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Mothers as Architects: Exploring How Mothers Promote the Academic and Social-Emotional Development of Their Young Children with Developmental Language Delay

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Abstract

Language delay is a fairly frequent phenomenon in young children, with associated negative outcomes across the academic, social, and emotional areas of their lives. This qualitative study was designed to deeply examine mothers' experiences and the ways in which they promote the development of their children with language delay. Twenty mothers of children with language delay (aged four to nine), who were recruited through advertisements posted by language preschool/school teachers, participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed themes relating to the challenges of raising a child with language delay, along with how mothers create a safe emotional environment for their child's development, find opportunities and encourage social interactions, utilize their day-to-day routines to promote language and learning, and actively engage with their children's educational framework. These results highlight how mothers serve as the "architects" of their children's development. Despite the difficulties they encounter, such as high stress levels, mental health challenges, isolation, and guilt, and the far-reaching implications of their children's language delay on their day-to-day living, mothers shape the home environment to promote their children's academic, social, and emotional development. The study thus indicates that mothers intuitively promote their children's development and that practitioners and others can support mothers' own initiatives along with providing guidance.

Keywords: language delay; home language environment; qualitative; academic development; emotional development; social development

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1. Introduction

Language constitutes a fundamental tool for children's participation in learning, management of social interactions, and emotional regulation, because it enables a child to understand others, express their needs, and deal with frustration in a functional manner (e.g., Buğan et al., 2022; Hadley et al., 2023; Kalland & Linnavalli, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, language delay in early childhood does not only affect communication itself, but may create a ripple effect in a variety of developmental and functional domains in everyday life. Language delay or late language emergence is common in young children, with global prevalence rates ranging from 2% to 15%, depending on inclusion criteria such as age (ASHA, n.d.; Law et al., 2003; Sunderajan & Kanhere, 2019). These are children who have delayed development of receptive language, expressive language, or both. They may have delays in language comprehension, vocabulary development, development of

sentence structure, articulation, or general language production (ASHA, n.d.; Bruinsma et al., 2024). Development in one or all of these areas is below the age-expected range for children, and generally, in the absence of other neurological or genetic disorders and typical cognitive and sensory development (Collisson et al., 2016; Nouraey et al., 2021; Singleton, 2018). Various panels of international experts have agreed to the term "Developmental Language Disorder" (DLD[1]) to characterize children with this language profile (Bishop, 2017; Bishop et al., 2017). Although language is the primary area implicated, language delay is associated with children's academic, social, and emotional outcomes, including lower academic achievement, difficulty in social interactions, and socio-emotional challenges (e.g., Duinmeijer et al., 2025; Matte-Landry et al., 2020). Children develop within various ecological systems, ranging from the microsystem closest to them, such as home and school settings, to the macrosystem furthest from them, such as broader cultural values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Being closer to the child, the home plays a significant role in fostering children's development (e.g., Egan et al., 2025). At the same time, studies have not explored how parents naturally (i.e., not part of an intervention) use the home environment to promote the development of their children with language delay. Increased knowledge can lend itself to optimizing interventions, perhaps being able to intervene earlier, and acquiring a more in-depth understanding of how ecological system theories may look in practice. As such, the current study set out to explore the microsystem in particular (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), examining how mothers of children with language delay promote their children's academic, social, and emotional development.

1.1. Language Delay and Children's Later Outcomes

Delays in language development and difficulty in functional use of language often have ripple effects on various areas of the child's life, and there is evidence that impaired language learning is associated with negative outcomes at the academic, social, and emotional levels (e.g., Eadie et al., 2018; Le et al., 2021). Children whose language delays persist into their elementary school years showed lower academic achievement compared to non-delayed peers (Bleses et al., 2016; Matte-Landry et al., 2020). In a review of research on peer interactions, Lloyd-Esenkaya et al. (2020) found that children with developmental language disorder generally have difficulty with play interactions (e.g., turn taking) and with conflict resolution. Similarly, Duinmeijer et al. (2025) found that for children with presumed DLD based on delayed language, better communicative participation (such as turn-taking in conversation and other pragmatic-related aspects of language) was related to fewer socio-emotional difficulties and an increased quality of life, indicating that communicative participation mediated the relation between language and socio-emotional functioning and quality of life. A critical portion of children's language development takes place in the home.

1.2. Importance of the Home Environment

There has been extensive evidence over the past decades to demonstrate that the home learning environment and what parents do in the home with their children have associations with children's academic and socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., Lehrl et al., 2020; Niklas et al., 2021; Pietropoli & Gracia, 2025). For example, one study demonstrated that aspects of the home learning environment, such as attitudes towards literacy and mathematics, were associated with third-graders' academic performance (Skwarchuk et al., 2022). Another study similarly showed that children's early learning environments, including literacy activities, the quality of mothers' engagement, and learning materials, predicted their fifth-grade academic skills (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019). Additionally, mothers' sensitivity to

their children's developmental level was related to children's language outcomes (Attig & Weinert, 2020). Research has similarly shown that the home environment is related to children's socioemotional development, such as emotional self-regulation, physical aggression, and cooperative behavior (e.g., Rose et al., 2018). This large body of research makes clear that the home environment plays an important role in children's developmental outcomes.

For children with language delay, the home environment takes on additional importance. Blom et al. (2023) reported that toddlers who were suspected to experience language delay not only vocalized less than their typically-developing peers, but they also heard fewer adult words and had fewer conversational turns. The authors note that it was not clear if parents were speaking less as a means of adapting to their child's developmental level or whether the parents themselves had some kind of language issue. Another study demonstrated that parental language input during infancy and childhood that was adapted to children's developmental level, while also being conceptually challenging, related to better language outcomes in children in their early school years (Levickis et al., 2023). The home plays a role not only in shaping children's language environments but also in terms of successfully implementing interventions to advance children with language delay. A recent review and meta-analysis revealed that interventions that improve parent–child interactions have positive outcomes on children's language amongst children with suspected DLD (van Witteloostuijn et al., 2025).

1.3. Parenting a Child with Language Delay

Alongside the difficulties facing the children themselves, parenting children with language delay can come with associated challenges. Parents of children with DLD have been found to have high stress levels (Kotsis et al., 2023) and to experience negative impacts on their mental health (Gallagher et al., 2018; Leitão et al., 2025). Many also experience isolation and guilt regarding their child's diagnosis (Burnley et al., 2024; O'Fallon et al., 2025). Mothers, in particular, report significant emotional difficulty, as well as challenges in managing the family (e.g., Ash et al., 2020; Chevalier McKechnie et al., 2018; Leitão et al., 2025). Higher levels of maternal burden have been found amongst mothers of children with language disorders, which are often related to the difficulties facing their children, including bullying (Rennecke et al., 2022).

Parents often have to fight to have their children's language issues recognized and diagnosed. Newbury and Eagle (2025) reported that mothers described having to move past professionals who did not take their concerns seriously and had to persist in their pursuit to have their children diagnosed. At the same time, many parents receive confusing or conflicting information about language disorders, treatment options, and how to contend with the diagnosis, which, in turn, may negatively impact parents' mental health (Ash et al., 2020; Kazmierczak-Murray et al., 2025).

1.4. Current Study

The above-reviewed literature highlights the prevalence of DLD diagnoses and the accompanying challenges of these diagnoses at both the child and parent levels. While there is evidence that parents can be effective contributors to interventions that target language and those that target socio-emotional development (Carson et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2024; Heidlage et al., 2020; Roberts & Kaiser, 2011; Vermeij et al., 2023), there is less knowledge of what parents do in the home setting to promote their children's socio-emotional and academic skills. Yet, understanding this is important for designing the most effective interventions for children with DLD, as well as providing the necessary support for their parents. The current study thus aimed to delve into maternal experiences of raising a child with language delay. The primary research question was how do mothers of children

with language delay promote their children's academic and socio-emotional development? To understand the mothers' experiences directly from them, we relied on a qualitative research design.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design grounded in a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). This approach provides a structured framework, which also enables flexibility, for locating patterns within the data and interpreting them (Ahmed et al., 2025). Using this design, we aimed to gain insight into how mothers of children with language delay promote their children's academic skills, as well as their socio-emotional development.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

Participants in the current study included 20 Jewish-Israeli mothers of children with speech delay. Overall, the mothers' ages ranged between 27 and 42 (M = 35.6, SD = 4.63). Nearly all were married, with one single mother and one divorced. A majority of the mothers worked in a range of careers, though most had time-flexible work, such as teachers, nannies, and a tour guide. Their children ranged in age from 4 to 9 years old (M = 5.86, SD = 1.72), with 8 females and 12 males. The majority of the children (16) were in a preschool setting, with four of them in first or second grade. In Israel, where the study was conducted, eligibility for a language preschool is granted by committees of the municipal psychological services, after the child has been diagnosed with a significant developmental delay by a speech therapist or developmental pediatricians, as well as a report from the current early education framework (Israel Ministry of Education, n.d.). Language preschools have a smaller number of children than a typical preschool and have a staff that includes a special education preschool teacher and assistant, as well as therapists, such as occupational therapists, speech therapists, emotional therapist, and psychologists, who are involved with the children during the week. These preschools are focused on closing gaps in children's language development, along with other areas of the child's development, especially social and emotional. Children who manage to reduce the gaps in their language delay are able to progress to general education elementary school, with some additional support, as opposed to needing special education classes or a special education school (Israel Ministry of Education, n.d.).

The demographic details of the participating mothers and their children can be seen in Table 1. The researchers reached out to language preschool/school teachers, who posted an advertisement for the research that was visible to all the mothers of children in the preschool/school. Mothers who were interested reached out directly to the researchers, who conveyed the details of the study and the consent form to the mothers. Those who signed participated in the interviews, which were conducted either using Zoom or face-to-face, according to the mothers' preferences. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew, with a few in English, based on the native language of the mother.

Table 1. Participants' and their children's demographic details.

Participant #	Maternal Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Child's Name	Child Age (Years, Months)	Child Sex
1	35	M	2	Talia	6	F
2	42	S	3	Ron	5	M
3	38	M	3	Shir	6	F
4	28	M	3	Yehuda	5.6	M

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participant #	Maternal Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Child's Name	Child Age (Years, Months)	Child Sex
5	34	M	3	Yosef	4	M
6	33	M	3	David	6	M
7	38	D	1	Tali	6.11	F
8	45	M	4	Amichai	8	M
9	30	M	5	Moshe	5.5	M
10	32	M	2	Lidor	6	M
11	41	M	3	Nurit	4	F
12	27	M	2	Dor	5	M
13	37	M	3	Twins—Hod and Hadar	5	M
14	37	M	3	Meital	5	F
15	42	M	2	Mirit	9	F
16	32	M	1	Oz	9	M
17	36	M	3	Boaz	6	M
18	33	M	4	Netanel	4	F
19	38	M	3	Orit	9	F
20	34	M	3	Adi	4	F

Note. # = Number, M = married, S = single, and D = divorced. All names used are pseudonyms.

2.3. Research Tool

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The interview questions were developed based on the existing literature and the research objectives. They were reviewed and updated by the research team. Additionally, a pilot of two interviews was conducted (that were not included in the sample), after which wording was improved/probes were added. The interviews began with a general question, asking the mothers to tell them about themselves—their age, occupation, etc. Some of the other questions included the following. Tell me about your child with language delay. When did you first realize something was not totally right with your child, and how did you react? How does your child's language delay impact the various areas of your life? Tell me about your connection with the educational framework. What do you do (if anything) to promote your child's language and learning in the home setting? Can you describe reading and writing activities that you may do at home? As the interviews were semi-structured, the interviewers had the flexibility to deviate from the interview protocol as needed to delve further into a topic or to follow up to obtain additional information. The interviews were conducted by students in an M.A. program in special education, who were trained with a qualitative interview course, practiced conducting the interviews, and received feedback on the quality of the interview after conducting the interview. The interviews generally lasted between 30 and 45 min.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Data were collected and analyzed in line with ethical guidelines for qualitative research (Zabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016). The study received the ethical approval [#004] of Michlalah Jerusalem. All the mothers signed an informed consent form prior to the interviews. They were assured that participation was voluntary, could be halted at any point, and that identifying information would be changed to protect their privacy. Participants did not receive any kind of compensation and debriefing will take place in the near future.

2.5. Data Analysis

The authors conducted a thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, inductively deriving themes from the coded data. Each author independently conducted iterative readings of the transcribed interviews, making notes regarding potential codes. They then met to discuss and agree upon the codes. Codes were then grouped together to generate potential themes, which were again discussed and reviewed against the full dataset by the authors together. Additional discussion between the authors was conducted to confirm and finalize the themes, resolving any discrepancies, and ensuring inter-coder reliability.

3. Results

Various themes emerged from the thematic analysis regarding mothers' challenges in their experience and how they approach their child's development at different levels. Each theme also included numerous subthemes (see Table 2). These are detailed below, along with illustrative quotes. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used for any mothers or children mentioned.

Table 2. Themes and subthemes that emerged from thematic analysis.

Themes	Subthemes
1. Maternal Difficulties	
	Love vs. Frustration
	Constant Worry for the Future
2. Creating a "Safe" Emotional Basis for the Child's Development and Self-Regulation	
	Encouraging and Modeling Emotional Self-Regulation
	Fostering Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy
3. Encouraging Opportunities for Social Interaction	
	Social Interactions In and Out of the Home
	Capitalizing on Social Situations
4. Using Day-to-Day Routines for Promoting Language and Learning	
	Reading and Storytelling
	Playtime and Games
	Practicing Speech-Therapy Techniques
5. Active Engagement with the Educational Framework	
	Selecting the Framework
	Relationships with Teachers and Staff
	Changing Frameworks or Support if Needed

3.1. Theme 1: Maternal Difficulties

In talking about raising a child with a language delay, the mothers all related to the difficulties and challenges involved. They conveyed a sense of being on the "front lines": facing their child, the family, the system, and themselves. Two subthemes emerged in relation to these difficulties. The first was a sense of love vs. frustration and the second was concern for their children's future.

3.1.1. Love vs. Frustration

A majority of the mothers mentioned the deep love they have for their child while also emphasizing the frustrations they deal with. The love was evident in statements such as Yehuda's mother relating to him as "the love of my life—he brings me joy each time he walks into the house." Ron's mother talked about her child as "a gift." Alongside these expressions of love, the mothers discussed frustration and other difficult emotions. Yosef's mother related how, "it's sometimes hard to be his mother," while Shir's mother explained

that, "It's very frustrating that she doesn't speak." Lidor's mother similarly talked about the frustration for herself and for him: "The thing that frustrates me is that I don't always understand him, and then I have to ask him again and again 'what are you saying', which is hard for him. . .there's a lot of frustration."

3.1.2. Constant Worry for the Future

Nearly all of the mothers mentioned that they are worried about their child's future on various levels. Some mothers were concerned about their children closing the language gaps and their academic progress. Nurit's mother worried that "she'll be able to express herself whenever she wants, and what's going to happen when we aren't here to take care of her." Similarly, Avigayil's mother was anxious that "she won't be able to learn to read." Talia's mother specifically talked about the uncertainty of the future: "Will she be ok? Like everyone? Will she manage to close the gaps or not?" At the same time, worry about the children socially was at the forefront of the mothers' concern. Hod's mother emphasized that she worries "a lot for the social aspect—will kids want to be his friend if they don't understand him?" Similarly, Netanel's mother was concerned that "He should be like everyone and shouldn't experience frustration because of society." There was a constant undercurrent of concern about what the children's future will look like—whether the children will be able to get past their language delay and the gaps they have, and how this will impact them socially.

3.2. Theme 2: Creating a "Safe" Emotional Basis for the Child's Development and Self-Regulation

Despite all the difficulties and challenges that the mothers related to, they were all engaged in trying to promote their child to the best of their abilities. One of the ways that they did so was by trying to create a space for the child to feel emotionally safe, for them to develop, especially when learning to regulate their emotions.

3.2.1. Encouraging and Modeling Emotional Self-Regulation

The mothers serve as an emotional anchor for the children. Tali's mother depicted this clearly: "When I'm with her in her difficulty, identify with her, give her calmness and that I'm there for her, it already contributes a lot to her communication and comprehension process." Dor's mother related how the way in which she responds to him—"calm, supportive, non-judgmental"—becomes a model for the rest of the home. A number of mothers described modeling emotional self-regulation for their children. For example, Yosef's mother explained that "we are learning to be more flexible and 'go with the flow'. . .we want him to be calmer." Eden's mother also expressed this: "Along with speech there were more outbursts and frustration, it's harder to stay calm. . .I try very hard to keep her calm and give her time to talk."

3.2.2. Fostering Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy

Many of the mothers talked about how they work hard to foster their child's self-confidence and self-efficacy. For example, Hadar's mother noted that, "whenever she used any type of utterance I try to give positive feedback, to encourage it." Etai's mother explicitly related to this: "As far as I'm concerned, he can stay with his delay, the important thing is that he should be healthy and self-confident." Dor's mother explained how she tries to balance between correcting her son while not impeding his confidence: "There are the challenges of teaching him how to speak without hurting his self-image. Sometimes it is very frustrating to know how to convey the message to the child without hurting him. . .For me, the challenge is knowing how to respond to him in a way that will advance him and not leave him behind."

3.3. Theme 3: Encouraging Opportunities for Social Interaction

The mothers did not only discuss language-related issues; they also focused on their children's social lives. They talked about various kinds of social interactions, how they mediate their children's social situations, and how they try to use social situations to promote their children's speech.

3.3.1. Social Interactions in and out of the Home

Many of the mothers described facilitating social interactions, both in and out of the home. Itamar's mother described how his older sister, "sits with him, plays with him, and talks with him." Similarly, both Amichai's mother and Moshe's mother related how the boys like to play with their siblings. Moshe's mother elaborated that he likes to play with mud and water with his siblings and she "lets him do this not only in terms of tactile play, but also as a social space." The mothers also mentioned social interactions outside of the home. Tali's mother explained that she "tries to have her meet other friends" so that she will not just be in the "bubble" of the language preschool. Avigayil's mother also explained that she hopes that they will be able to help her "make friends in school."

3.3.2. Capitalizing on Social Situations

Multiple mothers talked about using social situations as opportunities for scaffolding their children's learning—either social or speech. Ayelet's mother related how it is "difficult to explain to her that we have to take turns when we speak, she has to wait" and she can use social situations to help with this. Orit's mother similarly related, "we have to teach her what she can talk about with children. . .how to start conversations, even just playdates." The mothers also explained how they frequently have to mediate social situations for the child, in terms of teaching them how to manage interactions as well as learning elements such as rules of games, manners, etc. Amichai's mother explained how she "would print cards and we would play with them. . .that he won't feel like this is work." David's mother related, "I would ask him. . ..do your friends understand you. . .and if not, he should explain it in a different way."

3.4. Theme 4: Using Day-to-Day Routines for Promoting Language and Learning

Nearly all the mothers talked about how they utilize their day-to-day activities as a means for working with their children on their language and learning. They use activities to reinforce sounds and expressive language, and ensure that their children are building the necessary language skills, with an eye towards schooling.

3.4.1. Reading and Storytelling

Most of the mothers consistently identified reading together as a priority. Menachem's mother talked about "reading a Hebrew book every day" and Mirit's mother noted, "Since she was in utero I would read her stories." Lidor's mother mentioned how she "reads him stories that he loves" and has him "complete sentences," demonstrating that reading could be used as part of practicing language as well as an enriching activity. A number of mothers specifically mentioned reading as an opportunity to prepare their child for later schooling and a means to foster academic skills.

3.4.2. Playtime and Games

Many of the mothers described how they incorporate speech and practice into their children's playtime routines. For example, Etai's mother described how "based on the teacher's recommendations, we would sing a lot and make up songs when we were talking." Meital's mother talked about how they "play a card game that has all kinds of activities on the cards, and you turn over a card and she has to say the activity." One of the

mothers explained that when her daughter played, "she narrates what she's doing and I ask follow-up questions." Amichai's mother mentioned how she and Amichai would "say names of animals while tossing a ball back and forth." In this way, the mothers tried to take advantage of the activities that their children were already engaging in as an opportunity to promote their language.

3.4.3. Practicing Speech-Therapy Techniques

A number of the mothers described how they practice the various techniques that they have been shown by speech therapists or that the children receive from therapists at school. Shachaf's mother mentioned, "I try to take the speech therapist's recommendations and implement them in the day-to-day." Similarly, Menachem's mother explained, "The preschool teacher plays games with the children and then sends home directions so we can play them at home."

3.5. Theme 5: Active Engagement with the Educational Framework

In response to the question, "Tell me about your connection with the educational framework", the mothers related to various aspects of the educational framework, the teachers, and the like. At the same time, there were numerous instances where mothers also related to how they interact with the educational framework, what it provides, and how they feel about it, when answering other questions such as when relating to their child's diagnosis/delay and placement in a language preschool, how they promote language at home, or reading and writing activities at home. One theme that continually emerged was that the mothers were all actively engaged with the educational framework, which serves as an important method for promoting their child. The mothers talked about selecting the framework or their child being accepted into the framework, their relationships with the teachers and staff, and changing frameworks or supports if needed.

3.5.1. Selecting the Framework

Many of the mothers described the process of their child switching into a language-focused preschool, and the benefits that this provided for the child. One of the mothers talked about it being a "blessing to have a language preschool." Tali's mother mentioned how her daughter was supposed to start first grade, but instead took an additional year to go to a language preschool, and "I'm really happy about this, there is no question that this was the right decision for her." Etai's mother discussed how he started in a regular preschool, but "the teacher didn't see him at all. The minute we moved to a language-focused preschool I see his progress and I'm extremely at peace with my feelings."

3.5.2. Relationships with Teachers and Staff

All the mothers discussed how they relate to the teachers and staff and their child's educational framework, and nearly all of them did so in a positive light. Lital's mother explained how "I very much felt like I had partners at her school," and Ayelet's mother described how "the preschool teacher is very special; we have a great connection." Numerous mothers reflected upon the excellent communication they have with the teachers. For instance, Noam's mother mentioned that "they have always been very communicative with me about her progress." Similarly, Dor's mother said that the teacher "does an amazing job staying in touch with the parents of the children, and is always on top of what is going on."

3.5.3. Changing Frameworks or Supports if Needed

A few of the mothers focused on how they maintained awareness of their child's progress, making changes as needed to serve them in the best possible way. Adi's mother explained: "By like 16 months I was concerned. . .so by then I already had an appointment

for her to have a hearing test and a referral for a speech therapist. . .everyone was kind of telling me not to be concerned yet. . .but I just wanted to be on top of it." Dor's mother mentioned that when her child was not receiving the necessary response from the system before being placed in a language-specific framework, she "went to a private speech therapist, so they wouldn't start telling me to 'wait and see'." Tali's mother also explained that "when there wasn't the paramedical staff, I personally invested in private therapy on my own." Ron's mother explained, "In the beginning they scared me. . .but I stuck to my guns and told them that my child needs the appropriate framework. . .I'm happy that I insisted that he move to a language-focused preschool, I see his progress and I feel content with my instincts." Shir's mother relayed how she advocated for her: "After I put pressure on the previous preschool teacher and the system, Shir finally got to a language preschool, and it's just a blessing." Netanel's mother said how she wants "to know if there's progress, like what the next step is. . ..It's on my mind a lot." Most of the mothers felt that they needed to stay on top of their child's progress so that they could make adjustments if they were needed.

4. Discussion

The current study set out to qualitatively explore the ways that mothers promote their children with language delay at various levels—academic, social, and emotional. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that mothers first related to the challenges involved in raising a child with DLD, including conflicting feelings of love and frustration as well as concrete and ongoing concern for their children's futures. Beyond this, various themes emerged regarding the ways that mothers promote their children at the various levels. The mothers were very focused on creating a safe emotional environment, encouraging social interactions for their children and utilizing their children's day-to-day routines as a means for boosting their socio-emotional and language capabilities.

4.1. Broad Impact of Language Delay

It was very clear from the participating mothers that their child's language delay had an extensive impact not only on the children themselves, but on the entire family system. This is in line with the existing research demonstrating some of the extensive effects of a child's language delay (e.g., Matte-Landry et al., 2020; Lloyd-Esenkaya et al., 2020). For example, in a cross-country study, Jensen de López et al. (2021) found that children's language disorders impacted their social interactions (with family, peers, outsiders), which was stressful for the family as well. Similarly, Bruinsma et al. (2024) revealed that both parents and teachers reported that their children's communication challenges were reflected in situations both at home and at school. Mothers in the current study detailed some of the challenges that their children experienced, particularly on the socio-emotional front and in interactions with family members, peers, and others. Lu and Huang (2025) found that children with DLD demonstrated lower cognitive and affective Theory of Mind compared to their typically developing peers, highlighting that it is not only children's language that is affected by their delay, but also aspects related to processing emotions, understanding mental states, and interacting with others. Lu and Huang also indicated high levels of parental stress, which is in accord with our findings as well. Given the myriad ways that children's language delay can impact the broader family system, interventions should be similarly multifaceted in nature, not only targeting children's language skills, but also their socio-emotional skills, and perhaps, providing support at the family level as well (e.g., Durgungoz & St Clair, 2024). In a Chinese setting, Fan et al. (2024) demonstrated that a family-centered language therapy intervention, where parents (or other caregivers) were included in the training to help utilize the home setting, was more successful compared

to a control group that received speech therapy solely by a speech therapist without the family component. This reinforces the need to incorporate the family into working with children with language delay, and broadening the focus beyond just language.

While the concordance between our findings and the existing research described above indicates some universality across cultures in terms of the broad impact of language delay, culture and other aspects of the macrosystem may shape language development and affect the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Cycyk et al., 2021). Emphasizing the potential impact of culture is research on the cultural adaptation of language interventions (e.g., Albin et al., 2022). Taking these aspects into consideration when considering working with families can help to promote children's language outcomes (Bosire & Johnson, 2025).

4.2. Mothers as Architects

Our results suggest that the role mothers play is not just as an "intervener" (e.g., Davies et al., 2017): that is, someone who participates in an intervention, but rather as the architect of the home environment who shapes the conditions in which development can occur. This was evident in what emerged regarding how mothers promote their children at various levels, at times even without being fully aware of what they were doing. When relating to creating a safe emotional climate for the child's language development, many mothers highlighted how they try to boost the child's self-efficacy and confidence. Research indicates that adolescents and adults with lower communication abilities, particularly social communication, had lower perceived self-efficacy (Buteau-Poulin et al., 2025) and higher levels of self-esteem problems (St. Clair et al., 2023). By creating a climate that can promote children's self-confidence and their self-efficacy, the participating mothers are helping to set their children up for greater long-term success. As part of this climate, the mothers relied on modeling emotional self-regulation. Numerous studies have highlighted the important role of parental socialization of children's emotions, and modeling as one mechanism through which this can be accomplished (e.g., Are & Shaffer, 2016; Zinsser et al., 2021). Encouraging and supporting mothers in continuing these practices can be beneficial for children with language delay.

The mothers also created the foundations for social development and interactions for their children. They focused on fostering social interactions between their children and siblings, as well as their peers. They utilized these interactions as opportunities to teach the children important elements of social interactions, such as initiating or turn-taking in conversation. In this way, the mothers appear to be targeting the children's respective Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding their social learning and understanding.

The participating mothers took advantage of the day-to-day routines and activities as a means to promote their children's language. They sang songs with their children, encouraged their children to talk while playing games and discussing their day at school, reading and telling stories, and crafting an environment where speech and language was fun and wouldn't feel like "work". In a research synthesis, Dunst et al. (2013) found that children's participation in everyday activities was associated with language learning, and the authors argue that children's language development, regardless of whether or not they have disabilities, is "likely to be strengthened when language learning occurs in everyday activities" (p. 3). Further, McWilliam (2016) developed a routines-based model for supporting children's speech and language in children with language delay, where children participate in family routines and activities between professionals' visits as a means of family-centered intervention. The mothers in our study seemed to already be utilizing these techniques, even without a particular intervention.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. While the study relied on maternal self-report and reflection to provide greater insight into their lived experiences, questions relating specifically to the time they spend supporting their child's development, as well as consistency between home and school environments, could have provided richer insights. Additionally, this information could be strengthened by direct observation of the home environment. Similarly, this study only provided the mothers' perspectives, limiting the understanding of how other aspects of the home environment promote the child's development. Gaining additional information from the fathers or other caregivers could help to triangulate the study's findings and provide a different lens through which to view the family experience, exploring fathers' roles and their beliefs regarding mothers' roles. Importantly, culture and expectations of language help shape language development (e.g., Cycyk et al., 2021; Karlik, 2023); it is important to conduct similar studies in different cultures. While the study included only Jewish-Israeli mothers, limiting generalization to other cultural groups, future studies can include other cultures within Israel, such as among the Arab sector, as well as outside of Israel. Similarly, views of disabilities are impacted by culture (e.g., Babik & Gardner, 2021), which may also influence the way that parents perceive their child's language development and diagnoses of delay or disability. Finally, as socioeconomic status and education have been found to be important predictors of language development and caregiving practices (e.g., Kalil & Ryan, 2020; Read et al., 2025), the contribution of these variables to the mothers' beliefs and activities should be examined in future research.

4.4. Implications and Conclusions

This study's results have a number of conceptual and practical implications. At the conceptual level, the study lends itself to a somewhat different view of mothers of children with language delay. Rather than mothers being seen as individuals who need to be instructed by a specific method of intervention, they can be viewed as those who set the stage for their children's socio-emotional and academic development. This would seem to indicate that they should receive support to continue acting as they seem to be implicitly acting. Practitioners such as speech therapists can raise mothers' awareness as to the benefits of what they are already doing within the home setting and encourage them to continue. For example, speech therapists and other practitioners can work with mothers to create a map for daily routines, with suggestions for language prompts that can be incorporated. Similarly, mothers can be guided to utilize dialogic reading techniques that encourage the child to be more active (e.g., Lavelli et al., 2019; Ramsey et al., 2021). The study also highlights the importance of taking advantage of day-to-day situations for learning, beyond just "programmed" learning. In this sense, interventions such as the routines-based model (McWilliam, 2016) would seem to support mothers' agency in structuring the foundations of children's development on a daily basis.

Our results thus provide deep insight into the way these mothers of children with language delay shape the home environment to promote their children's development at multiple levels—academic, social, and emotional. Despite the far-reaching challenges that they encounter and the difficulties in their own emotional state, these mothers manage to provide the foundations that the children need to progress and develop in the best way possible.

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Notes

[1] In Israel, where the study was conducted, children tend to be assessed as having "language delay" in the earlier years, and if these delays persist, then the diagnosis DLD may be applied, although not consistently (Israel Ministry of Education, n.d.). Given the range of ages of the children in the study, we utilize both terms throughout this paper.

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