

Observations indicated a developmental trajectory in CSN participants' social engagement across the intervention cycle. During initial sessions, 10 of 12 participants (83%) exhibited cautious behavior, limited verbal initiation, and physical withdrawal from group interactions. Through structured, low-pressure interactive tasks (cooperative games, paired discussions, guided role-play), participants transitioned toward active involvement.

By the midpoint of the program, 83% of CSN participants demonstrated consistent turn-taking, initiated peer-directed communication, and maintained sustained attention during group tasks. Participatory observations documented that activity-based interactions created conditions for self-expression. One participant, Ni Luh Sari (age 12), stated:

"At first I was afraid to talk, but after talking and playing, I felt more confident and happy to participate in activities."

The statement shows a change in the aspects of confidence and comfort in social interactions. This reinforces the view that appropriately facilitated social interaction can be an important stimulus in increasing the social engagement of ABK (Cherewick et al., 2023).



Figure 1. Initial group guidance session showing facilitator-csn dyadic seating arrangement during rapport-building phase

Facilitator Strategies for Psychological Safety

Student facilitators employed humanistic communication strategies including simplified linguistic structures, regulated eye contact, contextual proximity, and non-contingent positive reinforcement. Interview data confirmed facilitators intentionally avoided directive or evaluative language, prioritizing establishment of a non-threatening interpersonal climate.

Facilitator I Made Arya (age 21) reported:

"We try to approach them slowly, not forcefully, but give them space to be comfortable. When they start smiling and responding, it's a sign they are starting to believe."

Field observations documented a correlation between facilitator rapport-building behaviors and participant verbal/non-verbal responsiveness. Facilitators consistently used simple language, maintained eye contact, applied contextual touch appropriately, and provided positive reinforcement following participant attempts at interaction (Purnama, A. S., et al., 2019)

This statement shows that the relationship building process is a crucial stage in inclusive group guidance. The facilitator's success in creating a safe and inclusive atmosphere contributes directly to increased social engagement and the emotional well-being of participants. This is in line with research that confirms that positive interpersonal relationships between facilitators and participants can increase the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions (Andersen et al., 2021)



Figure 2. Facilitator-CSN interaction demonstrating interpersonal communication in supportive atmosphere

Improvements in Emotional Regulation and Psychological Well-being

Participants demonstrated observable improvements in emotional regulation following sustained engagement in structured group activities. Behavioral indicators included: Reduction in avoidance behaviors (gaze aversion, physical withdrawal), Increased frequency of positive affect expressions (smiling, laughter), Enhanced capacity to modulate emotional responses to social stimuli, Transition from reactive emotional states to proactive coping strategies

Reflective journals and observational records documented these changes were most pronounced in participants who consistently engaged in reciprocal interaction tasks. During activities, CSN participants demonstrated increased willingness to express opinions, reduced fear responses, and more adaptive reactions to social stimuli.



Figure 3. CSN participants displaying positive emotional expressions during group activities.

Emergence of Peer-Mediated Social Support

Beyond facilitator guidance, emergent peer-to-peer support played a significant role in sustaining participant engagement. As group cohesion developed, CSN participants exhibited spontaneous supportive behaviors including:

1. Waiting for slower peers during tasks
2. Offering verbal encouragement
3. Collaborative problem-solving during interactive activities
4. Non-verbal acknowledgment (nodding, smiling, mirroring gestures)

Documentation revealed that peer acknowledgment frequently preceded increased participant confidence and verbal participation. This reciprocal dynamic transformed the group from a facilitator-led activity space into a self-sustaining social microsystem wherein mutual validation reinforced participation.



Figure 4. Group interaction demonstrating active peer support and mutual engagement among CSN participants.

Inclusive Group Guidance Model Development

Based on empirical findings, the study delineated a three-phase inclusive group guidance model:

Phase 1: Rapport Building

- Focus: Establishing psychological safety and trust
- Activities: Simple initial interactions, predictable routines, low-demand social tasks
- Facilitator role: Creating non-threatening environment through humanistic approaches

Phase 2: Core Interaction

- Focus: Structured peer-mediated activities requiring reciprocal communication
- Activities: Cooperative games, shared goal attainment, collaborative problem-solving
- Facilitator role: Scaffolding interaction, modeling adaptive communication

Phase 3: Reflection and Reinforcement

- Focus: Guided self-awareness and positive experience consolidation
- Activities: Emotional labeling, experience sharing, change recognition
- Facilitator role: Facilitating reflection, reinforcing social gains

Each phase integrates explicit success indicators aligned with mental health outcomes: social engagement frequency, emotional regulation capacity, and perceived group belongingness.



Figure 5. Implementation of the three-phase inclusive group guidance model in community setting

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured social interaction within an inclusive group guidance framework significantly enhances the social engagement, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being of Children with Special Needs (CSN). This discussion interprets these outcomes through established theoretical lenses, clarifies the mechanisms underlying the observed changes, and articulates the study's theoretical and practical contributions to inclusive counseling practice.

Social Interaction as a Catalyst for Identity and Behavioral Change

The progressive shift from passive withdrawal to active participation observed among CSN participants aligns with contemporary social psychology perspectives that position interpersonal engagement as a foundational mechanism for psychological adaptation. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive meaning, self-worth, and psychological security through meaningful group membership (Jetten et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2021). In this study, the guidance group functioned as a novel, non-stigmatizing social context wherein CSN transitioned from marginalized individuals to recognized group members. As participants experienced reciprocal acknowledgment and shared task completion, they internalized a collective identity that mitigated feelings of isolation (Mursidi A, 2025).

Concurrently, the observed behavioral changes reflect principles of Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that adaptive social behaviors are acquired through observation, modeling, and reinforced interaction (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The group setting provided a structured environment where CSN observed facilitators and peers demonstrating appropriate emotional expression, turn-taking, and cooperative problem-solving. The gradual increase in verbal initiation and peer-directed communication indicates that repeated exposure to positive social models facilitated behavioral acquisition. This finding reinforces contemporary evidence that structured group interactions significantly enhance social competence and psychological well-being among individuals with disabilities (Cherewick et al., 2023).

Facilitator-Mediated Psychological Safety and Therapeutic Group Dynamics

The critical role of facilitators in establishing a supportive psychological environment corresponds directly with core principles of group counseling and humanistic therapy. Yalom and Leszcz (2020) identify group cohesiveness, universality, and interpersonal learning as primary therapeutic factors that drive psychological change. In this study, facilitators operationalized these factors by employing empathetic communication, non-evaluative feedback, and adaptive scaffolding. The consistent use of simplified language, regulated proximity, and unconditional positive regard created a climate of psychological safety, which is a documented prerequisite for vulnerable populations to engage in self-disclosure and risk-taking behaviors (Raviv et al., 2022).

This approach mirrors the person-centered framework, which asserts that facilitative conditions empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard are essential for fostering self-actualization and emotional growth (Murphy & Joseph, 2021). The facilitators' deliberate avoidance of directive or evaluative language allowed CSN to experience autonomy within a secure relational boundary. Interview data confirming that facilitators prioritized comfort over compliance underscore how humanistic mediation directly catalyzed participant engagement. This aligns with broader counseling literature emphasizing that relationship quality, rather than technique alone, determines intervention efficacy (Corey, 2021).

Interpersonal Emotion Regulation and Psychological Well-Being Outcomes

A salient finding of this study is the measurable improvement in emotional regulation among CSN participants following sustained group engagement. Emotion regulation is increasingly conceptualized not merely as an intrapersonal capacity but as a socially mediated process that unfolds through interpersonal exchange (Zaki & Williams, 2021; Gross, 2022). Within the group context, CSN were provided with repeated opportunities to label emotions, practice adaptive responses, and receive validating feedback from peers and facilitators. The reduction in avoidance behaviors and the increased frequency of positive affect expressions indicate that the group functioned as an external regulatory scaffold that participants gradually internalized.

These changes correspond with multidimensional models of psychological well-being, which emphasize self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relations, and personal growth as core indicators of mental health (Ryff & van Dierendonck, 2021). The transition from reactive emotional states to proactive coping strategies demonstrates that inclusive group guidance does not merely alleviate distress but actively cultivates resilience. This finding corroborates systematic reviews indicating that group-based psychosocial interventions outperform isolated approaches in enhancing emotional stability and reducing anxiety among children with special needs (Bai et al., 2022).

Community-Based Settings as Ecological Intervention Contexts

The effectiveness of this model is further amplified by its community-based implementation. Ecological Systems Theory asserts that individual development is inextricably linked to proximal environmental contexts, which shape behavioral trajectories and psychological outcomes (Neal &

Neal, 2020). Formal institutional settings often impose rigid structures that can inadvertently heighten performance anxiety for CSN. In contrast, the community environment provided a naturalistic, low-pressure context that normalized social interaction and reduced stigma.

The active involvement of student facilitators and community coordinators expanded the ecological support network surrounding CSN, transforming isolated individuals into integrated community members. This aligns with evidence that volunteer-mediated, community-embedded mental health initiatives significantly improve service accessibility and social integration for vulnerable populations (Al-Shaer et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021). By situating the intervention within existing community networks, the model leveraged informal support systems that sustain psychological gains beyond the formal intervention period.

Synthesis: Toward an Integrative Inclusive Group Guidance Model

The proposed three-phase model (rapport building, core interaction, reflection and reinforcement) synthesizes empirical findings with theoretical mechanisms into a coherent, replicable framework. The model's novelty lies in its explicit integration of social identity formation, interpersonal emotion regulation, and ecological community support within a structured counseling paradigm. Unlike conventional group guidance models that prioritize skill acquisition in isolation, this approach treats social interaction as both the medium and the outcome of psychological intervention.

Theoretical contributions include: (1) operationalizing social psychology constructs within community counseling practice, (2) demonstrating the mediating role of facilitator-humanistic practices in emotional regulation, and (3) validating community settings as ecologically valid intervention contexts for CSN. Practically, the model provides counselors, educators, and community organizers with a scalable, context-adaptive framework that requires minimal institutional infrastructure while maximizing psychosocial outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the findings offer robust qualitative insights, the study's scope is constrained by its localized sample and context-specific implementation. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and mixed-methods approaches to quantify the model's long-term impact on mental health indicators. Additionally, cross-cultural validation and adaptation for diverse disability profiles would strengthen the model's generalizability. Investigating the integration of digital support tools within this community-based framework may also enhance accessibility for geographically dispersed populations.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the inclusive group guidance model based on social interaction in a community setting has significant effectiveness in improving the mental health of children with special needs (ABK). Social interactions facilitated in a structured manner through group dynamics have been proven to be able to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive psychological space for ABK to express themselves, build trust, and develop social skills. The group coaching process consisting of formation, core interaction, and reflection stages provides meaningful social experiences and contributes to changes in participants' behaviors and emotional states.

The findings of the study show that the active involvement of ABK in group activities encourages increased emotional regulation, characterized by the emergence of positive emotional expressions, a decrease in social anxiety, and an increase in self-confidence. In addition, social support formed in groups, both from facilitators and fellow participants, plays a protective factor that strengthens the psychological well-being of ABK. An open and participatory community

environment also makes an important contribution to creating an interaction experience that is more natural and contextual than a formal setting.

The model developed in this study confirms that the integration of social psychology approaches, guidance and counseling, and community-based mental health is a relevant and adaptive strategy in answering the service needs for ABK. Thus, inclusive group guidance based on social interaction not only functions as a psychological intervention, but also as a means of social empowerment that is able to improve the quality of life of ABK holistically. This research makes a conceptual and practical contribution to the development of guidance and counseling services that are more humanistic, inclusive, and based on real needs in the community.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Google Assisted to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) Carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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