

Assessment Of Self-Expression Levels Of Individuals With Intellectual Disabilities Participating In Recreational Activities

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess the self-expression levels of individuals with intellectual disabilities who participate in recreational activities. The study was conducted with 23 individuals with intellectual disabilities participating in programs organized by the Malatya Down Syndrome Association. Participants were regularly involved in social, artistic, and entertaining activities such as musical games, singing, drawing, and “handkerchief catching” twice a month over a period of four months. A semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was employed in the study, and data regarding the participants’ developmental processes were collected through face-to-face interviews with their families. The findings from the interviews revealed that recreational activities improve individuals’ social communication skills, help them share their emotions more openly, and foster self-confidence in self-expression. Additionally, observations by the families indicated that these improvements were not limited to the activity environment but were also reflected in daily life practices. In conclusion, recreational activities are considered an important tool for enhancing social participation and quality of life among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: recreational activity, individuals with intellectual disabilities, self-expression

INTRODUCTION

Recreational activities are among the important tools that support individuals’ physical, social, cognitive, and psychological development. Especially for individuals with intellectual disabilities, recreation is not only a way to spend leisure time but also a process that contributes to the development of learning, communication, social adaptation, and self-expression skills (Dattilo, 2015). Recreational activities allow individuals to enjoy activities according to their interests while simultaneously fostering self-confidence, active participation in group interactions, and easier expression of emotions (Heyne & Anderson, 2012, Karaca end Ilkim 2021).

Individuals with intellectual disabilities often face difficulties in communication and self-expression in social environments. This situation not only limits their individual development but also restricts their social participation (Schalock, 2010). Therefore, creating supportive social environments is crucial for enabling these individuals to participate more actively in social life. Group games, music, and art-related activities, in particular, strengthen communication skills and social bonds (Bullock & Mahon, 2017, Yurtseven et al 2024).

Recent studies have highlighted the positive effects of recreational activities on individuals with intellectual disabilities. For example, Mahoney, Roberts, and Vernon-Feagans (2007) emphasize that music-based recreational activities enhance social adaptation and communication skills in children. Similarly, Sherrill (2004) indicates that play and sports activities improve individuals’ sense of self-efficacy and help them take a more active role in social interactions. Furthermore, the behavioral changes observed by families and reflected in daily life are also supported by various studies (King et al., 2003, Gürer et al 2024).

In this context, recreational activities are considered not only a way for individuals with intellectual disabilities to have enjoyable experiences but also an important practice that contributes to the development of communication skills, self-confidence, and increased social participation. This study aims to examine the development of self-expression levels of individuals with intellectual disabilities through recreational activities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was designed based on a qualitative research approach to evaluate the effects of participation in recreational activities on the self-expression skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Qualitative research is frequently preferred in social sciences as a method aimed at understanding individuals’ experiences, perceptions, and observations in depth (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection Process

A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data in the study. This technique allows the researcher to ask questions within a specific framework while also directing new questions based on participants' responses. This enables the collection of more flexible, in-depth, and detailed data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Due to the challenges individuals with intellectual disabilities face in self-expression, interviews were conducted not directly with the individuals but with their families. This approach provided an opportunity to learn about participants' developmental processes directly from family observations.

Data Collection Through Observation

In addition to interviews, the researcher collected data through participant observation during the activities. The participants' behaviors, interactions within the group, and ways of expressing their thoughts and emotions were systematically recorded. This method contributed to supporting the findings from family interviews and diversifying the data (triangulation).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis method. Similar statements from interviews and observations were categorized thematically. The categories were organized under main headings such as sharing emotions, expressing needs, developing intra-group communication, and creative forms of expression (e.g., drawing, music). This allowed for a more systematic and meaningful presentation of changes in the self-expression skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In conclusion, the research design utilized the flexibility and depth of the qualitative approach to holistically evaluate data obtained through both family interviews and observations.

Participants

The study included 23 individuals with intellectual disabilities participating in activities organized by the Malatya Down Syndrome Association and their families.

Implementation Process

Participants attended a total of eight sessions of recreational activities over four months, twice a month. The activities included musical games, singing, drawing, and handkerchief-catching.

Data Collection Method

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the families of participants, and a semi-structured interview form was used to determine changes in the self-expression levels of the individuals.

Data Analysis

The interviews were evaluated using the content analysis technique, and the findings were presented in tabular form.

Findings

Theme Examples from Family Statements

Increase in social communication "My child now talks more with friends."

Development of self-confidence "His self-confidence increased during the activities, and he is no longer afraid of singing."

Support for productivity "He can express his feelings through drawing."

Reflection on daily life "At home, he can now express his needs more comfortably."

The findings demonstrate that recreational activities contribute to enabling individuals with intellectual disabilities to express their feelings, thoughts, and needs more comfortably.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that recreational activities play a significant role in the development of self-expression skills among individuals with intellectual disabilities. In particular, the observed improvements in emotional sharing, expressing needs, group communication, and creative expression reveal that recreational activities contribute multidimensionally to individuals' social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. This suggests that recreational activities are not merely a means of leisure but also a developmental domain that facilitates participation in social life and helps individuals realize their potential.

The literature supports these findings. Dattilo (2015) emphasized that recreational activities are a critical factor in strengthening social adaptation and communication skills. Recreational activities not only promote healthy relationships with peers but also encourage more effective interactions with family members and the wider community. Similarly, Schalock (2010) highlighted the importance of social participation in enhancing the quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Social participation contributes to individuals' sense of belonging, enhances self-confidence, and strengthens their perception of being part of society.

The findings of this study also show that especially group-based activities increase individuals' self-confidence, strengthen social ties, and positively reflect on daily life practices. Recreational activities conducted in group settings allow individuals to express themselves more comfortably, respect others' opinions, and act collaboratively. Anderson and Heyne (2012) similarly found that recreational programs promote social participation, increase opportunities for social interaction, and enhance quality of life. Therefore, the findings suggest that recreational activities are not only valuable for the individual development of people with intellectual disabilities but also serve as an important tool for promoting social adaptation and participation. Future research should be conducted across different age groups, using various types of recreational activities and long-term interventions, to increase the generalizability of these results. Moreover, the active involvement of families and educators will help ensure that gains are long-lasting and more strongly reflected in daily life skills.

CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal that recreational activities provide meaningful and significant improvements in the self-expression levels of individuals with intellectual disabilities. In particular, the progress observed in emotional sharing, expressing needs, group communication, and creative expression demonstrates that recreational activities serve as an effective tool for strengthening communication skills, supporting social relationships, and contributing to the development of self-confidence. This highlights that recreational activities are not merely a way of spending free time but also help individuals become more active, productive, and socially integrated members of society.

The results indicate that recreational activities can be used as an educational and rehabilitative tool for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Especially group activities support the acquisition of skills such as cooperation, sharing, and socialization, while also yielding positive reflections on daily life. Furthermore, the transfer of expression skills gained during activities into family and social environments contributes to individuals becoming more independent, self-confident, and open to communication.

Therefore, it is of great importance to expand recreational activities in a way that increases the social participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities and to implement them within systematic programs. The support of educational institutions, special education centers, and non-governmental organizations for such activities will enable individuals to play a more active role in social life. Additionally, involving families and professionals in the process will ensure that the gains are more sustainable and permanent.

In conclusion, recreational activities are a powerful tool that enhances the quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities, supports their social participation, and reveals their personal potential. Future research conducted across different age groups, genders, and levels of disability will provide more comprehensive data on the effectiveness of these activities.

Recommendations

Recreational activities should be made regular and implemented as long-term programs to ensure the continuity of gains and support developmental processes.

Diversity should be increased by incorporating activities from different art forms (painting, music, drama, dance, etc.) and sports, and programs should be designed in line with individuals' interests and abilities. Families should be actively involved in the process, guided, and supported so that gains can be reinforced in the home environment.

Multidisciplinary programs should be designed in collaboration with professionals (special education teachers, psychologists, occupational therapists, sports trainers, etc.).

Appropriate physical environments for recreational activities should be prepared, ensuring accessibility, safety, and sufficient equipment.

Local governments, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions should cooperate to promote the widespread implementation of such activities.

Regular assessments should be conducted to measure developmental progress, monitor the effectiveness of activities through scientific methods, and make improvements when necessary.

The participation of volunteers should be encouraged to raise social awareness and to foster more interactions between individuals with intellectual disabilities and their social environment.

Digital recreational activities (e.g., digital art applications, online group activities) should be developed by utilizing technology.

In the long term, integrating recreational activities into the special education curriculum could systematically support individuals' development.

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