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Interpersonal Communication Between Parents and Children With Down Syndrome: A Descriptive Study on Developing Speaking Skills and Interests

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Abstract: This study investigates the patterns of interpersonal communication (IC) employed by parents of children with Down Syndrome (DS) to foster their children's speaking skills and interests. Children with Down Syndrome (Trisomy 21) often experience developmental delays, including challenges in verbal communication, which necessitates specialized and effective communication strategies from their caregivers. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research conducted in-depth interviews and observations with three parents of children with DS in Bekasi, Indonesia. The theoretical framework utilizes Joseph A. DeVito's characteristics of effective interpersonal communication, namely Openness, Empathy, Supportiveness, Positiveness, and Equality. The findings reveal that parents effectively overcome communication barriers—such as the child's difficulty with message comprehension and active disposition—by consistently applying these principles. Key strategies include using simple, repetitive language and visual aids (Openness), prioritizing the child's perspective and non-verbal cues (Empathy), and providing tailored emotional and practical encouragement (Supportiveness). The study concludes that the deliberate and effective application of interpersonal communication techniques by parents is crucial in creating a supportive learning environment that successfully stimulates the development of speaking ability and cultivates the child's innate interests.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Down Syndrome, Speaking Skills, Parent-Child Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs (CSN), also referred to as exceptional children, are those who possess unique characteristics or limitations not commonly found among other children. As stated by Kosasih (2012), CSN often face learning barriers and may not achieve optimal development in general education settings due to challenges related to mental, physical, intellectual, or emotional conditions. These children require specialized educational approaches and communication methods tailored to their individual abilities. Ummah (2018)

emphasized that CSN need emotional support, social interaction, and structured guidance to develop discipline and self-awareness.

Among the various types of special needs, intellectual disabilities—particularly Down syndrome—require specific communication and learning strategies. Down syndrome, also known as *trisomy 21*, occurs when a child is born with an extra copy of chromosome 21, leading to delayed physical and cognitive development (Fadhli, 2022). Data from Indonesia's *Basic Health Research (Riskesdas)* indicate an increasing trend of Down syndrome cases: 0.12% in 2010, 0.13% in 2013, and 0.21% in 2018. Children with Down syndrome often face developmental delays, including fine motor skills, speech, and language comprehension (Wardah, 2019). Therefore, effective and adaptive communication between parents and children becomes crucial for supporting their learning process.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), between 3,000 and 5,000 babies with Down syndrome are born globally each year. In response, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) promotes inclusive education through the *Merdeka Belajar* policy to ensure equal opportunities and well-being for all students. Despite these efforts, parents of children with Down syndrome continue to experience significant emotional and physical exhaustion due to the high demands of caregiving and education. Preliminary research conducted between November 2023 and June 2024 found that parents often struggle with maintaining patience, managing fatigue, and encouraging their children's talents and interests, yet remain committed to fostering independence and self-confidence.

The process of nurturing children with Down syndrome requires consistent emotional engagement and effective interpersonal communication. As Suranto (2011) argues, interpersonal communication plays a vital role in social and intellectual development, shaping relationships and learning outcomes. In this context, communication between parents and children with Down syndrome must go beyond verbal interaction; it requires emotional attunement, patience, and nonverbal cues to overcome cognitive and sensory barriers.

Schools and extracurricular activities also serve as essential platforms for self-development and social learning (Suryobroto, 2005). Parents play a central role in identifying and nurturing their children's interests through daily communication, encouragement, and participation in supportive activities such as art or music lessons. However, the process is not without challenges—limited verbal ability, slow information processing, and emotional sensitivity can hinder effective communication. Thus, interpersonal communication becomes a key factor in enabling children with Down syndrome to express themselves, develop their talents, and achieve greater autonomy.

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on how parents build and maintain interpersonal communication with their children with Down syndrome to develop interests and talents. The research aims to describe the patterns, strategies, and emotional dynamics of parent-child interactions that support personal growth and learning among children with Down syndrome.

Based on the background, the primary research question is: How is the interpersonal communication carried out by parents when communicating with children with Down Syndrome in developing speaking skills and building interests?

The objective of this research is to ascertain and understand the nature of the interpersonal communication established by parents when interacting with their children with Down Syndrome, specifically focusing on its role in cultivating speaking skills and interests within the home environment.

The Concept of Interpersonal Communication (IC)

Interpersonal communication (IC) is defined as a direct, face-to-face communication process between two or more people that generates immediate feedback in response to the message conveyed. It is a high-frequency form of social interaction. IC is characterized by the intimacy of the parties involved (Hanani, 2017) , and allows for the simultaneous exchange of verbal and non-verbal reactions (Mulyana, 2008; Azehari & Khotimah, 2015). The characteristics of IC include messages delivered through both verbal and non-verbal means, focusing on content and relationship, containing feedback and coherence, and involving active, mutual interaction aimed at influencing each other's thoughts and attitudes (Rustan & Haqiqi, 2017).

For children with Down Syndrome, communication differs due to their specific disabilities. Thus, the family unit (parents and child) plays a critical role in enhancing the child's communication abilities by paying attention to the context, content, and form of the message (Wardah, 2019).

Characteristics of Effective Interpersonal Communication

Joseph A. DeVito outlines five core qualities for effective interpersonal communication (Saputra, 2020), which form the analytical framework for this study:

1. Openness (Keterbukaan): This involves three aspects: willingness to disclose information (self-disclosure) appropriately; willingness to react honestly to external stimuli; and acknowledging ownership of one's feelings and thoughts. For parents, this means creating a dialogical atmosphere where both parent and child can interact honestly.
2. Empathy (Empati): Defined as the ability to "know" what another person is experiencing from their perspective (Backrack). Accurate empathy requires both sensitivity to the feelings present and the verbal skill to communicate that understanding. In the parent-child relationship, empathy means understanding the child's motivations, experiences, and feelings, and avoiding judgmental evaluations or criticism.
3. Supportiveness (Perilaku Suportif): Effective relationships are characterized by a supportive attitude that minimizes defensiveness. A supportive environment is created when parents genuinely value the child's ideas, provide sincere attention, and use descriptive rather than evaluative language. This is key to cultivating the child's motivation.
4. Positiveness (Perilaku Positif): Requires a positive attitude toward both oneself and the communication situation. This is often manifested through stroking or positive encouragement, such as praise and appreciation, which supports the child's self-image.
5. Equality (Kesetaraan): Communication is more effective when there is an underlying sense of equality, recognizing that both parties are equally valuable and worthwhile. This principle demands unconditional positive regard for the other person, where disagreements are viewed as efforts to understand differences rather than opportunities to undermine the other party.

Communication Barriers

Communication is not without obstacles. Potential barriers include mechanical disturbances (physical or channel-related conflicts), semantic disturbances (misunderstanding of terms or concepts), self-interest (choosing to perceive only certain parts of a message), hidden motivation (ignoring messages that contradict one's drives), and prejudice (emotional

bias leading to illogical conclusions). These barriers are amplified when communicating with children with DS due to their cognitive limitations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive research design. This approach allows the researcher to naturally interpret and understand the phenomena as they occur in the field—specifically, the interpersonal communication patterns between parents and their children with Down Syndrome. The descriptive nature aims to provide a detailed, in-depth account of the observed communication processes.

Participants and Setting

The research participants (informants) were three mothers who are categorized as highly knowledgeable about communicating with their children with Down Syndrome.

- Informant 1 (Ibu Theresia): Mother of Dea (9 years old), residing in Bumi Dirgantara Permai, Bekasi.
- Informant 2 (Ibu Elda Sari): Mother of Anna (11 years old), residing in Puri Gardenia Babelan, Bekasi.
- Informant 3 (Ibu Yanti): Mother of Asfa (12 years old), residing in Prima Harapan, Bekasi.

The research was conducted through pre-research and main research activities taking place in the homes of the informants in the Bekasi area, Indonesia.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through three primary methods:

1. In-depth Interviews: Structured and unstructured conversations were conducted with the parents to gather detailed accounts of their communication strategies, challenges, and goals.
2. Observation: Direct observation of parent-child interaction during daily activities was performed to validate and contextualize the interview data.
3. Literature Study: Review of relevant academic texts and previous research on interpersonal communication and special needs was conducted to establish the theoretical framework.

Data Validity

To ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the data, the study employed Source Triangulation. This technique involved gathering the same data or information from various sources—in this case, three different parents—to establish a coherent and reliable understanding of the phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this descriptive study detail how parents utilize the components of effective interpersonal communication to address communication barriers and promote the development of speaking skills and interests in their children with Down Syndrome.

Communication Barriers and General Strategies

The primary challenge identified by parents is the child's difficulty with message comprehension and their inherent high activity level. To counter this, parents employ core strategies:

- Simple and Repetitive Language: Parents use simple, clear language, often repeating words or sentences slowly to ensure comprehension.
- Visual Aids: Tools such as pictures, visual charts, and educational toys are frequently used to support verbal communication, making the message more concrete and understandable.

Application of Effective IC Characteristics

The findings demonstrate the practical application of DeVito's effective IC characteristics in the parent-child relationship:

1. Openness (Keterbukaan)

Openness is established through parental love, patience, and clear, simple language. Parents actively strive to foster an environment where the child feels safe and understood, thereby enhancing trust. This willingness to be open is key to bridging the communication gap.

- Facilitating Expression: Parents understand that communication difficulties can lead to "bad communication". Therefore, they must be active in helping the child express their feelings and needs, sometimes by offering sentence options or discussing things the child likes to make interaction easier.
- Willingness to Adapt: Parents consistently report the challenge of adjusting their communication to the child's limitations. This perpetual search for the "simple and effective way" to convey complex concepts or changes in routine demonstrates the willingness to react honestly to the child's receptive capacity, a core aspect of openness.

2. Empathy (Empati)

Empathy is a cornerstone of effective IC for these parents, allowing them to overcome the communication barrier by understanding the child's inner world.

- Non-Verbal Sensitivity: Parents actively observe and read their child's non-verbal cues (facial expressions, body language, signs of confusion or discomfort). When a child appears upset or confused, parents respond by approaching gently, speaking softly, and providing comfort before attempting to resolve the issue.
- Prioritizing the Child's Needs: The parents' actions demonstrate a commitment to understanding the child's perspective and placing the child's interests and developmental needs above their own personal preferences. This fulfills the empathetic ideal of "knowing what the other is experiencing through their own eyes".

3. Supportiveness (Perilaku Supportif)

The parents' supportiveness is manifested through tailored motivational strategies that reduce defensiveness and encourage the child to engage.

- Tailored Motivational Techniques: Parents consciously adapt their support to the child's unique needs:
 - One parent adjusts her teaching to the child's mood.
 - Another follows a fixed routine and uses frequent praise and compliments.
 - A third focuses on encouragement and guidance in daily life.
- Fun and Interactive Learning: Supportiveness is directly linked to developing skills. Parents use simple and fun techniques like talking about the child's favorite things to motivate speech. They incorporate regular speech practice using flashcards, games, and daily conversation to actively practice language. This dedicated support creates an open situation and promotes motivation for learning.

4. Positiveness and Equality

While not detailed with separate thematic findings in the data, the observed parental actions demonstrate the presence of Positiveness and Equality:

- **Positiveness:** The consistent use of compliments, praise, and encouragement, as reported by the informants, aligns perfectly with the IC concept of stroking. By appreciating the child's work and showing genuine pleasure in communicating with them, parents reinforce a positive self-image and motivation.
- **Equality:** The parents' empathetic approach and willingness to adapt their superior communication style to the child's level demonstrate unconditional positive regard. They treat the child as a valued individual whose perspective must be understood and accommodated, promoting an atmosphere of relational equality despite the cognitive gap.

Interpersonal Communication in Developing Skills and Interests

The findings confirm that effective IC serves as the primary mechanism for skill development. By utilizing Openness (honest feedback and visual aids) and Supportiveness (tailored encouragement and interactive methods), parents successfully address the core developmental goals:

- **Speaking Skills:** Skills are developed through structured, repetitive practice (flashcards) integrated into daily conversation, often focusing on subjects the child enjoys.
- **Interests and Talents:** Communication is key to discovering and fostering the child's non-verbalized interests (such as drawing or music lessons). The empathetic and supportive communication ensures that these development activities are fun and meaningful, maximizing the child's potential.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that effective interpersonal communication (IC) plays a pivotal role in supporting the development of children with Down syndrome, particularly in overcoming communication barriers and enhancing speaking skills and personal interests. Parents demonstrate a strong understanding and practical application of DeVito's IC components—Openness, Empathy, Supportiveness, Positiveness, and Equality—within daily interactions. Through openness, they create a safe and trusting environment that allows the child to express themselves freely. Empathy enables parents to interpret and respond to non-verbal cues with sensitivity, while supportiveness ensures consistent motivation through praise, patience, and engaging learning methods.

Moreover, the consistent use of simple and repetitive language, visual aids, and interactive activities reinforces comprehension and helps children build communication confidence. These communication strategies are not only linguistic but also emotional, as parents continuously adjust their tone, approach, and expressions to align with their child's needs and moods.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that family-based interpersonal communication is the foundation of developmental progress for children with Down syndrome. By integrating emotional warmth with communication theory in daily practice, parents successfully foster both verbal abilities and personal interests, enabling their children to develop greater independence, self-confidence, and social connectedness.

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