



Pretend Play as a Key to Enhancing Sexuality Knowledge in Children with Mild Intellectual Disability

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the effect of the pretend play method on sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disabilities, while controlling for age, concentration, and verbal ability in special needs schools. This quantitative research uses an experimental approach with a pretest-posttest control group design. A total of 60 children, aged 11–14 years, with mild intellectual disabilities were selected through stratified random sampling and assigned to either the experimental group or the control group, each consisting of 30 participants. Data collection was conducted using modules and tests. The results revealed that the pretend play method significantly improved sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability, with an F value for the pretend play variable of 540.1 and a significance level of $p=0.00$ ($p<0.01$). Additionally, age, concentration, and verbal ability were positively correlated with sexuality knowledge, confirming their importance as covariates. These findings suggest that the pretend play method can serve as an effective educational strategy for enhancing sexuality knowledge among children with mild intellectual disability, highlighting the importance of integrating structured play-based learning into special education curricula to support their cognitive and social development.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pengaruh metode pretend play terhadap pengetahuan seksual pada anak dengan gangguan intelektual ringan, dengan mengontrol usia, konsentrasi, dan kemampuan verbal di sekolah khusus. Penelitian kuantitatif ini menggunakan pendekatan eksperimen dengan desain pretest-posttest control group. Sebanyak 60 anak usia 11–14 tahun dengan gangguan intelektual ringan dipilih melalui teknik pengambilan sampel acak terstratifikasi dan dibagi ke dalam dua kelompok, yaitu kelompok eksperimen dan kelompok kontrol, masing-masing terdiri dari 30 peserta. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui penggunaan modul dan tes. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa metode pretend play berpengaruh terhadap peningkatan pengetahuan seksualitas pada anak mild intellectual disability, dengan perolehan nilai F untuk variabel metode pretend play sebesar 540,1 dan signifikansi $p=0,00$ ($p<0,01$). Selain itu, usia, konsentrasi, dan kemampuan verbal memiliki korelasi positif dengan pengetahuan seksualitas, memperkuat peran ketiga variabel tersebut sebagai kovariat. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa metode pretend play dapat menjadi strategi edukatif yang efektif untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan seksualitas pada anak dengan mild intellectual disability, serta menekankan pentingnya integrasi

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INTRODUCTION

Sexuality knowledge plays a vital role in safeguarding children with intellectual disabilities (ID) from sexual violence. One key factor behind the increased vulnerability of children with special needs, particularly those with ID, is their limited sexuality knowledge (Wissink et al., 2015). Inadequate knowledge about sexuality increases the risk of sexual exploitation and unintended pregnancies among adolescents with ID. Providing accurate and appropriate information about sexuality can equip them with the ability to establish and maintain appropriate sexual boundaries, ultimately fostering self-control in sexual relationships.

Children with intellectual disabilities often experience significant gaps in understanding sexual matters despite the crucial role of sexuality education. This knowledge deficiency stems from their limited ability to comprehend and interpret social interactions. Furthermore, while they may experience cognitive and adaptive challenges, their sexual development progresses naturally, similar to their typically developing peers (Bisma et al., 2023; Büyükbayraktar et al., 2017; Nurqodriah et al., 2023; Rohali & Sitorus, 2025). This imbalance—between cognitive limitations and natural sexual maturation—places them at a higher risk of exploitation and inappropriate behaviors.

In the past, individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) were often perceived as incapable of making informed decisions about matters related to sexuality. Consequently, they frequently faced punitive interventions such as sterilization and institutionalization intended to prevent reproduction (McDaniels & Fleming, 2016). Although the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1970s fostered fairer and more humane treatment, it simultaneously

introduced challenges concerning the appropriate delivery of sexuality education to individuals with ID. Many of them struggle with decision-making skills, limited life experience, and inadequate social abilities required for building healthy relationships and defining sexual boundaries. As a result, their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and associated adverse outcomes remains high. Numerous studies have shown that most adolescents with ID possess low levels of sexuality knowledge and encounter few opportunities to acquire accurate information.

Sexuality education for children with ID must be tailored to accommodate their cognitive and developmental limitations while ensuring they receive comprehensive and accurate information. Effective sexuality education must address areas such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), reproduction, prevention of sexual abuse, social skills, sexual orientation, and personal safety strategies. Considering their challenges in retaining information, analyzing situations, and making decisions, instructional strategies need to be modified to improve both understanding and memory retention.

Due to their dependence on adults and their diminished capacity to resist manipulation or coercion, children with intellectual disabilities (ID) are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse. According to Mutiarani et al., (2022) physical fragility and dependence are significant contributors to the high rates of sexual violence against children. This vulnerability extends beyond typically developing children to also include those with special needs. Among this group, children with intellectual disabilities face an even greater threat due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of sexuality (Asra, 2013; Warmansyah et al., 2023). Educating children with ID about sexuality is

therefore essential to safeguard them from sexual exploitation and unintended pregnancies. Additionally, equipping them with accurate information enables them to develop appropriate self-regulation skills in sexual matters.

A thorough sexuality education for children with intellectual disabilities (ID) should cover essential subjects, including (a) marriage, (b) sexual behaviors, (c) pregnancy, (d) physical growth and social integration (e) reproductive options, (f) contraception, and (g) sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Kirby, 1998). Addressing these topics through structured and developmentally appropriate educational interventions can empower children with ID to navigate relationships safely, reduce their susceptibility to abuse, and enhance their overall well-being.

Children with special needs, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are at greater risk of sexual violence due to insufficient understanding of sexuality (Wissink et al., 2015). A study by Farakhiah et al. (2018) revealed that adolescents with intellectual disabilities often exhibit low levels of sexual awareness, resulting in inappropriate sexual behaviors. Similarly, Farisa et al., (2013) discovered that adolescents with intellectual disabilities tend to engage in excessive masturbation in inappropriate settings due to limited sexual understanding. Satryawan, (2021) identified various sexual behaviors, such as removing clothing and touching the breasts of the opposite sex, masturbating in class, engaging in genital play with peers of the same sex, and even engaging in sexual intercourse.

Interviews with teachers at SLB Kasih Ibu in Pekanbaru in March 2017 revealed that some students who had reached puberty did not understand their sexual development, exhibiting behaviors such as touching their genitals or hugging friends of the opposite sex. Interviews with teachers at SLB Negeri in Rokan Hulu, Riau, in July 2021 showed that some female students did not understand menstruation, leading them to avoid using sanitary pads and being unable to

communicate their condition to teachers. In July 2023, teachers at SLB Pembina Pekanbaru stated that the primary issue in the school was students exploiting their bodies and private areas, increasing the risk of sexual violence. Therefore, providing sexuality education to children with special needs is essential.

According to Kirby (1998), aspects of sexuality knowledge include birth control, sexual activity, physical development, marriage, social interactions, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Education is the primary means to improve the sexual knowledge of children with intellectual disabilities; however, teaching methods must be adapted to their limitations. Fleming (2016) stated that traditional didactic methods are ineffective for individuals with intellectual disabilities due to difficulties in understanding information, responding, and formulating questions. Therefore, a sexuality education curriculum should incorporate various teaching media (such as books, videos, and models), learning strategies (such as lectures, role-playing, and demonstrations), and student progress evaluations (such as tests, surveys, and concept identification). Role-playing has proven effective in helping students with intellectual disabilities develop skills and understand sexuality concepts, as existing sexuality education is often too abstract. However, observations in several SLBs in Riau indicate that lecture-based methods still dominate, yielding suboptimal results.

The pretend play method offers a promising alternative for enhancing the sexual knowledge of children with intellectual disabilities. Suminar (2009) explains that pretend play involves elements of make-believe, with an emphasis on the tools used, distinguishing it from role-playing, which focuses more on the characters being portrayed. Kızıldere et al. (2020) found that pretend play is associated with language development through activities such as pretend phone calls, imaginary pantomimes, and free-play sessions. Bergen (2001) highlighted that

pretend play plays a crucial role in fostering cognitive, social, and academic growth in children. Similarly, Hoffmann & Russ (2016) revealed the positive impact of pretend play on improving children's creativity and play abilities. Additionally, Alucyana et al. (2020) discovered that the use of pretend play is an effective approach for imparting sexuality education to young children.

Pretend play offers benefits not only for typically developing children but also proves to be effective for those with special needs. Rayhani & Widyorini (2021) identified a strong link between pretend play and secure attachment in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Vyshedskiy & Khokhlovich (2022) showed that pretend play promotes improvements in receptive language, expressive language, and awareness in children with ASD. Similarly, Ferreira et al., (2016) affirmed the role of pretend play in fostering development in children with intellectual disabilities.

Various studies have shown that pretend play has been used in numerous interventions to address issues faced by both typically developing and special-needs children. However, no research has specifically explored the application of pretend play to improve the sexuality knowledge of children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, this study serves as a novel exploration of the effectiveness of pretend play in enhancing the understanding of sexuality among children with mild intellectual disabilities.

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative methodology with an experimental design. To ensure the reliability of the experimental outcomes, specific variables are controlled. The variables controlled in this research include age, concentration, and verbal ability. The experimental setup follows a pretest-posttest control group design.

This study's population comprises all students with intellectual disabilities at SLB Negeri Pembina Pekanbaru, totaling 145

individuals (97 male and 48 female), all diagnosed with Mild Intellectual Disability (Mild Mental Retardation) and aged between 11 and 14 years. From this group, a sample of 60 students with mild intellectual disabilities was selected, with 30 students assigned to the experimental group and 30 to the control group. Furthermore, 60 students also participated in testing the research instruments. Stratified Random Sampling was utilized as the method for selecting the sample.

For data collection, the study utilized both modules and tests. The module applied is the Pretend Play Module, developed from The Affect in Play Scale, which assesses both cognitive and emotional aspects of pretend play. The researcher subsequently adapted this module to better meet the needs of children with mild intellectual disabilities.

The test methods used are as follows:

(a) **Sexuality Knowledge Test:** The study utilized the Mathech Questionnaires: Sexuality Questionnaires for Adolescents (Kirby, 1998), which assesses various topics such as physical development, social interactions, sexual activity, pregnancy, marriage, birth control, and sexually transmitted diseases. The researcher adapted the test by selecting relevant aspects focusing on physical development, social interactions, and sexual activity, ensuring the content was appropriate for children with intellectual disabilities. The test consists of 12 items, where answer option "a" is scored 1 and option "b" is scored 0. Higher scores reflect better knowledge of sexuality.

(b) **Concentration Test:** The concentration test used here refers to the subtest from the Children and Doll Train section (task spanning), which includes 8 questions that involve identifying the same object among similar ones. The distractors are more complex and varied compared to other subtests. The total score is derived from the number of correct answers across the 8 questions in the Nijmeegse Schoolbekwaamheids Test (NST), with a maximum possible score of 8 and a minimum score of 0.

(c) Verbal Ability Test: The researcher applied the Carter (2012) Verbal Ability Test, which evaluates (a) word meaning, (b) sentence completion, and (c) spelling. This test consists of 12 items tailored to the context of intellectual disabilities.

The research process was structured into three stages: pre-experiment, experiment, and post-experiment, with the experiment spanning 8 sessions. Data analysis was carried out using one-way ANCOVA, incorporating three covariates to assess the differences in sexuality knowledge between the experimental group (which was taught using the pretend play method) and the control group (which did not receive the method), while controlling for age, concentration, and verbal ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study comprised three stages: (a) preparation, (b) implementation, and (c) research findings. During the preparation stage, a readability test was conducted on 10 students with mild intellectual disability, followed by expert evaluation (professional judgment) before the instrument trial.

Validity and Reability

Content validity results indicated that the sexuality knowledge instrument scored 0.96 (>0.79), the verbal ability instrument scored 1.00 (>0.79), and the pretend play module ranged from 0.83 to 0.86 (>0.79), making all instruments suitable for use. According to Aiken (1980), a minimum content validity coefficient of 0.79 is considered acceptable. The instrument trial involved 60 children with mild intellectual disability (aged 11–14 years) to estimate reliability and item discrimination using Cronbach's Alpha analysis. Of the 14 sexuality knowledge questions, 3 items had low indices (5a, 5b, 6a), 8 were categorized as good, and 3 as very good. Despite some items having a discrimination index of <0.25 , all aspects of sexuality knowledge remained adequately represented. The reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha showed KR-20 values of 0.723 for sexuality knowledge and 0.716 for

verbal ability, both exceeding the 0.7 threshold, indicating that the instruments were reliable.

The pretend play module was tested for language, activity duration, and instructional clarity for facilitators, leading to improvements, particularly in language and duration. The study was conducted in three stages: pre-experiment, experiment, and post-experiment, involving 60 children with mild intellectual disability (ages 11–14), equally divided into experimental and control groups. Both groups had comparable intellectual disability levels.

In the pre-experiment stage, sexuality knowledge, concentration, and verbal ability were measured in both groups to establish baseline levels. The experiment stage applied the pretend play method to teach sexuality knowledge, with structured activities designed for effective learning.

Table 2. Implementation Sessions of Pretend Play – Sexual Knowledge

Session	Main Activities	Duration
I	Opening, stating objectives, ice breaking, reviewing, closing	50 minutes
II–III	Opening, Knowing My Body activities, ice breaking, reflection/practice, closing	150 minutes (2 × 75 minutes)
IV	Opening, Me and My Friend activities, ice breaking, reflection/practice, closing	75 minutes
V	Opening, Me and My Friend activities, ice breaking, reflection/practice, closing	50 minutes
VI	Opening, Let's Take Care of Our Body activities, ice breaking, reflection/practice, closing	60 minutes
VII	Opening, Let's Take Care of Our Body activities, ice breaking, reflection/practice, closing	50 minutes
VIII	Opening, recall and review, games, closing	45 minutes

In the post-experiment stage, sexuality knowledge, concentration, and verbal ability were remeasured in both the experimental and control groups to assess changes after the intervention.

Normality and Linearity

The normality test for sexuality knowledge data showed a Kolmogorov-Smirnov value of 0.200 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the data met the normality assumption. The linearity test results showed that the relationship between sexuality knowledge and age had an F-value of 0.42 and a significance of 0.958, the relationship with concentration had an F-value of 1.112 and a significance of 0.361, and the relationship with verbal ability had an F-value of 0.278 and a significance of 0.960. Since all significance values exceeded 0.05, these variables met the linearity assumption.

Hypothesis Testing

This study tested two types of hypotheses: the main hypothesis and the additional hypothesis, aimed at evaluating the effect of the Pretend Play method on sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability while controlling for age, concentration, and verbal ability. In the main hypothesis, the analysis results indicated that the group receiving the Pretend Play intervention had higher sexuality knowledge than the control group, which did not receive the same intervention. This finding suggests a positive effect of the Pretend Play method on improving sexuality knowledge after controlling for age, concentration, and verbal ability.

Table 2. ANCOVA: The Effect of the Pretend Play Method on Sexuality Knowledge with Control Variables (Age, Concentration, and Verbal Ability)

Dependent Variable: Sexuality Knowledge					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	334.984 ^a	4	83.746	165.989	.000
Intercept	1.742	1	1.742	3.452	.069
Verbal Ability	2.333	1	2.333	4.625	.036
Concentration	5.214	1	5.214	10.335	.002
Age	3.739	1	3.739	7.411	.009
Method	272.527	1	272.527	540.161	.000
Error	27.749	5	.555		

		5
Total	758.000	60
Corrected Total	362.733	59

= 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the main hypothesis of this study is supported.

Discussion

The results of this study show a positive correlation between the use of the pretend play method and the improvement of sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability. These results are supported by previous studies, including research by Kızıldere et al. (2020), which examined the relationship between pretend play and language development. In this study, pretend play was implemented through telephone tasks, pantomime tasks, and free play sessions. The results showed that the scores from these tasks were collectively associated with linguistic complexity. Similarly, Bergen (2001) found a link between pretend play and cognitive, social, and academic development in children, emphasizing its role in language development.

Other studies have highlighted the positive effects of pretend play on child development, emphasizing its potential as a school-based intervention to promote play skills and creativity (Hoffmann & Russ, 2016). Alucyana et al. (2020) reported that pretend play effectively enhanced sex education, leading to a better understanding of sexuality in young children. In addition, pretend play has proven advantageous for children with special needs. Rayhani & Widyorini (2021) identified a significant relationship between pretend play and secure attachment in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Vyshedskiy and Khokhlovich (2022) explored how pretend play impacted the development of both receptive and expressive language in children with autism, noting enhancements in combinatorial receptive language, expressive language, and overall awareness. Moreover Ferreira et al. (2016) demonstrated that pretend play positively contributed to

the developmental progress of children with intellectual disabilities.

This study further revealed a positive correlation between age and sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability. The analysis yielded an F-value of 7.41 with $p = 0.009$ ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant relationship. These findings align with previous research, which suggests that knowledge acquisition, including sexuality knowledge, can be influenced by various sources. Gazalba (1991) identified four pathways through which humans acquire knowledge: (1) innate knowledge, (2) intellectual reasoning, (3) sensory perception (vision, hearing, smell, or touch), and (4) inspiration or intuition. Age contributes to knowledge acquisition by enhancing cognitive processing and comprehension abilities. In this context, the study's findings indicate that as children with mild intellectual disability grow older, their sexuality knowledge improves. This supports Notoatmojo's (2010) assertion that age influences cognitive abilities, with older individuals demonstrating greater cognitive development and information retention.

In addition, the study revealed a significant positive relationship between concentration and sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability. The analysis produced an F-value of 10.335 with $p = 0.002$ ($p < 0.05$). Learning is a key avenue for acquiring knowledge, and Piaget (1952) emphasized that effective learning requires a balance between internal and external factors. Internal factors include physiological (physical health) and psychological aspects (intelligence, motivation, interest, attitude, talent, and concentration) (Hendrowati, 2015). This study's results suggest that children with greater concentration levels are more capable of processing and retaining sexuality-related information.

Additionally, a positive correlation was found between verbal ability and sexuality knowledge in children with mild intellectual disability. The analysis yielded an F-value of 4.625 with $p = 0.036$ ($p < 0.05$), confirming

that verbal ability significantly contributes to knowledge acquisition. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of verbal ability in the learning process. Wahyuddin, (2017) emphasized that verbal ability plays a crucial role in education, as it enables individuals to comprehend concepts, think critically, and solve problems using language. Supporting this, Olatoye & Aderogba (2011) found that students with strong verbal and numerical abilities achieved better academic performance. Similarly, Awofala et al. (2011) discovered that students with high verbal skills performed better academically than those with lower verbal skills. These findings suggest that children with stronger verbal abilities can process educational content more effectively, leading to better learning outcomes, including improved sexuality knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the pretend play method significantly enhances sexuality knowledge in children with Mild Intellectual Disability. Activities within the pretend play method, such as telephone tasks, imaginary pantomime tasks, and free play sessions, play a key role in improving linguistic complexity, which in turn positively impacts sexuality knowledge. Furthermore, after controlling for age, concentration, and verbal ability, pretend play still showed a significant effect on improving sexuality knowledge. This finding suggests that the pretend play method has its own effectiveness in enhancing children's understanding of sexuality concepts, regardless of age, concentration level, and verbal ability. Thus, pretend play can be considered an effective method for sexuality education in children with Mild Intellectual Disability, particularly in Special Schools (SLB), while taking cognitive and linguistic factors into account as part of a holistic learning approach.

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