Parental Communication in Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities: A Study at Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya

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Abstract

This study was motivated by the limited research on parental communication in raising children with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia, particularly within community-based informal education settings. Most previous studies have focused on pedagogical, therapeutic, and inclusive education aspects, while communication dynamics within families have received relatively little attention. This study aims to describe parental communication patterns, interpret how parents construct the meaning of parenting through communication, and identify adaptive communication strategies used in raising children with intellectual disabilities. A qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach was employed, involving four parents and two teachers from Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using bracketing, thematic coding, and the synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. The findings revealed three major themes: emotional and empathetic communication, visual and nonverbal communication, and storytelling as an instructional strategy. Parents perceived parenting as a continuous process of emotional engagement, meaning-making, and adaptive communication. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of Family Communication Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Narrative Theory to explain emotional, visual, and narrative communication strategies within the context of community-based informal education in Indonesia. This study contributes to the literature on family communication and disability studies by providing empirical evidence from a collectivist society that remains underrepresented in existing scholarship. The findings suggest the need to strengthen parent communication training, family support services, and visual communication-based interventions in special education settings.

I. Introduction

The family, in this case the parents, plays an important role in the child's education process. A harmonious and happy family situation will produce good and responsible children or future generations (Widiarto et al., 2018). Raising children with intellectual disabilities involves complex communication, encompassing verbal, symbolic, nonverbal, and emotional aspects, which affect the child's development and the family's emotional well-being. The occurrence of any interaction activity in a particular context depends on the presence of communication, because only through communication does the potential to influence individual behavior emerge (Rhamadona et al., 2024). Communication gaps between parents and children often lead to stress, misunderstandings, and emotional distress (Fong & Ali, 2023; Laçin & Doğan, 2024; Staunton et al., 2020). Social stigma and limited access to inclusive communication models exacerbate the situation, hindering the creation of a supportive environment. Research shows that family-focused and responsive communication can improve child development and family relationship satisfaction (Coulman, Gore, et al., 2022; Smythe et al., 2020).

Communication theories, such as Interpersonal Communication Theory, Family Communication Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, provide insights into the importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, and understanding in communicating with individuals with cognitive or behavioral limitations. Interactions within families raising children with intellectual disabilities are influenced by parental intentions, cultural expectations, emotional labor, and institutional support (Kim et al., 2021; Zulkifli et al., 2021). However, despite extensive research on pedagogical and clinical dimensions, studies on intra-family communication in this context, especially in collective societies such as

Indonesia, remain limited.

In Indonesia, parenting communication for children with intellectual disabilities remains under-explored, particularly in institutional settings such as community-based informal education and rehabilitation centers. Despite efforts to promote inclusive education, families often face psychosocial and communicative complexities without structured guidance. Rumah Anak Prestasi in Surabaya is an important context where informal education, therapy, and caregiving intersect, but the experiences and communication practices of parents in this space are underrepresented in academic discourse. Addressing this gap is important for understanding how Indonesian parents develop strategic communication methods in caring for children with intellectual disabilities.

Various national and international studies have demonstrated that family communication plays a crucial role in supporting child development, particularly in the contexts of disability and inclusive education. Research conducted in Indonesia indicates that parental involvement through intensive communication with teachers, home-based learning support, and participation in educational decision-making contributes significantly to the academic, social, and emotional development of children with special needs (Sari, 2025; Wati et al., 2025). At the international level, studies have shown that strong collaboration between families and schools enhances learning motivation, academic achievement, psychological well-being, and the successful implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities (Gaspar, 2025; Ioannidi, 2025). Recent research further emphasizes that families serve as a key factor in creating learning environments that foster child development through open communication, trust, and active engagement in the educational process, including the use of technology and artificial intelligence to support learning, emotional regulation, and children's social participation (Li et al., 2025; Mei et al., 2025). These findings suggest that

effective family communication constitutes a fundamental foundation for the success of inclusive education and the optimization of child development in the digital era.

Although numerous studies have confirmed the importance of family communication in supporting the development of children with intellectual disabilities, most previous research has primarily focused on pedagogical aspects, therapeutic interventions, clinical treatments, inclusive education, and parental involvement in formal learning processes (Aasma et al., 2022). Furthermore, prior studies have predominantly been conducted in Western contexts and have emphasized the effectiveness of educational or therapeutic programs rather than examining the communication dynamics that occur within families (Coulman, Clery, et al., 2022). This gap hinders understanding of how Indonesian families adapt their communication strategies to cultural norms, institutional constraints, and emotional labor.

The need for parents to maintain open and empathetic communication channels is crucial, as their ability to effectively express their children's needs often influences the quality of care and educational support their children receive (Jang et al., 2022). Research shows that parents who use empathetic listening, consistent feedback, and emotionally reinforcing messages can increase their children's relational satisfaction and self-esteem (Chen et al., 2022; Zulkifli et al., 2021). Parental adaptations, such as the use of simple language, gestures, or visual aids, become essential skills when children experience communication difficulties.

This study proposes an in-depth qualitative exploration of how Indonesian parents, particularly those affiliated with Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya, engage in parenting communication. The aim is to analyze communicative strategies, symbolic constructions, and emotional narratives in their parenting practices. The

use of a constructivist-narrative lens provides a rich framework for analyzing family communication dynamics, especially for marginalized families facing the complexities of intellectual disability. The core concept of this approach is the understanding that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interaction and shared experiences, which is a fundamental concept in constructivism (Beltrán-Jaimes et al., 2023; Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2021).

The Family Communication Theory (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie) provides a framework for understanding how family dynamics shape and are influenced by communication, with communication patterns affecting parenting styles and child development. Families that value open dialogue and emotional expression tend to raise more resilient and independent children (Yamaoka et al., 2021). However, in families with children with intellectual disabilities, communication patterns are often influenced by cultural expectations, stress, and the child's abilities, requiring culturally relevant communication models that incorporate emotional intelligence and flexibility (Al-Bahrani & Hokroh, 2022).

Furthermore, Symbolic Interactionism offers a perspective for analyzing meaning formation through symbols, language, and interaction. Parents in families with children with special needs often interpret their children's experiences, give meaning to their behavior, and develop their self-concept through interaction (Fong & Ali, 2023; Laçin & LAÇİN, 2023). This meaning develops through daily interactions and emotional rituals, with emotional cues, gestures of affection, and interpretive narratives that help children understand themselves and their social world.

Qualitative studies have begun to uncover narratives of parental resilience and adaptation, but few connect these to theories such as Narrative Theory or Symbolic Interactionism (Larsen et al., 2024; Michinobu et al., 2023), which allow for deeper interpretations of how parents articulate their lived realities and

relational changes. The application of these theories in local contexts such as Surabaya is still minimal, where families rely on support from informal institutions such as Rumah Anak Prestasi. Furthermore, although emotional labor is recognized in clinical psychology, its communicative implications in parenting children with cognitive impairments remain understudied.

There has been no comprehensive study mapping the forms, functions, and strategies of parenting communication in the context of informal education and rehabilitation in Indonesia. The absence of culturally grounded research can cause programs and interventions to fail to resonate with the realities of communication and emotional experiences of parents. By incorporating parents' narratives, this research seeks to ground theoretical frameworks in lived experiences, ultimately enriching the understanding of family dynamics where intellectual disabilities are present (Cavanagh et al., 2025; Feldman & Aunos, 2020).

The main objective of this study is to explore and understand the forms, meanings, and strategies of parenting communication among parents of children with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia, particularly at Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya.

This study aims to (1) describe parents' communication patterns, (2) interpret how parents construct and articulate the meaning of parenting through communication, and (3) identify adaptive communication strategies in parenting. These objectives are achieved through a narrative-based qualitative approach that values parents' life experiences and emotional narratives.

The novelty of this study lies in being the first to integrate Family Communication Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Narrative Theory to explore the emotional, visual, and narrative communication strategies developed by parents in raising children with intellectual disabilities within the context of community-based informal education in Indonesia (O'Neil & Gopal, 2021). The

research focuses on emotional labor, interpersonal meaning-making, and narrative construction, offering a constructivist-narrative perspective on parenting that is rooted in local realities and rich in theory. The study is set in the context of community-based informal educational institutions in Surabaya, contributing to local knowledge and offering practical insights for rehabilitation centers, policymakers, and communication scholars.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by expanding the limited scholarship on family communication within collectivist and developing-country contexts through empirical evidence derived from community-based informal education settings in Indonesia. It also advances methodological understanding by demonstrating the effectiveness of a phenomenological approach in capturing the lived experiences of parents, revealing how they navigate emotional challenges, construct meaning, and develop adaptive communication practices while raising children with intellectual disabilities.

2. Research Methods

Qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups attribute to social or humanitarian issues. The process is flexible, with data typically collected in the participant's setting and analyzed inductively, starting from specific details to broader themes. The final report's structure varies depending on the research context and purpose.

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had direct experience in raising and educating children with intellectual disabilities. The participants consisted of four parents of children with intellectual disabilities who were actively involved in educational and developmental programs at Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya, as well as two teachers who regularly interacted with these children within educational settings. The inclusion criteria required participants to possess substantial experience in caregiving, communication, and

educational support for children with intellectual disabilities. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection ceased when additional interviews no longer generated new themes or meaningful information. This approach is consistent with qualitative research principles that prioritize the depth and richness of information over sample size.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Prior to the interviews, the researchers developed and validated an interview guide based on relevant theoretical frameworks, including Family Communication Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and previous studies on parenting communication for children with special needs. Interviews were conducted individually in locations that were convenient and comfortable for the participants. Each interview explored participants' lived experiences, communication practices, emotional challenges, adaptive communication strategies, and perceptions regarding the process of raising children with intellectual disabilities. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To minimize researcher bias, bracketing procedures were employed through the preparation of reflective notes before and after each interview to identify the researchers' assumptions, expectations, and personal interpretations.

The data were analyzed using a transcendental phenomenological approach to understand participants' subjective experiences in parenting communication. The analysis began with a bracketing process, during which the researchers intentionally suspended prior assumptions, experiences, and knowledge in order to approach participants' experiences more objectively. Interview transcripts and observation notes were then reviewed repeatedly to identify significant statements related to parenting communication experiences. These statements

were subsequently grouped into meaning units and coded into thematic categories. The next stage involved the development of textural descriptions that portrayed participants' experiences and structural descriptions that explained the contexts in which those experiences occurred. Finally, these descriptions were synthesized to generate an essential understanding of parental communication in raising children with intellectual disabilities. Through this analytical process, the study identified three major themes: emotional and empathetic communication, visual and nonverbal communication, and storytelling as an instructional strategy.

The study employed several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement in the field, member checking with participants, triangulation of data sources through interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as peer debriefing to examine the consistency of interpretations. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and communication experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting all stages of the research process, including data collection, coding procedures, and theme development. Confirmability was ensured through the use of reflective journals, the application of bracketing procedures, systematic documentation of analytical decisions, and the preservation of interview transcripts and field notes, thereby allowing transparent examination of the relationship between empirical data and the researchers' interpretations.

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants received a comprehensive explanation regarding the purpose of the

study, research procedures, duration of participation, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Following this explanation, participants voluntarily provided written informed consent. To protect privacy and confidentiality, all participants were assigned codes or pseudonyms in interview transcripts, field notes, and research reports. Audio recordings and research documents were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. The study upheld the principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, respect for participants' dignity, and sensitivity toward the experiences of families raising children with intellectual disabilities.

The research is conducted in four stages. The first stage involves an in-depth literature review to strengthen the conceptual foundation, including theories on interpersonal communication (DeVito), developmental ecology (Bronfenbrenner), and empirical studies on parental communication strategies for children with special needs (Levante et al., 2025; Raine & Skinner, 2023). Researchers also develop and validate semi-structured interview guidelines and address ethical principles like informed consent and confidentiality.

3. Results and Discussion

Communication between parents and children with intellectual disabilities is vital for building emotional relationships, supporting cognitive development, and fostering independence. The study participants were parents of children with intellectual disabilities who were actively involved in the Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya community.

The participants' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education level, employment status, and family socioeconomic status, are crucial to understanding the communication patterns between parents and

children. These factors influence how parents interpret their children's needs and shape their communication practices. Participant profiles are provided to assist in interpreting the research findings.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Role	Gender	Child's Age	Level of Disability	Education	Occupation	Experience (Teacher)
P1	Parents	Female	10	49	-	Private	-
P2	Parents	Female	13	50	-	Housewife	-
P3	Parents	Women	16	50	-	Self-employed	-
P4	Parents	Female	16	49	-	Private	-
P5	Teacher	Male	-	-	Bachelor	Teacher	3 years
P6	Teacher	Male	-	-	D3	Teacher	3 years

The study involved four mothers of children aged 10 to 16 years with intellectual disabilities, representing diverse occupational backgrounds, including housewives, private sector employees, and entrepreneurs, which reflected varying socioeconomic conditions. Additionally, two male teachers at Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya, with D3 and S1 educational backgrounds and an average of three years of teaching experience, provided complementary insights into parenting communication patterns.

To better understand the themes, the researcher analyzed the frequency

with which key themes were mentioned in the interviews, indicating their relevance and significance in the participants' experiences. The frequency data is presented in the following table based on the research findings.

Table 2. Frequency of Mention of Parenting Communication Strategies Used by Parents in Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities

Main Theme	Frequency of Mention	Participants Who Mentioned
Emotional and Empathetic Approach	9	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5
Visual and Nonverbal Communication	8	P1, P3, P4, P5
Storytelling as an Instructional Strategy	3	P1

The study identified three main themes. The first, *Emotional and Empathetic Approach*, was mentioned 9 times by five participants, highlighting the importance of emotional and empathetic interactions. The second theme, *Visual and Nonverbal Communication*, was mentioned 8 times by four participants, indicating that non-verbal communication also plays a significant role. The third theme, *Storytelling as an Instructional Strategy*, was mentioned only 3 times by one participant (P1), suggesting it was less emphasized compared to the other two. Overall, the emotional and empathetic approach was the most prominent, followed by visual communication, while storytelling was a less discussed instructional method. These themes reflect the different communication strategies used in the care of children with intellectual disabilities.

The following provides a detailed explanation of these findings:

A. Emotional and Empathetic Approach

An emotional and empathetic approach refers to a communication strategy that prioritizes children's feelings, psychological comfort, and emotional security. Parents emphasize the importance of being fully present emotionally, creating a safe environment, and giving children space to express their emotions freely.

These findings are presented further in a table containing initial codes, axial codes, and selective codes based on participant quotes representing the theme "Emotional and Empathetic Approach."

Table 3. Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes from the Emotional and Empathetic Approaches

Initial Codes	Axial Code	Selective Code	Description	Participant Quotes
Setting aside special time	Emotional involvement	Empathetic and emotional approach	Parents take special time to listen to and understand their children's feelings. This process strengthens emotional bonds and provides a sense of security.	"I often give him hugs or gently touch his back... so that he feels appreciated and loved." (P2)
Asking about feelings	Emotional openness	Space for emotional expression	Parents show concern by asking about their child's feelings and giving them space to express their emotions openly.	"I don't scold them right away, but give them time to vent their emotions." (P1)

Hugs, gentle touches	Physical contact is calming	A sense of security and comfort	The use of physical contact, such as hugs and gentle touches, to calm children who are experiencing intense emotions creates emotional comfort.	"I often ask, 'How are you feeling today?' to listen more deeply." (P2)

Based on the table, it is evident that an emotional and empathetic approach has proven to be a strong foundation in fostering communication between parents and children with intellectual disabilities. This strategy not only prevents emotional outbursts, but also strengthens attachment and opens up richer channels of non-verbal communication. In the context of children with intellectual disabilities, who often have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally, this approach serves as a "bridge" for conveying emotions through facial expressions, gestures, and certain physical situations. Parents' sensitivity to these signs is the key to successful two-way communication.

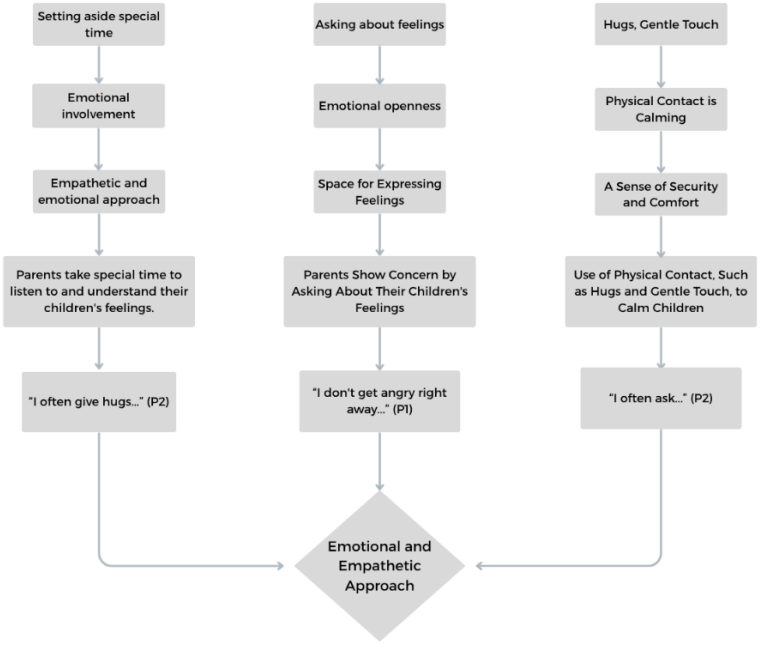
"I don't scold them right away, but give them time to vent their emotions." (P1).

"I often give him hugs or gently touch his back... so that he feels appreciated and loved." (P2).

Based on these quotes are explained that emotional and empathetic communication approach in which parents prioritize understanding and responding to their children's emotional needs rather than immediately correcting or disciplining their behavior. By allowing children time to express their emotions before intervening, parents create a supportive environment that encourages emotional expression and reduces feelings of frustration or distress.

Similarly, the use of physical affection, such as hugs and gentle touch, conveys acceptance, love, and emotional reassurance, helping children feel valued and secure. In the context of intellectual disability, these practices strengthen emotional attachment, foster trust, and facilitate communication, particularly when children experience difficulties expressing their feelings verbally. The findings suggest that parental communication functions not only as a means of interaction but also as a mechanism for emotional regulation, psychological support, and the development of a positive parent-child relationship.

Picture 1. Diagram of Emotional and Empathetic Approaches



The diagram presents a flowchart illustrating parents' emotional and empathetic communication with their children. It highlights three interconnected paths leading to this core concept. The first path stresses the importance of dedicating special time to listen and understand children's feelings, reflecting emotional involvement, as seen in the quote, *"I often give him hugs or gently touch his back... so that he feels appreciated and loved."* (P2). The second and third paths focus on empathetic communication through inquiring about the child's feelings and using gentle touch to provide security and comfort, with the quote *"I don't scold them right*

away, but give them time to vent their emotions." (P1) emphasizing concern without reprimand.

The flowchart underscores that combining empathetic verbal and nonverbal communication fosters emotional bonds, trust, and healthy attachment between parents and children.

B. Visual and Nonverbal Communication

Visual and nonverbal communication includes the use of images, symbols, facial expressions, and hand gestures as the primary means of bridging the verbal limitations of children with intellectual disabilities. These media are used not only as educational aids, but also as emotional connectors between parents and children.

Table 4. Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes of Visual and Nonverbal Communication

Initial Codes	Axial Code	Selective Code	Description	Participant Quotes
Flashcards and pictures	Visual aids	Visual and nonverbal communication	The use of visual media to help explain instructions or concepts that are difficult to understand with words alone facilitates understanding.	"I use pictures of faces to represent emotions... so that children can recognize them more easily." (P4)

Facial expressions for emotions	Nonverbal expressions	Understanding children's feelings	Using facial expressions as a way to communicate children's feelings that are difficult to express verbally.	"The child's facial expressions really help me understand how he feels, even if he doesn't say anything." (P5)
Simple hand gestures	Alternative language	Concrete and clear instructions	Using hand gestures to give cues or instructions to children, especially when verbal communication is ineffective.	"We often use hand signals as our primary tool." (P3)

Visual and nonverbal communication is not only a technical aid, but also an effective alternative language for children with intellectual disabilities. The use of symbols, pictures, and hand gestures has been proven to open up channels of communication that are inclusive, adaptive, and reduce frustration in daily interactions.

Children with intellectual disabilities have difficulty understanding abstract linguistic symbols. Therefore, a visual approach provides a concrete means of conveying meaning and understanding children's responses. Parents actively replace complex verbal messages with visual media that are easier for children to understand.

"I use pictures of faces to represent emotions... so that children can recognize them more easily." (P4).

Based on this quote it is explained that Parents use visual media as a

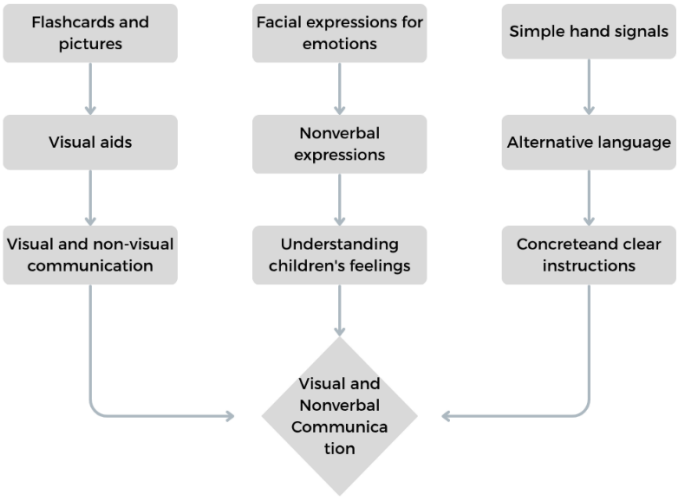
communication strategy to help children with intellectual disabilities understand and recognize various emotions that may be difficult to comprehend through verbal explanations alone. Pictures of facial expressions serve as concrete symbols to represent emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, or fear, enabling children to identify and express their feelings more easily. This finding indicates that visual communication functions as an adaptive communication strategy that helps overcome cognitive and language limitations among children with intellectual disabilities while simultaneously strengthening interaction and emotional understanding between parents and their children.

"We often use hand signals as our primary tool." (P3)

"The child's facial expressions really help me understand how he feels, even if he doesn't say anything." (P5).

Based on this quote it is explained that the child's facial expressions serve as an important source of information for parents and teachers in understanding the child's emotional state when the child experiences difficulty expressing feelings verbally. In the context of intellectual disability, communication does not occur solely through spoken language but also through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body movements, and eye contact. This quotation indicates that parents and teachers develop sensitivity to these nonverbal signals as a means of interpreting the child's needs, feelings, and emotional responses. Therefore, nonverbal communication functions as a bridge that facilitates emotional understanding and promotes more effective interactions between the child and those around them.

Picture 2. Visual and Nonverbal Communication Diagram



The diagram illustrates visual and nonverbal communication strategies between parents and children. The first path highlights the use of flashcards and pictures to help children understand messages more concretely, especially for those with difficulty understanding verbal language, creating a balance between visual and nonverbal communication. The second and third paths focus on nonverbal communication through facial expressions and simple hand gestures, offering clear, concrete cues for children.

These nonverbal forms help children grasp emotions and the meaning behind messages without relying on words. Overall, the flowchart emphasizes the importance of visual and nonverbal communication in fostering emotional understanding and positive interactions between parents and children.

C. The Importance of Communication in Parenting

Communication in parenting children with intellectual disabilities is understood by parents as an essential element that not only functions as a means of conveying messages, but also as an emotional bridge between parents and children. Based on the participants' narratives, intensive, open, and empathetic communication can create a sense of security, increase emotional attachment, and

help children recognize and express their emotions in a healthier way.

Table 7. Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes of the Importance of Communication in Parenting

Initial Codes	Axial Code	Selective Code	Description	Participant Quotes
Open Communication	Emotional Communication	Effective Communication	Open and empathetic communication between parents and children with intellectual disabilities strengthens emotional bonds and helps children manage their emotions	*"I believe that when children get used to communicating their emotions from an early age, they will grow up to be calmer individuals." (P1)*
Empathetic Approach	Compassionate Approach	Emotion Management	Parents use a gentle and loving approach to calm and help children express their feelings	*"I speak slowly and understandingly, helping them calm down by offering things that can distract them." (P3)*
Use of Visual Aids	Use of Pictures	Visual Aids	The use of visual aids such as pictures and flashcards greatly helps children understand instructions and emotional expressions, as well as accelerate communication learning	*"I use pictures of faces with different expressions (happy, sad, angry) to help children more easily recognize and express their feelings." (P4)*

Communication in parenting children with intellectual disabilities is not

only a tool for interaction, but also the foundation of emotional relationships and a means of character building. Openness, patience, and emotional presence are the main principles that make children feel valued and develop in a safe environment.

"I believe that when children get used to communicating their emotions from an early age, they will grow up to be calmer individuals." (P1).

Based on this quote it is explained that the parent's belief that early emotional communication plays a crucial role in a child's emotional development. Parents perceive that providing children with opportunities to recognize, express, and openly discuss their feelings can help them develop stronger emotional regulation skills. Through this process, children learn to understand their own emotions, reduce frustration, and respond to situations in a calmer and more controlled manner. In the context of children with intellectual disabilities, consistent emotional communication also helps foster a sense of security, enhance self-confidence, and strengthen the emotional bond between parents and children. Therefore, communication functions not only as a means of conveying messages but also as a process of character formation and the development of children's social and emotional competencies.

"I speak slowly and understandingly, helping them calm down by offering things that can distract them." (P3).

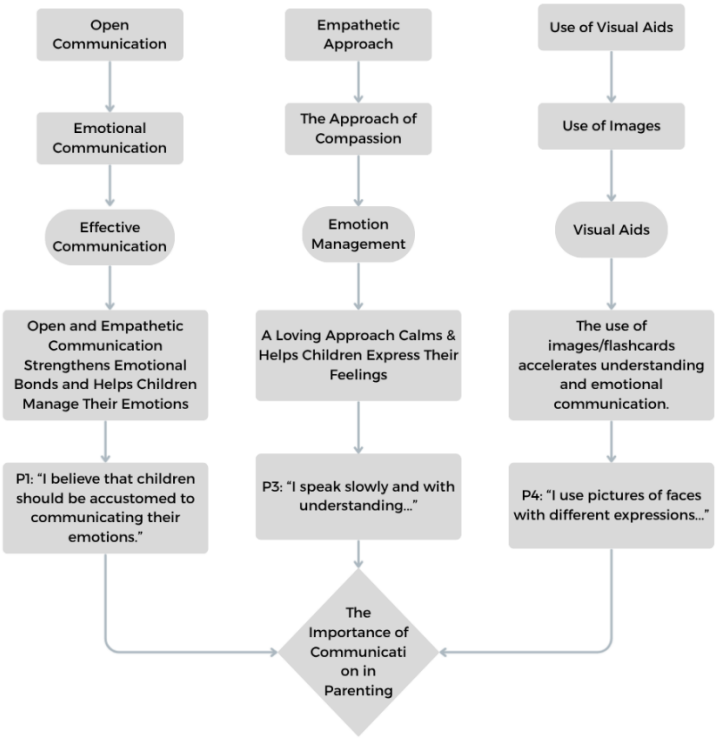
Based on this quote it is explained that that parents adopt a patient, empathetic, and adaptive communication approach when interacting with children with intellectual disabilities. Speaking slowly helps children better understand the messages being conveyed, while an understanding and supportive attitude helps reduce the emotional distress they may experience. In addition, the use of positive distraction serves as a strategy to help children calm themselves when facing frustration, anxiety, or emotional outbursts. This finding

indicates that parental communication extends beyond the mere transmission of information and also plays an important role in emotional regulation and the provision of psychological support for the child.

"I use pictures of faces with different expressions (happy, sad, angry) to help children more easily recognize and express their feelings." (P4).

Based on this quote it is explained that Parents use visual media as a communication tool to help children recognize and express emotions that may be difficult to convey verbally. Pictures of facial expressions serve as concrete representations of different feelings, enabling children to more easily understand the meaning of specific emotions. This strategy helps enhance children's emotional awareness while facilitating the communication process between parents and their children. The finding suggests that visual communication constitutes an effective adaptive communication strategy for overcoming language and cognitive limitations among children with intellectual disabilities.

Picture 3. Diagram of the Importance of Communication in Parenting



The diagram outlines three main approaches to fostering effective communication between parents and children: open communication, an empathetic approach, and the use of visual aids. The first path emphasizes that open and emotional communication helps children express their feelings openly, strengthening emotional bonds and promoting positive emotional management (P1). The second and third approaches highlight the role of empathy and the use of visual aids, such as pictures and flashcards, in facilitating children's emotional expression.

The empathetic approach helps children feel calm and open (P3), while visual aids enhance their understanding of emotional expressions (P4). Overall, the diagram underscores the importance of combining emotional communication, empathy, and visual aids to build harmonious relationships and support children's social-emotional development.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that parental communication plays a central role in raising children with intellectual disabilities within the context of community-based informal education at Rumah Anak Prestasi Surabaya. The findings reveal three interconnected communication patterns that shape parenting practices: emotional and empathetic communication, visual and nonverbal communication, and storytelling as an instructional strategy. Parents construct the meaning of parenting not merely as a caregiving responsibility but as a continuous process of emotional engagement, meaning-making, and adaptive communication. Emotional involvement through active listening, physical affection, emotional openness, and patient responses enables children to feel secure, valued, and understood. At the same time, visual media, facial expressions, hand gestures, and other nonverbal cues function as alternative communication channels that help children overcome cognitive and linguistic limitations. Storytelling further

supports emotional understanding and social learning by translating abstract concepts into concrete and relatable experiences. These findings confirm that effective parental communication extends beyond information exchange and serves as a foundation for emotional regulation, social development, self-expression, and parent-child attachment among children with intellectual disabilities.

The practical implications of this study highlight the need for structured parent training programs that focus on emotional communication skills, active listening techniques, emotional regulation support, visual communication methods, and storytelling-based interventions. Parents should be trained to recognize nonverbal signals, utilize visual aids such as emotion cards and pictorial schedules, and apply adaptive communication strategies tailored to their children's developmental needs. Educational institutions and rehabilitation centers should develop family-centered communication support services that provide regular workshops, coaching sessions, and collaborative consultation between parents, teachers, and therapists. Teachers should integrate visual communication tools and socio-emotional learning activities into daily instruction, while therapists should incorporate parent-mediated communication interventions that can be consistently implemented at home. Policymakers should establish guidelines and funding mechanisms that support family communication training within special and inclusive education programs. Community-based institutions such as Rumah Anak Prestasi can serve as communication support hubs by providing accessible resources, parent support groups, and interdisciplinary intervention services that strengthen collaboration among families, educators, and healthcare professionals.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small number of participants from a single community-based

educational institution in Surabaya, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other cultural, institutional, or geographical contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on the perspectives of parents and teachers, while the voices of children with intellectual disabilities were not directly explored. Third, the qualitative phenomenological design focused on understanding lived experiences rather than measuring the effectiveness of specific communication interventions. Consequently, the findings provide rich contextual insights but do not establish causal relationships between communication practices and developmental outcomes.

Future research should expand the participant base by involving families from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds across different regions of Indonesia. Comparative studies between formal and informal educational settings could further illuminate contextual differences in parenting communication. Researchers should also examine the perspectives of children with intellectual disabilities, siblings, therapists, and other family members to develop a more comprehensive understanding of family communication dynamics. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific communication interventions, including visual communication systems, emotion-regulation programs, parent training models, and technology-assisted communication tools. Further investigation into the role of digital media, artificial intelligence, and assistive technologies in supporting parent-child communication may also provide valuable insights for developing evidence-based communication programs in special and inclusive education environments.

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