



HOW DO THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMS PROVIDED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AFFECT CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN ARAB INSTITUTIONS IN ISRAEL?

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Abstract:

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of workers in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel regarding the impact of therapeutic programs provided to children from birth to the age of three on their long-term growth and development, and the factors that affect the effectiveness of these programs. The study adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including nursery directors, educators, counselors, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and emotional therapists. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that early detection, continuity of intervention, collaboration among members of the multidisciplinary team, and effective family partnerships are key factors for the success of therapeutic programs and achieving their long-term impact. The results also indicated that these programs contribute to improving children's linguistic, cognitive, motor, social, and emotional development, and enhance their readiness to integrate into subsequent educational stages. Conversely, challenges emerged in the form of a lack of specialized staff, limited resources, and weak participation from some families. The study concludes that achieving a sustainable impact of therapeutic programs requires the integration of efforts between educational institutions, therapeutic teams, and families, in addition to developing supportive policies for early intervention services in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel.

Keywords: early childhood; early intervention; therapeutic programs; child development; multidisciplinary team; family partnership; long-term development; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The early childhood stage, extending from birth to the age of three, is one of the most influential stages in a person's life, as it witnesses rapid growth in cognitive, linguistic,

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motor, social, and emotional aspects, making it a crucial stage for laying the foundations of learning, health, and well-being in later stages of life (Richter *et al.*, 2019; Heckman, 2006). The literature indicates that investing in this stage yields long-term educational, social, and economic returns, especially when early intervention services are provided to children that comprehensively address their developmental needs (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Black *et al.*, 2017).

Therapeutic programs are considered one of the most important components of early intervention, as they include occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physical therapy, emotional therapy, and other services aimed at enhancing the overall development of children and reducing the impact of developmental delays before they worsen. Studies have shown that early intervention contributes to the improvement of linguistic, cognitive, and social abilities, and enhances children's readiness to integrate into subsequent educational environments, especially when programs are implemented through interdisciplinary teams and in partnership with families (Jeong *et al.*, 2021; Jasmin *et al.*, 2017; Mateo Pérez & Nicolás Ríos, 2024).

Despite the growing global interest in early intervention programs, qualitative studies exploring the impact of these programs in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel remain limited, especially from the perspective of field workers who are directly involved in providing therapeutic services and monitoring children. Additionally, challenges related to resource availability, professional competencies, and collaboration with families may affect the quality and outcomes of these programs (Silverman & Blank, 2023; Vaknin, 2020). Based on this, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of workers in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel regarding the impact of therapeutic programs on children's long-term growth and development, and the factors that contribute to enhancing their effectiveness or hinder the achievement of their goals.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, early childhood therapeutic programs have attracted increasing attention, driven by a growing body of scientific evidence confirming that the early years of life are a critical period in shaping children's future development. The literature has addressed this field from multiple angles, including the importance of early childhood, the effectiveness of intervention programs, the factors influencing their success, and the role of families and professional staff in supporting children's development. In light of this, this section reviews the most relevant literature related to the themes of the current study, leading to the identification of the research gap that prompted this study.

2.1 Early Childhood

The early childhood stage, extending from birth to the age of three, is one of the most sensitive phases in a person's life, as it witnesses rapid growth in the brain and in various cognitive, linguistic, motor, social, and emotional aspects. Studies indicate that the experiences a child acquires during this stage directly affect their ability to learn, adapt

socially, maintain mental health, and achieve academic success in later stages of life (Richter *et al.*, 2019; Black *et al.*, 2017). Heckman (2006) believes that investing in early childhood is one of the most efficient investments due to the long-term educational, social, and economic returns it achieves. Cunha and Heckman (2007) also confirm that the skills built in the early years form the foundation for acquiring future skills, and that delaying intervention reduces the chances of compensating for developmental gaps later on.

In the same context, Blossfeld *et al.* (2017) explained that providing supportive educational and therapeutic environments during the early years contributes to enhancing the overall development of children and reduces the likelihood of developmental delays persisting, while Britto *et al.* (2017) confirmed that the quality of care and positive interaction with the child represent a fundamental element in building cognitive and social abilities. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) also indicated that early interventions provided during the early years have a sustainable impact on improving health, growth, and learning, especially for children most at risk of developmental hazards.

The literature shows a broad consensus that early childhood is not just an age stage, but rather a critical developmental window where biological, familial, educational, and social factors intersect to shape the child's developmental trajectory. This perspective is supported by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), who argue that children's development is shaped through continuous interactions between the child and multiple environmental systems, including the family, educational settings, and the wider community. Furthermore, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasized that the early years of life represent a unique period of rapid brain development, during which early experiences shape the neural architecture that underpins future learning, behavior, and health. Accordingly, providing timely therapeutic and educational interventions during this developmental window increases children's opportunities to achieve positive long-term developmental outcomes and reduces the risk of persistent developmental difficulties.

Therefore, investing in educational and therapeutic services during this stage is a fundamental pillar for enhancing opportunities for holistic growth and reducing the long-term effects of developmental delays, which justifies the increasing interest in early intervention programs in educational and health policies worldwide

2.2 Early Childhood Intervention Programs

Early intervention programs are among the most effective strategies in supporting children who experience developmental delays or are at risk of developing them, as they aim to provide comprehensive therapeutic and educational services during the early years of life, a period characterized by high brain plasticity and greater responsiveness to therapeutic interventions (Guralnick, 2017; Jeong *et al.*, 2021). These programs include a wide range of specialized services, such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physical therapy, and emotional therapy, in addition to family counseling

programs and play-based interventions, which aim to enhance the child's overall development and improve their functional and adaptive abilities (Jasmin *et al.*, 2018; Mateo Pérez & Nicolás Ríos, 2024).

The literature confirms that the effectiveness of early intervention programs is not only related to the provision of therapeutic services but also depends on the timing of the intervention, its comprehensiveness, continuity, and alignment with the individual needs of each child. Jeong *et al.* (2021) pointed out that organized early intervention significantly contributes to the improvement of linguistic, cognitive, and social skills, while Guralnick (2017) clarified that programs based on collaboration between different disciplines achieve more sustainable results compared to single interventions. The study by Begić *et al.* (2021) showed that the integration of therapeutic services and continuous follow-up leads to improved functional abilities in children and increases their chances of integration into educational environments later on. Despite the widespread agreement on the importance of early intervention, studies indicate that the quality of program implementation varies depending on institutional capabilities, the availability of specialized staff, and the level of cooperation between institutions and families. Therefore, the success of therapeutic programs is no longer measured solely by the provision of services, but by their ability to offer an integrated and sustainable intervention that considers the developmental characteristics of each child and enhances family participation as a key partner in the therapeutic process (Dunst *et al.*, 2019; Silverman & Blank, 2023). These recommendations are consistent with the DEC Recommended Practices (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014), which emphasize family-centered services, interdisciplinary collaboration, and individualized intervention as essential principles of high-quality early intervention.

2.3 Long-term Impact of Early Childhood Therapeutic Programs

The long-term impact of therapeutic programs in early childhood has garnered increasing attention in the scientific literature, due to the growing evidence confirming that interventions provided during the early years of life not only improve current developmental abilities but also extend to influence the educational, social, and emotional trajectories of children in the future. Early intervention is viewed as a long-term investment that contributes to enhancing children's opportunities for achieving holistic growth and integrating more effectively into society (Heckman, 2006; Richter *et al.*, 2019).

Studies indicate that children who receive early and organized therapeutic services achieve significant progress in language, cognitive, motor, and social skills compared to children who experience delays in receiving appropriate intervention. These programs are also associated with increased levels of independence, improved communication skills, and enhanced ability to adapt to the educational environment, which contributes to better readiness for children to transition to school and reduces the likelihood of developmental difficulties persisting in later stages (Jeong *et al.*, 2021; Zarra-Nezhad *et al.*, 2024; Begić *et al.*, 2021; Ghorbani Golzari Nezhad & Mehrabanfar, 2014).

Conversely, the literature confirms that achieving these results depends on the continuity and quality of therapeutic services, not just on early intervention alone. Guralnick (2017) explained that developmental gains are more sustainable when programs are provided within a comprehensive therapeutic plan that relies on continuous follow-up and periodic evaluation. Jasmin *et al.* also pointed out (2018) that integrating therapeutic services within early childhood institutions contributes to improving children's participation in daily activities and enhances their chances of integration into regular educational environments. A study by Mateo Pérez and Nicolás Ríos (2024) found that therapeutic programs that consider individual differences and integrate roles between specialists and families achieve more sustainable results at both the academic and social levels.

Despite this agreement, some studies still indicate a disparity in the sustainability of long-term impact due to differences in service quality, family involvement, and the availability of human and institutional resources. This underscores that the success of therapeutic programs does not rely solely on early intervention, but also on the continuity of support and coordination among all concerned parties to ensure the best developmental outcomes for children.

2.4 Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Early Childhood Therapeutic Programs

The literature indicates that the success of therapeutic programs in early childhood does not depend solely on the type of therapeutic service provided, but is also influenced by a set of professional, institutional, and familial factors that interact with each other to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and the sustainability of its results. The more a supportive environment includes qualified staff, individualized treatment plans, and effective collaboration among all parties, the greater the chances of achieving positive developmental outcomes for children (Guralnick, 2017; Silverman & Blank, 2023). One of the most prominent factors emphasized by the studies is the collaboration among members of the multidisciplinary team, which includes educators, institutional managers, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and emotional therapists. King *et al.* (2009) explained that integrative work among specialists contributes to building more comprehensive treatment plans, enhances service continuity, and reduces effort duplication, which positively reflects on the child's development. As Begić *et al.* (2021) pointed out, continuous coordination among specialists enhances the quality of therapeutic interventions and increases their effectiveness.

The literature also confirms that family involvement is a pivotal element in the success of early intervention programs, as parents' commitment to implementing therapeutic recommendations at home and maintaining communication with specialists enhances the child's chances of improvement and preserves the developmental gains achieved during therapy sessions (Dunst *et al.*, 2019; Jeong *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, the lack of awareness among some families, their delay in accepting the presence of developmental delays, or their limited participation in implementing therapeutic plans, may reduce the effectiveness of the programs and delay the achievement of their goals.

In addition, institutional factors, such as the availability of specialized staff, the amount of financial resources, the continuity of professional supervision, and the quality of the educational environment, affect the level of services provided to children. Silverman and Blank (2023) indicated that the disparity in capabilities among early childhood institutions in Israel directly reflects on the quality of early intervention services and children's access to them. Therefore, achieving the desired impact of therapeutic programs requires adopting an integrative approach that combines professional competence, institutional support, and effective partnership with the family, ensuring the provision of sustainable services that respond to the changing developmental needs of children.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted the qualitative research method due to its suitability for the nature of the study problem and its objectives, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of therapeutic programs provided in early childhood on the long-term growth and development of children. The qualitative approach is considered one of the most suitable methods for studying educational and social phenomena that require interpreting human experiences within their natural context, rather than being limited to quantitative measurements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study was based on an exploratory qualitative design, aiming to explore the perspectives of workers in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel regarding the effectiveness of therapeutic programs and the factors influencing their success. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and reveals the meanings that participants attribute to their professional experiences, making it suitable for studies addressing topics that still require in-depth interpretation (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study sample consisted of 30 participants selected using the purposive sampling method, due to their direct experience in implementing or supervising therapeutic programs within Arab early childhood institutions in Israel. The sample included nursery directors, educators, educational counselors, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and emotional therapists, which allowed for obtaining diverse perspectives that reflect the professional reality from different angles (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were prepared based on the study's objectives and previous literature, allowing participants to freely express their experiences and opinions while maintaining the uniformity of the main interview themes. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and some were recorded with the participants' consent, while others were documented through detailed note-taking during the interview.

After completing data collection, all interviews underwent thematic analysis, where the data were read multiple times, initial codes were extracted, and then classified into main themes reflecting the common patterns in participants' responses, leading to the construction of final themes that formed the basis for presenting and interpreting the study's results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ethical principles were adhered to at all stages of the study, where participants were voluntarily involved after clarifying the study's objectives and procedures, obtaining their informed consent before conducting the interviews, ensuring data confidentiality, and not disclosing the identities of the participants or the institutions they work for, using the information solely for scientific research purposes, in accordance with the ethical principles adopted in qualitative research (Orb *et al.*, 2001).

4. Results

The findings of this study revealed a set of key themes that reflect their perceptions of the impact of therapeutic programs provided to children in early childhood on their long-term growth and development. The thematic analysis revealed five main themes, which were: early detection and continuous follow-up, collaboration among the multidisciplinary team, partnership with the family and parental involvement, the long-term developmental impact of therapeutic programs, and the improvement of therapeutic programs. These themes reflect the professional experiences of the participants, as well as the factors contributing to the success of therapeutic programs and the challenges affecting their effectiveness within Arab early childhood institutions in Israel.

4.1 Early Identification and Continuous Monitoring

The findings revealed that almost all participants confirmed that early detection of developmental delays and continuous follow-up form the foundation for the success of therapeutic programs in early childhood. Participants indicated that identifying difficulties during the early years of a child's life allows for timely therapeutic intervention, which contributes to improving linguistic, cognitive, motor, and social development, and reduces the exacerbation of developmental issues in the future. They also emphasized that regular follow-ups allow for the assessment of the child's progress and the adjustment of the treatment plan to suit their changing needs. One of the participants explained: *"The earlier we detect the delay, the better the child's response to treatment and the greater the chances of progress."* While another participant pointed out that *"continuous follow-up is no less important than the start of treatment, as it helps us know if the child is progressing or needs a change in the treatment plan."* These findings are consistent with those of Jeong *et al.* (2021) and Richter *et al.* (2019), who emphasized the importance of early intervention and continuous follow-up in improving long-term developmental outcomes.

4.2 Multidisciplinary Collaboration

Analysis of the interviews demonstrated that collaboration among members of the multidisciplinary team is one of the most prominent factors that enhance the success of therapeutic programs in early childhood institutions. Participants confirmed that continuous coordination between nursery directors, caregivers, guides, occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and emotional therapists contributes to building comprehensive therapeutic plans that respond to the needs of each child, while also ensuring the continuity of follow-up and information exchange among all parties. One of the participants pointed out that *"the success of any therapeutic program depends on everyone working as a team, because each specialist sees a different aspect of the child's needs."* Another participant explained that *"regular meetings among staff members help make more accurate therapeutic decisions and achieve noticeable progress in children."* These results are consistent with the findings of King *et al.* (2009) and Begić *et al.* (2021), who confirmed that the integrative work among members of the multidisciplinary team contributes to improving the quality of therapeutic interventions and achieving more effective and sustainable developmental outcomes.

4.3 Family Partnership and Parental Involvement

Participants indicated that partnership with the family and parental involvement are essential elements in the success of therapeutic programs and achieving long-term results. Participants confirmed that the family's commitment to implementing therapeutic recommendations at home and maintaining continuous communication with specialists contributes to accelerating the child's progress and enhancing the continuity of improvement. On the other hand, several participants pointed out that the delay of some families in accepting the presence of developmental delays or their lack of cooperation with the therapeutic team might limit the effectiveness of early intervention and delay achieving the desired results. One of the participants explained: *"When the family is a true partner in the therapeutic plan, we notice greater progress in the child."* Another participant added, *"The success of the therapy does not depend solely on the sessions, but on continuing the work with the child at home."* These results are consistent with the findings of Dunst *et al.* (2019) and Jeong *et al.* (2021), who confirmed that family involvement and continuous cooperation with specialists are among the most important factors that support the success of early intervention programs and improve their outcomes.

4.4 Long-Term Developmental Outcomes

The study results showed that the participants unanimously agreed that therapeutic programs in early childhood leave positive effects that extend into later stages of the child's life. They indicated that children who receive early therapeutic interventions make significant progress in language, cognitive, motor, and social skills, as well as enjoying greater independence and higher self-confidence, and being more prepared to integrate into the school environment. One of the participants explained: *"We noticed that children who started therapy at an early age were more ready to transition to kindergarten and relied on*

themselves more." Another participant added, *"Early intervention not only addresses the current problem but also reflects on the child's academic and social future."* These results are consistent with the findings of Zarra-Nezhad *et al.* (2024) and Jasmin *et al.* (2018), which confirmed that early intervention programs contribute to the overall development of children and enhance their long-term educational and social readiness.

4.5 Improving Therapeutic Programs

The interview results showed that the participants see the necessity of working on developing therapeutic programs to ensure the provision of higher quality and more sustainable services for children. They emphasized that achieving this requires providing specialized staff, enhancing continuous professional training for workers, increasing resources and capabilities available within early childhood institutions, as well as raising awareness among families about the importance of early intervention. One of the participants pointed out that *"having specialists within the institution on a permanent basis facilitates the follow-up process and provides children with better opportunities for progress."* Another participant explained that *"program development requires institutional support and continuous collaboration among all stakeholders."* These results align with what Silverman and Blank (2023) and Guralnick (2017) indicated, who confirmed that improving the quality of therapeutic services depends on the availability of resources, continuous professional development, and integration between institutions and families, contributing to better developmental outcomes for children.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated that therapeutic programs implemented during early childhood play a significant role in promoting children's long-term development. The study identified five major themes that explain the factors contributing to the effectiveness of these programs, namely early identification and continuous monitoring, multidisciplinary collaboration, family partnership and parental involvement, long-term developmental outcomes, and improving therapeutic programs. Overall, these findings support previous literature emphasizing that successful early intervention depends on the integration of professional, family, and institutional efforts.

Regarding **Early Identification and Continuous Monitoring**, participants emphasized that identifying developmental delays during the first years of life provides greater opportunities for successful intervention and prevents developmental difficulties from becoming more complex over time. These findings are consistent with Jeong *et al.* (2021), who reported that children receiving intervention at younger ages achieve significantly better developmental outcomes than those receiving delayed services. Similarly, Richter *et al.* (2019) and Heckman (2006) highlighted that the first years of life represent the most sensitive period for brain development, making early identification and continuous monitoring essential components of effective intervention.

The second theme, **Multidisciplinary Collaboration**, highlighted the importance of cooperation among educators, therapists, counselors, and nursery directors in planning and implementing therapeutic interventions. Participants believed that collaborative decision-making improves the quality of services and ensures continuity of care. These findings support King *et al.* (2009), who argued that interdisciplinary collaboration leads to more comprehensive intervention plans, and Begić *et al.* (2021), who found that coordinated professional practice contributes to better developmental outcomes for children receiving therapeutic services.

Concerning **Family Partnership and Parental Involvement**, the results demonstrated that active family participation represents one of the strongest predictors of successful intervention. Participants indicated that parents who consistently implement therapeutic recommendations at home contribute substantially to children's developmental progress. These findings are in agreement with Dunst *et al.* (2019), who emphasized that family-centered intervention improves child outcomes by strengthening parental competence, and Jeong *et al.* (2021), who identified parental engagement as a key factor in maintaining developmental gains over time.

With regard to **Long-Term Developmental Outcomes**, participants perceived therapeutic programs as having lasting effects beyond the immediate improvement of developmental delays. According to their experiences, early intervention enhances children's language, cognitive, motor, emotional, and social development while increasing school readiness, independence, and self-confidence. These findings are consistent with Zarra-Nezhad *et al.* (2024), who demonstrated the long-term behavioral and emotional benefits of early intervention, as well as Jasmin *et al.* (2018), who reported that continuous therapeutic support improves children's participation and successful inclusion in educational environments.

Finally, the theme of **Improving Therapeutic Programs** reflected participants' belief that strengthening therapeutic services requires greater institutional support, increased availability of specialized professionals, continuous professional development, and stronger collaboration between institutions and families. These findings support Silverman and Blank (2023), who highlighted inequalities in access to early childhood services within Israel, and Guralnick (2017), who argued that sustainable improvements in early intervention depend on coordinated policies, qualified professionals, and integrated service delivery systems. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of therapeutic programs extends beyond clinical intervention itself and depends on the integration of early identification, multidisciplinary collaboration, family engagement, and institutional support. These findings provide valuable implications for policymakers and practitioners working in Arab early childhood institutions in Israel.

6. Conclusion

This study addressed the impact of therapeutic programs provided in the early childhood stage on the long-term growth and development of children in Arab early childhood

institutions in Israel, by exploring the perceptions of professionals in this field. The results showed that early therapeutic intervention is one of the most important factors supporting the overall development of children, and its effectiveness is not only related to the provision of therapeutic services but also depends on an integrated system that includes early detection, continuous follow-up, collaboration among multidisciplinary team members, effective partnership with the family, and the availability of a supportive institutional environment. These results align with previous studies that indicated the early years of a child's life represent a critical stage for intervention, and that investing in early intervention services yields sustainable positive effects on both developmental and educational levels (Heckman, 2006; Richter *et al.*, 2019; Jeong *et al.*, 2021). The study also showed that the success of therapeutic programs does not depend solely on the type of intervention, but also on the quality of coordination among specialists, the continuity of follow-up, and the extent of family involvement in implementing therapeutic plans, which are essential factors in enhancing the child's development and improving their ability to integrate into subsequent educational stages. Conversely, the results indicated that certain challenges, such as a lack of specialized staff, limited resources, and weak participation from some families, may hinder the effectiveness of these programs. This necessitates the development of policies and professional practices that support early intervention services within Arab early childhood institutions (Silverman & Blank, 2023; Guralnick, 2017).

This study contributes to enriching the literature related to early intervention programs by providing a qualitative understanding based on the experiences of field workers. It also offers indicators that can be utilized in developing therapeutic services and enhancing cooperation between educational institutions, therapeutic teams, and families, which contributes to improving the quality of services provided to children, enhancing their growth and development opportunities in the long term, and supporting the development of educational policies that are more responsive to the needs of early childhood.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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