



Speech Delay in Children Aged 4–5 Years as a Barrier to Early Childhood Language and Communication Development

Hendriadi¹, Fitri Fadillah¹, Elsa Ajriani¹, Arma Atus Seha¹

¹STIT Syekh Burhanuddin Pariaman, Indonesia

 hendriadi27121991@gmail.com*

Abstract

The development of language and communication is a fundamental aspect of early childhood growth, especially at the ages of 4–5 years, which are known as the golden period for language development. However, at this stage, there are still children who experience speech delays, which hinder their communication abilities and social interaction skills. This study aims to describe the condition of speech delay in children aged 4–5 years, identify the forms of speech delays experienced by the children, and analyze internal and external factors that contribute to the occurrence of speech delay. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method. The research subjects consist of ten children aged 4–5 years, along with teachers and parents. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, while data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that children with speech delay demonstrate limitations in expressive and receptive language abilities, low vocabulary mastery, and difficulties in forming complete sentences. The factors causing speech delay include internal factors, such as low self-confidence and developmental language barriers, as well as external factors, including limited language stimulation within the family environment and excessive use of digital devices. This study emphasizes the importance of early detection and collaboration between educators and parents in providing appropriate language stimulation for young children.

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INTRODUCTION

Language and communication development is a fundamental aspect of early childhood growth and development, closely linked to cognitive, social, and emotional development (Wisudaningsih et al., 2025; Talango, 2020; Rahma & Padilah, 2025). Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a means of thinking, expressing feelings, and building social relationships with those around them. Through optimally developed language skills, children can understand the world, convey ideas, and respond appropriately to stimuli. Therefore, language skills are the main foundation for children's readiness to enter the next level of education (Anggraini et al., 2019; Afina, 2020).

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In the context of early childhood education, language development is viewed as a gradual process influenced by active interactions between children and their environment (Afria et al., 2025; Syahdia & Khadijah, 2025; Arjanti et al., 2024). Children learn language through imitation, listening, and communicating directly with adults and peers. This process requires consistent and meaningful stimulation to ensure optimal language development. If this stimulation process does not go well, children can potentially experience obstacles in their language development (Riskiyah et al., 2025).

The ages of 4–5 are known as the golden age of language development, during which children should be able to speak simple sentences, understand instructions, and engage in fluent two-way communication. At this stage, children's vocabulary develops rapidly, and sentence structures begin to develop more clearly. The language skills developed during this period are an important indicator of a child's readiness for socialization and formal learning. Therefore, language disorders or delays at this age require serious attention (Desiarna et al., 2023).

One of the most common problems in early childhood language development is speech delay. Speech delay is a condition in which a child's speech and language abilities fall below the developmental standards for their age. Children with speech delays generally have difficulty pronouncing words, constructing sentences, and verbally expressing their needs and feelings. This condition can impact various aspects of a child's development if not addressed early (Wibowo & Pratikno, 2025).

Speech delay in children aged 4–5 years is not just a delay in speaking, but can also be a serious barrier to communication and social interaction (Fernanda et al., 2024). Children with speech delays often have difficulty interacting with peers, tend to withdraw, or exhibit frustrated behavior due to the inability to express their desires. In the long term, this condition has the potential to impact the development of a child's self-confidence and emotional well-being.

The increasing number of cases of speech delay in early childhood has attracted attention from various parties, particularly educators and parents. Various reports and research findings indicate that the number of children experiencing speech delays has tended to increase in recent years. This condition is influenced by changes in parenting patterns, modern family dynamics, and increasingly rapid technological developments. Without appropriate intervention, speech delay can impact a child's future academic success (Sapitri et al., 2025).

Family environmental factors play a significant role in children's language development. A limited verbal communication environment, a lack of quality interaction between parents and children, and the habit of leaving children to digital media can hinder language stimulation. Children who are rarely spoken to, engaged in dialogue with, or read to tend to have limited vocabulary. This suggests that the quality of family interactions significantly determines children's language development (Ningsih & Hestiyana, 2023; Ayuni & Sunarti, 2025).

Parenting styles are also a significant factor influencing speech delay in early childhood. Parenting styles that are unresponsive, authoritarian, or overly permissive can hinder the development of a child's communication skills. Children need consistent and positive verbal responses to stimulate their courage to speak and communicate. When parents provide insufficient verbal feedback, children tend to be passive and less linguistically stimulated (Ananda et al., 2025; Jannah et al., 2024).

In addition to family factors, the educational environment also plays a significant role in a child's language development. Early Childhood Education Institutions should be spaces rich in language stimulation through play, singing, storytelling, and simple discussions. However, in practice, learning still lacks an emphasis on verbal communication. This can exacerbate speech delays, especially for

children already at risk for speech delay (Sapriani & Depalina, 2025; Purnama et al., 2025).

The development of digital technology has also had a significant impact on early childhood communication patterns. Excessive use of devices without adult supervision can reduce direct verbal interaction between children and their environment. Children receive more passive visual stimuli than active verbal stimuli. As a result, children's speech and language skills do not develop optimally due to a lack of opportunities to practice two-way communication (Wulan & Watini, 2024).

Various studies have shown that children who are exposed to digital screens frequently tend to have lower language skills than those who receive intensive direct interaction. Uncontrolled device use can cause children to become passive listeners and less skilled at expressing their thoughts verbally. This situation further strengthens the suspicion that unwise technology use is a risk factor for speech delay (Nuzulah & Thoriqussuud, 2024).

The impact of speech delay is not limited to language but also extends to a child's cognitive and social development. Children with speech difficulties often struggle to understand instructions, participate in learning activities, and collaborate with peers. This can impact a child's readiness for formal education in elementary school. Therefore, speech delay needs to be understood as a multidimensional developmental issue (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

From an early childhood education perspective, speech delays need to be identified and addressed as early as possible through a holistic approach. Educators and parents need to work together to provide developmentally appropriate language stimulation. Early detection of speech delay symptoms is a crucial first step in preventing more serious consequences later in life. Without appropriate intervention, speech delays can persist into school age (Ramdana et al., 2024).

The role of early childhood education teachers is strategic in observing and stimulating children's language development. Teachers have the opportunity to observe children's communication behavior in various learning situations. Through language-based play activities, teachers can help children gradually improve their speaking skills. Therefore, teachers' understanding of the characteristics of speech delay is a crucial factor in supporting children's language development (Fahimah et al., 2021).

In the context of early childhood Islamic education, language development is also linked to the formation of morals and the child's ability to understand Islamic values. Language is the primary means of instilling moral values, prayer, and religious teachings from an early age. Children with speech delays may experience difficulties participating in verbal religious activities. This suggests that speech delays also have implications for children's character development (Muslimat et al., 2020).

Although speech delay is a fairly common phenomenon, many parents still consider this condition to be normal and will resolve on its own. This perception leads to delays in implementing appropriate interventions. However, the earlier the speech delay is addressed, the greater the child's chance of catching up on language development. Therefore, a deeper understanding of speech delay is needed in the community.

Based on these various descriptions, it is clear that speech delay in children aged 4–5 years is a complex problem influenced by various factors. This condition not only impacts a child's speech ability but also other aspects of development. Therefore, in-depth scientific studies on speech delay are crucial to provide a comprehensive picture of this condition.

Thus, research on speech delay in children aged 4–5 years as a barrier to early childhood language and communication development is highly urgent. This research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the field of early

childhood education, particularly in efforts to prevent and treat speech delays. Furthermore, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for educators, parents, and future researchers in improving the quality of early childhood language stimulation (Putri & Maslam, 2025).

Based on the background description, a number of main problems related to speech delay in children aged 4–5 years can be identified, including low verbal abilities compared to their developmental stage, children's difficulties in expressing ideas, needs, and feelings verbally, and limitations in two-way communication with the surrounding environment. This condition has an impact on inhibited social interactions in children, the emergence of withdrawn behavior, and decreased self-confidence in communicating with peers and adults. Therefore, this study was formulated to answer several basic questions, namely what forms of speech delay are experienced by children aged 4–5 years, what factors cause speech delay in early childhood, and how speech delay impacts children's language and communication development. In line with the formulation of the problem, the general objective of this study is to obtain a comprehensive picture of the condition of speech delay in early childhood, while the specific objectives are to describe the characteristics of speech delay, analyze the underlying causal factors, and understand the impact of speech delay on language development and communication skills in children aged 4–5 years.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study approach, aiming to deeply understand the phenomenon of speech delay in children aged 4–5 years in a natural context. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to comprehensively explore data on children's language behavior, communication patterns, and factors underlying speech delay. Through this approach, researchers were able to obtain a complete picture of the research subjects' conditions based on the experiences, interactions, and perceptions of the parties involved, thus making the research results more meaningful and contextual (Creswell, 2018; Engkizar et al., 2023; 2025; Oktavia et al., 2025; Abishev et al., 2025).

The subjects in this study included children aged 4–5 years who were identified as having speech delays, Early Childhood Education teachers as educators who interact directly with children in learning activities, and parents as parties who play an important role in the family environment. Subject selection was carried out purposively by considering their relevance to the research focus. Meanwhile, the research object focused on children's language and communication development, which includes verbal abilities, language comprehension, and children's interaction patterns in the family and school environment. This determination of subjects and objects is expected to provide rich and in-depth data regarding the phenomenon of speech delay.

Data collection techniques in this study were carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to directly observe children's communication behavior and language skills in natural situations, both at school and at home. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and parents to obtain information regarding the history of children's language development and the factors that influence it. Documentation was used as supporting data in the form of child development records, activity photos, or learning reports. The data obtained were then analyzed through the stages of data reduction, systematic data presentation, and conclusion to obtain valid and accountable research findings (Busral et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2023; Islahuddin et al., 2025; Puspitasari, 2022; Rahmah et al., 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Language Skills of 4–5 Year Old Children with Speech Delay

Based on observations and interviews with children aged 4–5 years, it was found that the language skills of children with speech delays were below the language development milestones expected for that age range. Children showed limitations in vocabulary, both in quantity and variety of words used in everyday communication. Most children were only able to pronounce single words or simple phrases and were unable to consistently construct complete sentences consisting of a subject, predicate, and object. This condition indicates a delay in the development of children's expressive language (Fatmawati, 2016; Hadian et al., 2018).

In addition to limitations in expressive language, children also experience difficulties in receptive language, namely the ability to understand verbal instructions or commands from adults. Observations show that children often require repetition of instructions or the assistance of nonverbal cues to understand the meaning of a conversation. Children appear to have difficulty responding to simple questions and tend to provide responses that are irrelevant to the context of the conversation. These findings indicate that speech delays impact not only speaking skills but also children's overall language comprehension (Muthia et al., 2024).

During classroom learning activities, children with speech delays tend to be passive in activities that require verbal communication, such as storytelling, singing, or simple discussions. They prefer to communicate through gestures, pointing to objects, or using facial expressions to convey their desires. This indicates that the child lacks sufficient confidence in using spoken language as the primary means of communication. This finding aligns with previous research findings that children with speech delays tend to avoid verbal communication situations (Suryadi, 2025).

Forms of Speech Delay Found

Research shows that speech delays in children aged 4–5 years vary in terms of articulation, sentence structure, and fluency. Some children experience difficulty pronouncing certain sounds, such as substitution or omission of phonemes, resulting in unclear speech and difficulty for others to understand. This condition often causes children to feel frustrated when they are not understood by their conversation partner, which then results in decreased motivation to speak (Gustiana, 2024).

In addition to articulation disorders, delays in sentence structure are also found. Children tend to use very simple sentences or even single words to convey their meaning. Their use of conjunctions, pronouns, and verbs is still very limited, resulting in less effective communication. This indicates that children's syntactic development has not progressed according to their age (Heryani, 2020).

Another form of speech delay identified is limitations in pragmatic language skills, namely the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Children often fail to respond to greetings, are unable to initiate conversations, or have difficulty maintaining verbal interactions with peers. In group play situations, children tend to participate in activities without speaking much or simply imitate the behavior of others. These findings suggest that speech delay also impacts children's social-communicative aspects (Solehah et al., 2025).

Internal and External Factors That Influence Speech Delay

Based on interviews with parents and teachers, internal factors influencing speech delay in children aged 4–5 years include individual differences in development, a history of language delays, and a lack of confidence in communication. Some children tend to be shy and reluctant to speak in front of others, despite having fairly good language comprehension skills. These internal factors contribute to delaying a child's expressive language development.

The dominant external factors originate from the family environment, particularly parenting styles and the quality of verbal interactions between parents and children. Research shows that children who are rarely spoken to, engaged in

dialogue with, or read to tend to have limited vocabulary. Furthermore, busy parents and a lack of quality time with their children contribute to the limited language stimulation children receive at home. This situation reinforces the view that the family environment plays a central role in children's language development (Anggraini, 2020).

In addition to the family environment, excessive device use has also been found to be an external factor influencing speech delay. Children who spend more time on digital devices tend to be verbally passive and receive fewer opportunities for direct social interaction. Excessive screen exposure without adult supervision results in children receiving more visual stimuli than verbal ones. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that uncontrolled device use can hinder language and communication development in early childhood (Lestari et al., 2024).

Narrative Description of Research Results

Overall, the research results indicate that speech delay in children aged 4–5 years is a complex phenomenon influenced by various interrelated factors. Children with speech delay exhibit limitations in expressive and receptive language skills, varying degrees of speech delay, and significant impacts on social interactions and self-confidence. These findings underscore the importance of early detection and appropriate language stimulation by parents and educators to ensure optimal language development.

Table 1. Observation Results of Language and Communication Skills of Children Aged 4–5 Years with Speech Delay (n = 10)

No	Child Initial	Age	Expressive Language Ability	Receptive Language Ability	Form of Speech Delay	Communication Behavior	Information
1	A1	4 th 1 bln	Single word, not yet forming a sentence	Understand simple instructions with repetition	Limited vocabulary	Passive, more often pointing	Mild speech delay
2	A2	4 th 4 bln	Inconsistent 2-word sentences	Understanding instructions with the help of gestures	Sentence structure is not yet developed	Reluctant to speak	Moderate speech delay
3	A3	4 th 6 bln	Unclear pronunciation	Slow response to questions	Articulation disorder	Easily frustrated	Limited vocabulary, frequent repetition of words
4	A4	4 th 8 bln	Limited vocabulary, frequent repetition of words	Understand simple commands	Low expressive language	Dominant nonverbal communication	Moderate speech delay
5	A5	4 th 10 bln	Not yet able to construct sentences	Difficulty understanding verbal instructions	Low receptive and expressive language	Withdrawn	Severe speech delay
6	A6	5 th	Simple short sentences	Understanding basic instructions	Low speech fluency	Speak when asked	Mild speech delay
7	A7	4 th 5	Incomplete pronunciation	Understand some	Phonological delay	Lack of confidence	Moderate speech delay

		bln	of words	instructions			
8	A8	4 th 7 bln	Sound without clear words	Very limited response	Verbal language is very limited	Very passive	Severe speech delay
9	A9	4 th 9 bln	2–3 word sentences, often misstated	Understand simple instructions	Immature syntax	Speak softly	Moderate speech delay
10	A10	5 th	Simple but limited sentences	Understanding instructions with repetition	Vocabulary is less varied	Minimal verbal interaction	Mild speech delay

Narrative Description of Observation Results

Based on observations of ten children aged 4–5 years, it was found that the majority of children showed delays in expressive language skills, characterized by limited vocabulary, use of very simple sentences, and unclear pronunciation. Children's receptive language skills also showed variation, ranging from still being able to understand simple instructions to having difficulty responding to verbal commands without the aid of gestures. The dominant forms of speech delay included articulation disorders, syntactic delays, and low speech fluency. In addition, children's communication behavior tended to be passive, avoiding verbal communication and relying more on gestures or nonverbal expressions, which resulted in low self-confidence in social interactions. These findings reinforce the indication that speech delay in early childhood is a condition that varies in degree and requires appropriate treatment and language stimulation from an early age.

This discussion section links the field observation results, as presented in Table 1, with theoretical studies on early childhood language development and the phenomenon of speech delay. The analysis is based on key indicators of language development: expressive language, receptive language, forms of speech delay, and social communication behavior, as well as internal and external causal factors.

The first is an analysis of children's expressive language abilities. Based on Table 1, the majority of children aged 4–5 years observed demonstrated expressive language abilities that were not yet developed according to their age. Children still predominantly used single words, inconsistent two-word sentences, or even sounds without meaningful words. Theoretically, children aged 4–5 years should be able to construct simple sentences with a subject–verb–object structure and have a vocabulary broad enough to express ideas and feelings (Nuraeni, 2017). These findings indicate a gap between children's actual abilities and expected language development achievements, which is a key characteristic of speech delay (Nurhasannah et al., 2024).

Second, analyze children's receptive language skills. In addition to expressive language, children's receptive language skills also show limitations. Some children still require repetition of instructions or gestural assistance to understand simple commands. However, children aged 4–5 years are normally able to understand step-by-step verbal instructions and respond appropriately to simple questions. These receptive language limitations directly impact the classroom learning process, as children have difficulty following teacher directions and actively participating in learning activities. This reinforces the view that speech delay is not only related to speaking ability but also to overall language comprehension (Mulia et al., 2024).

Third, we analyzed the types of speech delays. The research results showed that the types of speech delays identified included articulation disorders, syntactic delays, limited vocabulary, and low fluency. Children often omitted certain sounds, repeated the same words, or used incomplete sentence structures. Theoretically, these

delays indicate that the child's phonological and syntactic development is not yet mature enough for their age. This condition makes the child's messages difficult to understand, thus hindering effective communication.

Fourth, we analyzed children's social communication behavior. From a behavioral communication perspective, children with speech delays tend to be passive, withdrawn, and use more nonverbal communication, such as pointing or facial expressions. They also appear less confident when speaking in front of peers. Psychosocially, limited verbal communication can impact children's social and emotional development, as language is a primary tool for building social relationships. These findings align with social development theory, which states that language skills play a crucial role in building children's self-confidence and social skills (Riska et al., 2024).

Table 2. Internal and External Factors Causing Speech Delay in Children Aged 4–5 Years

No	Child's Initials	Internal Factors	External Factors	Information
1	A1	Low self-confidence	Lack of verbal stimulation at home	Mild speech delay
2	A2	Shy, reluctant to talk	Less responsive parenting	Moderate speech delay
3	A3	Articulation difficulties	Minimal verbal family interaction	Moderate speech delay
4	A4	Slow language development	Excessive use of devices	Moderate speech delay
5	A5	Receptive language barrier	Lack of parent-child communication	Mild speech delay
6	A6	Low concentration	Inconsistent language stimulation	Severe speech delay
7	A7	Low self-confidence	Less communicative environment	Moderate speech delay
8	A8	Verbal responses are very limited	High-definition display	Severe speech delay
9	A9	Immature language structure	Limited social interaction	Moderate speech delay
10	A10	Limited vocabulary	Lack of literacy activities	Mild speech delay

Fifth, we analyzed the factors causing speech delay. Based on Table 2, the factors causing speech delay in children aged 4–5 years are divided into interrelated internal and external factors. Internal factors include low self-confidence, language development barriers, and articulation difficulties. These factors are related to the child's individual characteristics and influence their readiness to communicate verbally. Meanwhile, dominant external factors include a lack of language stimulation at home, unresponsive parenting, and excessive use of gadgets. These findings align with research stating that the quality of verbal interaction between parents and children is a key factor in early childhood language development (Ramona et al., 2025).

Implications of Discussion

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that speech delay in children aged 4–5 years is a multidimensional problem that affects the child's language, social, and emotional aspects. Therefore, collaborative efforts between teachers and parents are needed to provide planned, consistent, and developmentally appropriate language stimulation. These findings reinforce the urgency of early detection and early

childhood education-based interventions to minimize the impact of speech delay on a child's overall development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that speech delay in children aged 4–5 years is a condition of delayed language development characterized by limited expressive and receptive language skills, low vocabulary mastery, inability to construct complete sentences, and a tendency for children to use nonverbal communication. Forms of speech delay found include articulation disorders, delayed language structure, and low speech fluency, which have a direct impact on communication skills, social interactions, and children's self-confidence in their learning and social environments.

The causes of speech delay in early childhood are influenced by internal factors, such as individual differences in language development and low self-confidence, as well as external factors, such as lack of language stimulation in the family environment, less responsive parenting, and excessive use of gadgets. Therefore, it is recommended for educators to increase language stimulation through play activities and active verbal communication in the classroom, for parents to build intensive and quality verbal interactions at home, and for further researchers to study speech delay with a broader scope of subjects and intervention approaches to obtain more effective and sustainable treatment strategies.

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