

SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN



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Silence is Not Golden




When a child has little or no speech, he can feel isolated from the rest of his world. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening to a lot of children with Down Syndrome.

In terms of speech development, there still exists great disparities among them; some have little or no speech some can speak moderately well whilst a few exceptional ones seem to possess the gift of the gab.

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Purpose of Study



This study was undertaken to investigate the possibility of other factors, apart from that of specific language impairment, affecting the speech development of children with Down Syndrome.

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This study, being qualitative in nature, adopted the ethnographic approach:


Data was collected via interviews conducted with parents and/or family members of a total of 20 children and young adults with Down Syndrome (ages ranging from 12 - 30 years old) as well as other relevant personnel.

The participants comprised 9 males and 11 females, hailing from diverse socio-cultural as well as economic backgrounds.

None had severe motor or sensory impairments.

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The Results



Band	(1) No of Children out of 20	% Out of total no (20)	(2) No pre-school (Home/baby-sitter)	%	(3) Special Pre school	%	(4) Regular Pre-school	%
0	3	15%	1	35%	2	65%	0	0%
1	1	5%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
2	5	25%	3	60%	2	40%	0	0%
3	10	50%	1	10%	1	10%	8	80%
4	1	5%	0	0%	0	0%	1	100%

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Speech Proficiency Indicator



Band	Features	Description
0		only attempts to make sounds
1	Poor	verbal communication limited to words; unable to speak at sentence levels
2	Fair	Can communicate basic needs through two to three word structure; limited vocabulary; a lot of substitutions
3	Good	Can communicate ideas and speak relatively well
4	Excellent	Communicates like a regularly developing child

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What the Findings show

Pre-school exposure has an impact on their speech development.

In the pilot study, children with Down Syndrome who attended regular pre-school or childcare centres generally exhibited better speech and communication skills than those who attended special pre-schools.

In fact, those who had good or excellent speech and could communicate well never attended special pre-school and their early childhood exposure was either purely mainstream or with regularly-developing peers/brother/sister

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This seems consistent with the views of sociolinguists who regard social interaction as the main foundation of communication development (Schaffer, 1984; Bruner, 1983)

In fact, Vygotsky (1986) and Bruner (1960), both proponents of the socio-linguistic approach to communication and speech development, suggest that a sensitive language environment acts as a language acquisition support system (LASS) which scaffolds the child's speech development.

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The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the influence of culture, peers, and adults on the developing child.

To understand this influence, Vygotsky proposes the "zone of proximal development." This zone refers to the difference in a child's performance when she attempts a problem on her own compared with when a peer provides assistance. The help from the regularly-developing peer is called scaffolding. Just as the scaffolding of a building helps to support it, assistance from mainstream peers in a regular pre-school environment helps support the child's development.

Quite obviously, this type of scaffolding will be quite rare in special pre-schools where all the children require very individualized learning programs tailored to fit their needs.

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The Implication

Children with Down Syndrome should be exposed to a sensitive language environment that can help stimulate the emergence of speech during their pre-school years.

Such an environment can only be found in a regular pre-school.

This is consistent with Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development which seems to tilt the scales in favour of inclusion

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The Challenges Ahead

#1 Lack of Resources

Regular pre-schools, citing lack of resources in the form of manpower and rehabilitative facilities, are reluctant to accept disabled children, thus directly depriving them of a chance to integrate with regularly-developing children.

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#2 The Path of Least Resistance

A lot of parents are not aware of their children's right to education and ways in which they can support their children's learning. So when they encounter obstacles in the form of logistics or rejection from pre-schools of their choice, they take the path of least resistance - at the expense of their child.

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3 Lack of Awareness

There still exist parents who are either unaware of the resources or services available, or are over protective of their disabled children and hide them away, thus limiting their access to the outside world.

Some recommendations . . .

Extending the right to an education for every child to pre-school level

Ensuring that pre-schools and other learning environments clearly demonstrate their commitment to an education which is open to all children and inclusive

Creating greater awareness amongst all those involved in the education process of their roles and responsibilities as nurturers, leaders, decision makers and above all listeners

Developing respect for children as individuals, each with their own aspirations to participate and succeed in education

Conclusion

A leading pre-school in Kuching declares
"Happiness is knowing how to Read"



Among our children, happiness is knowing how to speak.

Help to give our children a voice.

