

Childcare Center Director's Perceptions of the Importance and Performance of Parent Counseling Competencies for Children with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities as perceived by childcare center directors using the importance-performance analysis (IPA) method. Participants were childcare center directors located in the K region in South Korea. The results indicated that counseling skills were identified as the highest-priority area for improvement among the components of parent counseling competencies. These findings highlight the need for systematic teacher education and case-based professional training focused on counseling skills to enhance the quality of parent counseling for children with disabilities. Based on these findings, implications for improving parent counseling practices and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Parent counseling competency, children with disabilities, childcare center director, IPA.

1. Introduction

Recently, the importance of inclusive childcare has been increasingly emphasized, leading to a growing number of cases in which children with and without disabilities are cared for together in general childcare centers (Park et al., 2023). In response to these changes, many childcare institutions have made various efforts to enhance their professional capacity for inclusive childcare for young children with disabilities. However, despite the quantitative expansion of inclusive childcare, interest in and demands for qualitative improvement continue to increase (Park, 2025). Although effective inclusive childcare requires the interaction of various factors, collaboration with families, particularly effective communication with

parents of children with disabilities, has been highlighted as a critical element (Park, 2025).

Today, parents can easily access diverse information related to child-rearing through both online and offline channels; however, they still require reliable professional guidance and individualized information based on their children's characteristics (Kim & Cho, 2010; Kim, 2023). Parents of children with disabilities often experience psychological stress and a lack of information while raising their children. Therefore, professional parent support services are required to address these challenges (Jeon et al., 2020). Educational and counseling services have been identified as effective strategies for supporting these families, and previous studies have shown that effective parent counseling contributes to parents' emotional stability and

strengthens family competencies (Do, 2019; Park & Jeon, 2022).

Parent counseling refers to a collaborative process in which counselors and parents communicate and exchange information to support children's development and address child-rearing concerns (Kim, 2015; Koo & Bae, 2025). Beyond providing information, parent counseling aims to promote mutual understanding of children's developmental characteristics and establish cooperative relationships between families and educational institutions. Accordingly, parent counseling competency has been recognized as one of the essential professional competencies of early childhood teachers (Yoo et al., 2020). Counseling competency encompasses the professional knowledge, communication skills, counseling techniques, problem-solving abilities, and ethical attitudes required throughout the counseling process (Byun, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that parent counseling competency includes theoretical knowledge, counseling performance, and professional attitudes, emphasizing that these competencies should be integrated to provide effective support for families (Gerich et al., 2016; Kim, 2023).

Parent counseling is particularly important for families of children with disabilities because these parents often experience psychological distress, emotional burden, and challenges in obtaining appropriate educational and developmental information (Jung & Cho, 2013). In addition, children with disabilities have diverse developmental characteristics and educational needs that require individualized support. Consequently, effective parent counseling requires not only general counseling competencies but also specialized knowledge of disabilities, communication strategies, empathy, emotional regulation, and the ability to support parents' acceptance and adaptation processes (Park, 2025). Parent counseling for children with disabilities should therefore be understood as a professional practice that integrates psychological support, information sharing, and collaborative partnerships between families and childcare institutions.

However, current childcare teacher education programs provide insufficient opportunities for counseling-related education and practical training, making it difficult for teachers to develop professional counseling competencies. In addition, even professional counselors have limitations in providing counseling for young children with disabilities because of insufficient specialized knowledge and experience regarding disabilities (Park et al., 2013; Kim, 2023). These structural limitations may negatively affect the quality of parent counseling for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, research on parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities remains limited. In particular, little is known about how counseling competencies are developed and supported within inclusive childcare settings. Therefore, there is a need to understand institutional support systems for strengthening parent counseling competencies in order to improve the quality of inclusive childcare.

Previous studies have indicated that directors' professionalism and perceptions significantly influence teachers' job performance and professional development and are closely associated with improving the quality of parent counseling (Lee, 2022; Ahn & Lee, 2024). This suggests that teachers' counseling competencies are influenced not only by individual capabilities but also by systematic support at the institutional level. Thus, directors' perceptions and roles represent important structural factors influencing the quality of parent counseling and the development of teachers' counseling competencies. Accordingly, childcare center directors were selected as the participants in this study because they play a key role in determining institutional-level support and the counseling environment. By examining directors' perceptions, this study sought to comprehensively understand the development and support structure of parent counseling competencies within inclusive childcare settings. Furthermore, this study provides foundational evidence for identifying strategies to improve the quality of inclusive childcare by analyzing

institutional-level perceptions and support systems beyond individual teacher competencies.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

First, what are the levels of importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities as perceived by childcare center directors?

Second, what are the key attributes of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities identified through Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)?

2. Methodology

1. Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) method to examine the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities as perceived by childcare center directors. The study aimed to identify priority areas for improvement by comparing childcare center directors' perceptions of the importance and actual performance of parent counseling competencies.

2. Participants

The participants of this study were childcare center directors located in G Province in South Korea. A total of 36 directors were selected through convenience sampling from childcare centers that were currently providing childcare for children with disabilities or had previous experience in caring for children with disabilities. The participants included directors of various types of childcare centers, including general childcare centers (including home-based and private childcare centers), inclusive childcare centers for children with disabilities, and specialized childcare centers for children with disabilities, based on the type of institution in which they were employed at the time of the survey.

The largest proportion of participants had 5–10 years of experience as childcare center directors (72.2%). Regarding educational background, the

proportions of participants with a bachelor's degree and those with a graduate degree were similar. All participants were female (100%). In terms of institutional type, general childcare centers (including home-based and private childcare centers) accounted for the largest proportion (55.6%).

3. Instruments

In this study, a questionnaire was developed to examine the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities based on the perceptions of childcare center directors with experience in providing childcare for children with disabilities. The questionnaire items were developed based on previous studies (Gerich et al., 2015; Kim, 2023; Byun, 2013; Park, 2025), focusing on competencies required for parent counseling for children with disabilities. The questionnaire consisted of three subdomains reflecting the characteristics of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities: counseling skills competency, communication competency, and coping skills competency. The content validity of the items was verified by two experts in disability childcare and one expert in education. Following the content validity review, the items were revised and refined, resulting in the final version of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire consisted of three factors and 15 items. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 points for “strongly agree” to 1 point for “strongly disagree.” Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived importance and performance for each item.

To examine the construct validity of the questionnaire, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. Principal component analysis was used as the factor extraction method, and Varimax rotation was applied. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was .705, indicating acceptable sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974; Bartlett, 1950). The exploratory factor analysis revealed three factors, with a cumulative explained variance of 47.9%. Internal consistency

tency was examined using Cronbach's α coefficient, which was .807, indicating a high level of reliability.

The results of the reliability and validity analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor analysis of the items

Number	Items	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
1	Consider parents' emotions when communicating information related to their child with disabilities	.893		
2	Create a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions	.652		
3	Empathize with and actively listen to parents' emotions and situations	.635		
4	Make efforts to establish trusting relationships with parents	.587		
5	Maintain a respectful attitude toward parents at all times	.537		
6	Appropriately utilize counseling skills based on parents' characteristics	.504		
7	Maintain a professional and calm attitude even in conflict situations during parent counseling	.363		
8	Explain characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand		.865	
9	Provide parents with guidance on teaching and educational strategies for children with disabilities		.747	
10	Identify parents' verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions and attitudes)		.587	
11	Actively incorporate parents' opinions during the counseling process		.457	
12	Closely collaborate with parents when children with disabilities display challenging behaviors			.742
13	Maintain consistent guidance and discipline strategies through collaboration between families and childcare institutions			.701
14	Provide specific problem-solving strategies that parents can implement			.512
15	Consider connecting parents with professionals (e.g., therapists and medical specialists) for additional support			.502
Eigen value		2.78	2.30	2.10
Cumulative %			47.9	
Cronbach's α			.807	

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using JAMOVI. Descriptive statistical analysis and frequency analysis were conducted to examine participants' demographic characteristics. Reliability analysis and exploratory factor analysis were performed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

To examine the perceived importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities, Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) was conducted. IPA is an analytical method that measures the importance and performance of each attribute, categorizes their relative positions into four quadrants, and identifies areas requiring improvement as well as areas that should be maintained and strengthened (Choi, 2024).

For the IPA, each competency attribute was classified into four quadrants based on the mean scores of importance and performance. The relative positions of the attributes were analyzed to identify priority areas for improvement and areas requiring continued maintenance.

3. Results

1. Importance and Performance of Parent Counseling Competencies for Children with Disabilities

This study aimed to examine childcare center directors' perceptions of the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities. First, the overall means and factor-specific means were examined. The overall mean score for importance was 4.24 ($SD = .58$), and the overall mean score for performance was 4.21 ($SD = .64$). Based on the descriptive statistics, the analysis of the importance rankings revealed that the following items showed the highest levels of importance: “Considering parents' emotions when communicating information related to their child with disabilities” ($M = 4.39$), “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand” ($M = 4.39$), and “Maintaining consistent discipline and guidance strategies through collaboration

between families and childcare institutions” ($M = 4.39$). This was followed by “Creating a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions” ($M = 4.33$).

The analysis of importance rankings by sub-factor showed that, within the counseling skills competency factor, “Considering parents' emotions when communicating information related to their child with disabilities” ($M = 4.39$) received the highest score. Within the communication competency factor, “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand” ($M = 4.39$) showed the highest score. Finally, within the coping skills competency factor, “Maintaining consistent discipline and guidance strategies through collaboration between families and childcare institutions” ($M = 4.39$) was rated the highest. Meanwhile, the analysis of performance rankings indicated that “Providing specific problem-solving strategies that parents can implement” ($M = 4.53$) showed the highest performance level, followed by “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand” ($M = 4.47$) and “Creating a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions” ($M = 4.42$). The analysis of performance rankings by sub-factor revealed that, within the counseling skills competency factor, “Creating a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions” ($M = 4.42$) showed the highest performance. Within the communication competency factor, “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand” ($M = 4.47$) showed the highest performance. Within the coping skills competency factor, “Providing specific problem-solving strategies that parents can implement” ($M = 4.53$) was rated the highest. Overall, the item that showed consistently high rankings in both importance and performance was “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand.” Childcare center directors perceived counseling skills competency, communication competency, and coping skills competency as important components of parent counseling

competencies. However, in terms of actual performance, coping skills competency demonstrated the highest level.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of IPA

Factor	Items	Importance		Performance	
		M	SD	M	SD
Counseling Skills	Consider parents' emotions when communicating information related to children with disabilities	4.39	.49	4.33	.47
	Create a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions	4.33	.67	4.42	.50
	Empathize with and listen attentively to parents' emotions and situations	4.31	.62	4.19	.66
	Make efforts to establish trusting relationships with parents	4.28	.61	4.11	.57
	Maintain a respectful attitude toward parents at all times	4.14	.68	4.28	.81
	Appropriately utilize counseling skills according to parents' characteristics	4.28	.56	4.00	.71
	Maintain a professional and calm attitude even in conflict situations during parent counseling	4.28	.51	3.75	.73
Communication	Explain the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand	4.39	.59	4.47	.60
	Provide guidance to parents on teaching and educational methods for children with disabilities	4.36	.48	4.39	.59
	Identify parents' verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions and attitudes)	3.97	.56	3.97	.77
	Actively reflect parents' opinions during the counseling process	3.94	.58	3.94	.71
Coping Skills	Closely collaborate with parents when children with disabilities exhibit challenging behaviors	4.17	.65	4.39	.54
	Maintain consistent discipline and guidance strategies through collaboration between families and childcare institutions	4.39	.54	4.06	.67
	Provide specific problem-solving strategies that parents can implement	4.22	.68	4.53	.50
	Consider referrals to professionals (e.g., therapists and medical specialists) for additional support	4.22	.48	4.25	.69

2. Key Attributes of Parent Counseling Competencies for Children with Disabilities

To analyze the differences between the perceived importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities, an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) matrix was conducted. This method establishes a cross-point based on the mean values of importance and performance and compares and analyzes each attribute according to its relative position within the matrix. In this

study, the X-axis represented performance, and the Y-axis represented importance. Based on the mean values, the four quadrants were interpreted as follows: the first quadrant represents areas that require continued maintenance, the second quadrant represents areas requiring improvement, the third quadrant represents areas of low priority, and the fourth quadrant represents areas where excessive effort has been invested. The Importance-Performance Matrix visualizing the results of this analysis is presented in Figure1.

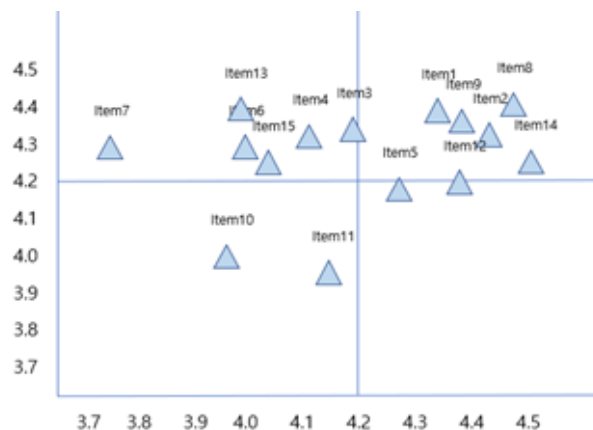


Figure 1. Importance and Performance Matrix

Quadrant 1 which represents the area requiring continued maintenance, includes the following attributes: “Considering parents’ emotions when communicating information related to children with disabilities,” “Creating a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions,” “Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand,” “Providing guidance to parents on teaching and educational methods for children with disabilities,” and “Providing specific problem-solving strategies that parents can implement.” This quadrant represents areas where both importance and performance are perceived as high. Quadrant 2 represents the area requiring concentrated improvement, where importance is high but performance is relatively low. The attributes included in this quadrant are “Empathizing with and listening to parents’ emotions and situations,” “Making efforts to establish trusting relationships with parents,” “Appropriately utilizing counseling skills

according to parents’ characteristics,” “Maintaining a professional and calm attitude even in conflict situations during parent counseling,” “Maintaining consistent discipline and guidance strategies through collaboration between families and childcare institutions,” and “Considering referrals to professionals (e.g., therapists and medical specialists) for additional support.” Quadrant 3 represents the low-priority area, where both importance and performance are perceived as low. The attributes included in this quadrant are “Identifying parents’ verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions and attitudes)” and “Actively reflecting parents’ opinions during the counseling process.” Quadrant 4 represents the area where excessive effort has been invested, indicating that performance is high despite relatively low importance. The attributes included in this quadrant are “Maintaining a respectful attitude toward parents at all times” and “Closely collaborating with parents when children with disabilities exhibit challenging behaviors.”

Table 3. Characteristics of IPA Quadrants

Quadrant	Meaning	Characteristic	Items
1	Quadrant Sustainability	Information Provision and Problem-Solving Counseling Competency Based on Emotional Support	• Consideration of parents' emotions when communicating disability-related information • Creation of a comfortable atmosphere for parents' self-expression • Explanation of disability characteristics in an understandable manner • Guidance on teaching and educational methods for children with disabilities • Provision of practical problem-solving strategies for parents
2	Quadrant Priority policy	Coping Skills Competency Involving Empathy-Based Counseling Relationship Building and Multi-Agency Collaboration	• Empathy and active listening to parents • Establishment of trusting relationships with parents • Use of counseling skills tailored to parents' characteristics • Professional and calm responses during counseling conflicts • Consistency in guidance through family-institution collaboration • Professional referrals for additional support
3	Quadrant low priority	Reciprocal Communication and Participation-Promoting Counseling Competency	• Identification of parents' verbal and nonverbal cues • Reflection of parents' opinions during counseling
4	Quadrant Overexertion	Respectful and Collaborative Counseling Attitude	• Maintenance of a respectful attitude toward parents • Collaboration with parents regarding children's challenging behaviors

4. Discussion

This study examined the perceived importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities among childcare center directors and identified priority areas for improvement using the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) method. The findings provide meaningful implications for understanding the competencies required for effective parent counseling in inclusive childcare settings.

First, the results showed that childcare center directors perceived counseling skills competency as a highly important component of parent counseling competencies. In particular, items such as "Considering parents' emotions when communicating information related to children with disabilities," "Creating a comfortable atmosphere that allows parents to freely express their opinions," and "Empathizing with and listening to parents' emotions and situations" were rated as highly important. These findings indicate that emotional support, empathy, and active listening are essential elements in parent

counseling for children with disabilities. Previous studies have also emphasized the importance of empathic attitudes and active listening skills in effective parent counseling (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023; Nursyani et al., 2025). Therefore, teacher education and professional development programs for parent counseling should include practical training in empathic communication and emotional support strategies.

Second, the findings revealed differences between the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies. Although counseling skills competency was perceived as highly important, its performance level was relatively lower than that of other competency areas. This suggests that childcare center directors recognize the necessity of professional counseling skills but perceive challenges in implementing these skills in actual counseling situations. In contrast, communication competency and coping skills competency showed relatively higher performance levels, indicating that childcare professionals may be more familiar with daily communication and immediate problem-solving processes than with structured counseling practices. Therefore, case-based training and practical counseling education are needed to strengthen teachers' abilities to apply professional counseling techniques in various parent counseling situations.

Third, within the domains of communication competency and coping skills competency, items related to providing information and educational support for children with disabilities were perceived as highly important. Specifically, items such as "Explaining the characteristics of children with disabilities in a way that parents can easily understand," "Maintaining consistent discipline and guidance strategies through collaboration between families and childcare institutions," and "Providing guidance on teaching and educational methods for children with disabilities" received high importance ratings. These findings suggest that parent counseling for children with disabilities should extend beyond simple information delivery and include educational intervention, collaborative problem-solving, and family support. Previous

studies have also emphasized the importance of family–institution collaboration and the provision of educational information to enhance family functioning (Lee & Seok, 2006; Seo & Jang, 2008).

Taken together, these findings suggest that childcare institutions should develop systematic support strategies to enhance parent counseling competencies. Specifically, teacher education programs should include case-based counseling training, disability-specific communication strategies, and opportunities for reflective practice. In addition, childcare centers should establish institutional support systems, including standardized counseling guidelines and family-linked programs, to promote effective parent counseling practices.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of a relatively small number of childcare center directors from a single region, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may not fully reflect actual counseling practices. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples from different regions and consider multiple perspectives, including those of teachers and parents of children with disabilities. Furthermore, longitudinal research is needed to examine changes in counseling competencies following professional training and institutional support interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the importance and performance of parent counseling competencies for children with disabilities as perceived by childcare center directors using the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) method. The findings revealed that counseling skills competency was recognized as a highly important area but showed relatively lower performance, indicating a priority area for improvement. In particular, competencies related to empathy, active listening, understanding parents' emotional needs, and providing professional counseling support were identified as essential components of effective parent counseling.

These findings suggest that systematic professional development programs and institutional support systems are necessary to strengthen parent counseling competencies in disability childcare settings. Practical training programs based on counseling cases, opportunities for reflective practice, and collaboration with community professionals

should be developed to enhance childcare professionals' counseling abilities. Future research should include diverse participants, such as childcare teachers, parents, and related professionals, and explore effective support models for improving parent counseling practices for children with disabilities.

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