

DEVELOPING SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS AT PRESCHOOLS

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Abstract: *In recent years, the number of children with autism spectrum disorders is increasing rapidly, these children's need to learn and play is like many other children. However, defects in social interaction and communication are a barrier that make it difficult for them to participate in activities with their peers at school. Therefore, to create opportunities for children to integrate into the community, the role of the teacher in the process of organizing preschool activities is very important. This article provides some measures to developing social communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorders at preschools such as: Adjusting the classroom environment to encourage the communication of the children with autism spectrum disorders; Developing social communication skills based on an individualized education plan; Stimulating children with autism spectrum disorder to join play groups; Developing social interaction skills for children with autism spectrum disorders; Supporting language and communication of children with autism spectrum disorders; Coordinating with parents to support children with autism spectrum disorders in family activities. Research results will suggest preschool teachers in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder to develop communication skills when they participate in activities with their peers in preschool.*

Keywords: *Inclusive education, social communication skills, children with autism spectrum disorders, Kindergarten.*

1. Introduction

The right to access education of children with disabilities in general and children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in particular has always been affirmed in international documents, State policies and educational practice in Vietnam [11, 7]. The purpose of inclusive education is to create opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) to integrate into the community, overcoming barriers caused by the effects of disabilities to access educational services. Early intervention and therapies are methods to help children with autism develop and integrate with the community, recent studies always aim to find measures to support them [2, 3, 5]. Timmons. V.et al. (2006) pointed out some language and communication difficulties of autistic children such as: Limited eye contact, not actively interacting with others, on the basis of which offers some ways to educate children in the inclusive classroom [10, 12]. Besides, some researchers also gave some ways to develop communication skills and adjust linguistic behavior for children with autism to integrate in

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preschool through educational activities and use of functional exercises [8, 9]. It shows that the educational environment in preschool plays an important role in supporting children with autism, stimulating them to communicate through interaction with their peers.

Currently, most children with autism spectrum disorders have been integrated into preschools. The organization of inclusive education is considered as an important educational goal in the intervention and therapy for children, basically meeting their needs and parents. However, it is difficult in educating them to integrate in preschool. In which many reasons stem from the competencies of preschool teachers [6]. Therefore, developing communicative skill of children with autism spectrum disorders in preschool is a priority task, at the same time, orient for fostering a responsive preschool teacher with the goal of teaching children with ASDs and equipping them for the next levels

2. The reaserch content

2.1. What is inclusive education?

According to UNESCO 2009, inclusive education is an ongoing process that aims to provide quality education for all, respecting diversity, differences in learning needs, abilities, characteristics and expectations of students, the community as well as the elimination of all forms of discrimination [3]. The concept of inclusive education is linked to equality, social equity and every child's opportunity to participate. Inclusive education is seen as welcoming, creating values, empowering and helping all children to learn their knowledge and social skills in a common environment and a place to achieve their goals. The goal of quality inclusive education is the basis for achieving human, social and economic development. Besides, some other researchers said that inclusive education is the support for all children, including children with disabilities, to equally receive educational services with necessary supports in the classroom, at school, local in order to prepare them to become useful members of society [7].

According to the article 15 of the Education Law, inclusive education is a mode of education aimed at meeting the different needs and abilities of learners; ensure the right to equal learning, educational quality, and suit the needs, characteristics and capabilities of learners; respect for the diversity of learners and do not discriminate. The State adopts policies to support the implementation of inclusive education for learners being children with special circumstances in accordance with the Law on Children and other relevant laws.

Thus, inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) is also considered an educational method that meets the needs and abilities of each autistic spectrum disorder child, ensuring the right to equal learning and quality of education, in accordance with the children's needs, characteristics and abilities; respecting for diversity, differences and not discriminating against children with autism.

2.2. The children with autism spectrum disorders

ASDs are considered a brain developmental disorder that affects the ability to communicate and build up personal social relationships. Currently, there are many disagreements about the definition of autism as well as its relationship with childhood disabilities, including all learning and language difficulties. There are many opinions and

theories that have been made about the autism. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM - V), Autism Spectrum Disorders) are a lifelong developmental disability that usually occurs during the first three years of life. It is caused by a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain. It can appear in any individual, regardless of gender, nationality or socioeconomic status [1]. ASDs have been identified with the three basic types of difficulty as follows:

- Difficulties in communicating and interacting with others;
- Limiting interests and stereotyped behavior;
- Symptoms impairing their abilities to perform functions in school, work, and other fields normally.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex neurobiological disorder that is characterized by difficulty in communicating verbally and relating socially to others, alongside a need to engage in repetitive behaviors or language. Some common early signs noted by parents are delayed speech, restricted interests, not responding when called by name, and avoiding eye contact.

2.3. The goals of developing social communication skills for children with autism spectrum disorders at preschool

Inclusive education for children with ASDs has been strongly developed in the past two decades. In the years of 1999 - 2001, with the support of a number of international organizations such as UNICEF, CRS, the Vietnam - Netherlands Health Committee, many large-scale projects on early intervention and inclusive education for children with disabilities in general and children in particular are carried out in a number of major cities across the country. These projects have made a significant contribution to building and developing human resources for the special education sector in our country, in which early intervention and inclusive education for children of pre-school children get a lot of attention. However, in addition to these achievements, inclusive education for children with disabilities in general and autistic spectrum disorder in particular is still facing many difficulties. Some of the barriers affecting the quality of inclusive education for children with ASDs can be mentioned such as: Awareness of social communities on inclusive education, quality of management staff and preschool teachers, school environment practice and activities of children in inclusive learning, policy issues, mechanisms, programs, documents, facilities, equipment for inclusive education, and participation of communal forces festival. These are difficulties affecting the organization of inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorders in preschools.

Preschool education program issued under Circular No.17/2009/TT-BGDĐT dated July 25, 2009 and amended according to Circular 28/2016/TT-BGDĐT dated December 30, 2016 was compiled based on point towards the comprehensive development of children, creating conditions for all children to develop continuously and ensuring to meet the diversity of regions and child groups [7]. Applying the preschool program to the process of caring and educating children with disabilities also poses a challenge for preschool teachers. The guiding documents for the implementation of the preschool program with suggestions for the care and education of children with disabilities are only orientation, reference sources about the content, methods and forms of organization and operation to educate children with ASDs have many limitations. Therefore, the goal of organizing an inclusive education for children

with autistic is to help children have opportunities to develop themselves, overcome the limited difficulties caused by the effects of disabilities and access educational services like all children. Through organizing inclusive education for children with autism spectrum disorder, it will aim to support them to communicate and interact better. They know how to flexibly apply their own communication experiences, at the same time, through the support from the teacher, the process of interacting with the classmates, they will know how to use language and non-verbal elements. In addition, the goal of teaching social communication skills also stimulates children to actively interact with their peers, establish relationships with people around them. In addition, teaching social communication for children with ASDs to intergrate in preschool also helps their parents and relatives believe in their development, reduce family's worries about the ability of children with ASDs to integrate into the community.

2.4. Measures of developing social communication skills for children with autism spectrum disorders in preschools

Measure 1: Adjusting the classroom environment to encourage children with ASDs to communicate with other peers

The classroom environment has a great influence on the interaction and communication process between autistic children and their peers. Therefore, in order to stimulate them to communicate and express language during activities, it is necessary to pay attention to adjust the classroom environment, including the physical environment and psychosocial environment.

Adjusting the physical environment: Teachers select and rearrange classroom utensils and toys to suit their active topics and interests, ensure children's safety, and stimulate interaction between children with autism and their peers and vice versa.

Adjusting the psychological environment positively stimulates the autistic children to communicate: Help them feel safe, friendly, and barrier-free, teachers should adjust ways of communicating and interacting with children in all activities including welcoming children. Create feelings and emotions through talking with children with ASDs, praise them for their efforts that children have made during participating in school activities. Enhance interactions with the children in all activities so that they feel respected. Involve them in activities, promote their communication needs, use their appropriate language, pay attention to the use of non-verbal elements such as eye contact, facial expressions and gestures.

Measure 2: Developing social communication skills based on an individualized education plan

In addition to the educational program that is applied to all children, the children with ASDs also need an individual educational plan. Individual education plans help to create opportunities for children to achieve success, achieve set goals and make children feel successful, creating confidence and motivation to continue participating in activities. Therefore, individual education plans help teachers systematically achieve their educational goals. Identify the children's abilities, advantages and disadvantages when they interact with others around them. So, teachers will be more proactive in choosing the contents, methods, and forms that are suitable for the children's characteristics towards educational goals for

them. Adjusting plans and ways of impact to support children to integrate in preschool. In individual education plans, teachers need to focus on some of the following:

Determine educational goals for children with ASDs in the process of integrating.

Choose activities to develop skills for the children with ASDs.

Clearly define the goals, contents and ways of impacting each game in the education of inclusive kindergarten children.

Adjust the children's assessment to stimulate children to communicate and interact in other activities.

Measure 3: Stimulating children with autism spectrum disorders to join play groups

Participating in play groups has important implications for the development of children in general and the children with ASDs in particular. The children with ASDs have serious communication and social interaction disabilities, group play helps children with autism integrate with their peers of the same age, and encourages their friends in the group to play to communicate with autistic children. Through play groups, children will develop important social skills, especially the rule of turning and interacting with each other through appropriate eyes and facial expressions

The teacher identifies the children's difficulties in group play to choose the appropriate play contents, needs and interests with the aim of connecting friends with autistic children and friends in the group play, step by step supporting children to overcome language and communication barriers. Teachers can choose from different play groups to stimulate children to interact and socialize with their peers. However, when they joins the play group, the teacher needs to choose the content that attracts their interest and other friends towards the development of the children's essential skills. The teacher should encourage the children in the play group to interact with the children with ASDs by different methods, such as creating situations during play, talking face-to-face with children to involve them in play activities..

Measure 4: Developing social communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorders through daily activities at preschool

Teaching social communication skill to children with autism spectrum disorders in preschool will help them feel confident and reduce feelings of loneliness, frustration and abandoned in school activities. Besides, It is also a way to practice and develop a number of skills for them such as language skills, interactive skills; cognitive skills or motor skills.

Teachers observe the process of children participating in activities with their peers to recognize the difficulties they are facing, what barriers make it difficult for them to integrate with their peers to have a plan to support and help them. This support is done by direct interaction, or indirect interaction. Teachers can choose learning activities or play activities that give priority to activities that the children are interested in. After that, the teachers base on the classroom education plan to encourage the child to enter some activities where the child is still facing many difficulties. Every child with autism spectrum disorder has unique needs and abilities. Therefore, the selection of educational content must be based on the unique characteristics of each child, such as language restrictions, communication and social interaction, other children with behavioral disorders or tutoring syndrome “Attention Deficit - Hyperactivity Disorder” (AD/ HD) to have appropriate educational measures. Thus, the support for children with autism spectrum

disorder through personal education will create a sense of safety, reduce anxiety and isolation when they attend preschool. In addition, supporting the children also helps teachers to grasp the child's development level, see the progress in each play session, and recognize the child's difficulties in order to promptly adjust the support in individual education plan.

Measure 5: Developing social interaction skills of children with autism spectrum disorders

One of the most noticeable defects in children with autism spectrum disorder is social interaction skills, which is the reason why children have difficulty in joining activities at school. Therefore, developing social interaction skills to help children integrate into the community and actively participate in activities with their peers at preschool.

Teachers attract children's attention to school activities, even at the time of picking up and dropping off children, teachers need to pay attention to coordinate with parents to teach children to interact with teachers such as: greetings, express joy, say goodbye. Encourage autistic children to participate in group activities and group games. During the playing time, teachers need to maintain children's attention by calling their names often but purpose fully, using visual stimuli and symbols to maintain children's listening attention. When children with autism spectrum disorder tend to be isolated, or alone, they often play alone with their own interests in one area of the classroom, at school, and teachers connect with them regularly for them feel closeness, safety and express their needs and interests. On the other hand, the teacher encourages the peers, in the group to play support for children with autism and share some of their difficulties and gradually accept their differences.

Measure 6: Supporting language and communication of children with autism spectrum disorders

Language and communication of children with autism spectrum disorders are more limited than other children. Therefore, their learning and playing in preschool face many difficulties. Therefore, education of language and communication for children with autism spectrum disorders through school activities have an important role, to help them have a positive communication environment to interact with peers. On the other hand, the education of language and communication skills for children with autism spectrum disorder in preschool is also an intervention measure and therapy for children, limiting defects that make it difficult for children to integrate into the community and step by step help them become normal people like many other peers.

Teachers need to create a positive communication environment in the classroom, take regular care of the children, talk to them, combine attentive gestures so that children feel close, friendly and safe. When children participate in activities with their peers, the teacher needs to create excitement so that the child will be impressed and interested in what's happening. Call out children's names regularly while active activities are in progress to attract children's attention, stimulate children to communicate.

Encouraging children every time they complete a task, it could be words in front of their peers or by gestures that show closeness and love like holding the baby or gently touching the child's shoulder or head. In addition, through each activity, the teacher encourages children to use spoken language and make eye contact, smiles, and suggestions for children to use sentence patterns while communicating with their peers, for example: If the child can say the word "ball", the teacher should practice her to speak poorly with adjectives such as "the blue ball". On the contrary, the teacher encourages the other

classmates to stay close to the child, often play and support the child when the child shows signs of alienation to play alone. Teachers use everyday situations and topics that their classmates are interested in to create opportunities for children to interact with their peers on different communication topics. Encourage your child to communicate with different responses such as clapping, smiling, and cuddling so that he or she understands and wants to interact in a variety of preschool activities.

Teaching the children to communicate through personal education plans. In each activity, the teacher spends 10 - 15 minutes practising with the child, noting the communication difficulties that autistic children are facing such as: verbal skill; nonverbal; skills.

Measure 7: Coordinating with parents to support children with autism spectrum disorder in family activities

In order to follow a child's progress, schools and parents need a close coordination that will find ways to support children and development strategies through interactive family activities. A positive educational environment is a place where families can always share information about children's education and development at school, especially finding it difficult to plan intervention and support for children.

Teachers need to share about some educational methods for children to apply when children play at home. In addition, suggesting some activities to stimulate children to interact, communicate such as playing with children anytime, anywhere, chatting often at different times and needing attention to practice overall communication skills for children at home. In addition, teachers also need to discuss children's shortcomings while playing with their peers, inappropriate behaviors, and teachers' difficulties when educating children at school. On the contrary, a child's parents can share their child's progress on a daily basis, even if it is a very small change, while also providing the teacher with their child's unique traits for them to adjust to support children in classroom activities. Therefore, teachers can communicate directly with parents at pick up times or through other means. The coordination between teachers and parents of children will create an equal and friendly educational environment, demonstrating the right to access education for all children.

3. Conclusion

The educational environment in preschool plays an important role in the process of intervention and therapy for children with autism spectrum disorders. The goal of teaching social communication skills for them in kindergatens is to create opportunities for children to establish and interact with other children, helping them integrate into the community. Besides, it helps parents to believe in their child's communication skill development, see the child as well as many other children. Children with autism spectrum disorders have communication and social interaction defects, building educational goals through preschool activities requires teachers to have understandings and skills at caring and educating the child, at the same time, it is necessary to know how to adjust the ways to support children through group activities and individual educational activities. Creating a positive psychological environment to stimulate children to participate in activities with their peers. The proposed measures will suggest teachers and children's parents in the process of

educating social communication skill of children with autism spectrum disorders in preschools which will support them to integrate into the community, get into high school and make contributions to society. The application of measures to develop communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorders in inclusive classes in preschools needs to be flexible and based on each child's ability. In addition, preschool teachers need to evaluate and monitor the child's communication skills development based on individual education plans to apply appropriate educational measures to support early integration into the community.

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