

# Teaching Communication Skills to Preschool Children with Mild Intellectual Disabilities: An Evidence based Study

Dr. Ho Sy Hung\*

Faculty of Early Childhood Education, Hong Duc University, Vietnam

\*Corresponding author: Dr. Ho Sy Hung

✉ hosyhung@hdu.edu.vn

Faculty of Early Childhood Education, Hong Duc University, Vietnam.

**Citation:** Hung HS (2020) Teaching Communication Skills to Preschool Children with Mild Intellectual Disabilities: An Evidence based Study. J Child Dev Disord Vol.7 No.1:3

## Abstract

Children with mild intellectual disabilities have many limitations in language and communication. These barriers make it difficult for them to communicate and interact with other people. Helping children develop communication skills to integrate with the community and participate in activities with their peers in preschools is considered the goal in the educational organization of children with intellectual disabilities in preschool. Therefore, this article aims to synthesize and analyze research around the world and at the same time give some important conclusions about the teaching of communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities; the measuring of communication skills education for children with intellectual disabilities; and the relationship between play and the teaching of communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities. On that basis, it aims to orient preschool teachers as to how to support their children's integration in preschools.

**Keywords:** Communication skills; Intellectual disabilities; Inclusive classroom

**Received:** September 01, 2020; **Accepted:** November 02, 2020; **Published:** November 09, 2020

## Introduction

Communication skills play an important role in the development of children in general and children with intellectual disabilities in particular. Thanks to good communication skills, children will actively explore the world around them and actively interact with other people. Most children with mild intellectual disabilities have language and communication limitations, which makes it difficult for them to participate in educational activities in preschools. Therefore, they often tend to be passive, with sometimes inappropriate behaviors in communication situations. In addition, they also exhibit limitations in non-verbal communication, in which the most noticeable is that eye contact is not steady and they rarely use gestures to express needs to others. On the other hand, they use words in conversations with many difficulties: Limited vocabulary, the use of words not suitable for communication content, some of them have expressions such as impatience, anxiety, easy irritability, impulsiveness, poor tolerance and lack of social skills [1,2]. Studies have shown that participating in preschool activities will help children with mild intellectual disabilities improve their social communication skills, develop friendly relationships through cooperation and listening,

take turns and use language to interact with each other [3-6]. Thus, using activities at school will create many opportunities that stimulate them to actively communicate with others and develop communication skills.

The number of children with mild intellectual disabilities in preschools has been increasing. They are participating in learning and playing activities like their peers. In addition, fully aware of the role of activities in helping children to integrate with their friends, teachers have regularly supported children in activities and chosen appropriate activities to practice communication skills with children [7,8]. Although the teachers are aware of the language and communication limitations of children with intellectual disabilities when they are in preschool, helping children develop communication skills and communicate with others has not yet achieved expected results. In particular, teachers are still confused when organizing activities for children with intellectual disabilities to study with their peers in preschools. This is also the reason for the limited effectiveness of teaching communication skills to children. Therefore, choosing appropriate educational activities to integrate the teaching of communication skills for children with intellectual disabilities plays an important role.

## Research Methodology

This study synthesizes the research on the teaching of communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities and analyzes the results to find new information.

### Research on communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities

Children's communication and language development occurs spontaneously and develops in parallel with other developmental fields. The communication skills of children with mild intellectual disabilities are more limited than their peers. The effect of disability is the cause of the children's lack of skills. Therefore, studies on communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities play an important role in the process of supporting these children to integrate into the community.

### Research on the role of communication skills in the development of children with intellectual disabilities

Gooden C showed that communication skills are the foundation for children to enter into life and learn social skills [9]. When they have good communication skills, they will have many opportunities to participate in activities with their peers confidently and discover everything around [9-11]. Children with mild intellectual disabilities are supported to communicate through activities in preschool as well as daily life situations that will help them develop social interaction skills; therefore, teachers and parents play an important role in teaching communication skills. Beisler, Frank, Gooden Caroline and Owen Hargie introduced some basic communication skills of children including understanding and expressing skills, emotional expression skills, and communication skills. These are communication skills that play an important role in helping them to integrate into the community [9,12,13]. Rae Pica paid special attention to body movement and considered it as a form of communication, as the use of body language and gestures helps children easily interact with other people and move towards interactive relationships [14].

### Research on the development of communication skills for children with intellectual disabilities

Children's communication skills are developed through many different activities, in which play activities will stimulate them to actively interact in group play [6]. Rahil Mahyuddin and Habibah Elias said that the development of communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities is closely related to the development of social skills. For example, children know how to express their needs, say thank you, apologize, handle life situations, listen and actively interact with other people [11]. Some researchers appreciated the role of social skills in the development of communication skills of children with cognitive impairment and directly impact on perception, language, and emotion [10,15]. Studies upheld the role of adults in developing communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities. If they teach children to communicate in ways that is appropriate for their own characteristics, it will be a positive impact on the

development of other areas. Conversely, when children are not educated based on their own abilities, it will inhibit their development significantly.

### Research on the communication difficulties and limitations of children with mild intellectual disabilities

Sunish believed that most children with intellectual disabilities have difficulties in interacting with other people. Their limited vocabulary and inflexible language use are barriers that make them difficult to integrate into the community and establish social relationships [6]. Kaiser, Hester said that the communication skills development of children with intellectual disabilities are not as good as their peers and reduces their chance of learning [1]. Difficult communication is the main cause of behavioral disorders: aggression, screaming, difficulty controlling actions and toy destruction [16]. In addition, Jennifer and Mark Wolery also showed that children with intellectual disabilities usually use inappropriate words; rarely do they use body language to interact with their peers in conversations. Therefore, they always need the support from other people to create opportunities for them to participate in preschool activities [17]. Abbeduto & Rosenberg argued that children with intellectual disabilities have low IQs, and they tend to have limited expression in clear pronunciation [18]. Some studies suggested that children with Down syndrome can communicate when talking for a long time. Children with Williams Syndrome are also very good at maintaining ongoing topics during interaction. However, in boys with fragile X syndrome, it is difficult to maintain a conversation topic, and they usually use inappropriate words in conversations [19,20]. Although many children with intellectual disabilities have acquired some basic communication skills, they have difficulties in maintaining emotional, focused attention in conversations.

### Research on language and communication disorders in children with intellectual disabilities

"Early Language Development in Children with Mental Retardation", Tager-Flusberg & Sullivan showed that children with mild intellectual disabilities are still in the early stages of language learning. Therefore, the number of words of the children is quite limited, and the child has a few familiar words such as the names of family members and a few close subjects [21]. Lesser & Hassip gave specific evidence about the communication disorders of children with mild intellectual disabilities compared to others, that is: Children with expressive language disorders are 3-10%, the receptive language disorder is 1-13%, the children's communication and language disturbances are much higher than that of non-disabled children, estimated at 55% [22]. Language and communication difficulties are typical of preschool children with disabilities. Intellectual disabilities have a negative effect on a child's language development. For example, children with Down syndrome have difficulties in pronunciation; however they have less language use disorder. In contrast, for children with Fragile X syndrome [21] it is difficult to use spoken language [21]. Most studies suggested that language and expression disorders are factors in causing communication difficulties in children with

intellectual disabilities. It is these difficulties that make children confused, have lack of confidence and many children become shy and isolated from their peers in group play.

### **Research on the role of educational environment in the development of communication skills of children with mild intellectual disabilities**

Rahil Mahyuddin and Habibah Elias said that besides teaching children basic knowledge, parents need to equip children with good communication skills at an early age. A positive educational environment will create a good interaction between children and their classmates. Therefore, teachers must have different educational strategies and methods to recognize their differences and apply appropriate measures to stimulate children to express communication skills [11]. Steven Gutstin showed that it is necessary to create a positive communication environment to develop social relationships to help children understand the world around them, starting with simple words (names, body parts), understanding relationships and relationships between children and surrounding objects (names, features, uses) [23]. When children participate in activities at school, a good educational environment will help them limit their difficulties. Therefore, teachers should adjust activities to enhance their interactions in positive ways.

### **Research on measures to teach communication skills for children with mild intellectual disabilities**

Difficulties in communication of children with mild intellectual disabilities affect their participation in daily activities at preschool. Studies suggested a number of measures that can be applied to help children with mild disabilities develop communication skills, and at the same time guide educators to choose appropriate educational methods for the children's unique characteristics when they are at preschool.

### **Using fun activities to educate children with intellectual disabilities**

Sunish [6] said that role-play helps children with mild intellectual disabilities develop speech and non-verbal communication. It is considered an effective means of teaching communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities [6]. However, role-plays are not widely used in an inclusive education environment, especially as a means to teach language and communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities. Doris Bergen, Raman, Sutha, Lin, Marisa emphasized the importance of the use of games to stimulate children with intellectual disabilities to use language and see it as a way to teach communication skills to children with language and communication disorders [3,4]. The game not only stimulates the interest of children in the inclusive classroom but also helps all children in the class to actively interact with each other. Children with intellectual disabilities playing in groups will create a positive psychological environment. Open and active interaction with members of the group play is a factor

that directly affects the training and language development for children with mild disabilities.

### **Using storytelling to teach communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities**

Russu CS, Corina Florina and Carroll, Valeria pointed out that preschoolers are interested in stories and educational lessons from stories help children develop a comprehensive personality. Therefore, using stories is one of the important educational methods in schools to teach communication skills to children with low cognitive skills. In addition, the study also suggests that educators and parents can choose suitable stories to create a positive language environment, step by step stimulating children to express their communication skills [24]. The results of this study will inspire educators in finding ways to teach communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities who learn in inclusive classes in preschools.

### **Using interactive activities at home to teach communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities**

Pelin & Nilay Kayhan [25] with "An Investigation of the Effect of the Communication Skills of the Children with Intellectual Disability to the Anxiety Level of Their Mothers" said that children often interact with family members, experiencing daily activities that will create a positive language environment that stimulates them to communicate [25]. Harel S and Greenstein Y [26] highly appreciated the role of the educational environment at home which is of great significance for the development of communication skills of children with disabilities such as the parents' care for the child's development, understanding the child's communication skills and supporting measures in family activities [26]. Thus, since the language and communication development of children with intellectual disabilities are formed through different daily activities, it will be an opportunity for children to actively interact and learn to communicate with other people.

### **Applying early intervention programs to teach communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities**

Udeme Samuel Jacob and colleagues believed that early intervention is a method that can help children with intellectual disabilities with language and communication barriers overcome initial difficulties [27]. Bailey, Hebbeler [28], Hickman and Jones [29] identified special benefits from early intervention programs for children with communication disorders for families, society and children with intellectual disabilities [28,29]. Early education and intervention should start at preschool age, which will help parents overcome psychological problems such as pressure and anxiety stemming from their children's special needs. However, studies showed that the number of doctors specializing in speech therapists such as speech disorders, pronunciation, audiology and special education teachers who directly teach children with intellectual disabilities in communication skills are still lacking and training should be strengthened in higher education institutions.

Haris Memisevic, Selmir Hadzic [30] argued that with the increasing proportion of children with speech and language disorders, providing therapeutic solutions to all children with intellectual disabilities is extremely necessary [30]. McIntosh et al. [31] recommend that there must be coordination among speech therapists, teachers and young parents, and preschool teachers must provide necessary information about the development of communication skills in children, helping professionals grasp the children's development to adjust therapy in a timely manner. Research suggested some rules in speech therapy for children with intellectual disabilities such as: 1) Therapy should be started as early as possible, preferably at kindergarten age; 2) Close coordination of specialists including speech therapists, psychologists, preschool teachers and special education teachers; 3) It is necessary to regularly evaluate the progress of children with intellectual disabilities during therapy [31]. Speech therapy solutions can provide opportunities to improve social skills for children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, if children are detected in time and have early intervention methods from experts in different fields, they will reduce the pressure and feelings of isolation when children participate in school.

### **The relationship between play and teaching of communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities**

Fun activity is one of the main activities for children in preschool. In a classroom with children with intellectual disabilities, the use of games not only stimulates the child's interest in learning but also helps them to express their communication skills. Bailin and TV Sunish suggested that using role play can help children with mild intellectual disabilities improve verbal and non-verbal skills, as a guide for educators to choose suitable role play for the children's ability in the process of educating in general and teaching communication skills in particular [32]. Rebecca R. Fewell, et al. [33] "*The Relationship between Play and Communication Skills in Young Children with Down Syndrome*" showed the close relationship between role play and teaching of communication skills to children. Nineteen children with mild intellectual disabilities with Down syndrome were selected for research through celebrating a birthday and creating situations while playing and showed how they actively interact with gestures, paying attention, and using spoken language to participate in fun activities. The research showed that while playing, children can interact and experience with playing materials. This is an opportunity to develop the ability to express language and use expressions when interacting with new toys [33]. Ciara O'Toolev and Shula Chiat argued that pretend play is closely related to expressive and receptive language, so educators can use it for therapeutic intervention for children with Down syndrome, language and communication skills disorders [34]. The findings in these studies will help educators to see clearly the role of play activities in the development of children with special education needs, and at the same time, take advantage of the strengths of role play to create excitement for children in kindergarten and plan to teach children to communicate through different games.

### **Discussion**

Studies on teaching communication skills to children with mild

intellectual disabilities showed different results on communication skills, the ways of teaching communication skills, while at the same time, pointed out the relationship of play for the training and development of communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities in preschools. Besides the determination of the relationship between play and the teaching of communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities, it has also shown the importance of organizing games. Many authors believed that in order to stimulate children to express communication skills, parents and teachers need to have a specific education plan. On that basis, it is necessary to adjust the goals to match among fun activities and language and communication education for children with mild intellectual disabilities who learn in preschool. Some ways to teach communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities have also been proposed, such as: Creating a positive communication environment, creating situations to teach children to communicate and support them when they have difficulty, and encouraging positive interaction between children and their peers in play groups.

The research on communication skills of children with intellectual disabilities showed that they encounter some communication difficulties, and pointed out differences in communication skills between children without disabilities and children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, educators need to apply appropriate educational measures to help children with mild intellectual disabilities participate in preschool activities.

The research suggested a number of measures such as: using games to educate children with communication skills; using storytelling; adopting early intervention and special education; applying some speech therapy solutions; and developing some social skills to support communication skills. The results of this study are valuable references for educators in the process of searching for measures to teach communication skills to children with mild intellectual disabilities in preschools.

### **Conclusion**

An important educational goal in preschools is the teaching of communication skills to children with intellectual disabilities to integrate into classrooms. The number of children with intellectual disabilities is increasing, so they will have many difficulties if they do not receive the support of teachers and their peers. Language and communication barriers will make it difficult for them to integrate with their peers. The results of this study will be suggestions for preschool teachers educating children with intellectual disabilities in preschool activities. To teach communicative skills to children with intellectual disabilities to integrate in preschools, teachers should apply a number of measures as follows: create a friendly environment for children with intellectual disabilities to actively interact with their classmates; build individual education plans; create situations that stimulate interactions between children with intellectual disabilities and their peers; support them to communicate; practice communication skills for children through different activities; and increase interactive activities at home.

## References

- 1 Kaiser AP, Hester PP, McDuffie AS (2001) Supporting communication in young children with developmental disabilities. *Mental Retardation Dev Dis Res Rev* 7: 143-150.
- 2 Papoutsakia K, Genab A, Kalyva E (2013) How do children with mild intellectual disabilities perceive loneliness? *Europe's J Psychol* 9: 4.
- 3 Bergen D (2002) The role of pretend play in children's cognitive development. *Earlyhood Research & Practice* pp. 1-8.
- 4 Raman S, Lin M (2015) The role of role play in special education: Review of the "Play with Me" Programme.
- 5 Sameena N (2011) The relationship between play and communication skills of young children in a childcare setting Proquest, Umi Dissertation Publishing, USA.
- 6 Sunish DT (2013) Effect of role play on developing communication skills of children with moderate mental retardation and cognitive disabilities. *Cognitive Discourses Int Multidisciplinary J* 4: 41-46.
- 7 Hùng HS (2019) Developing communication skills for children aged 5-6 years with ID through pretend play. *HNUE J Sci* 64: 168-176.
- 8 Thu ĐN (2017) Communication skills education for students with intellectual disabilities in primary school. PhD thesis in education, Hanoi University of Education, Vietnam.
- 9 Gooden CM The Importance of Communication Skills in Young Children.
- 10 Copple C, Bredekamp S (1997) Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- 11 Elias RM (2010) The Correlation between Communication and Social Skills among Early Schoolers in Malaysia. *Pertanika J Soc Sci Hum* 18: 167-174.
- 12 Beisler F (1993) *Communication Skills*: Longman Cheshire, Australia.
- 13 Hargie O (2006) *The Handbook of Communication Skills*.
- 14 Pica R (2010) *Linking Literacy and Movement. The Professional Resource for Teachers and Parents*.
- 15 Hart B, Risley T (1995) *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Brookes Publishing Co, Baltimore, USA.
- 16 Sigafoos J, Arthur M (2003) *Challenging behaviour and developmental disability*: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co, Baltimore, USA.
- 17 Ledford JR (2011) Teaching imitation to young children with disabilities: A review of the literature. *Top Early Child Spec Educ* 30: 245-255.
- 18 Rosenberg S, Abbeduto L (1993) *Language and communication in mental retardation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, USA.
- 19 Beeghly M, Weiss-Perry B, Cicchetti D (1990) Beyond Sensorimotor Functioning: Early Communicative and Play Development of Children with Down Syndrome Children with Down Syndrome in : A Developmental Perspective. *Child Down Syndrome* 3: 329-368.
- 20 Kelley K, Tager-Flusberg H (1994) Discourse Characteristics of Children with Williams Syndrome: Evidence of Spared Theory of Mind Abilities.
- 21 Flusberg HT, Sullivan K (1998) Early Language Development in Children with Mental Retardation *Handbook of Mental Retardation and Development* 2: 208-239.
- 22 Lesser R, Hassig S (1986) Knowledge and Opinions of Speech Therapy in Teachers, Doctors and Nurses. *Child: Care, Health Dev* 4: 235-249.
- 23 Steven G (2002) *Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children*: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.
- 24 Russu CS, Valeria (2017) Using storytelling to improve communication skills of children with intellectual disability. Paper presented at the 26th International Congress on Educational Sciences (ICES/UEBK - 2017), Antalya, Turkey.
- 25 Pelin PA, Kayhan N (2016) An Investigation of the Effect of the Communication Skills of the Children with Intellectual Disability to the Anxiety Level of Their Mothers. *Univ J Edu Res* 4: 2423-2431.
- 26 Harel S, Greenstein Y, Kramer U, Yifat R, Samuel E, Nevo, Y, et al. (1996) Clinical characteristics of children referred to a child Development Centre for Evaluation of Speech, Language, and Communication Disorders. *Paediatric Neurol* 3: 305-311.
- 27 Jacob US, Olisaemeka AN, Edozie IS (2015) Developmental and Communication Disorders in Children with Intellectual Disability: The Place Early Intervention for Effective Inclusion. *J Edu Pract* 2: 1.
- 28 Hebbeler K, Spiker D, Bailey D, Scarborough AA, Mallik S, Simeonsson RJ, et al. (2007) Early Intervention for Infants & Toddlers with Disabilities and their Families: Participants, Services, and Outcomes.
- 29 Hickman C, Jones K (2009) *Inclusive Practice for Children with Special Education Needs An Introduction to Early Childhood: A Multidisciplinary Approach* 5: 126-151.
- 30 Memisevic H, Hadzic S (2013) *Speech and Language Disorders in Children with Intellectual Disability in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Centre for Education and Rehabilitation, Mjedenica, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- 31 McIntosh B, Crosbie S, Holm AT, Sian, Dodd B (2007) Enhancing the Phonological Awareness and Language Skills of Socially Disadvantaged Preschoolers: An Interdisciplinary Programme. *Child Lang Teach Ther* 2: 267-286.
- 32 Bailin S (1998) Critical thinking and drama education. *Res Drama Edu* 3: 145-155.
- 33 Fewell RR, Notari A, Wheeden A (1997) The Relationship between Play and Communication Skills in Young Children with Down Syndrome. *J Hamil Inst on Disabil* 3: 103-118.
- 34 O'Toolev C, Chiat CO (2006) Symbolic functioning and language development in children with Down syndrome. *Int J Lang Commun Dis* 41: 155-171.