

GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR PARENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN: INTEGRATING PSYCHODYNAMIC AND CREATIVE ART

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Abstrak

Parents' and families' needs change over time (Bristol and Schopler, 1983; DeMyer and Goldberg, 1983). The needs focused on understanding their special child's diagnosis, dealing with the emotions that are stirred upon encountering a serious problem in their child's development, finding services, and working intensively on behalf of their child. For older children, there is the growing realization that their child's needs will continue over a lifetime. The parents play a key role in effective treatment of their children. They face multiple, demanding roles. Gallagher (1992) points out the complex demands on parents and the need to support family decision making and control, while providing sufficient professional expertise to enable their choices. They may confront sadness, anger, disappointment, or other complex emotions that can accompany the initial discovery that one's child has a significant developmental problem and the ongoing need to make sacrifices to serve the needs of their child. Some families may encounter very substantial stress as they raise their children. There are significant research gaps in the area of interventions for parents of children with special needs, such as implementation of interventions in natural environments and support for child and family transitions. I found that little or no such research has been conducted, nor do these gaps appear to inform directions for future program development and research. This is the "why" we have for the intention to study this topic.

Keywords: Parent with Special Needs Children; Group Psychotherapy; Stages of Group; Psychodynamic; Creative Art; Resilience.

Introduction

This process group integrates psychodynamic theory combine with creative art therapy to support parents of children with special needs The approach emphasizes emotional processing, self-awareness, self, compassion, self-care, and reflective skills while addressing the unique challenges these parents face.

Objectives

To investigate the effect and experience of Parent Process Group using psychodynamic and Creative Art in helping the coping and resilience, quality of life for parents of children with special needs and building the bonding relationship between the parent and child. The expected Outcomes are reducing emotional distress through expression and validation, improving self-compassion and self-care, have stronger and healthy copy strategies for daily challenges, enhancing reflective functioning, understanding child's behavior without personalizing.

The specific goals for parents are to rediscover the "joy" of parenthood, increase their understanding, acceptance, and sensitivity to their children, particularly their emotional worlds. Parents also learn how to encourage their children's self-direction, self-responsibility, and self-reliance and develop more realistic and tolerant attitudes and perceptions toward self and the child. Through the group process, parents will gain insight into self in their relation to their child and grow in their self-acceptance, increase confidence in their ability and also

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develop in their parenting skills. This integrative model allows parents to process deep emotions (psychodynamic) while engaging in creative, non-verbal healing through creative art process. The group setting normalizes their struggles and fosters resilience through shared growth.

Research Questions

These research questions were examined: How to maximize the potential and strength of the parents of special needs children?. How can process in the parents work to improve in their resilience, finding their strength and potential to help their children thrive in their life?. How effective are my ideas of helping parents through play to help them with their bonding with their children and their family?. How did this experience influence their resilience, mental health development and ability to function as parents?

Methods

This study was exploratory and based on interviews with parents of children with special needs, then continued with ten Process group sessions. The interviews were conducted in February 2024. Recruitment of parents was done through referral from YIPABK (NGO helping children and families of special needs). Those willing to participate made the initial contact. The main criterion for participation was to be a parent of a child with special needs. The age of the child and the type of the special needs were not restricted. At the time of interviews and sessions all participants, but one, lived together with the child. This integrated psychodynamic and creative art approach can be significantly enhanced through Action Research, a methodology that bridges practical improvement, critical reflection, cultural adaptation and practitioner-researcher collaboration. Action research is a form of action inquiry that employs recognized research techniques to inform the action taken to improve practice. Action research characteristics are a tension between action in the fields of practice and research, and it is essential not to lose sight of action research as a process in which practitioners "gather evidence about their practices and critique assumptions, beliefs and values embedded in them (Elliott, 2000:209). Action research involves becoming aware of the principles that drive us in our work: we need to be clear about both what we are doing and why we are doing it. Another characteristic of the reciprocal relationship between research and improved practice is that one does not just understand practice in order to improve it in action research, one also gains an improved understanding of routine practice through improving it, so improvement is the context, means and main end of understanding.

Summary and Research Questions

There are significant research gaps in the area of interventions for parents of children with special needs, such as implementation of interventions in natural environments and support for child and family transitions. I found that little or no such research has been conducted, nor do these gaps appear to inform directions for future program development and research. This is the "why" I have the intention to do the study on this topic and I hope my study will give contribution to the state of knowledge of the academic field, especially in helping parents of special needs children and be the agent of change.

Parents and Children with Special Needs Children

The Children- A child with special needs is any child that because of a medical, emotional, or learning problem may need added accommodations and supports. These may include medicine, therapy, social skills instruction, and extra help in school, which other kids generally do not need or might benefit from for a temporary time. Children who have special needs may

have a hard time regulating their emotions, and they may act out more behaviorally because they have a difficult time communicating their feelings, especially when upset. The fight or flight response is their primal instinct and children, in this mode, are prone to using unsafe hands, challenging limits, trying to take control, and may oppose, as an avoidance strategy.

The Parents- For most parents, the birth of their child is a joyous time. Becoming a parent is often viewed as a transition in one's life and a developmental stage involving growth and change, bound to certain responsibilities such as caring for the child and assuring that the child's needs are properly met. Becoming a parent comes with responsibilities such as the responsibility to make decisions necessary to assure that the well-being of the child is assured. Raising a child with special needs involve, as all parenthoods, challenges as well as great love and joy. Parents also report that having a child with disabilities increases their tolerance, self-understanding, personal growth, and strength. While it is important to focus on the positive news, it is also important to address how everyday parenting differs when one has a child with special needs and what kind of support parents might need for their child and directed towards them as parents.

Literature Review

The Interpersonal theory from Irvin Yalom highlight the healing power of group dynamis, encourages shared experiences and mutual support. This psychodynamic approach help the parents to explore the unconscious conflicts (eg: repressed anger, fear and worry). The Creative Art approach help them to externalizes emotions (eg: draw your guilt, paint your stress or worry), provides a non-verbal outlet for complex emotions, catharsis and symbolic expression (Jung, McNiff).

McKenzie & Dies's Four-Stage Model of Group Development (Adapted from Yalom) Stage 1: Engagement (Forming / Orientation) focusing on building safety, trust, and cohesion. The key dynamics : Members seek acceptance and avoid conflict, dependency on the leader (therapist) is high, polite, superficial interactions dominate.

Stage 2: Differentiation (Storming / Conflict) focusing on emergence of conflict, competition, and power struggles. The key dynamics are members challenge the leader and each other, subgroups may form; disagreements surface, resistance to group norms or therapy tasks.

Stage 3: Individuation (Norming / Personal Work): The focus of this stage is greater autonomy, self-disclosure, and responsibility. The key dynamics of this stage are: Members shift from dependency to interdependence, Authentic sharing increases; feedback becomes more direct, Group cohesion strengthens as trust deepens.

Stage 4: Intimacy (Performing / Deep Relating), focusing on emotional closeness, vulnerability, and meaningful work. The key dynamics of this stage are the high levels of mutual support and honesty, members take ownership of their growth, existential or deep interpersonal issues are explored.

Process Group: *Orangtua Bisa* (Parents Can) 10 Sessions

A. Group Therapy "Parents Can" for Parents of Children with Special Needs

Reflections and Session-by-Session Notes

When parents are blessed with children with special needs, they are often confronted with heavy feelings, stress, and even a sense of not being able to accept their child's condition. Hopes and dreams of a bright and "normal" future often fade, replaced by worry and disappointment. Many parents feel trapped in this situation, their hearts burdened.

“This is the background for the implementation of the ‘Parents Can’ program — a pilot group designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a group therapy approach supported by professionals in accompanying parents of children with special needs.”

B. Interview Session

Parents who have children with special needs have to endure a significant amount of stress. Studies show that they experience more stress compared to parents of typically developed children. The child with special needs and his or her family are both affected by the child's condition and way of living. Parenting those children is not an easy task. Having a child with special needs places strain on the whole family (Nissel et al., 2003). Parents having a child with special needs experience a variety of ‘psychological stress’, like chronic stress and burnout (emotional and physical exhaustion), grief and loss (mourning unmet expectations for their child), social isolation (feeling misunderstood by others), guilt and self-blame (did I cause this?. Am I doing enough?), marital/family strain (differing coping styles, sibling dynamics).

1. Getting to Know Each Other and Building Commitment

The first session began after in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. From this process, thirteen parents demonstrated their commitment by agreeing to attend the full ten sessions. They consisted of five married couples and three single parents. The facilitator opened the session warmly and openly. Each parent was asked to introduce themselves and briefly share about their child with special needs and their hopes in joining the program.

All parents introduced themselves and expressed their hope that the meetings would help them better understand and support their children. They envisioned these sessions as a training class that would provide them with techniques to handle children with special needs.

Mackenzie's group development stages

Dies & Mackenzie (1983) described group development as a process in which the matured structure is obtained through a series of transformation and this happens in sequential stages. Through the deepening and enriching of relationships within the group, the different task and threats in each stage are resolved, leading to growth and transition. As our process group is conducted over a short period of 10 months, these transitions seem to manifest faster and are generally more overt.

Stage 1: Engagement

In this first stage of group development, the fundamental task is engagement and the establishment of group identity (Dies & Mackenzie, 1983). This stage of development is clearly depicted in the process group as we begin to discover and appreciate the fact that we are similar and can identify with one another on different levels. We see members (including) sharing about the excitement they feel as they embark on this learning experience with curiosity. While there were some self-disclosures, it was on a more superficial level revolving around things that were non-threatening and somewhat safe to talk about. There were also some disclosures about how comfortable people feel in the group as members are nice and supportive and some members contrasted it with the relationships they have in their own life and people generally share similar assumptions that the group is going to be a safe and non-judgmental environment to be in. These disclosures exemplify both the formation of group identity (the “We-ness” and how we differ as a group from the outside world) and the idea that assumptions (about the niceness of people and the safety of the group), though untested, are largely unchallenged as characterized by the engagement stage. Taken in all, these transactions among group members, as mentioned by Dies and Mackenzie (1983), embodies the primary mechanism of universality, where members find some degrees of gratification by

realizing and appreciating the fact that the many experiences one have is also shared by other members.

2. Session 2: Parental Resilience – Rain and Umbrella

The strength of parents in facing the challenges of raising children with special needs is the focus. Of this session: The parental resilience. The facilitator introduced this concept using a simple but meaningful metaphor: "rain and umbrella." as the risk and protective factors in their parenting. Risk and protective factors can have influence throughout a person's entire lifespan. Risk factors tend to be positively correlated with one another and negatively correlated to protective factors. In other words, people with some risk factors have a greater chance of experiencing even more risk factors, and they are less likely to have protective factors.

In this session, the metaphor rain symbolizes the risk factors that parents face, such as pressures, difficulties, and challenges. An umbrella symbolizes protective factors, the sources of strength, support, and hope that sustain parents.

Participants were divided into two groups: fathers and mothers. This allowed parents to speak more freely without feeling judged or constrained by their partners. Through drawing their metaphors, parents began to recognize both their vulnerabilities and strengths in their journey. Some participants were hesitant to share deeply at first, but the process was just beginning. In group therapy, there is no pressure, only an invitation to gradually open up at one's own pace and in one's own comfort.

The session closed with all parents regrouping. Some began to feel more comfortable sharing. Although awkwardness still lingered, the first step had been taken—toward a safe, empathetic space. They realized and were surprised that the 'Parents Can' program supports parents of children with special needs. It is far from what they initially expected. It was not only about their children's conditions but about themselves—their hearts, minds, and hidden strengths. The most significant challenge they faced was not to change their children but to change how they perceived and responded to the challenges. Focusing on parental resilience helped them see it.



3. Session 3: From Curiosity to Awareness

The session began with an open question from the facilitator: "Who would like to share their experience from last week?"

Anto, one of the participants, raised his hand. With a calm and firm voice, he bravely shared his thoughts,

"If we share and support one another, nothing feels too heavy. The burden feels lighter."

This simple sentence touched many parents. His words created an opening for a deeper discussion.

Yanto and Lani responded enthusiastically, "Curious—what are we doing today?"

The facilitator then smiled, "Curiosity is a good thing."

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The discussion became more lively. Other participants like Hani and Lini joined in, expressing how drawing about parental resilience made them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as parents. Edo said, "I wonder if these strengths will grow stronger." Full of hope and optimism. The facilitator responded, "This sharing indeed strengthens us." Then, the facilitator brought the discussion back to the rain and umbrella drawings. The focus today was on the child. The facilitator, with their expertise and experience, guided the discussion, ensuring that all parents had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings.

The facilitator explained that children consist of two essential elements: Nature – the strengths, potential, and qualities they are born with. Nurture – how we grow, envision, and prepare them to fly and become independent.

"As parents, there are two things we hope to give our children," said the facilitator, "Strong roots so they grow firm, and strong wings so they can soar."

Anto shared again. He said he saw his child as a star—special, even compared to their siblings. "I instill values of truth, prayer, and faith," he said.

Lini was moved. With a trembling voice, she said, "I'm amazed to see such strong love from a father. You're proud of your child and see their strengths."

Andi shared that he used to see his child's strengths as weaknesses. He cried, realizing this mindset. Anto responded gently, "From how you speak, I still hear confusion, shame, and fear. But remember... God never makes mistakes. Our child is special. Believing God has a good plan for our children and ourselves through this beautiful opportunity helps us change our way of thinking to accept and believe. Not every parent has this privilege. "

It was a profoundly moving moment when the other parents joined in. We all realize how fear, denial, and unclear hopes often shape our way of thinking and block acceptance.

The discussion grew warmer and deeper. These three group therapy sessions were more than just meetings—they became spaces of reflection, growth, and a laboratory of compassion.

Parents found strength, courage, and hope together. Being a parent to a child with special needs may not be easy—but they no longer walk alone.



4. Session 4: When Parents Begin to Care for Themselves

Stage 2: Differentiation

In this stage, the group task is to recognize the existence of differences among members and to shift the focus from external group boundary to the boundary that exists between the individual members (Dies & Mackenzie, 1983). Divergent points of views surfaced into awareness, challenging the underlying assumption of universality at the first stage. This is evident in the process group where members begin to disagree with one another's points of views, illuminating the existence of individual differences

The fourth session began with a warm question from the facilitator:

"Who would like to start tonight? Please feel free to share."

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Edo raised his hand and shared his experience: "Earlier, I almost couldn't join because I ran out of internet data and had no money. But when I checked my wallet, there was some cash—just enough."

The facilitator responded reflectively: "How did it feel, going through that struggle, and then reality exceeded your expectations?"

Edo smiled, "It felt excellent. Being able to join this session and express my feelings brought relief."

The facilitator thanked Edo for his courage in opening the space for others to share.

"How do the rest of you feel hearing Mr. Edo's story?"

Patar added: "I just met Mr. Edo, but when I heard about the changes in Ronaldo, I was really happy. I was inspired to do the same for Jeff. Earlier, my wife also said that Jeff is now able to express his feelings in words."

The facilitator then directed the discussion: "So, what are your hopes for this group moving forward?"

Patar answered with enthusiasm: "I hope that after this program ends, we'll stay in touch and be able to help other parents who may feel alone. I work in a restaurant, and I once saw a guest whose child seemed like Jeff. But because they felt financially secure, they just let the child be."

Edo responded, "Since joining here, I've felt more motivated. I want to stay consistent every day despite it being emotionally and physically exhausting. I hope this group continues and continues to share positive things. Because it helps our children with special needs."

The facilitator concluded: "That's great—to start having hope. So, what is our hope for tonight's session? And how are we feeling right now?"

Patar replied, "Let's not hesitate. Let's support, strengthen, and help one another."

The facilitator continued: "Tonight, we'll talk about something very important: self-care. Raising a child with special needs is physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. That's why it's vital that we also take care of ourselves."

After explaining the concept of self-care, participants were asked to draw metaphors about how they care for themselves—what they do to "recharge."

Mita opened the discussion: "My self-care is in my bedroom. When I'm in a bad emotional state, I go into my room, stay silent, pray, and listen to worship songs until I fall asleep. When I wake up, I feel calmer and ready to talk to my kids. If I don't do that, I'm afraid I'll hurt them with my words."

Hani added: "It's similar for me. If I can hold back my emotions, I prefer to stay silent or go to a quiet place. I pray in my heart and ask God to calm me."

Lini responded honestly: "Mita and Hani are amazing at controlling themselves. I explode easily. Sometimes, my older child even says, 'Mom, are you PMS-ing?' I'm the kind of person who, when upset, nags and looks for others' mistakes. I don't deal with myself. What helps me most is actually my first child. When I get too emotional, they know I need alone time."

"My self-care is taking time for myself. My kids know—I need that time."

Hani continued, "Sometimes, I calm myself by singing. Once I'm calm, then I can talk to my child."

Vani shared a simple technique: "I usually use breathing. I take deep breaths to release anger slowly."

The facilitator asked,

"How did it feel just now when you tried breathing like Ms. Vani said?"

Lini answered, "It felt relieving."

Meri also shared, "I usually rant first, then withdraw. It's a process for me."

Lini added with a smile: "My other self-care is window shopping at Ranch Market, looking at spices and fresh fruits—for hours. If I have extra money, I take the train and look at the green scenery outside. My mental health needs nurturing, too."

Vani contributed: "I walk 5 km every morning. It really helps. A healthy body houses a healthy soul."

Hani summed up simply: "Walking, breathing, and continuously trying to stay calm."

The facilitator underlined that self-care is a form of love toward oneself. But from me-care, we can also move toward we-care—caring for our families.

One father said: "Self-care is so important. How can we take care of our kids if we can't take care of ourselves?"

The discussion became increasingly open, and everyone began to feel comfortable and confident in sharing. They learned that taking care of oneself isn't selfish—it's the foundation needed to become a strong parent. Because from a whole heart, we can continue to give.



5. Session 6: Discovering the Treasure Within Ourselves and Our Children

Stage 3: Individuation

This is the stage where the group is encouraged to individuate, allowing the complexity of each member (Dies & Mackenzie, 1983). As mentioned earlier, the "rules of engagement" established in the earlier stages seem to set the stage where members become more open to self-exploration, especially the split off or disowned parts of self. There were many exchanges within the group that reflected the manifestation of this stage.

After opening the session with a question about the differences between attending sessions online and offline, the facilitator noted that meeting in person created a distinct sense of closeness. Several participants expressed that offline sessions felt warmer and more personal: "It feels more connected; I don't want to go home quickly."

"The connection is deeper, the atmosphere is just 'there.'"

"I'm grateful I could still share, even though last time was online." (Andi)

"Offline feels more real, and it's easier to express feelings." (Yanto)

The atmosphere became increasingly open, and trust among participants grew naturally. The facilitator then directed the session toward the evening's main topic:

"What is our treasure as parents? And what is the treasure we see in our children?"

Each participant was asked to illustrate their treasure in the form of a metaphor. This activity sparked deep reflection. The treasure here was not interpreted as material things but as strengths, values, and precious qualities within each person.

Once the drawing process was complete, the participants began to share their work one by one. The discussion unfolded with warmth and empathy. The group appeared increasingly close and comfortable with one another. Laughter and tears became part of the evening. The atmosphere was positive—a safe space created together.

Lini opened up again with courage: "When I was drawing earlier, what came up were mostly negative things. I felt ashamed as a failed parent. I felt inadequate because I don't have experience

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raising a child with special needs—especially compared to Jeff's older brother, who can do everything on his own."

But with a steadier voice, she continued: "But what I want to give to Jeff is precisely what I didn't have back then: abundant love, strength, and the ability to survive. And now, I don't feel alone. Having fellow fighters makes me stronger."

The facilitator gently responded: "How does it feel to have comrades like this?"

With teary eyes, Lini replied: "Relief. It feels like... I'm not carrying this burden alone. Others are fighting like I am."

Mita then shared the treasure she wanted to instill in her child: "For Marco, I only want to give him one thing: love. I believe, with love, my child can grow and believe in himself."

Hani spoke next, touching many hearts that night: "I used to not accept what God gave. But now I've learned. My faith in my daughter has grown. I've learned to reach her heart. Fifi has changed, even though I've had to teach her repeatedly. But I've seen that when I'm calm, she's calm too. Now she even believes in God."

The facilitator nodded and noted that calm, persistent love can bring about significant change.

Vani reflected wisely: "I've learned to be grateful and accept what's in front of me. I know I'm sensitive and easily overwhelmed, but I try to focus now. Focus on the things I can do."

That evening's session was vibrant. Not just because the parents began to bravely share their deepest feelings but also because they began to discover that within themselves—often clouded by guilt or inadequacy—lay hidden treasures: love, strength, hope, faith, and courage.

And within their children lay treasures just as beautiful—trust, growth, self-expression, and even the power to inspire others.

The session closed with one shared belief: every parent and child is a treasure entrusted by God. Sometimes hidden beneath worry, guilt, and exhaustion—but tonight, together, they began to uncover it. And what they found... was something truly precious.

As Dies & Mackenzie (1983) mentioned, this is a stage where members engaged in a process of psychological exploration, attempting to connect to different facets of the self (which may be hard or anxiety-provoking to acknowledge and take ownership of previously) and finally achieving the task of accepting the fact that as a whole person, I have good and bad parts, desirable and undesirable traits and that I can still be tolerated and accepted in spite of that.



6. Session 7: Resonance – When Hearts Echo Together

Resonance is considered as a basic aspect of human communication.

Mitchell (2000) uses the term as being a part of human affective permeability.

Foulkes: "Affect is contagious, and, on the deepest level affective states are often transpersonal. Intense affects like anxiety, rage, depression, and euphoria tend to generate corresponding affects in others. Early in life, on the deepest unconscious levels throughout life, affects are evoked interpersonally through dense resonance between people, without regards for who, is feeling what." (pp. 61).

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As usual, the session began with a warm circle, where parents gathered and greeted each other. The facilitator opened by inviting everyone to reflect back on the previous session.

Edo was the first to share: "I've been moved to share with other parents of children with special needs. I told them what I've learned here. It feels like I've been given a lamp for those who are still in confusion."

Anto followed with gratitude: "It feels like a chain. We strengthen one another, and that has a direct impact. Marco graduated from elementary school yesterday. We used to just hope he would pass, but it turns out... his grades were excellent. We never expected that."

Ms. Mita added with teary eyes: "It's all by God's grace. I know it's not because we're great but because of the amazing support from this group. Thank you... truly thank you for this gathering. It gives us encouragement to keep going and achieving." The facilitator paused, then said:

"I'm touched to hear that. It encourages me, too. Thank you for sharing and for being a light for one another."

Tonight's theme was Resonance—a moment to deeply reflect on each one's life journey. The facilitator invited participants to contemplate four main questions:

- 1. What do you want to let go of?*
- 2. What new thing have you discovered?*
- 3. What is emerging from within you?*
- 4. What do you want to keep holding on to?*

Patar began, sharing how the journey had impacted not just Jeff, his child with special needs, but also Lukas, his first child: "I've learned to treat my children not based on their achievements or abilities but for who they really are."

Lini then earnestly showed a drawing she had made. It was simple but significant. "This gathering changed the way I see things. I now see Jeff in a new light. I used to compare him to his older brother. Now, I'm learning to love him just as he is. What I want to let go of is shame and disappointment. What I've gained is an understanding that Jeremy is unique and valuable. What is emerging within me is love. And that is what I want to keep."

Mita spoke with conviction; for me, I want to :Let go: Fear of the future, especially in terms of academics. What's new: This gathering opened up a new perspective. What's emerging: Spirit. Spirit. And spirit. What I want to say: May our children soar high.

Hani shared very honestly: For me. Let go: The constant anxiety of always asking "why?" and the need to always be in control. What's new: I've learned to accept and let Fifi choose what she likes. I used to feel ashamed. But now... everyone in this group is proud of their children. And I am, too. "I've learned from this group. Even in my ministry now, I've found a new group that accepts Fifi as she is." What's emerging: Creativity.

Meri shared a small but meaningful change. For me: Let go: The pressure of anxiety. What's new: I've become more patient and more grateful for this group, and I've started learning to share responsibilities at home. What's emerging: A desire to try again. What I want to say: I have a family, and I am thankful.

As the session was coming to a close, some parents expressed heartfelt words:

Lini said: "For this group... I feel like I've been recharged. It's like I've gained new energy and renewed strength."

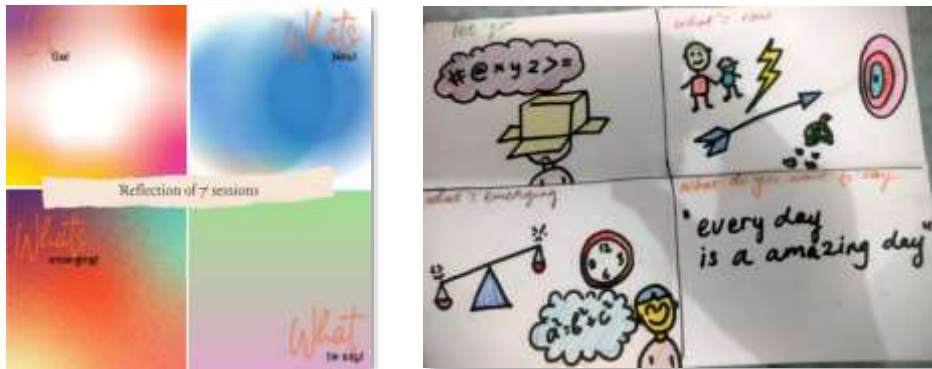
Edo, pointing to his reflection drawing, said: "These drawings help me clearly see what I need to do. Every day is an extraordinary day."

Patar and Lini added together: "Every day, we must be ready."

Anto and Mita closed with a simple but deeply confident statement: "God's presence... is extraordinary."

Session seven became an incredibly powerful moment. Resonance was not just a concept—it was truly felt in the discussion space when one person's heart echoed and touched the hearts of others.

They came as individuals, but that night, they parted as a community—one that echoed hope, faith, and love.



7. Session 8: Mapping the Journey – Becoming Aware of Growth, Embracing Hope

Stage 4 and 5: Intimacy and Mutuality

Dies & Mackenzie (1983) described this stage as a stage where group members, through the many disclosures and transactions from the previous, begin to understand one another in more complex ways and be drawn into closer here and now interactions. Members are not only able to discover closeness and their importance to one another but also the fact that whatever they do or say in the group has important influence on other members.

The eighth session opened with a gentle invitation from the facilitator to all participants:

"Who would like to begin sharing tonight?"

After a brief pause, Vani raised her hand. Her face was calm, yet there was a spark of energy in her voice.

"I actually really want to share. However, I often have to do it while multitasking. Sometimes, I can only listen while doing something else."

The facilitator welcomed her warmly:

"I truly appreciate that you still want to share, even though the situation isn't always ideal. But when the signal is bad, or when others are around listening—how does that feel?"

Vani answered honestly: "It's uncomfortable. Zoom makes me feel less free. I don't feel as open to speak. But I still want to learn. I'm happy to be learning from this group. In fact, if I could, I'd love to share with more people, not just here."

The facilitator nodded sincerely: "Thank you for your courage and sincerity, Ms. Vani. What you're sharing is so meaningful—not just to me, but to everyone in this group family."

The facilitator then invited the parents to create their own "Growth Roadmap"—a metaphorical map illustrating each person's journey since the program began. "Imagine your journey as a parent—from the starting point to today."

After drawing, the participants began to share their work.

Andi started enthusiastically "This roadmap is like a strategy. Now, I can clearly define my goals. I have a direction I want to reach. I started in confusion and doubt. But now I've begun walking, and I know where I'm going."

Lini added cheerfully: "I started from a place of confusion. I didn't know where to begin. But slowly, I've begun preparing Jeff. I've started to find direction."

The discussion grew warm and full of appreciation.

Andi commented again: "This roadmap is really great. I can see my own progress. And it feels real. Progress is proven."

The facilitator then invited the group to reflect together on this question: "If we think about Ms. Vani, when would be the best time to give support? At the beginning? Or later on?"

This question was actually about all of us—about recognizing the right moment to be present for others and understanding our role in supporting one another.

Ms. Vani responded with honesty: "I feel like I've returned to this group. I feel welcomed again. And I want to say that this group... is not just a group. It's a family."

The facilitator responded with empathy:

"What you've shared, Ms. Vani, is very precious to all of us. In every story you've told, there's a resonance that touches us. And it strengthens us."

The eighth session closed with deep gratitude and warmth. The parents no longer talked only about their children but began to place themselves within the roadmap of life. They were no longer just "parents of children with special needs."

They were change agents, true learners, and fighters who kept moving forward.

What was shared that night—especially from Ms. Vani—became a resounding echo that tied their hearts together.

This session wasn't just about drawing a roadmap—it was about rediscovering themselves and remembering that in every difficult step... there is another hand walking beside them.



8. Session 9: Grateful for the Journey, Finding New Direction

After each parent had drawn and shared their roadmap in the previous session, the facilitator invited deeper reflection:

"What do you feel in this journey? What has changed in you and in your family?"

Mita spoke first. Her voice was calm, full of gratitude:

"I'm genuinely grateful for this group. As parents, we've undergone significant changes in our parenting approach. I used to feel like I had to constantly push Marco. However, he's now enthusiastic about learning on his own and can accept the learning process.

He studies joyfully—not because of pressure."

Vani followed, and the room fell silent to hear her story: "My husband has passed away. At first, I felt utterly alone. But through Parents Can, I've received a double blessing. It's truly a miracle.

I started observing: Can my child open up? Is he confident and able to adapt? Can he communicate with his peers? Not everything has been achieved yet... but I believe it's all in progress. The miracle is unfolding."

Hani then shared with a renewed spirit: "I'm so grateful I joined. In this group, I've seen real examples from other parents. I've learned to explore my own potential—and also Fifi's. I used to be easily upset and quick to give up. But now, I feel stronger. There's a support system—my family and this group. I've learned to have a vision for Fifi, not just to get through the day. The roadmap helped me know where I want to go."

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The facilitator asked gently: "What have you discovered through this process? How do you understand yourself now?"

Hani answered honestly: "I used to feel insecure easily, and I would cry seeing how my child was different from others. However, I've now learned to be consistent. And most importantly, I've started to accept."

Andi then spoke with deep gratitude:

"At first, I thought this program would only offer theory. But I was moved because we've learned from one another—from real-life experiences of fellow parents of children with special needs. That's more powerful than any theory."

The facilitator asked:

"Out of the last seven sessions, which one impacted you the most?"

Andi replied: "The session on acceptance. Sometimes I ask myself—why me? When my wife was pregnant, all the test results were fine. So why did this happen? However, I now believe that this child is a gift from God. We must keep learning to love."

"God's power is real. Miracles do exist. And I'm thankful." What Do We Want to Carry Forward?

The session flowed into a vital question: "What do you want to carry forward after this journey?"

Mita answered gently: "I want to keep going with my child's therapy and be a parent who is willing to accept and be grateful. I also want to love and support other children with special needs and bring encouragement to their parents. I want to be a listener for those who don't have anyone to talk to."

Hani added: "I want to apply what I've learned here. Have a roadmap and clear targets."

I also want to reach out to other parents of children with special needs—because they may be feeling the same way I did. And I believe... everything can change."

The facilitator responded: "This is extraordinary. We're starting to shift from focusing only on ourselves—to wanting to be a blessing for others."

Vani said softly: "I force myself to keep thinking positively and to keep hoping."

I keep fighting. And I pray that one day my child will find a partner who can love him the way I love him."

Andi shared his hope: "I'm grateful, even though life isn't easy. But because of that, life becomes more meaningful."

I also want to support my wife in reaching other couples."

Edo, in his signature style, added: "I used to be like a feather—blown around by the wind. But now I'm like an arrow. I have direction."

And finally, Lini closed the session with a small but meaningful story: "On Jeff's birthday, he had a therapy session at YIPABK—on August 14. That day, I cried. Miracle happen. I saw my child with different eyes. I saw hope."

The evening ended in a profoundly moving and empowering atmosphere. The parents looked at each other differently now—not just as participants, but as fellow travelers, as family.

They came with burdens.

They journeyed with hope.

Now, they move forward with a new mission: To be a light for others.

9. Session 10: Celebrating Transformation, Living the Hope

Stage 5: Termination

This is the last stage of the group where the group, described as an artificial social system by Dies and Mackenzie (1983), has to end. The task for the group in this stage is disengagement with the incorporation of the group processes as a constructive experience. As our process group has not ended and will continue monthly online, it will be interest to the connect Mackenzie's theory of group development to the actual experience when the group

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terminates online and how this might differ (if any) from a traditional face to face process group.

This morning was different—livelier, warmer, and far more vibrant.

The children with special needs, who had previously only been stories told behind the scenes, were now physically present in the room—together with their parents. They laughed, ran around, drew pictures, sat quietly, and played with older siblings who joined them for the morning. Today was a special day: a celebration, a milestone in this meaningful journey—not an ending, but a new beginning.

From the start of the Parents Can program, all the parents had arrived with hopes of “fixing” their children—so they could become like other kids. They expected these to be training sessions full of theory, tips, and strategies for handling children with special needs.

However, what they discovered was something far greater and more profound.

Throughout the ten sessions, the parents slowly came to realize that it wasn’t their children who needed to be “changed”—it was their own perspective of their children and, even more profoundly, their view of themselves.

They discovered that acceptance doesn’t mean giving up. That loving doesn’t mean being without struggle. And that parenting isn’t just a duty—but a calling to show up wholeheartedly.

In this final session, the facilitator invited each parent to choose two figurines to represent themselves and their child before the program and two more figurines to represent themselves and their child after the program. These figurines were placed on two separate sand trays—each symbolizing a different world of life experience.

One by one, the parents shared about the figurines they had chosen and placed them in the sand tray. These symbols represented transformations that may not be instantly visible—but were deeply felt.

Transformations that healed wounds restored love, and strengthened the heart.

Anto and Mita spoke with voices full of gratitude:

“This program changed our mindset, our parenting, and our level of acceptance. We learned that Marco doesn’t have to be like other children. He just needs to be himself. And we, as parents, must learn to be a safe place for him.”

The room fell silent in emotion when Marco’s two older siblings also shared. One of them said with deep conviction:

“Marco will always be our little brother. Even when Papa and Mama are no longer here, and we have our own families—Marco will still be loved and protected by us.”

The room grew quiet. Eyes welled with tears.

That simple sentence was a statement of love—pure, deep, and powerful.

Edo continued with a calm tone: “This program made me realize... Ronaldo is a miracle. All this time, I’ve been busy trying to help Ronaldo with what he lacks. But now I see—his very presence is the miracle in our lives.

Ronaldo is living proof that miracles are real.”

Andi and Hani shared with warmth: “We thought this program would be about theories and parenting knowledge for children with special needs. But it has gone far beyond theory and knowledge. We have been transformed. Now, we can accept Fifi, love Fifi, and even... dream for her. We’re no longer afraid to dream.”

Patar and Lini declared with conviction:

“We’ve experienced a leap of faith and love through this program. Jeff is not a difficult child. Jeff is a gift. And now we know—we are not alone. We have the big Parents Can family that will continue to support one another.”

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That day, the children also had their own session, which included playing, singing, drawing, and laughing. And when they returned to their parents' arms, there was a different light in their parents' eyes.

No longer the light of burden but the light of pride and love.

The session closed with prayer, hugs, group photos, and, of course—tears of gratitude, tears of victory, and tears of hope for a journey that now feels lighter and for the new dreams that have begun to take flight.

The Parents Can program has proven that group psychotherapy with creative arts interventions is an effective and impactful approach.

Not only in helping parents of children with special needs face their challenges but also in transforming:

Fear into strength

Despair into real hope

Shame into the love that offers safety

In this space, they grew.

Now, they return home with something far more precious than techniques or strategies. They return home with the understanding that:

In this space, they grew.

Now, they return home with something far more precious than techniques or strategies. They return home with the understanding that:

Their children are a blessing.

And they, the parents, are part of that miracle.



Conclusion

Taken in all, the experience first going through the ten sessions of process group included two very interactive in person group processes is a very enriching process. It places me in a vantage point to rethink about the exchanges, transactions, interactions, conflicts and interventions that happened in the process group and make meaning connections between experiential and theoretical learning.

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