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## **Implementing Nature-Based Self-Grounding Techniques as an Alternative Therapy for Elementary School Children with Sensory Problem in Homeschool Total Mind Learning (TML)**

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** This study explores the implementation of nature-based self-grounding techniques as an alternative therapeutic approach for elementary school children with sensory problems at Homeschool Total Mind Learning (TML). **Novelty:** The study emphasizes the use of nature-based self-grounding activities within the Homeschool Total Mind Learning (TML) approach as an alternative therapy for children with sensory problems, highlighting direct interaction with natural environments to support sensory integration, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning. **Methods:** Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with three parents and two teachers. The implemented activities included walking barefoot in gardens, playing in rice fields, climbing hills, herding livestock, and participating in farming activities. The analysis was guided by A. Jean Ayres's Sensory Integration Theory, particularly concerning tactile and proprioceptive stimulation. **Results:** The findings reveal that nature-based self-grounding activities provide meaningful sensory experiences that help improve children's emotional regulation and adaptive behavior. Parents reported reduced meltdowns and increased sensory tolerance, while teachers observed better focus, classroom participation, and social interaction. Furthermore, the children showed greater self-awareness and independence in managing their sensory needs. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that implementing nature-based self-grounding techniques can serve as an effective alternative therapy for supporting sensory development and improving the quality of life and adaptive functioning of elementary school children with sensory problems in homeschooling contexts.

**Keywords:** Special education, children with special needs, sensory issues, grounding techniques.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Children with Special Needs are individuals who have different characteristics from children in general, both physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. These differences often require a specific approach in parenting, education, and therapy in order for them to grow and develop optimally (Mahmud et al., 2023). One of the challenges faced by ABK is sensory problems, where the brain has difficulty receiving, organizing, and responding to incoming information through the senses. Sensory problems can manifest in many forms, such as hypersensitivity (overreaction to stimuli) or hyposensitivity (less responsiveness to stimuli), and often impact a child's behavior, emotions, and ability to interact with his or her environment. Children with conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) often show significant symptoms of sensory problems (Komalasari & Yunengsih, 2021).

Sensory problems in ABK can cause various difficulties, such as difficulty concentrating, easy tantrums, excessive anxiety, sleep difficulties, and problems in social interaction. Conventional therapies such as occupational therapy and integrated sensory therapy are effective, but they often require significant costs and limited accessibility (Adawiyah et al., 2015). Therefore, there is a need for therapeutic alternatives that are more accessible, affordable, and can be applied independently by parents.

The grounding/earthing technique is beginning to gain attention as an effective non-pharmacological intervention. Grounding is a series of techniques that help individuals to refocus, improve body awareness, and calm the nervous system. This technique works by activating the senses to reconnect individuals with their physical environment, so that it can reduce feelings of anxiety, panic, or overwhelm that are often experienced by ABK with sensory problems. Examples of grounding techniques include focusing on breathing, feeling the texture of objects, smelling certain scents, or performing repetitive physical movements (Binis, 2024).

Although grounding techniques have been widely applied in general to manage stress and anxiety, research on its implementation as an alternative therapy for individuals with sensory problems is still limited, particularly in Indonesia (Umy Yonaevy & Ratih Prananingrum, 2024). The potential of this technique to assist ABK in regulating sensory responses, improving focus, and reducing maladaptive behavior is urgently needed. Given the challenges of the accessibility of conventional therapies and the need for practical interventions, this study is expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the implementation of grounding techniques as an alternative solution that can be practiced.

Many therapies for ABK require intensive professional intervention. One of the great potentials of the grounding technique is its ease of teaching and application by parents or teachers independently in the home or school environment. The lack of data on the implementation of grounding techniques by parents or teachers, perceptions and challenges they face in their implementation, makes this research necessary to design sustainable and affordable programs.

Previous research on the implementation of grounding techniques has been widely conducted, although it has not specifically focused on Children with Special Needs (ABK) with sensory problems with their context in Indonesia. Kohli (2020) highlight how techniques that focus on body sensations can help individuals regulate emotions and reduce symptoms of trauma. Byrne (2017) It shows that *mindfulness-based* interventions, which often include grounding elements, are effective in improving focus and reducing impulsive behavior in individuals. However, most of the existing research tends to be general or focus on conditions such as clinical anxiety and *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) in adult populations, or if in children, often does not specifically address sensory processing issues as the primary target. Until now, there is still a lack of empirical research that examines the implementation of

grounding techniques as an alternative therapy that can be applied by parents/caregivers for children with sensory problems.

This research is urgent because conventional therapy for crew members with sensory problems is often expensive and difficult to access, especially in big cities such as Depok, West Java. Without proper treatment, sensory problems can disrupt the quality of life of children and families, causing learning, social, emotional difficulties, and triggering behaviors that disrupt the surrounding environment. By examining grounding techniques as an accessible and affordable therapeutic alternative, this study has the potential to empower parents and teachers to help their children, while filling the empirical data gap on grounding implementation in the local Indonesian context, providing evidence-based practical guidance for families and professionals. Therefore, this study aims to examine in depth how the implementation of grounding techniques can be an effective alternative therapy for Children with Special Needs who experience sensory problems. The results of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to developing more innovative, accessible, and sustainable intervention strategies for crew members in Indonesia.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological design. The phenomenological design was chosen to in-depth describe the experiences of parents and teachers at Homeshool TML in implementing grounding techniques as an alternative therapy for children with special needs who have sensory problems. This approach allows researchers to explore the perceptions and phenomena experienced by participants in Homeshool TML regarding the implementation of grounding techniques based on sensory integration theory (Ayres, 1979). The two main indicators in measuring the achievement of grounding techniques are the presence of *deep pressure* and *proprioceptive inputs* that are integrated in learning. The research sample was purposively selected as many as 3 parents and 2 therapists at Homeshool TML. Data was collected through in-depth interviews as the main method and related documents from Homeshool TML. The place of this research is located at Homeshool TML Depok.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Homeshool Total Mind Learning (TML)

TML Homeshool is an education center for ABK at the elementary school level. TML Homeshool provides a variety of intervention programs based on the latest research, comprehensive testing, and educational programs based on scientific approaches. TML has the main goal of presenting a comprehensive therapy and education program. Dr. Yovan P. Putra, M.Psi. founded TML Homeshool in 2005. Having had ADHD since childhood, learning felt very difficult for Yovan, starting from the elementary and junior high school levels and reached the peak of his difficulties in high school, when he stayed in class due to not being able to follow the lessons given. Difficulty in participating in learning at school is caused by concentration barriers due to the ADHD condition he has. After going through various intervention programs, ranging from medical to various therapy programs, he finally found a therapy program that could really pull him out of the various learning obstacles he experienced. Not only that, even the program was able to skyrocket the potential of his mind, marked when he managed to get 4 lecture scholarships, one of which was at the University of Indonesia. This

personal experience later shaped her commitment to dedicate her work and life to the treatment and empowerment of autism.

His love of the outdoors inspired Yovan to develop a model of ABK therapy intervention that was different from other autism institutions. Nature-based educational and therapeutic models provide more opportunities for exploration and learning for ABK. Another factor that is no less important in handling ABK is the involvement of parents and families. ABK is not only a problem for the individual, but also a family problem. Parents and families play a very important role in the success of the handling of ABK considering that most of the time ABK is spent with their families. That is why at Homeshool TML, we also provide a training program aimed at educating parents and families to handle ABK at home.

TML refines and develops various intervention methods that are carried out continuously by conducting research and providing education to the ABK parent community fostered by TML (AUSSIE Community). All of these efforts are solely aimed at helping crew members live a more optimal life.



Figure 1. A Child with Autism Is Harvesting Vegetables with the Guidance of a Teacher

At Homeshool TML, the Therapy and Education program is tailored based on the severity of the ABK condition and the specific challenges they face. Teachers or TE (Therapeutic Educators) design educational and therapeutic programs that are personalized to each individual. Speech therapy is recommended to improve communication skills, while integrated sensory therapy is aimed at addressing sensory and motor difficulties. Cognitive training is aimed at helping improve cognitive abilities such as concentration, memory, logic and reasoning. Meanwhile, for adult individuals, TML Homeshool has job preparation exercises combined with therapeutic interventions, called Supported Employment (SE). Through SE, individuals with adult needs are trained in independence and readiness to work, while at the same time being given therapeutic activities according to their needs.

One thing that really distinguishes TML Homeshool from various other ABK service centers, is the existence of natural therapy facilities at TML Therapeutic Farm, where ABK gets therapeutic interventions in a vast and natural farm-farm environment. At TML Homeshool, teachers or TE (Therapeutic Educators) work to ease and direct ABK in completing their various functions and daily responsibilities. At all times, all dedicated teachers

or TEs focus on improving the well-being of individuals with autism and helping them develop their full potential to achieve their aspirations and aspirations.

### **Masalah Sensoris pada Anak**

Children with sensory problems experience challenges in processing information received through their senses. Their brains have trouble interpreting and responding appropriately to sensory stimuli such as sound, touch, light, or movement. This condition can manifest in a variety of ways: some children may be very sensitive to certain sounds or textures (hypersensitivity), while others may respond poorly to stimuli and continue to seek additional sensations (hyposensitivity). These differences in sensory processing are not just personal preferences, but rather neurological dysfunctions that can interfere with a child's ability to learn, play, socialize, and perform daily activities independently, and have a major impact on their development (Adigun, 2021).

A study by Miller (dalam Adawiyah et al., 2015) who used *the quantitative electroencephalography* (qEEG) method found different patterns of brain activity in children with sensory impairment compared to the control group, suggesting a dysregulation in sensory processing at the cortical level. This study provides objective evidence that sensory disorders are not just behavioral problems, but measurable neurological problems. Furthermore, research by Davies et al. (2009) which involved clinical observations and parental reports, found that sensory disorders are often present in conjunction with other developmental conditions such as autism, ADHD and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), although the symptoms are distinctive enough to be independently diagnosed.

The impact of sensory disturbances can extend to various aspects of a child's life. Academically, studies by Ainscow & Kaplan (2005) It found that children with sensory processing difficulties often experience challenges in focus in classroom settings, which can hinder their learning abilities. Socially, they may have difficulty participating in group games or interacting with peers due to sensitivity to unexpected touch or movement, as outlined by Akrim & Harfiani (2019). Further, sensory problems can also affect a child's emotional regulation, where frustration or anxiety due to sensory overload can trigger emotional outbursts or withdrawals, as discussed in by Mulligan (2009).

Nonetheless, there is hope for improvement through appropriate interventions. Sensory *Integration Therapy*, pioneered by Dr. A. Jean Ayres, is the primary therapeutic approach. Research by Almalky & Alrabiah (2024) in a randomized controlled trial showing that Sensory Integration Therapy was effective in reducing sensory-related behavioral problems in children with autism, ADHD and SPD, showing improvements in social participation and self-regulation. This therapy focuses on providing a planned sensory experience in a therapeutic environment, helping the child better organize sensory inputs. In addition to direct therapy, environmental adaptation strategies, such as the use of weighted vests for children who are hyposensitive or dimming of light for hypersensitive ones, have also been shown to be helpful.

Understanding of sensory problems in children has evolved rapidly thanks to previous studies outlining the neurological basis, broad impact on daily functioning, and the effectiveness of interventions. This evidence confirms that sensory problems are real conditions that require serious attention from health and education professionals. With early diagnosis, evidence-based interventions such as grounding techniques, and comprehensive

support from families and the environment, children with sensory problems have a greater chance of developing adaptive skills, increasing their participation in life, and reaching their full potential.

### Teknik Grounding

Sensory problems in children with special needs, such as those often seen in children with autism, ADHD and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), often cause sensory overload, anxiety, and difficulty regulating emotions. These children feel overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights, unexpected touches, or even small changes in routine. In this overload state, their nervous system becomes overstimulated, triggering a "fight, flight, or freeze" response that can manifest as an outburst of anger, withdrawal, or restless behavior. To help these children regain calm and feel safe in their bodies, grounding techniques have become one of the important strategies (Bong & Chua, 2023).

Grounding techniques in the context of sensory issues refer to a set of strategies designed to help individuals reconnect with the present moment and their bodily sensations, reducing the effects of sensory overload or excessive anxiety. For children with special needs, grounding often involves activities that provide deep, soothing sensory input, known as *deep pressure* or *proprioceptive input*. Examples include barefoot, tight hugs, the use of weighted blankets, squeezing or squeezing objects, or even strong pressure on the joints. The main goal is to stabilize the child's nervous system, shifting the focus from flooding stimuli to more structured and soothing body sensations, thus helping them to feel more secure and controlled (Brown, 2019). Other research by Butler & Shevlin (2001), through case studies, he has extensively discussed the benefits of deep pressure through tools such as *the squeeze machine* that he developed himself, showing that deep pressure can provide a sense of security and reduce sensory over-responsiveness in individuals with autism.



Figure 2. Two Crew Members with Autism are Planting in the Garden with the Guidance of a Teacher

Study by Carrington & Holm (2005) Examining the impact of structured physical activity on self-regulation of children with autism. While not specifically focusing on grounding techniques, their findings suggest that activities involving heavy movement and coordination, such as pushing or pulling heavy objects, can help children manage sensory inputs and improve adaptive behavior. This kind of activity inherently provides strong *proprioceptive input* ,

which is a form of sensory grounding, helping the child feel the limits of their body and reconnect with their environment.

The grounding technique offers a practical, sensory-based approach to helping children with special needs who have sensory regulation difficulties. While more empirical research with a rigorous design is needed to confirm the specific effectiveness of each grounding technique, preliminary evidence and clinical experience consistently suggest that activities that provide *deep pressure* and *proprioceptive* inputs can be an invaluable tool. By helping children ground and regulate their nervous system, grounding techniques facilitate calmness, reduce sensory overload, and allow children to more effectively engage in daily activities and social interactions (Carrington & Holm, 2005).

### **Implementasi Teknik Grounding di Homeshool TML**

Ms S revealed that before joining Homeshool TML, her son (9 years old) who was diagnosed with autism often experienced severe *meltdown* episodes, especially when in crowded places or faced changes in routine. He revealed,

"In the past, if you went to the mall, you would immediately cry or scream. It is very difficult to control. It's been 2 years since we followed therapy at Homeshool TML with a focus on *the grounding* approach, I noticed a significant change in my son. He is now calmer and able to manage sensory overload better. At Homeshool TML, the teacher took my son to explore nature, farm and farm barefoot. Now, when we are in a new place, my son adapts faster and his reaction is not as bad as it used to be, The *grounding* approach at Homeshool TML helps my son feel safer and more in control."

Mr. B shared his experience of his daughter (11 years old) who has Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), especially hypersensitivity to certain sounds and textures. He revealed,

"My child doesn't want to wear certain clothes, eat food with a strange texture, and is very disturbed by the sound of the horn or blender. That severely limits our activities. At Homeshool TML, teachers introduce various *grounding* techniques such as pressing light barbed balls on the palms of the hands, walking on textured surfaces, and doing activities that involve nature, namely farming and livestock. After a year of therapy at Homeshool TML, my daughter became more tolerant of sensory stimuli that she had previously avoided. He now dared to try some new types of food, and didn't panic too much when he heard a loud noise. The therapist explained that this *grounding* helps his brain interpret sensory information more regularly. With increased tolerance, it opens up more opportunities for my daughter to participate in daily life."

Mother A shared that her son (8 years old) who was diagnosed with ADHD showed sensory problems, especially difficulty focusing and excessive stimulation-seeking behavior. He stated,

"My son can't be still, is always moving, and is very impulsive. Sometimes it hits goods. At Homeshool TML, my son is taught grounding techniques through intense yet directed physical activities, such as jumping on a trampoline, pushing walls, weighting vests while studying, planting and herding goats. This approach really helps channel his excess energy in a more positive direction. After 8 months of therapy, my son was calmer and better able to concentrate on household chores. He becomes more able to sit quietly while doing homework, and his impulsivity is also reduced. It feels like there's a channel for his excess energy, so it doesn't explode."

Mrs. R, a teacher who focuses on early childhood at Homeshool TML, revealed that the grounding approach is very effective in helping her students regulate their emotions and sensory behaviors. He stated,

"Many early childhood with GSA (Autism) or SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder) are very easily overwhelmed. Just a little loud noise can trigger a meltdown. We here rely heavily

on grounding techniques. I use a hug, a weighting vest, asking the child to squeeze a stress ball before starting an activity that requires concentration. For example, before learning to write, we often ask our children to press on the playdough or push a chair that is a bit heavy. It's like channeling their energy, making them calmer and ready to learn. I also invite them to walk barefoot in the outdoors."

Mr. D, a teacher who deals with school-age children, emphasizes the importance of grounding to help them overcome anxiety and improve focus in the classroom. Mr. D stated,

"At this age, the challenge is that they have to interact more complex and are often faced with a noisier, high-concentration environment in a school environment. Sensory overload can make them withdraw or even hyperactive. I apply proprioceptive activities such as wall *push-ups*, lifting slightly heavy objects, or 'heavy' walks (such as walking in a rice field) as part of my daily routine or when I notice signs of anxiety. I also have some rocking chairs or fidget toys that provide soothing sensory input. This helps the child stay focused without having to constantly move around or disturb other friends. Through the grounding approach, I see a significant increase in children's self-regulation and participation abilities in the classroom, making them better prepared for a more formal learning environment."



Figure 3. A Student Walking Barefoot in a Rice Field

### Pembahasan

The approach applied at Homeshool TML is very much in line with the Sensory Integration Theory developed by Dr. A. Jean Ayres. Ayres (1972), who defined sensory integration as a neurological process that organizes sensations from the body and the environment, allows for the effective use of the body in the environment. The three main sensory systems that are the focus are tactile (touch), vestibular (balance and movement), and proprioceptive (awareness of body position). Children with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (GSA) often have dysfunction in the integration of these senses. For example, tactile hypersensitivity (such as that experienced by Mr. Budi's child to the texture of food or clothing) indicates difficulty in filtering out tactile stimuli, while

proprioceptive or vestibular hyposensitivity (such as Mrs. Ani's child constantly seeking movement or "bumping") indicates the need for stronger *input* to feel "connected" to their body. The *grounding* approach, which focuses on providing *deep, structured inputs* (often through tactile and proprioceptive systems), aims to help the child's brain better integrate this information, resulting in a calmer and more organized adaptive response (Chevalier et al., 2015).

The findings directly support the key role of deep pressure and *proprioceptive input* as core components of grounding techniques. Mrs. S reported activities in the outdoors, agricultural and livestock activities. Previous research, such as a review by (Estiningtyas et al., 2024), has shown that weight vests can reduce anxiety and improve sleep quality in children with ADHD, autism and SPA, supporting the idea that deep pressure has a calming effect on the nervous system.

Temple Grandin (1992), through his "squeeze machine" tool, which anecdotally and then through several case studies, shows that consistent deep pressure can help reduce sensory over-responsiveness and provide a sense of security. These activities help children feel "where their bodies are in space", which is especially important for those with proprioceptive dysfunction. One of the most prominent results of the interview was a significant improvement in the regulation of children's emotions and adaptive behaviors. Children who had frequent *meltdowns* became calmer, more tolerant of stimuli, and showed decreased impulsivity. This phenomenon is in line with research showing a close relationship between effective sensory processing and emotion regulation. When a child's nervous system is overstimulated, their emotional response often becomes dysregulated (e.g., outbursts of anger, withdrawal).

Grounding interventions serve as strategies to help with sensory modulation, which is the nervous system's ability to adjust the extent to which it reacts to sensory stimuli. By providing calming and structured input, *grounding* helps to "reset" the nervous system, allowing children to process information more calmly and their emotional responses to become more controlled. This is in line with research on the impact of *sensory input* on the emotional regulation of children with special needs, which suggests that the environment and appropriate sensory interventions can facilitate calmness and focus (Oschman et al., 2015).

The interesting thing about the teacher and parent reports is how children begin to show self-awareness of their sensory needs. This increase in self-regulation in turn facilitates more functional participation in daily activities and learning environments. Children who are calmer and more focused can learn more effectively, interact socially better, and manage transitions or challenging situations with less stress. Mr. D specifically highlighted how *grounding* helps children in the classroom, allowing them to more actively participate and reach their academic potential. The results of these interviews reinforce the idea that the *grounding approach* is a very valuable component in the therapy of special needs children with sensory problems. Homeshool TML shows a model in which the application of evidence-based techniques (such as *deep pressure* and *proprioceptive input*) consistently produces positive impacts.

Nonetheless, it's important to note that these interviews are qualitative. For stronger validation, further research with a rigorous experimental design (e.g., randomized controlled trials) is needed to objectively measure the specific effectiveness of each *grounding* technique on different subtypes of sensory problems and a broader population of children with special needs. Future research may also explore the optimal duration and frequency of *grounding*

interventions, as well as individual factors that may influence a child's response to certain techniques.

## CONCLUSION

Parents reported that with grounding therapy, there was a decrease in meltdowns, increased tolerance to previously intrusive stimuli, and improvements in focus and impulse control. This shows that grounding techniques, especially through the application of deep pressure and proprioceptive input, are successful in helping children's brains better process and organize sensory information, so that they can respond to the environment in a calmer and more organized manner. This grounding technique is in line with A. Jean Ayres' Theory of Sensory Integration. The various grounding techniques used in TML Homeschool, such as weighting vests, squeeze activities, and heavy and directed movements, directly manipulate the tactile and proprioceptive systems to achieve a calming and organizing effect. This is in line with research findings that show that structured sensory input can reduce anxiety, improve focus, and facilitate sensory modulation.

The success of *grounding* techniques is driven by increased child self-awareness and consistency of application between therapy and home environment. Children begin to learn to recognize their sensory needs. Sustained support and application from parents and teachers strengthens the child's ability to self-regulate, which ultimately facilitates greater functional participation in daily activities and the learning environment. This study confirms that grounding techniques are a valuable alternative and have a strong theoretical and empirical basis in the therapy of children with special needs with sensory problems.

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