

## CULTURAL BELIEFS AND DELAYED RECOGNITION OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AMONG PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

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### ABSTRACT

Speech and language development is a critical aspect of early childhood development that influences children's cognitive, social, emotional, and communication abilities. Early recognition of developmental delays is essential for timely intervention; however, parents' recognition of speech and language problems is often influenced by cultural beliefs and social norms. This study aimed to explore cultural beliefs contributing to delayed recognition of speech and language development among parents of young children. A qualitative exploratory study was conducted among parents of children under five years of age in coastal communities in Batam City, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using purposive sampling. Additional perspectives were obtained from midwives and community health volunteers involved in child developmental monitoring. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings related to parental beliefs and developmental recognition. Five major themes emerged: (1) speech delay perceived as a normal developmental variation, (2) belief that children will eventually speak without intervention, (3) influence of family traditions and intergenerational advice, (4) limited awareness of speech and language developmental milestones, and (5) delayed healthcare-seeking behavior. These beliefs often reduced parental concern regarding developmental delays and contributed to delayed utilization of developmental screening and health services. Cultural beliefs play an important role in shaping parents' understanding of speech and language development. Misconceptions regarding normal developmental patterns may hinder early recognition and intervention. Strengthening culturally sensitive parent education and empowerment programs is necessary to improve awareness of developmental milestones and promote timely access to developmental screening services.

**Keywords:** Cultural Beliefs, Early Childhood Development, Early Detection, Language Development, Speech Development

### ABSTRAK

Perkembangan bahasa dan bicara merupakan aspek penting dalam tumbuh kembang anak yang memengaruhi kemampuan kognitif, sosial, emosional, dan komunikasi. Pengenalan dini terhadap keterlambatan perkembangan sangat penting untuk memungkinkan intervensi yang tepat waktu dan meningkatkan luaran perkembangan anak. Namun, kemampuan orang tua dalam mengenali masalah perkembangan bahasa dan bicara sering kali dipengaruhi oleh kepercayaan budaya dan norma sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi kepercayaan budaya yang berkontribusi terhadap keterlambatan pengenalan perkembangan bahasa dan bicara pada orang tua yang memiliki anak usia dini. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif eksploratif yang dilakukan pada orang tua yang memiliki anak usia di bawah lima tahun di komunitas pesisir Kota Batam, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan teknik purposive sampling. Untuk memperkaya perspektif penelitian, wawancara juga dilakukan dengan bidan dan kader kesehatan yang terlibat dalam pemantauan tumbuh kembang anak. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan makna yang berulang terkait keyakinan orang tua dan pengenalan perkembangan anak. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima tema utama, yaitu: (1) keterlambatan bicara dianggap sebagai variasi perkembangan yang normal, (2) keyakinan bahwa anak akan dapat berbicara dengan sendirinya tanpa

intervensi, (3) pengaruh tradisi keluarga dan nasihat antargenerasi, (4) keterbatasan pemahaman mengenai tonggak perkembangan bahasa dan bicara, dan (5) keterlambatan dalam mencari layanan kesehatan. Kepercayaan tersebut berkontribusi terhadap rendahnya kewaspadaan orang tua dan keterlambatan pemanfaatan layanan skrining perkembangan. Kepercayaan budaya berperan penting dalam membentuk pemahaman orang tua mengenai perkembangan bahasa dan bicara anak. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan program edukasi dan pemberdayaan orang tua yang sensitif terhadap budaya untuk meningkatkan deteksi dini dan akses terhadap layanan perkembangan anak.

**Kata Kunci:** Deteksi Dini, Kepercayaan Budaya, Perkembangan Anak Usia Dini, Perkembangan Bahasa, Perkembangan Bicara

## INTRODUCTION

Speech and language development is a fundamental component of early childhood development and serves as a foundation for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and communication competencies. The first five years of life represent a critical period for brain development, during which children rapidly acquire language skills through interactions with caregivers and their surrounding environment. Optimal speech and language development during this period is essential for school readiness, academic achievement, and future social participation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; UNICEF, 2023; Black et al., 2017).

Globally, developmental delays remain a major public health concern. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 250 million children under the age of five in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential due to biological, environmental, and social factors (WHO, 2022). Among developmental disorders, speech and language delays are among the most frequently reported concerns during early childhood. These delays can negatively affect children's communication abilities, learning outcomes, social interactions, and emotional well-being if not identified and addressed at an early stage (Law et al., 2021; McLaughlin, 2021).

Early detection of speech and language delays is critical because timely intervention can significantly improve developmental outcomes. Parents play a central role in this process as they are the primary caregivers and the first observers of developmental changes. Their ability to recognize developmental milestones and warning signs is essential for initiating appropriate health-seeking behavior and accessing developmental services. However, research has shown that many parents have limited knowledge regarding age-appropriate speech and language milestones, which may contribute to delayed recognition of developmental concerns (Jeong et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2023; Yousafzai et al., 2020).

Beyond knowledge, cultural beliefs and social norms significantly influence how parents interpret child development. Cultural beliefs provide a framework through which parents understand children's behaviors, developmental milestones, and health conditions. In many communities, speech delays are often perceived as a normal developmental variation rather than a developmental concern requiring professional attention. Common beliefs such as “every child develops at their own pace,” “boys naturally speak later than girls,” or “speech will improve with age” may reduce parental concern and delay help-seeking behavior. These culturally embedded beliefs can result in missed opportunities for early identification and intervention during critical developmental periods (WHO, 2022; Bornstein, 2017; Wallerstein, 2021).

Previous studies have identified various determinants of speech and language development, including parental education, socioeconomic status, environmental stimulation, parenting practices, and access to healthcare services (Madigan et al., 2020; Law et al., 2021). However, limited research has specifically explored how cultural beliefs shape parents' recognition of speech and language

developmental delays (Jeong et al., 2021). Existing studies have predominantly focused on quantitative assessments of risk factors, while qualitative investigations examining parental experiences, perceptions, and cultural interpretations remain limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

In Indonesia, developmental monitoring is integrated into primary healthcare services through the Stimulation, Detection, and Early Intervention of Growth and Development (SDIDTK) program. The program aims to support early identification of developmental problems among children through routine monitoring and parental education. Despite these efforts, utilization of developmental screening services remains suboptimal, especially in coastal and underserved communities where access to healthcare services and developmental information may be limited (Ministry of Health of Indonesia, 2022; WHO, 2021). In these settings, family traditions, community norms, and intergenerational advice often play a substantial role in shaping parental understanding of child development and healthcare decision-making (Jeong et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

Understanding the cultural context that influences parental recognition of speech and language development is essential for designing effective and culturally sensitive interventions. Exploring parents' beliefs and experiences may provide valuable insights into barriers that hinder early detection and timely intervention. Such evidence is particularly important for strengthening parent empowerment initiatives and improving developmental monitoring programs within primary healthcare settings (Wallerstein, 2021; WHO, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to explore cultural beliefs influencing delayed recognition of speech and language development among parents of young children. By examining parents' experiences and perceptions, this study seeks to contribute to the development of culturally appropriate strategies that promote early recognition of developmental delays and enhance the utilization of child developmental screening services (WHO, 2022; Ministry of Health of Indonesia, 2022).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to explore cultural beliefs influencing delayed recognition of speech and language development among parents of young children. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and cultural interpretations regarding child speech and language development. The study was conducted in coastal communities within the service areas of selected primary healthcare centers (Puskesmas) in Batam City, Indonesia. These communities were selected because developmental monitoring services are provided through the Stimulation, Detection, and Early Intervention of Growth and Development (SDIDTK) program, while access to developmental information and healthcare services remains limited in some areas. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The study involved multiple stakeholder groups to obtain comprehensive perspectives and ensure data triangulation. Participants consisted of parents of children under five years of age, midwives responsible for maternal and child health services, community health volunteers (Posyandu cadres), and SDIDTK program coordinators. Parents were eligible if they had children aged 0–59 months, resided in the study area, and were willing to participate. Midwives, cadres, and program coordinators were selected based on their involvement in child developmental monitoring and SDIDTK implementation. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews between November 2025 and February 2026. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature. The interviews explored participants' understanding of speech and language development, beliefs regarding speech delay, family and community influences, experiences with developmental monitoring, and healthcare-seeking behaviors. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting. All interviews

were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations and non-verbal expressions. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Data analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure that themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 28 participants were included in this study, comprising 15 parents of children under five years of age, 5 midwives, 5 community health volunteers (Posyandu cadres), and 3 SDIDTK program coordinators. Participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education, occupation, and experience with child developmental monitoring. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes related to cultural beliefs influencing delayed recognition of speech and language development among young children. These themes included: (1) normalization of speech delay, (2) belief in natural maturation, (3) intergenerational cultural influence, and (4) delayed healthcare-seeking behavior. Each theme reflects how cultural beliefs and family traditions shape parents' understanding of child development and influence their decisions regarding developmental monitoring and healthcare utilization. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes identified from the interviews. The themes illustrate the ways in which parents interpret speech and language development and how these interpretations may contribute to delayed recognition of developmental concerns.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes of Cultural Beliefs Influencing Delayed Recognition of Speech and Language Development

| Theme                                | Subtheme                            | Description                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Normalization of Speech Delay        | Speech delay is considered normal   | Parents perceived delayed speech as a normal variation of child development rather than a developmental concern. |
|                                      | Comparison with family members      | Parents compared their children with siblings or relatives who had experienced similar delays.                   |
| Belief in Natural Maturation         | Children will eventually speak      | Parents believed that speech development would occur naturally without intervention.                             |
|                                      | Gender-related beliefs              | Parents perceived boys as naturally speaking later than girls.                                                   |
| Intergenerational Cultural Influence | Grandparents' advice                | Family elders played a major role in shaping parental understanding of child development.                        |
|                                      | Family experiences                  | Previous family experiences influenced parents' interpretation of developmental milestones.                      |
| Delayed Healthcare Seeking Behavior  | Waiting for spontaneous improvement | Parents postponed developmental assessment because they expected the condition to improve over time.             |

| Theme | Subtheme                     | Description                                                                                         |
|-------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|       | Reliance on informal support | Parents preferred advice from relatives and community members rather than healthcare professionals. |

Table 2. Representative Quotations Supporting Each Theme

| Theme                                | Representative Quotation                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Normalization of Speech Delay        | “Every child develops differently. My older child also spoke late, so I think it is normal.” (Parent 3)           |
| Belief in Natural Maturation         | “People told me not to worry because children will eventually speak when they are ready.” (Parent 7)              |
| Intergenerational Cultural Influence | “My mother said that my husband also spoke late as a child, so she believed our child would be fine.” (Parent 11) |
| Delayed Healthcare-Seeking Behavior  | “We decided to wait because everyone said it was normal and would improve by itself.” (Parent 5)                  |

Table 3. Summary of Findings

| Theme                                | Impact on Recognition of Speech and Language Delay                  |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Normalization of Speech Delay        | Reduced parental awareness of developmental warning signs.          |
| Belief in Natural Maturation         | Delayed identification and intervention.                            |
| Intergenerational Cultural Influence | Reinforced cultural beliefs that minimized developmental concerns.  |
| Delayed Healthcare-Seeking Behavior  | Reduced utilization of developmental screening and health services. |

This study explored cultural beliefs influencing delayed recognition of speech and language development among parents of young children. The findings revealed that parents' recognition of developmental concerns was strongly influenced by cultural beliefs, family traditions, and social norms. Four major themes emerged: normalization of speech delay, belief in natural maturation, intergenerational cultural influence, and delayed healthcare-seeking behavior. These findings highlight the importance of understanding cultural contexts when promoting early identification of developmental delays among children. Early childhood development, including language development, is strongly influenced by caregiver interactions and timely developmental support.

The first theme, normalization of speech delay, demonstrated that many parents perceived delayed speech as a normal variation of child development rather than a developmental concern. Parents often compared their children with siblings or relatives who had experienced similar developmental patterns and eventually developed normal speech abilities. Such perceptions may reduce parental vigilance and delay developmental assessment. While developmental trajectories

vary among children, established developmental milestones remain important indicators for identifying children who may require additional support.

The second theme, belief in natural maturation, highlighted the widespread perception that children will eventually acquire speech and language skills without professional intervention. Many participants believed that developmental delays would resolve naturally as children grew older. Although developmental variability is expected, excessive reliance on this belief may reduce parents' motivation to seek developmental screening and intervention services. Evidence suggests that early childhood interventions and parenting support programs contribute significantly to improved developmental outcomes, including language development.

The findings also emphasized the influence of intergenerational cultural beliefs on parental decision-making. Grandparents and older family members were frequently identified as trusted sources of advice regarding child development. Parents often relied on family experiences and traditional beliefs when interpreting developmental milestones. In many communities, family networks play a central role in shaping parenting practices, attitudes, and health-related decisions. While family support may provide emotional and practical benefits, reliance on traditional beliefs may also perpetuate misconceptions regarding child development when not supported by evidence-based information. Another important finding was the tendency of parents to delay seeking healthcare services. Participants often postponed consultation with healthcare professionals because they expected spontaneous improvement or relied on reassurance from family members. Delayed healthcare-seeking behavior may reduce opportunities for early detection and intervention, particularly during the critical period of early brain development. The WHO emphasizes that responsive caregiving, early learning opportunities, and timely developmental support are essential components of optimal early childhood development. The findings of this study highlight the importance of culturally sensitive developmental monitoring programs. Educational interventions should not only improve parental knowledge of developmental milestones but also address cultural beliefs that influence parental interpretation of developmental concerns. Parenting interventions that enhance caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices have been shown to improve child developmental outcomes across diverse settings. Therefore, developmental education programs should incorporate culturally appropriate communication strategies and actively involve influential family members, including grandparents and extended family networks.

This study has important implications for practice and policy. Strengthening SDIDTK implementation should include community-based educational approaches that improve awareness of speech and language developmental milestones while addressing misconceptions that delay healthcare utilization. Collaboration among healthcare providers, community health volunteers, and families is essential to promote early recognition and timely intervention for developmental delays. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The findings were derived from participants living in coastal communities and may not represent all sociocultural contexts in Indonesia. Future studies should examine cultural beliefs across different regions and explore the interaction between cultural beliefs, parental knowledge, and healthcare access in influencing developmental monitoring behaviors

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrated that cultural beliefs play a significant role in influencing parents' recognition of speech and language development among young children. Four major themes emerged from the findings: normalization of speech delay, belief in natural maturation, intergenerational cultural influence, and delayed healthcare-seeking behavior. These beliefs often shape how parents interpret developmental milestones and determine whether professional assistance is needed.

The findings suggest that delayed recognition of speech and language developmental problems

is not solely related to a lack of knowledge but is also influenced by deeply rooted cultural beliefs and family traditions. Such beliefs may reduce parental concern regarding developmental warning signs and contribute to delayed utilization of developmental screening and intervention services. Understanding these cultural influences is essential for improving early identification and promoting optimal developmental outcomes among children

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