

SPECIAL CHILDREN'S FESTIVAL: IMPLEMENTING BEHAVIORAL THERAPY THROUGH INTRODUCING JAPANESE CULTURE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

Children with Special Needs (CSN) in Surabaya still face limitations in conventional therapy services that tend to focus on symptom management, necessitating a more inclusive and enjoyable alternative approach. The Special Children Festival program presents an innovation through implementing Japanese culture-based behavioral therapy to improve children's emotional regulation, focus, and fine motor skills. The novelty of this activity lies in integrating cultural elements into behavioral therapy and strengthening collaboration between hospitals, universities, and the community. The activity was held on June 28, 2025, at Campus B UNUSA, involving 14 CSN and their parents, three therapists from RSI Jemursari Surabaya, one Japan Corner facilitator, and six UNUSA Medical Faculty students. The implementation method included participatory observation and feedback analysis. The intervention consisted of onigiri-making and Japanese calligraphy (shodo) sessions, preceded by education for parents about culture-based behavioral therapy. Evaluation was conducted by assessing children's engagement, responses during the activities, and parents' perceptions of the program's usefulness. This activity increased CSN participation and had a positive impact on focus, emotional regulation, and fine motor skills. Promotion strategies through parent communities and digital media proved effective in participant recruitment. Service standardization through training and certification of support staff enhanced service quality and sustainability, making this program a replicable model for culture-based behavioral therapy for CSN.

Keywords: Behavioral Therapy, Children With Special Needs (CSN), Japanese Culture, Psychosocial Rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

The number of children with special needs (CSN) in Surabaya significantly increases yearly. According to 2017 data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), approximately 1.6 million children in Indonesia have special needs, with nearly 70% not receiving adequate education (Kristy & Anggoro, 2020). At the local level, data shows that the number of CSN in Surabaya increased from 813 in 2013 to 2,562 in 2023 (Ambarwati et al., 2022; Pramesti & Wibawani, 2024). Although the Surabaya City Government has initiated an inclusive education program, the increase in CSN has not been matched by the availability of appropriate facilities and teaching staff (Saradia Agustina & Rahaju, 2021). This gap is evident in the low utilization rate of support services, such as the Achievement Children's Home, which only registered 599 children as recipients, significantly lower than the number of CSN identified (Pramesti & Wibawani, 2024). Furthermore, many children with special needs still lack access to adequate therapy or behavioral intervention services due to limited facilities and the lack of optimal integration of cross-sector support (Ambarwati et al., 2022; Trisno et al., 2021). This situation highlights the importance of developing innovative, sustainable, and adaptable interventions tailored to the specific needs of CSN in Surabaya.

As the number of CSN increases, the need for innovative therapies becomes increasingly urgent to address the current limitations of conventional methods.

Traditional therapies often fail to maintain child engagement, particularly for those with conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and cerebral palsy, hampering motivation and the effectiveness of interventions. Furthermore, impersonalized approaches make it difficult to tailor therapy to each child's individual needs and track their development optimally (Tommy et al., 2024). Another major weakness is the minimal integration of cultural and artistic elements into the therapy process, even though these elements are beneficial in supporting a child's holistic development (Rongyu & Shuanghui, 2022). On the other hand, play-based therapy—including arts and creative activities—has significantly improved communication and social skills in children with ASD (Balog, 2024; Yustesari & Azizah, 2023). Parents are increasingly expressing their hope for therapies that are not only clinically effective but also fun, engaging, and child-friendly (Rodríguez et al., 2021). However, this innovative approach still needs to be balanced with conventional therapies, which have been shown to provide a stable foundation of support for some children with ASD, making the integration of the two an ideal option (Tommy et al., 2024).

Integration of Japanese culture, such as calligraphy and onigiri-making, is effective as a therapeutic medium for CSN because it can improve emotional regulation, fine motor skills, and focus. Activities like calligraphy encourage mindfulness and emotional expression, which helps children manage their feelings and reduce anxiety,

thus improving their emotional regulation abilities (Lin, 2024). Programs incorporating emotional activities into art therapy have also successfully taught important emotional regulation skills, making learning more enjoyable and effective for CSN (Saniatuzzulfa et al., 2023).

Activities like onigiri-making involve well-coordinated hand movements, which can significantly improve fine motor skills in children (Verisa et al., 2024). Art therapy, including calligraphy, has improved motor dexterity and coordination, particularly beneficial for children with motor skill challenges (Wu, 2024). Cultural activities like these also help children develop focus and sustained attention, as the structured nature of these activities requires concentration (Hosu, 2022). Furthermore, the therapeutic effects of arts in education have also been linked to increased self-awareness and behavioral management that support improved focus (Lin, 2024). Although the benefits of integrating Japanese culture into therapy for CSN have been demonstrated in previous research, challenges remain regarding resource allocation and personalized approaches in arts education programs (Wu, 2024).



Figure 1. Behavioral therapy seminar for healthcare workers at RSI Surabaya Jemursari (Algristian, Delina, et al., 2024).

Since 2022, the community service team has consistently developed a hospital-based psychosocial rehabilitation model as a sustainable approach for People with Mental Disorders (PMD) and CSN. Starting in Gresik Regency, the 2022 activity successfully initiated a Psychosocial Rehabilitation program for PMD at Grha Husada Hospital in Gresik with an intervention module adapted from behavioral therapy for CSN (Algristian, Nobel Bistara, et al., 2023). The following year, the program was expanded through training for mental health cadres to be able to select non-acute PMD patients who were ready to participate in entrepreneurship training (Algristian, Fitriyah, et al., 2024), and continued with the development of KOMPAK (Empowered PMD Families) to strengthen the socio-economic independence of PMD through sensory training and culinary skills (Algristian, Khoirul Fitriyah, et al., 2023). In 2024, the focus shifted to Surabaya, targeting a broader audience, specifically PMD and CSN. This initiative initiated behavioral therapy services at RSI Surabaya Jemursari, involving professionals and the community in designing standardized and sustainable services (Algristian, Delina, et al., 2024). This year, the Special Children's Festival (Festival Anak Istimewa) continues this series of community service programs, focusing specifically on CSN through integrating Japanese culture-based behavioral therapy. This program diversifies adaptive, creative, and contextual therapeutic approaches while simultaneously expanding the social impact of the rehabilitation program.

While similar programs have been implemented in various locations, this community service program is unique. The

involvement of the Japan Corner of UNUSA as part of the implementation team allows for an authentic introduction to Japanese culture, providing a rich and meaningful learning experience for participants with special needs. Furthermore, RSI Surabaya Jemursari, as a community service partner, strengthens the implementation of behavioral therapy with the expertise of its therapists in treating CSN. The program is designed with an inclusive approach that considers the diverse needs of participants and ensures individualized support and teaching methods. This collaboration between cultural practitioners and therapists ensures the quality and effectiveness of the activities, making this program not only therapeutically innovative but also potentially replicable in other regions, making it worthy of continued development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The community service activity, "Special Children's Festival: Implementation of Behavioral Therapy through the Introduction of Japanese Culture for Children with Special Needs," has positively enhanced partners' understanding of culture-based therapy approaches at RSI Surabaya Jemursari. This activity applies Japanese cultural elements such as calligraphy (shodo) and culinary arts (onigiri) in behavioral therapy tailored to children with special needs. This activity demonstrates that integrating arts and culture can strengthen children's emotional regulation, focus, and fine motor skills. The results of this activity are outlined in three main points: patient promotion and recruitment, service

standardization, and research and development outcomes.

C2. Patient Recruitment: Community and School Promotion

Recruitment of participants with special needs is carried out through promotions within inclusive schools and communities of parents of children with special needs, which have been established since 2024. The approach is carried out through digital media such as flyers and community Zoom forums, as well as through direct collaboration with teachers and counsellors (Algristian, Delina, et al., 2024). This strategy has proven effective in increasing participation and expanding outreach. A total of 14 CSN were successfully recruited through this effort, most of whom came from the patient network of therapists at RSI Surabaya Jemursari. This promotion also raised community awareness about the importance of a more enjoyable, cross-culturally based therapy approach.



Figure 2. Zoom activity with parents of children with special needs to recruit children with special needs as participants in the 2025 Special Children Festival activities.

B.2. Service Standardization: Training and Certification

To standardize services, the implementation team conducted training

for behavioral therapy support staff for CSN. This training covered the implementation of Japanese culture-based therapy, such as onigiri-making and Japanese calligraphy (shodo) activities. Participants included behavioral therapists at RSI Surabaya Jemursari, cultural volunteers, and parents or guardians of CSN and CSN. Certification was awarded to the behavioral therapists as a form of validation of their competency in implementing a fun and structured approach. This activity aims to ensure uniform service quality while strengthening human resource capacity. This step serves as an important foundation for the development of sustainable and evidence-based behavioral therapy services.



Figure 3. Onigiri and Japanese Calligraphy (Shodo) making activities accompanied by the Japan Corner Team and the RSI Surabaya Jemursari Therapist Team.

D2. Research and Development: Publication in a Reputable Journal

In terms of research and development, this community service

activity previously produced a scientific article published in 2024 entitled "Initiation of a Hospital-Based Psychosocial Rehabilitation Program for People with Mental Disorders and Children with Special Needs in Surabaya" (Algristian, Delina, et al., 2024). This article outlined the initial achievements of the behavioral therapy program for CSN and PMD, implemented in collaboration with RSI Surabaya Jemursari. This publication documented the focus group discussions (FGDs), outreach, and the collaborative role of health institutions and the community in developing psychosocial services. In 2025, a scientific paper was developed to assess the effectiveness of integrating Japanese culture into behavioral therapy for children with special needs. The results of this research are expected to contribute to national and international literature and serve as a means of reflection and evaluation for future program design.

DISCUSSION

The Special Children's Festival is strongly relevant to the needs of CSN in Surabaya, particularly in addressing the limitations of conventional therapy services. Therapy tends to emphasize symptom management over holistic recovery, often neglecting the social, emotional, and skill development aspects of children (Kartikasari et al., 2024; Widianingsih & Astanto, 2020). Furthermore, accessibility to conventional therapy services remains a barrier, particularly in urban areas like Surabaya. The culture-based psychosocial rehabilitation approach promoted through the Special Children's Festival offers a more inclusive, adaptive, and enjoyable alternative. By integrating Japanese

cultural elements such as shodo and onigiri-making, this activity not only serves as a behavioral therapy tool but also creates opportunities for improving children's social functioning, emotional regulation, and fine motor skills.

Cultural integration in behavioral therapy is a key strength of this activity. Activities like shodo and onigiri not only create a fun therapeutic atmosphere but have also been shown to support improved focus, emotional control, and fine motor coordination. This aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of play and arts-based interventions in supporting child engagement, stimulating neural plasticity, and facilitating more adaptive emotional expression (Safonicheva & Ovchinnikova, 2021; Siddique, 2024). Authentic cultural elements make therapy more engaging and relevant to participants, encouraging children to actively participate without feeling burdened by rigid therapy patterns.

The effectiveness of this program is also reflected in the recruitment and promotion strategies implemented. Community involvement of parents of CSN has proven to be a key factor in increasing participation because community networks can build trust and facilitate closer communication with families of CSN. Parents are more receptive to information from those they know and trust, thus increasing parental engagement (Farombi et al., 2024; Tully et al., 2021). This strategy is reinforced using digital media such as online flyers and Zoom forums, which allow for broader promotional reach and facilitate access for families spread across diverse regions (Phipps, 2025; Wright et al., 2024). The combination of these two approaches proved effective, successfully recruiting 14 CSN while

raising collective awareness of the importance of culture-based therapy.

Implementing service standardization through training and certification for therapy support staff plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality of the intervention. The training provided enables therapists and support staff to acquire structured skills in implementing culture-based therapy, thereby minimizing practice variability, and increasing service quality consistency (Connors et al., 2021; Mohammad, 2024). Certification serves as a form of competency validation and increases support staff confidence (Bruns et al., 2021). With a standardized service foundation, this program not only improves the quality of implementation but also strengthens human resource capacity in the field of child mental health. This step opens opportunities for program sustainability and replication in other regions while maintaining flexibility to adapt to the diverse needs of CSN (Klöppel et al., 2023; Swan & Connolly, 2023). However, flexibility is still needed to allow the program to adapt to the diverse conditions of CSN and community dynamics, thereby maintaining innovation in therapy practice.

The research and development aspect of this activity also strengthens the program's sustainability. Previous publications have documented the initial achievements of the behavioral therapy initiative for CSN and PMD with partners at RSI Surabaya Jemursari, providing an evidence-based academic foundation (Algristian, Delina, et al., 2024).

Overall, the Special Children's Festival confirms that a culture-based approach can be an innovative and inclusive model of community service in addressing gaps in therapy services for

children with special needs. Going forward, this program has the potential to be developed through exploration of other cultures, including local cultures, that are more contextualized for children. By strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration between universities, hospitals, and communities, this activity has significant potential for replication across Indonesia, enabling its benefits to be felt more widely by CSN and their families.

CONCLUSION

The Special Children's Festival demonstrates that integrating Japanese cultural elements into behavioral therapy effectively enhances emotional regulation, focus, and fine motor skills in children with special needs. Community-based promotion supported successful participant recruitment, while training and certification ensured service standardization and sustainability. The program also contributed to scientific development, indicating that culture-based behavioral therapy is a feasible and replicable model for inclusive psychosocial services.

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