

As A Leading Activity, Play Holds Special Significance For The Speech Development Of Preschool-Aged Children With Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract: This article explores the role of play as a leading activity in the development of speech in preschool children with intellectual disabilities, with particular emphasis on the pedagogical potential of didactic games in correctional and educational practice. Early childhood is considered a critical period for the formation of personality, cognitive processes, voluntary behavior, and especially speech development. However, for children with intellectual impairments, these developmental processes require specially organized pedagogical support. The study highlights that play activity serves as the primary natural environment in which children acquire communication skills, expand vocabulary, and develop coherent speech. Among various types of play, didactic games are identified as especially effective, as they combine learning objectives with engaging and emotionally rich activity. Through structured game situations, children are encouraged to actively participate in speech interactions, practice sound pronunciation, develop phonemic awareness, and improve grammatical structures of language. The article also analyzes different types of didactic games, including verbal, sensory, and motor-based activities, demonstrating their role in stimulating cognitive functions such as attention, memory, perception, and logical thinking. Special attention is given to the importance of adult participation in guiding play, modeling correct speech behavior, and creating communicative situations that motivate children to express themselves. Furthermore, the research emphasizes that didactic games contribute not only to speech development but also to the correction of developmental delays by fostering motivation, emotional engagement, and social interaction. They help children with intellectual disabilities gradually transition from nonverbal communication to active verbal expression, from isolated words to structured speech.

Keywords: Didactic games, preschool education, intellectual disabilities, speech development, cognitive development, correctional pedagogy, play-based learning, vocabulary enrichment, phonemic awareness, communication skills, attention development, memory development, motor skills development, emotional engagement, social interaction, individualized learning, role-playing games, early childhood development, educational process, behavioral development.

Introduction: Preschool age is a unique and crucial stage of a child's development, during which the foundations of personality are formed, willpower and voluntary behavior are developed, and key psychological processes such as thinking, perception, attention, imagination, and speech are actively emerging. This period is also characterized by the rapid development of creativity and general initiative. However, it is important to emphasize that these

essential qualities are not primarily formed through formal instructional activities, but rather within the leading and most significant activity of the preschool child — play.

Play has a central role in the overall development of children at preschool age, particularly in the formation and enrichment of speech. The nature of play activity directly influences speech functions, the content of communication, and the means through which children

interact with others. Different types of play activities are widely used to support and enhance speech development, each contributing in its own specific way to the improvement of communicative abilities.

In creative role-playing games, children's dialogical speech becomes more developed and structured. These games create a natural need for the use of coherent monologue speech, as children begin to express their thoughts, describe actions, and explain roles within the game context. Such interactions encourage children to move beyond simple responses and engage in more meaningful and extended verbal communication.

The role of the teacher in this process is especially significant. The active participation of the educator in children's play, the discussion of game plans and processes, and the intentional focus on language use all have a positive impact on speech development. By providing clear, concise, and accurate speech models, and by engaging children in conversations about past and future games, educators help children expand their linguistic abilities and improve the quality of their communication.

A particularly important place in the pedagogical process is occupied by didactic games. These games are purposefully designed to address various tasks of speech development. Through didactic games, children's vocabulary is enriched and actively expanded, correct pronunciation is formed, and coherent speech is systematically developed. At the same time, such games also support the development of cognitive processes, making learning both effective and engaging for preschool children.

Verbal games are primarily aimed at the development of speech, the formation of correct pronunciation, as well as the clarification, consolidation, and active enrichment of children's vocabulary. Through such games, children not only learn new words but also learn how to use them correctly in different communicative situations. For example, the game "Who lives in the house?" helps children reinforce their knowledge of animals while also practicing correct pronunciation of sounds and improving their ability to name objects and living beings accurately.

Traditional nursery rhymes and movement-based games such as "Ladushki" and "The Horned Goat" play an important role in early speech development. These

games train children to carefully listen to the educator's speech, to match actions with words in rhymes, to respond to questions, and to complete sentences. Such activities gradually develop children's ability to understand spoken language and actively participate in verbal interaction.

One effective method for stimulating a child's speech activity is the game "Assignments" (or "Instructions"). In this type of activity, the educator gives simple, meaningful tasks, for example: asking a child to bring a doll, place a pyramid on a shelf, give a red ball to a large doll, or a blue cube to a small one. After completing the task, the child is encouraged to answer questions such as: "What did you bring?" and "Where did you put it?" This type of questioning strengthens expressive speech and helps children form simple but meaningful sentences.

In didactic games such as "Dress the doll for a walk," "Put the doll to bed," and "Feed the doll lunch," children become familiar with the surrounding world and everyday life situations. This contributes significantly to both general development and speech development. Moreover, children gradually transfer the skills acquired in didactic games into role-playing activities involving dolls, thereby reinforcing and expanding their communicative experience in more spontaneous contexts.

Other didactic games such as "Guess who is speaking," "Guess what is in the bag," "Guess what I am doing," "Name objects of blue (red, yellow) color," "Say what is sounding," "How does the rooster crow," "How does the bell ring," and "Guess and say who makes what sound" are specifically designed to develop phonemic hearing, refine children's understanding of color and form, and train them in sound imitation. These activities are essential for building the foundations of correct speech perception and production.

For non-verbal or minimally verbal children, games that require coordination and precise finger movements are particularly important. Such activities include threading beads, hammering pegs, mosaic games, and finger games like "Ladushki," "Magpie-Crow," "Guli-gulenk," and "Finger-boy." These exercises support the development of fine motor skills, which are closely linked to speech development, especially in early childhood.

A didactic game should always include a model of correct speech behavior. It should help develop children's attention to language and activate their existing speech abilities. It is essential to create conditions in which children are encouraged to speak voluntarily, based on their own initiative and interest, often motivated by engaging toys or game situations. At first, children may express themselves through emotional exclamations and sound imitations. Gradually, these develop into single words, then into word combinations, and eventually into simple sentences, marking a progressive development of their speech abilities.

The use of didactic games in the educator's work significantly contributes to the development of children's speech activity. These games create a structured yet engaging environment in which speech is naturally stimulated through interaction, imitation, and purposeful communication. As a result, children become more active participants in verbal exchanges, gradually improving both their expressive and receptive language skills.

One of the most important conditions for successful speech development during active and movement-based games is the genuine interest of the children themselves. Therefore, all games organized by the educator should be conducted in an emotional, lively, and relaxed manner. A positive emotional atmosphere helps children feel comfortable, reduces psychological barriers to communication, and encourages spontaneous speech production.

For younger preschool children, emotional and imaginative perception of the surrounding world is particularly characteristic. In corrective and developmental practice, it is highly effective to use sound imitation games. For example, in the game "Sparrows and the Car," children imitate natural and mechanical sounds. The educator encourages sound reproduction such as "pi-pi-pi" representing the chirping of sparrows and "bi-bi-bi" representing the sound of a car. Such activities not only develop phonemic awareness but also help children associate sounds with real-world objects and actions.

Didactic games are characterized by clearly defined content and rules. Their main purpose is to organize children's activity and interpersonal relationships in a

purposeful direction. During these games, a child not only enriches their speech but also actively corrects and improves it. Importantly, speech disorders are not corrected in isolation; instead, speech activity is developed within the structure of play and in close connection with it. In this context, speech activity is understood as a complex system of speaking and understanding processes that form the basis of communicative and social interaction. It includes not only verbal expression but also gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and vocal reactions.

Didactic games, while having an implicit pedagogical goal of forming correct speech, simultaneously provide children with new knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and improve grammatical structures of language. They also contribute to the development of mental processes, especially cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and thinking.

In addition, these games develop children's logical thinking, imagination, and perceptual abilities, particularly in relation to color, size, and shape of objects. In picture-based games, children learn to classify objects and phenomena, which strengthens mental operations such as comparison, generalization, and categorization.

In the process of didactic play, children with intellectual disabilities develop a more stable speech rhythm, improved intonation, and greater expressiveness. Their pronunciation becomes more accurate, and they gradually learn to structure their thoughts in a logical and sequential manner. These games also help children develop appropriate communicative behavior, including maintaining eye contact, listening attentively, and responding appropriately during conversation.

Furthermore, during didactic games, children learn to ask questions, give correct answers, describe game situations, take on leadership roles, and evaluate results. All of these activities contribute to the gradual and systematic development of their speech abilities. In this way, didactic games serve as an essential tool in fostering both linguistic competence and social communication skills in children with intellectual disabilities.

In the process of educating and training children with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays in cognitive functioning, it is often observed that such

children are unable to study effectively in mainstream preschool settings due to the specific nature of their developmental difficulties. These challenges in mastering educational material frequently lead to a decrease in motivation and interest in learning activities. As a result, one of the most important tasks in the early stages of preschool education for these children is to awaken their interest in learning, engage them emotionally, capture their attention, and actively stimulate their participation in educational activities.

To achieve this goal, educators use a wide range of teaching methods and techniques, including the use of colorful didactic materials and visual aids. These resources help to involve children in practical, hands-on learning processes and support their understanding of basic concepts through direct interaction with objects. Among all these methods, didactic games are considered one of the most effective tools for stimulating genuine interest in learning activities, as they combine educational content with play-based engagement.

Children with intellectual disabilities often use didactic materials as toys during lessons, without fully understanding their educational purpose. This behavioral characteristic is also noted by educators in mainstream preschools when describing children who are later referred to specialized educational institutions. Such behavior reflects both the developmental level of the child and the need for a more structured and purposeful approach to learning.

The natural desire to play and the strong need for play activity in preschool children with intellectual disabilities should be carefully utilized and directed toward achieving specific corrective and educational goals. Ignoring these needs in the correctional and educational process would mean neglecting the fundamental characteristics of the child's development. Therefore, play must be considered not only as a natural activity but also as a powerful pedagogical tool.

Through play, it becomes possible to capture and maintain the attention of children with intellectual disabilities, even toward objects and materials that would normally not attract their interest. In ordinary circumstances, these children may struggle to focus their attention, but within the context of a game, their engagement significantly increases. Didactic games,

therefore, provide an opportunity to address various pedagogical tasks in a form that is both accessible and appealing to this category of children.

Moreover, didactic games help to establish continuity between the child's upbringing in the family, the preschool environment—where play is the dominant form of activity—and later school-based education. This continuity is essential for ensuring a smoother transition between different stages of learning and development.

The primary form of organized education in preschool settings is the structured lesson or activity. Integrating didactic games into these lessons, especially those that meet educational and developmental requirements, helps to align new learning activities with familiar play-based experiences. This makes the learning process less stressful and more natural for children with intellectual disabilities.

Teaching children to play while simultaneously learning to count, solve problems, build, and construct objects fosters the development of essential cognitive and practical skills needed for future education. Through such activities, children gradually develop attention, concentration, goal-directed behavior, and persistence in achieving tasks.

At the initial stages, these educational activities often include elements of familiar games. As the child grows older and develops higher cognitive abilities, these game elements are gradually reduced, and more structured learning tasks are introduced. In this process, the educator plays a crucial role by introducing new methods to stimulate, maintain, and expand cognitive interest.

Without teaching children with intellectual disabilities how to effectively participate in didactic games during the early stages of education, it would be difficult to develop sustained learning motivation. At first, the child becomes interested in the game itself, and only later does interest shift to the learning material embedded within the game. Gradually, this leads to the emergence of interest in the academic subject itself, forming the foundation for further cognitive and educational development.

The value of didactic games in the educational process lies in the fact that they are specifically designed for instructional purposes and serve the goals of teaching,

upbringing, and overall child development. Through the systematic use of didactic games in classroom activities, educators are able to achieve more solid, meaningful, and consciously acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies. Unlike traditional forms of instruction, didactic games allow children to learn in a more natural and engaging way, where educational content is embedded within playful activity.

During play, children complete a large number of tasks without consciously perceiving them as formal learning exercises. Their attention is fully focused on the game itself and on achieving game-related goals. At the same time, they are actively overcoming difficulties and applying previously acquired knowledge in new and unfamiliar situations. This becomes especially important in cases where it is difficult to teach children to transfer knowledge to changing contexts, to maintain their attention on repetitive tasks for a long time, and to sustain interest, active participation, volitional effort, and persistence in achieving learning objectives.

Didactic games also stimulate children's imagination and create a positive emotional atmosphere, as they are closely connected to the child's natural interests and developmental needs. Because of this emotional engagement, children perceive learning as enjoyable rather than demanding, which significantly increases their willingness to participate in educational activities.

The positive emotions experienced during play activate children's cognitive activity and support the development of voluntary attention, memory, and associative thinking. They also contribute to the formation of important intellectual skills such as comparison, analysis, generalization, and logical reasoning. This clearly demonstrates the corrective and developmental role of didactic games in early childhood education.

Furthermore, didactic games allow for the individualization of the learning process. Educators can provide tasks that are appropriate for each child's level of intellectual and psychophysical development, ensuring that every child can participate successfully and experience a sense of achievement. In this way, the individual abilities of each preschool child are developed to the maximum extent.

In group or collective games, didactic activities also play an important role in shaping children's personal

qualities. Children learn to consider the interests of others, regulate their own desires, and work cooperatively within a group. As a result, preschool children develop a sense of responsibility, strengthen their willpower, and form essential character traits that are important for their future social adaptation and personal growth.

Conclusion

Didactic games are an essential pedagogical tool in the development of preschool children, especially those with intellectual disabilities. They provide an effective way to organize the learning process in an engaging, emotional, and child-centered form. Through play-based activities, children actively develop speech skills, expand their vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and enhance their communicative abilities. In addition, didactic games significantly contribute to the development of cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and thinking. They help children learn to apply previously acquired knowledge in new situations, develop problem-solving skills, and strengthen logical thinking. The use of games in education also allows for individualization of learning, taking into account each child's abilities and developmental level, which increases motivation and participation. Moreover, didactic games foster positive emotional engagement and support the development of social and personal qualities such as cooperation, responsibility, self-control, and perseverance. Children learn to interact with peers, respect others' interests, and follow rules within group activities. In conclusion, didactic games play a crucial role not only in speech development but also in the overall psychological, cognitive, and social development of preschool children. They prepare children with intellectual disabilities for successful social adaptation and create a strong foundation for their future educational progress.

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