

# *Understanding Social Skills in Children with Autism and the Challenges in Building Them in Albania*

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## **Abstract**

*This study aims to explore the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the general public and professionals regarding the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Albania. Social skills encompass a wide range of interpersonal competencies, which are essential for the social integration and personal development of these children (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007; Mundy & Neal, 2001). The study used a 16-item questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring knowledge, attitudes, and interest in training related to the development of social skills. The Likert scale allows participants to express the intensity of their agreement with each statement, enabling detailed statistical analysis (Boone & Boone, 2012; Likert, 1932).*

*With a sample of 455 participants, including parents, psychologists, speech therapists, doctors, teachers, support teachers, educators and students, the results showed that 97.1% of participants had knowledge about developmental disorders, while 93.8% appreciated the importance of social skills for children with autism. However, only 32.8% were aware of local initiatives such as “Little School”, while 47.3% expressed dissatisfaction with current methods. A large proportion (78%) believed that social skills can be learned, but 81% considered them challenging to learn. Interest in training and support programs was high (82.5%), indicating a large*

*scope for developing professional and family capacities. These findings correspond to international literature that highlights the importance of early and evidence-based interventions for social development in children with ASD (Lord et al., 2020; Howlin et al., 2009). The study highlights the need to promote effective programs and professional training in Albania to improve the independence and well-being of children with autism.*

**Keywords:** *social skills, autism, Likert scale, social intervention, inclusive education, Albania.*

## **Introduction**

Social skills represent an essential aspect of children's development and daily functioning, especially for those facing neurodevelopmental challenges such as autism. Children with ASD often experience great difficulties in building and maintaining social relationships, which directly affects their educational, family and social experiences (Klin et al., 2007; White et al., 2007). In this sense, the promotion of social skills is essential for improving their quality of life.

In Albania, the development of services for children with special needs is relatively new and limited by human, institutional and financial resources (Krauss et al., 2014). The educational and health system faces challenges in effectively addressing issues related to the autism spectrum, including the lack of structured programs and specialized interventions in the field of social skills. Public awareness on these issues remains limited and is often based on fragmented or inaccurate information. This study aims to contribute to enriching knowledge on the perceptions and level of awareness that professionals and family members have regarding the development of social skills in children with autism. It also aims to identify the challenges that exist in Albania in providing effective treatments and opportunities for well-structured interventions. By including data collected from a large sample, this study provides an important insight into the Albanian reality in this area. In developing countries, including Albania, access to these treatments is limited. The lack of qualified personnel, didactic materials and comprehensive policies is an obstacle to the implementation of effective interventions. Local initiatives such as the "Little School" show potential for improvement, but are recognized by a very small part of professionals, which indicates a lack of institutional promotion and commitment of policymakers.

## Literature Review

The development of social skills is a critical component of the overall functioning of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Social skills include a range of complex behaviors that allow the individuals to interact effectively with others, such as sharing joint attention, using language not only for instrumental but also for social purposes, taking and understanding the perspective of others (Theory of Mind), and the ability to respect unwritten rules of interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Volkmar & Wiesner, 2009). Children with autism often exhibit significant difficulties in all of these areas, which significantly affects quality of life, social inclusion, and the development of interpersonal relationships. International studies emphasize the vital importance of early and structured interventions for children with autism in the development of social skills. According to Howlin et al. (2009), social behaviour, communication, and functional independence can all be improved over time with early interventions based on scientific evidence, such as developmental models, applied behaviour therapy (ABA), and group interventions for social skills training. These interventions help children not only build the skills to initiate and maintain interactions, but also develop the self-confidence and social awareness necessary to function in a community.

White, Keonig, and Scahill (2007), in one of their studies of group interventions for children with autism in school, emphasize that training specifically focused on social skills leads to increased positive interaction with peers, improved social relationships, and reduced undesirable behaviors such as aggression, isolation, and verbal or physical stereotypies. They suggest that programs that include modeling, role-playing, and encouragement to share personal experiences may be particularly effective. Also, the inclusion of peers in training sessions has shown a positive reciprocal impact on the perception and social acceptance of children with ASD by the school environment.

Klin et al. (2007) analyze in depth the neurocognitive mechanisms underlying social difficulties in children with autism. They argue that disorders in social cognition and emotional information processing are essential in the diagnostic framework of autism and should be addressed as a priority in intervention. According to them, many children with ASD have difficulty understanding facial expressions, tone of voice and body language of the interlocutor, which makes it more difficult to understand the intentions and emotions of others. Consequently, Klin and colleagues emphasize the necessity of specialized approaches that target daily interactions and concrete challenges of children, using visual techniques, social stories and training led by assistant teachers or therapists.

The latest analysis from Lord et al. (2020) concerning the long-term efficacy of therapies for autistic children show that adapting the intervention to the child's specific requirements and development profile would significantly increase the chances of functional progress. They suggest that in addition to the content of the intervention, components such as frequency, consistency, and active family involvement are determinants of success in developing social skills. In particular, interventions that occur in natural contexts such as school or home, and that are integrated into daily activities, offer more opportunities for generalization of skills and their spontaneous use in new situations.

Another important area of the literature review is related to the use of technology and visual aids in supporting the development of social skills. Many studies in recent years have demonstrated the effectiveness of computer applications, social robots and virtual reality in training children with autism to recognize emotions, practice dialogues and improve verbal and non-verbal expression in social interactions (Ramdoss et al., 2012; Grynszpan et al., 2014).

These technological tools, when structured and integrated with therapeutic supervision, can reinforce traditional interventions and provide motivating forms of teaching for children with ASD. However, despite developments and progress at the international level, challenges in the Albanian context remain numerous. In developing countries, including Albania, access to these treatments is limited in terms of both economic, institutional and professional infrastructure. The lack of qualified personnel in autism therapies, didactic materials and comprehensive policies is a serious obstacle to the implementation of effective interventions. Furthermore, delayed diagnosis and the lack of functional assessment programs contribute to the loss of golden time for early intervention.

Local initiatives such as the "Little School", independent therapeutic centers or projects of non-profit organizations show potential for improvement, but are recognized by a very small part of professionals and the wider community. This indicates a lack of institutional promotion and systemic commitment of policymakers in the field of early development and support for children with disabilities. Another concern is the lack of standardization of interventions and the lack of certified training for specialists dealing with behavioral therapy and social development.

To improve the situation in Albania and the region, a coordinated effort is required between mental health professionals, educational institutions, families and the community. Raising awareness, providing funds for professional training, and creating intersectoral cooperation networks are necessary steps to create a supportive environment for the social development of children with autism.

## Methodology

### *Study design*

This study used a quantitative approach to gauge people's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about the social skills of Albanian children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). 16 questions total, broken down into three primary categories, were employed in the structured questionnaire:

1. Knowledge of autism and social skills,
2. Impact of social skills in daily life,
3. Knowledge and interest in methods and trainings offered in Albania.

All questions used a 5-point Likert scale for responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree., which is a standard method for measuring attitudes and perceptions in psychological and social research (Likert, 1932; Boone & Boone, 2012). Consistent statistical interpretation and question comparability are made possible by this standardised response format.

### *Measuring instrument*

The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

- Demographics include residency and occupation for comparison of impressions by social and professional groups.
- Knowledge of autism and social skills: questions about participants' understanding of ASD and social deficits.
- Impact of social skills: questions about perceptions of the consequences of social skills on daily functioning.
- Methods and interventions: questions about knowledge, experience, and interest in existing training and practices in Albania.

To guarantee its content validity and clarity, the questionnaire's first draft was assessed by subject-matter specialists such as developmental psychologists and special educators. We made small language changes to improve the questions' understandability after a pilot test with 20 participants.

Standardization of the response scale was applied to all Likert questions, using the same 1–5 scale. In addition to supporting the measurement's validity and reliability, this standardisation guarantees question comparability and numerical interpretation (Boone & Boone, 2012).

## *Participants and procedure*

Convenience sampling, a non-probability technique that chooses participants who are most accessible, was used to choose the study's  $N = 455$  participants. The sample included professionals related to children with ASD, students of social sciences, and parents of children with autism, from 12 cities in Albania.

Data collection was carried out through an online form (Google Forms), distributed to social networks, professional groups, and institutional contacts. The data that were processed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of scientific research and participation was voluntary and anonymous (APA, 2010).

## *Validity and reliability of the instrument*

Cronbach's alpha could not be computed since Google Forms only produced summary data (frequency and percentage). Nevertheless, the tool ensured methodological quality by:

- Expert review for content validity (DeVellis, 2017).
- Piloting to verify the clarity and understandability of the questions,
- Standardization of the response rate, which allows for comparability and statistical interpretation.
- Analysis of the percentages that showed consistent and coherent responses within each category.

This approach ensures that the questionnaire is reliable and valid for exploring the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of the public and professionals on the social skills of children with SEN in Albania.

## *Research ethics*

This study adhered to ethical principles of scientific research, including informing participants about the purpose of the research, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data was stored securely, for academic and research purposes only. The study did not involve any direct intervention with children or individuals with ASD.

## Results

Data collected from 455 participants through the questionnaire were analyzed focusing on three main dimensions related to the study objectives: (1) knowledge about autism and social skills; (2) the impact of social skills on the daily lives of children with ASD; and (3) knowledge about current intervention methods in Albania and interest in professional training.

### *Main Findings*

- 97.1% of participants have knowledge about developmental disorders.
- 93.8% recognize the importance of social skills.
- Only 32.8% knew about local projects such as “Little School”.
- 47.3% expressed dissatisfaction with current methods.
- 82.5% would like to participate in training on treatment methods.
- 81% consider learning social skills as very difficult.

### *Autism Knowledge and Social Skills (Axis 1)*

The given results showed that the majority of the respondents understood autism as a developmental disorder and the importance that social skills had for children with autism. Specifically, 97.1% of participants stated that they have good knowledge about childhood developmental disorders, while 93.2% stated that they are aware that lack of social skills is one of the main characteristics of autism (see Table 1). The information points to a high level of awareness of the social difficulties faced by kids with autism, which is in line with the global body of research that highlights how social interaction issues are a hallmark of the condition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007).

Seventy-eight percent of participants believe that structured Interventions can enhance social skills in children diagnosed with autism. However, 19.3% of respondents are not sure about this statement, which may suggest the misinformation or familiarity with effective international methodologies, for example social skills training (SST) and applied behavior analysis (ABA) (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Furthermore, 89.3% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the lack of intervention for the development of social skills has a long-term impact on an individual’s life, while 81% highlighted the difficulty of teaching these skills, suggesting their perception as a complex pedagogical and therapeutic challenge.

**TABLE 1.** Summary of percentage agreement with statements on autism and social skills (Axis 1)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
I have good knowledge about developmental disorders.	97.1%	Totally agree
Social skills are a core problem in autism	93.2%	Totally agree
Social skills can be learned	78%	Agree / Neutral
Lack of social skills affects your entire life	89.3%	Agree / Completely
Learning social skills is difficult	81%	Agree

### *The Impact of Social Skills on the Lives of Children with Autism (Axis 2)*

In this axis, the data reflected strong perceptions of the importance of social skills for the integration and well-being of children with autism. Looking at the results from the respondents, 93.2% agree that social skills deficiencies cause people to isolate themselves which can have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing. Similarly, 89.3% of them, highlighted how the development of such abilities directly influences the degree of independence, emphasizing their necessity in preparing kids for autonomous and fruitful lives as part of society.

One of the most significant findings is the support for early intervention, which is seen as an effective strategy to improve long-term outcomes for children with ASD. This is in line with numerous international research that argues that interventions applied at an early age bring significant improvements in the social skills and overall functioning of the child (Dawson et al., 2010; Rogers & Vismara, 2008).

However, only 59.1% of participants agreed or were neutral with the statement that people with autism can live independently. This finding indicates a limited perception of the potential for independent living for these individuals, possibly due to a lack of experience or sufficient education about transition to independence programs for adults with autism (Wehman et al., 2014).

**TABLE 2.** Perceptions of the impact of social skills on the lives of children with ASD (Axis 2)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
Lack of social skills affects independence	89.3%	I completely agree
Poor social skills lead to isolation	93.2%	I completely agree
Early intervention helps with long-term outcomes	-	I agree (implied)
People with autism can live independently	59.1%	Neutral / Agree
Social awareness and belonging are essential	93.8%	I completely agree

### *Knowledge and Interest in Methods in Albania (Axis 3)*

The data show an interesting contrast between existing knowledge and expressed interest in learning more. Only 65.9% of participants stated that they are familiar with the methods used in

Albania to help develop social skills, while 47.3% expressed neutrality regarding satisfaction with these methods. In particular, only 32.8% had heard of the KODDI Center's «Little School» project, perhaps reflecting a lack of information dissemination about existing initiatives at the

national level. It is noteworthy that 82.5% of participants expressed a desire to learn more and participate in training or workshops related to this field. This result highlights a great potential for capacity building and professional development in the field of autism and social interventions.

**TABLE 3.** Knowledge and interest in training on current methods in Albania (Axis 3)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
I am familiar with the methods in Albania	65.9%	Agree
I heard about "The Little School" (KODDI)	32.8%	Disagree / Neutral
I am satisfied with the current methods	47.3%	Neutral
I want to learn more	82.5%	I completely agree
Trainings/workshops organized by KODDI	82.5%	I completely agree

### *Summary of general trends by topic*

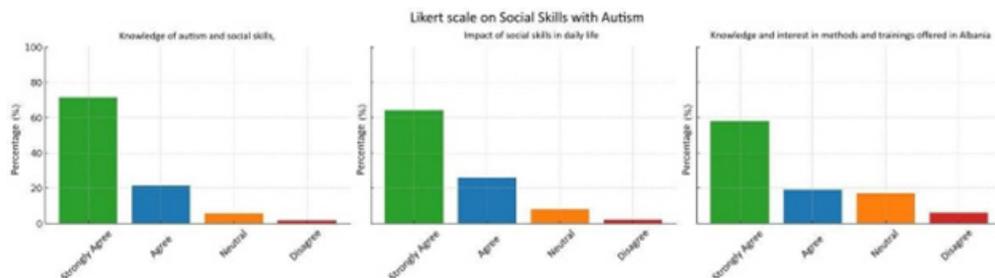
A comparative summary of the percentage of responses by topic of the questions shows that:

- 71.4% of the participants completely agreed with the statements related to knowledge about autism and social skills.
- 64% completely agreed with the statements related to the impact of these skills on the lives of children with ASD.
- Regarding the methods and interest in training, 58% completely agreed.

**TABLE 4.** Percentage of participants' agreement by question topic

Theme	Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	I Disagree
Knowledge about Autism and Social Skills	71.4%	21.4%	5.7%	1.5%
Impact on Children's Lives	64%	26%	8%	2%
Knowledge and Interest in Methods in Albania	58%	19%	17%	6%

The graphic below visually illustrates the percentage of participants who agreed with the statements in each thematic category. This summary allows for comparison of perceptions and knowledge about autism, the impact of social skills, and knowledge/interest in current methods in Albania.



These data suggest a good level of awareness and readiness for professional development, but also highlight the need for improved information dissemination and access to effective methods in Albania.

## Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study shed light on a clear and significant picture of the perceptions and practices of education professionals and parents regarding the development of social skills in children with autism in Albania. One of the main conclusions is that there is considerable awareness of the importance of these skills in the social inclusion, daily functioning and psychological well-being of the child. However, this awareness is not uniformly accompanied by in-depth knowledge of concrete intervention methods and existing training and professional development projects or programs. More specifically, survey participants expressed low satisfaction with the current approaches used in Albania for the development of social skills, which indicates a gap between awareness and practical implementation of evidence-based knowledge.

These data are consistent with international literature that emphasizes that interventions for the development of social skills in children with autism require ongoing training, specialized approaches, and institutional support (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007; Krauss, Gulati, & Soles, 2014). The high interest in training reported by participants, especially by teaching assistants and professionals who work directly with children with autism, constitutes a positive indicator and promises the potential for the development of professional capacities if supported by resources, structures, and programs that are sustainable over time. This interest is consistent with studies that support the necessity of ongoing professional development in the field of autism interventions (Simpson, 2005; Wong et al.,

2015), and especially in treating social skills as a critical component for inclusive inclusion. Another important aspect that emerges from the data is the high perception of difficulties encountered when teaching social skills. Over 80% of participants considered this process to be difficult or very difficult, which is consistent with the complex and multidimensional nature of interventions in the field of social skills. This perception is in line with the conclusions of the literature suggesting that the development of these skills requires individualized, ongoing interventions that address the cognitive, emotional, and communicative aspects of children with autism (Howlin, Baron-Cohen, & Hadwin, 1999; Lord et al., 2020).

Further analyzing the complexity of interventions, it is very important to emphasize that the development of social skills cannot be achieved through isolated training alone, but requires a combination of evidence-based methodologies, functional assessments of children, and the involvement of multiple actors in the therapeutic and educational process. For example, interventions that rely on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) techniques and structured group training programs have been shown to be effective in increasing social interactions but require a high level of expertise and institutional support to be implemented sustainably (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Bellini et al., 2007).

The lack of knowledge about currently existing programs for the development of social skills, as evidenced by the participants, also suggests the need for greater promotion of good practices and successful interventions that have been piloted in the country or region. One of the main barriers appears to be limited access to information and resources, as well as the lack of networking between professionals, educational institutions and therapeutic centers. This situation hinders the sharing of positive experiences and reinforces the gap between the practices recommended by the literature and the practical reality in Albanian institutions. These findings coincide with the literature from developing countries, where infrastructural limitations, lack of coordinated policies and trained human resources directly affect the quality of interventions for children with autism (de Vries, 2016; Elsabbagh et al., 2012). Furthermore, this study shows that educators and other professionals are aware of the need to improve practices, requesting more guidelines, practical materials and technical support. They highlight the lack of clear and standardized protocols for teaching social skills at the institutional level. This makes it difficult to ensure quality and evaluate intervention outcomes, which is essential for improving services and building sustainable public policies. International literature has long addressed the importance of standardizing and monitoring therapeutic practices as a way to ensure effective outcomes in autism interventions (National Research Council, 2001; Kasari et al., 2012).

From a policy and institutional perspective, the findings highlight the need to develop national strategies for the development of social skills in children with autism. These strategies should include not only specialised training for

professionals, but also public awareness, support for parents, and the development of supportive policies that promote interventions in the child's natural settings (such as kindergartens, schools, and the community). This ecological intervention model has proven successful in many countries and has been recommended by international authorities as a way to increase the inclusion and sustainability of interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schreibman et al., 2015).

In the Albanian context, these findings represent an important opportunity to develop policies and practices that are more adapted to the local reality, taking advantage of the interest and willingness of professionals for change. Supporting these efforts through collaboration between academic institutions, relevant ministries, NGOs, and practitioners would enable a gradual but sustainable transformation in the approach to the development of social skills in children with autism in Albania.

In conclusion, this discussion underscores the need for a comprehensive, coordinated, and evidence-based strategy for developing social skills. High awareness and interest in professional development constitute a good basis for successful interventions, but more institutional commitment, structured resources, and standardization of practices are required to truly improve the quality of life of children with autism in Albania.

## **Study Limitations**

This study faces several methodological limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. The sampling method used is of the convenience kind which limits the national generalizability of the results at a national level. While the data are valid for the context of the surveyed participants, they may not be equally representative of all professionals and parents in Albania. This limitation is well-known in social research, especially in contexts where resources and access are limited (Bornstein et al., 2013).

Second, the use of a self-report instrument may introduce biases related to social desirability. Participants may have reported higher levels of awareness or satisfaction to reflect a positive image of themselves or the institution where they work. This is a known tendency in such research and suggests the need for triangulation with other methods such as observation or structured interviews (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, the representation of different cities has not been proportional, limiting the real reflection of the diversity of practices and approaches between urban and rural regions in Albania. This may affect the identification of specific local needs and context-oriented policy proposals.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sheds light on an important panorama of perceptions and attitudes towards social skills of children with autism spectrum disorders in Albania. The findings show a high awareness of the importance of these skills in the development and integration of children, but also highlight a significant gap in professional knowledge and the effective use of intervention methods.

In line with the international literature, social skills are not just a set of learnable behaviors, but an essential component of children's well-being, autonomy and social inclusion in school and community (Carter et al., 2014; Bauminger-Zviely, 2013). The need for personalized and multidisciplinary approaches is urgent, especially in educational systems like the Albanian one that are in transition towards full inclusion. Based on these findings, the following is recommended:

### *Developing Evidence-Based Programs*

The design and implementation of structured interventions for teaching social skills, based on the latest scientific models such as ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), TEACCH or Social Thinking (Winner, 2007), will help improve the social capacities of children with autism.

### *Ongoing Training for Professionals and Families*

Training should aim to increase the practical competencies of teachers, therapists, and parents to implement sustainable and appropriate strategies in the child's natural environments (Brookman- Frazee et al., 2009).

### *Public Awareness and Sensitization*

Awareness campaigns for the community and educational structures should promote the importance of social interaction and minimize the stigmatization of children with special needs. The use of media and digital platforms aids in spreading information and sharing success stories.

### *Institutional Support and Policy Oriented*

Public policies should allocate specific funding for social interventions within the framework of inclusive education. Additionally, integrating social skills into preschool and school curricula can significantly benefit the development of all children (Odom et al., 2014).

## Ongoing Research and Longitudinal Studies

Expanded research on the effectiveness of specific social interventions in Albania is needed to build a sustainable foundation for educational policies and practices based on local data.

In conclusion, as Albania moves towards an inclusive education system, it is essential that knowledge and interventions for the social skills of children with autism are structured, resourced, and evidence-based. This commitment is essential not only for inclusion, but for the well-being and sustainable development of every child.

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