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Preventive Interventions for Speech Development in Preschool Children. Research Report

Oddziaływania profilaktyczne w okresie kształtowania się mowy przedszkolaków – raport z badań

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

speech therapy, preventing speech disorders, preschool age, speech development, preschool teacher, speech therapist

Preschool age is a period of intensive language development. The aim of the study was to assess the quality of prevention of speech disorders in preschoolers and to verify the knowledge of speech therapists on the preventive strategies used during speech development. The specific features of the study required the use of a diagnostic survey method, which allowed for assessing social awareness as well as investigating the opinions and views of speech therapists.

Based on the analysis of the obtained results, preventive measures implemented by speech therapists in preschoolers and therapists' ideas on further steps to improve the quality of these measures were discussed. The educational interventions of speech therapists targeting parents and teachers, as well as their opinion on the preventive effectiveness of information technology were also addressed. Additionally, the quality of cooperation between speech therapists and other specialists to improve prevention of speech disorders was discussed. The results confirm that speech therapists employ diverse preventive approaches which are important for proper speech shaping

in preschool children. The research has shown the interdisciplinary nature of teams cooperating for the prevention among preschool children and a wide range of specialists involved in this process. Speech therapists encounter minor difficulties when cooperating with other professional groups. Solving these problems requires both individual and systemic changes that would support better work organisation and communication between specialists.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

profilaktyka
logopedyczna,
wiek przedszkolny,
kształtowanie się
mowy, nauczyciel
przedszkola,
logopeda

Na wiek przedszkolny przypada okres intensywnego rozwoju mowy dziecka. Celem podjętych badań jest sprawdzenie jakości profilaktyki logopedycznej świadczonej przedszkolakom oraz zweryfikowanie wiedzy logopedów na temat stosowanych metod profilaktycznych w czasie kształtowania się mowy. Specyfika badań wymagała wykorzystania metody sondażu diagnostycznego, która umożliwiła przyjrzenie się stanom świadomości społecznej, poznanie opinii i poglądów logopedów.

Analiza uzyskanych wyników badań skutkowałą zaprezentowaniem działań logopedów o charakterze profilaktycznym w stosunku do przedszkolaków oraz przedstawieniem ich pomysłów odnośnie do dalszych kroków w celu poprawy jakości świadczonych działań. Omówiono również działania edukacyjne logopedów wobec rodziców i nauczycieli, jak również przybliżono ich opinię na temat skuteczności technologii informacyjnej w profilaktyce. Podczas wywodu miała miejsce także prezentacja jakości współpracy logopedów z innymi specjalistami na rzecz profilaktyki logopedycznej.

Uzyskane wyniki potwierdzają, że logopedzi w ramach profilaktyki logopedycznej stosują zróżnicowane działania, które są istotne dla prawidłowego procesu kształtowania się mowy dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym. Badania ukazują interdyscyplinarny charakter zespołów współpracujących na rzecz prowadzenia profilaktyki dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym oraz szeroki zakres specjalistów zaangażowanych w ten proces. Podczas współpracy z innymi grupami zawodowymi logopedzi napotykają na niewielkie trudności. Rozwiązanie tych problemów wymaga zarówno indywidualnych, jak i systemowych zmian, które wspierałyby lepszą organizację pracy i komunikację między specjalistami.

Introduction

The development of a child's speech is one of the key aspects of their overall development, playing a fundamental role in the process of socialisation, education and building interpersonal relationships. Proper speech is the basis of communication

allowing the child to express thoughts, feelings and needs, as well as receive and understand information from the environment (Banaszkiewicz, 2021; Bieńkowska, 2012). Therefore, promoting the prevention of speech defects and disorders, and expanding speech therapy measures to include prevention and increasing social awareness are among the dimensions of speech therapy interventions. Prevention of speech disorders is gaining recognition, and its scope is expanding to include various stages of a child's life (Sindrewicz & Siudzińska 2021, p. 32).

Prevention of speech disorders involves screening for signs of possible defects and implementing corrective and activating interventions. Its aim is to provide children with appropriate conditions for communicative development (Woźniak et al., 2018, p. 211). As emphasised by Stanisław Grabias (2010, p. 20), prevention is an area of speech therapy that promotes the development of language skills, also in individuals with normal biological and mental status. According to the International Association of Logopedics and Phoniatics (IALP), the goal of speech therapy is to prevent the development of communication disorders. It also involves social education about the essence of communication process and methods for preventing disorders, early diagnosis of communication difficulties, and cooperation with other specialists (Węsierska, 2012, p. 28).

Given the importance of preventive measures during the period of intensive development of a child's speech, which falls on preschool age, research was conducted to assess the quality of speech therapy prevention in preschoolers and to verify the knowledge of speech therapists on the interventions implemented during speech formation. The research was also intended to suggest effective methods of speech therapy prevention that can be used in preschools to support the correct development of speech in the youngest children.

Prevention of Speech Disorders in Kindergarten – Current Research

Speech therapists emphasise the need for a broad approach to preventive interventions within the scope of logopedics (Skorek, 2023). Modern prevention is not limited to eliminating speech defects and identifying children at risk of disorders. It strives to provide children with specialist care, as well as involves increased stimulation of speech development in normally developing children. This requires effective cooperation between speech therapists, family members and the children's educational environment (Węsierska, 2013, p. 27).

Children are generally screened for speech disorders by therapists employed in educational institutions at the beginning of each year, both in kindergartens and

schools. The screening may suggest the need for a more detailed speech therapy diagnosis (Sindrewicz & Siudzińska 2021, p. 42). The following aspects are assessed during screening: the child's ability to understand verbal commands; the range of vocabulary used; the child's ability to express themselves verbally; articulation correctness, taking into account the fluency of speech, as well as the health and functioning of the speech organs (Węsierska, 2013, p. 91). The speech therapist conducting the examination should also consider physiological aspects related to speech, such as breathing, biting, chewing, swallowing, and the presence of other abnormalities, including nail biting, thumb sucking, etc. (Pluta-Wojciechowska, 2022). Early detection of defects in physiological processes allows for intervention and elimination of unhealthy habits in the child (Węsierska, 2013, pp. 91–92). A speech therapy diagnostic tool should meet key requirements, such as: reliability, validity, objectivity, standardisation and normalisation (Kielar-Turska, 2019, pp. 215–216). At this point, the following ready-to-use diagnostic tools that allow for the preliminary assessment of speech and language development in preschool and early school children should be mentioned: *Speech Therapy Screening Test* by Zbigniew Tarkowski, *Screening Tests for Detecting Speech Disorders in 5-, 4- and 6-year-olds* by Danuta Emiluta-Rozya, Halina Mierzejewska and Paulina Atys, *Logopedic Screening Test for School-age Children* by Stanisław Grabias, Zdzisław M. Kurkowski and Tomasz Woźniak, *Speech Screening for Preschool Children* by Iwona Michalak-Widera and Katarzyna Węsierska, *Brief Child Development Score* by Magdalena Chrzan-Dętkoś, *Do I Speak Correctly? A Set of Diagnostic Tests for Preliminary Speech Therapy Diagnosis of Preschool Children* by Marzena Lampart-Busse; *Inventories of Speech and Communication Development – [Inwentarze Rozwoju Mowy i Komunikacji (IRMIK)] – Words & Gestures and Words & Sentences* by Magdalena Smoczyńska (Moćko et al., 2012, p. 176; Wójcik, 2021, p. 281).

Preschool speech therapists cooperate with parents and preschool teachers, organise speech therapy classes, monitor children's language behaviour among their peers, and monitor the development of basic functions such as breathing, eating, drinking, and swallowing (Łuszczuk, 2022; Malicka, 2021). The speech therapist's duty is to provide parents with information on speech development and factors influencing this process. It is also important to discuss the structure and function of speech apparatus and their impact on correct pronunciation. Additionally, the speech therapist is obliged to inform the parents about the possibility of consulting the child's problems with other specialists, such as an orthodontist, dentist, phoniatriest, otolaryngologist, psychologist or audiologist (Woźniak et al., 2018, p. 212).

Preventive measures focus primarily on the use of orthophonic, breathing, phonation, and rhythm exercises, as well as activities to shape phonemic awareness and games to improve articulatory motor skills (Węsierska, 2013, p. 27). Such exercises

are implemented through the cooperation of a speech therapist and a teacher. They support speech therapy and promote language development.

The goals of preventing speech disorders include: 1. Education of caregivers on the development of children's speech, symptoms of disorders, and the available forms of support; 2. Early detection of children at risk of dyslexia through speech therapy screening; 3. Support for children with speech disorders through individual speech therapy; 4. Improvement of language skills of all kindergarten children by preparing them for starting school; 5. Reinforcing the cooperation between the speech therapist and the teacher in order to promote children's health and language education; 6. Dissemination of knowledge about speech therapy-related issues among kindergarten teachers (Węsierska, 2013, p. 35–36).

Harmonious and planned speech therapy prevention in the care and educational setting of a kindergarten is crucial for the further educational success of children. It is necessary to regularly evaluate the efficacy of the therapy, which should include all dimensions of communication, such as improving articulation, developing language skills, speech fluency, and the ability to listen and use the voice (Węsierska, 2013, p. 38). These activities not only influence the development of conceptual skills necessary for starting school, but also the development of motivation and emotions (Porayski-Pomsta, 2023). In turn, group speech therapy exercises develop a positive attitude to learning process and respecting rules, and help shape patience. They have a positive effect on both large and small motor skills, speech, the senses of sight and hearing, memory, concentration and orientation in the body scheme (Woźniak et al., 2018, p. 214).

Research Methods and Tools, Study Population

In order to assess the quality of preventive speech therapy for preschoolers, the following working hypotheses were formulated: H1 – Speech therapists undertake preventive interventions aimed at preschool children, which mainly focus on speech therapy diagnosis; H2 – Speech therapists educate parents and teachers in the field of speech therapy preventive measures; H3 – Speech therapy prevention widely incorporates new information technology; H4 – Speech therapists implement speech therapy preventive interventions in cooperation with other specialists.

Due to the specific features of the research, the diagnostic survey method was used, which allowed for assessing social awareness as well as exploring the opinions and views of speech therapists on preventive measures (Pilch, 1995, p. 50). A survey technique was used, which enabled researchers to reach a large number of respondents while maintaining their anonymity (Grabowska, 2009, p. 49). The survey

questionnaire entitled “Preventive interventions in the process of shaping speech in preschoolers”, addressed to speech therapists working in kindergartens, was used as a research tool. It consisted of 26 items, including closed, semi-open, open and multiple choice questions.

The survey was conducted in May 2024 among 100 speech therapists active in online groups. Women and men accounted for 94% and 6% of respondents, respectively. The largest group of respondents were aged 3–40 years (42%), followed by those aged 20–30 years (35%), 41–50 years (15%), and 51–50 years (8%). There were no speech therapists over 61 years in the study group. The largest group of respondents came from medium-sized towns (40%), followed by those living in cities of up to 100.00 inhabitants (34%). People living in villages accounted for only 19% of respondents, but they were more numerous than residents of the largest cities (7%). Respondents with professional experience from 1 to 5 years (31%) were the largest group, followed by speech therapists with experience from 6 to 10 years (26%). Respondents with the shortest experience (less than a year) accounted for 14% of the surveyed population. The smallest group was represented by those with the longest experience, i. e. over 20 years (10%).

Analysis of Results

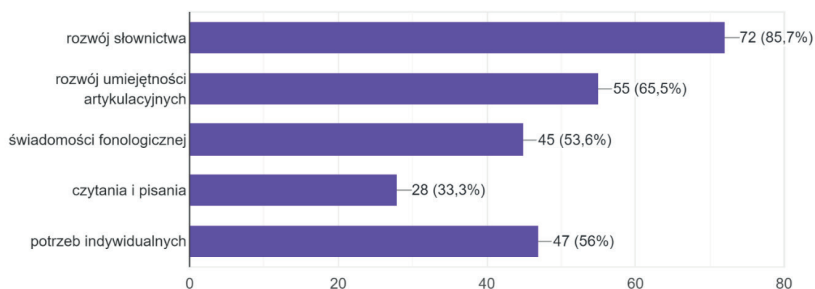
1. Preventive Interventions Implemented by Speech Therapists in Preschoolers

At the beginning of the study, it was necessary to determine whether the respondents take preventive actions towards preschoolers. This allowed us to focus on the group of speech therapists who actually deal with speech therapy prevention. It was found that the majority of the respondents (i. e. 84%) use prevention in preschool children, as opposed to only 16%. Speech therapists who incorporate preventive interventions in their work indicated which aspects of speech and communication development they most often address (Fig. 1).

Fig 1. Aspects of speech and communication development most commonly addressed in preventive interventions.

3. Jakie aspekty rozwoju mowy i komunikacji najczęściej uwzględnia Pan/Pani w działaniach o charakterze profilaktycznym?

84 odpowiedzi



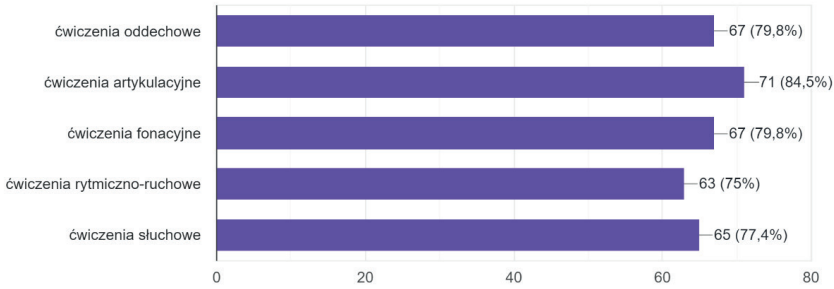
Source: the author's own research

Our findings on the aspects of speech and communication development addressed by speech therapists have shown that they most often focus on the development of vocabulary in preschoolers. Articulation skills were another aspect mentioned by speech therapists. The study group was least likely to focus on improving reading and writing skills.

Figure 2 shows the preferences and practices of respondents in terms of activities used during speech therapy prophylaxis. The surveyed speech therapists mainly used articulation (about 85%), breathing (about 80%) and phonation exercises (about 80%), while rhythmic-movement (75%) and listening exercises (slightly over 77%) were less common.

Fig. 2. Activities used in speech therapy prevention.

15. Które spośród wymienionych ćwiczeń stosuje Pan/Pani w ramach profilaktyki logopedycznej?
84 odpowiedzi

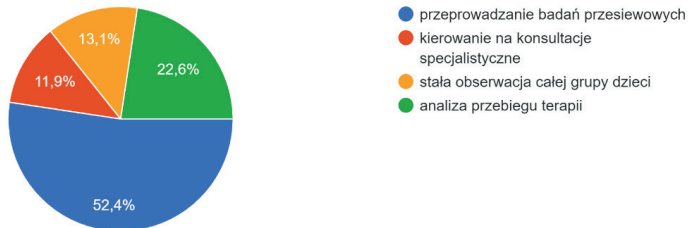


Source: the author's own research

The literature on speech therapy prevention indicated common incorporation of games and play in preventive measures among speech therapists. Our respondents also pointed out the potential of this form of intervention in preschoolers, using rhythmic-movement exercises as part of speech therapy prevention. The effectiveness of specific activities used in preschoolers as part of prevention of speech disorders is presented in Figure 3.

Fig. 3. Effective speech therapy activities for preschoolers

17. Które z poniższych aktywności są według Pana/Pani bardziej skuteczne w profilaktyce logopedycznej skierowanej do dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym?
84 odpowiedzi



Source: the author's own research

More than half of the surveyed speech therapists who use prevention of speech disorders considered screening to be the most effective intervention. Analysis of the course of therapy came second (>22%). Referral to specialist consultations was indicated by approximately 12% of respondents. Continuous follow-up of the entire group of children received the lowest score, which suggests a lower importance of these activities in speech therapy prevention for preschool children. In the open-ended question regarding the most effective activities to support the development of speech in preschool children, the following were listed: screening tests; articulation, breathing, phonation and listening exercises; exercises supporting the development of auditory and visual analysis and synthesis; reading, rhymes, counting-out rhymes, singing, storytelling, word games, symbolic games, playing instruments; logorhythmics; relaxation techniques; parental support; workshops, lectures; the Good Start method; the Developmental Movement Method; oral-facial massage; learning to read using the simultaneous-sequential method; rational use of technology.

In order to improve the quality of preventive interventions, it was necessary to reflect on the directions of future activities. According to our respondents, the process of speech formation is influenced by multiple factors, such as environmental, genetic, and biological factors; prenatal factors (such as past illnesses, stress, alcohol consumption and use of psychoactive substances, smoking); perinatal complications; abnormal anatomy of speech organs; health problems in the child (such as dental problems, malocclusion, ear infections, frequent illnesses); long-term use of technology; emotional and motivational disorders; ignoring the child/devoting too little time to the child; using simplified baby talk and social isolation of the child. The above factors affect the process of shaping the child's speech (not only at preschool age) and need to be considered during speech therapy interventions.

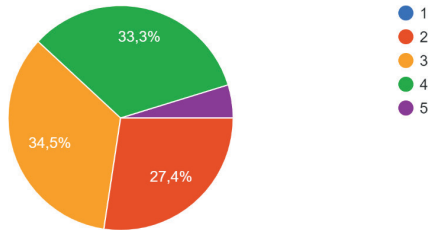
2. Educational Interventions of Speech Therapists Aimed at Parents and Teachers

The conducted research verified the readiness of the surveyed speech therapists to undertake educational interventions aimed at parents and preschool teachers. The results indicate that all respondents promote active involvement of parents and teachers in speech therapy. Almost all respondents (95%) offer parental consultations on prevention of speech disorders for parents. This indicates their full readiness to offer support and advice. Only 5% of respondents admitted that they do not conduct consultations on prevention of speech disorders. Figure 4 shows parental interest in consultations on speech therapy in the opinion of respondents.

Fig. 4. Parental interest in consultations on prevention of speech disorders according to the surveyed speech therapists.

7. W jakim stopniu rodzice są zainteresowani konsultacjami z zakresu profilaktyki logopedycznej? (1- nie są zainteresowani; 5 są bardzo zainteresowani)

84 odpowiedzi



Source: the author's own research

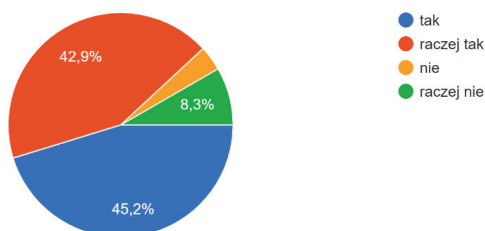
The respondents considered that parents show moderate interest in consultations on preventing speech disorders. The majority of therapists rated parental involvement at 3 (on a scale of 1–5), which is about 35%. A smaller group of respondents (slightly over 27%) rated the interest at 2, which suggests that parents are not entirely interested in consultations. As can be seen, there is a need to introduce measures to increase parental awareness of the importance of speech therapy for the child's speech development.

The majority of respondents offer consultations on prevention of speech disorders for teachers (about 90%). It may be concerning that this is not 100%, which is why it was crucial to analyse the responses to the survey question: *Are preschool teachers interested in gaining knowledge about prevention of speech disorders?* (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Interest in acquiring knowledge on preventing speech disorders among preschool teachers

9. Czy nauczyciele wychowania przedszkolnego są zainteresowani zdobywaniem wiedzy dotyczącej profilaktyki logopedycznej?

84 odpowiedzi



Source: the author's own research

It was found that the vast majority of respondents claim that teachers are generally interested in gaining knowledge about prevention of speech disorders (over 45%). About 4% believe that they are not interested at all. There is a clear need to fully convince teachers about the need for preventive measures targeting children in the period of speech formation.

3. Information Technology in Prevention of Speech Disorders

The conducted research also served to examine the opinion of speech therapists on the effectiveness of information technology (IT)¹ in prevention of speech disorders. This is an important issue as the development of computer technology has led to the need to use information technology in every sphere of everyday life, including education and therapy (Lichota, 2015, pp. 113–115). The research shows that the majority of respondents support the usefulness of IT in preventing speech disorders (>63% of respondents). On the other hand, a smaller number of speech therapists (slightly over 26%) noticed that such activities are not effective.

A total of 38 speech therapists (slightly over 45%) confirmed that they used IT in their speech therapy practice. A larger number of respondents (46, about 55%) do not use IT in their speech therapy practice, and thus in prevention. As can be seen,

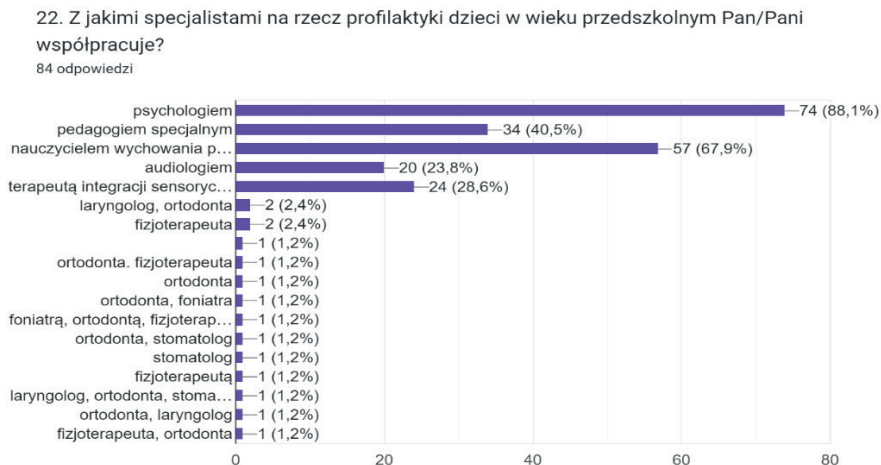
1 Computers, educational software and the Internet are considered the main components of information technology.

the majority of respondents do not use IT. IT users indicated that they use various computer programmes, platforms, mobile applications, educational and therapeutic games, and interactive tools. The technologies mentioned included *mTalent*, *logopediaPro*, *logoobrazki*, speech therapy games, *ZOOMinki*, *LogoSylaby*, interactive board, magic carpet, *eduterapeutica* and *edusensus*. However, the respondents had various opinions on IT efficacy in monitoring therapeutic progress. Those pointing out that modern tools support better monitoring of the child's progress accounted for the smallest group (about 30%). Slightly more respondents (32%) did not agree with the opinion that IT allows for better monitoring of the child's progress in speech therapy. The largest percentage of respondents (38%) did not express a clear opinion. This may suggest a lack of knowledge about available technologies and failure to use them in professional practice.

4. Collaboration of Speech Therapists With Other Specialists in Prevention of Speech Disorders

Our findings on the cooperation of speech therapists with other specialists for preventing speech disorders showed a high degree of cooperation among the respondents (98%). This suggests that specialists are aware of the need for such collaboration. The respondents were most likely to cooperate with psychologists (88%), preschool teachers (about 68%), special education teachers (slightly over 40%) for the prevention in preschool children. A smaller proportion of respondents indicated a sensory integration therapist (about 29%) and an audiologist (about 24%) as specialists with whom they cooperate when implementing preventive interventions (Figure 6).

Fig. 6. Specialists collaborating with speech therapists for the prevention in preschool children.



Source: the author's own research

The respondents indicated the following as the main areas of cooperation with other specialists for prevention of speech disorders: elimination of risk factors, adapting preventive strategies to the abilities of children, diagnosis, therapy and progress monitoring. Additionally, the respondents reported that they usually encounter no difficulties when cooperating with other specialists. Only a few respondents indicated occasional problems when collaborating with other specialists, such as unwillingness to cooperate, lack of time, lack of appropriate organisational structures, communication difficulties, and different professional priorities.

Results of Scientific Analysis

The aim of the study was to determine the scope and quality of preventive interventions in the process of developing preschoolers' speech. Our findings confirm that speech therapists employ various interventions as part of prevention of speech disorders, which are important for the correct speech development in preschoolers. Our study has shown that more than half of speech therapists consider screening as the most effective intervention in such prevention for preschoolers. Thus, hypothesis H1 was confirmed. The hypothesis H2 was also positively verified, as the research showed that all respondents promote active involvement of parents and teachers in preventing speech disorders. Furthermore, most therapists offer parental consultations in the

field of prevention of speech disorders. The hypothesis H3, according to which new information technology is widely used in preventing speech disorders, was partially confirmed. Only some speech therapists use IT. The respondents were not convinced about the effectiveness of using computer programmes in preventive interventions. The hypothesis H4, which read "Speech therapists implement speech therapy preventive interventions in cooperation with other specialists" was confirmed. The research showed that most speech therapists implement such prevention in collaboration with other specialists, and all respondents believe that this cooperation increases therapeutic efficacy.

The study showed significant involvement of speech therapists in preventive measures supporting the development of speech in preschool children. It was demonstrated that speech therapists focus on speech therapy diagnosis, education of parents and teachers, and cooperation with other specialists. Speech therapists are aware of the significant impact of environmental, genetic and biological factors on speech development in children. They demonstrate knowledge of various preventive approaches that effectively support the development of speech and communication in preschool children. Not only do they know these methods, but they also use them. The following forms and methods were most commonly used: group classes, games, workshops, methods using modern technologies. These methods exert a synergistic effect, integrate play, learning and support, which may contribute to the holistic development of speech and communication in preschoolers. Speech therapists use measures to prevent speech disorders in children, implement specific interventions in preschools and conduct speech therapy screening.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Specialists from various fields are involved in collaborative interventions targeting prevention of speech disorders. This shows a high awareness of the need for an interdisciplinary approach when supporting speech development in children. This is important as speech therapy prevention requires extensive cooperation with various specialists to prevent or eliminate potential problems. Specialist knowledge and skills are insufficient. Openness to cooperation and understanding the needs of the child and their parents are also needed to effectively support the child in achieving their full developmental potential. When cooperating with other specialists, speech therapists encounter only minor problems and difficulties. Solving these problems requires both individual and systemic changes to improve organisation of therapeutic work.

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