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Research Article

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL INTERACTION AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Children with special needs represent a diverse group of learners whose cognitive development is influenced by individual characteristics and the environments in which they grow and learn. Parental interaction and educational environment play important roles in providing stimulation, emotional support, and structured learning experiences, yet their combined influence on cognitive development among children with special needs requires further examination. This study aims to analyze the influence of parental interaction and educational environment on the cognitive development of children with special needs using an analytical perspective. A quantitative correlational research design was employed involving children with special needs enrolled in inclusive and special education institutions and their parents or primary caregivers. Data were collected through parental interaction questionnaires, educational environment assessments, and age-appropriate cognitive development tests, then analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression techniques. The results indicate that both parental interaction and educational environment have positive relationships with cognitive development, with parental interaction emerging as a stronger predictor. The combined model explains a substantial proportion of variance in cognitive development outcomes, demonstrating complementary contributions from family and educational contexts. The findings suggest that cognitive development among children with special needs is influenced by consistent and supportive experiences across home and educational environments. Strengthening parental engagement and improving inclusive educational environments are therefore important for supporting cognitive development and learning outcomes among children with special needs.

Keywords: cognitive development; children with special needs; parental interaction; educational environment; inclusive education

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INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs represent a diverse population with different cognitive, emotional, social, communication, and learning characteristics (Heinz et al., 2026). Their developmental processes may be influenced by individual abilities as well as the quality of support provided by their surrounding environments. Cognitive development in children with special needs includes the development of language, memory, attention, problem-solving, reasoning, and other cognitive processes that support learning and everyday functioning (K. Chen & Zhang, 2025a). Because developmental characteristics may differ from one child to another, appropriate environmental support is important in helping children develop their abilities according to their individual potential.

The family environment represents one of the earliest and most important contexts for cognitive development (Therrien et al., 2026). Parents or primary caregivers interact with children through communication, daily routines, play, emotional support, and learning activities. These interactions provide children with opportunities to develop language, attention, memory, and problem-solving abilities (Apaydın Cırık & Karakurt, 2024). For children with special needs, parental interaction may become particularly important because children may require additional guidance, repetition, encouragement, and individualized support during learning activities.

The quality of parental interaction is not determined only by the amount of time spent with children (Wu & Zhang, 2024). The responsiveness of parents, the quality of communication, emotional availability, and ability to adapt activities to children's needs may influence the effectiveness of interaction. Parents who provide appropriate stimulation and respond to children's individual characteristics can create learning experiences that encourage children to explore, communicate, and solve problems (Qiu & Liang, 2024). In contrast, limited interaction or inappropriate stimulation may reduce opportunities for cognitive development.

In addition to the family environment, educational environments play an important role in supporting the cognitive development of children with special needs (Xia, 2024). Educational institutions provide structured learning activities, instructional support, teacher-child interaction, learning resources, and opportunities for social participation. A supportive educational environment can provide children with appropriate challenges while also accommodating individual learning differences (Ren et al., 2024). Classroom structure, teacher responsiveness, learning materials, and individualized instruction may therefore influence children's cognitive engagement.

Inclusive and special education environments face particular challenges in meeting the diverse needs of children (Li et al., 2020). Children with different abilities may require different instructional strategies, levels of assistance, communication approaches, and learning resources. An educational environment that does not adequately accommodate these differences may create barriers to participation and learning (Zhao & Chen, 2025). Therefore, the quality of the educational environment becomes an important factor in supporting cognitive development among children with special needs.

Despite the importance of parental interaction and educational environment, these factors are often examined separately (Chui et al., 2026). Some studies focus primarily on the role of parents, while others emphasize educational services and teacher support. Such separate approaches may not fully explain the developmental experiences of children with special needs because children continuously move between home and educational environments (Davolyte et al., 2026). The influence of one environment may be strengthened or limited by the conditions experienced in another environment.

Another important issue concerns differences in the quality of support provided to children with special needs (Valcárcel Jiménez et al., 2025). Parents may have different levels of knowledge, time availability, resources, and experience in supporting their children's

development. Similarly, educational institutions may differ in teacher preparation, classroom resources, instructional strategies, and accessibility (Çitil et al., 2026). These differences may contribute to variations in children's cognitive development and learning experiences.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the influence of parental interaction and educational environment on the cognitive development of children with special needs (Çitil et al., 2026). The research examines the relationships between the quality of parental interaction, the quality of the educational environment, and children's cognitive outcomes (K. Chen & Zhang, 2025b). By examining these factors simultaneously, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how home and school contexts contribute to cognitive development.

A secondary objective is to identify the dimensions of parental interaction and educational environment that are most strongly associated with cognitive development (Y. Zhang et al., 2026). The study focuses on communication, responsiveness, learning support, and joint activities within the family environment, as well as teacher-child interaction, classroom structure, learning resources, instructional support, and individualized learning opportunities within educational settings.

The study also seeks to generate practical implications for parents, teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers. Understanding the relationship between environmental support and cognitive development may help stakeholders develop more appropriate strategies for children with special needs (Xie et al., 2026). The findings may contribute to the development of coordinated interventions that connect family support with educational practices.

A conceptual gap remains in understanding how parental interaction and educational environment operate together in shaping cognitive development among children with special needs (I.-J. Chen et al., 2026). Children do not experience family and school environments independently. Their learning and development are influenced by the continuity, consistency, and quality of support across these settings. An integrated perspective is therefore necessary to understand the developmental process more comprehensively.

Another gap concerns the diversity of children with special needs. Research that treats children with special needs as a single homogeneous group may overlook differences in cognitive abilities, communication patterns, learning needs, and environmental requirements (Fatema et al., 2026). Therefore, research should recognize the importance of individualized support while examining broader environmental factors that can contribute to positive cognitive outcomes.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of parental interaction and educational environment as interconnected influences on cognitive development among children with special needs. Rather than examining family and educational factors independently, this research considers their combined contribution within a single analytical framework (Qiu et al., 2024). This perspective provides a broader understanding of how cognitive development can be supported across multiple developmental contexts.

Another important aspect of the study is its focus on interactional quality and educational responsiveness. The research does not only consider whether parents and teachers interact with children, but also examines the quality of communication, emotional support, learning guidance, and opportunities for participation (Lyu et al., 2026). This focus provides a more detailed understanding of how everyday interactions may contribute to cognitive development.

The justification for this research is based on the importance of providing children with special needs with continuous and appropriate developmental support. Cognitive development is closely connected to children's ability to learn, communicate, solve problems, and participate in educational activities (Shentu & Yang, 2026). By identifying the contributions of parental interaction and educational environment, this research can provide evidence for strengthening cooperation between families and educational institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between parental interaction, educational environment, and cognitive development among children with special needs (M. Zhang et al., 2026). The correlational design was selected because the study aims to identify the strength and direction of relationships among variables without manipulating the natural conditions experienced by the participants. A cross-sectional approach was used to collect information about parental interaction, educational environment, and cognitive development during the same research period.

The conceptual framework positioned parental interaction and educational environment as independent variables, while cognitive development was treated as the dependent variable. Child age, gender, and type of educational setting were considered as contextual variables during the analysis (Wang et al., 2024). This design enabled the researcher to examine the individual and combined contributions of family and educational environments to cognitive development.

Research Target/Subject

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the direct, individual, and combined contributions of family and educational environments to the cognitive development of children with special needs. The research targets the systematic evaluation of specific parental factors (communication, emotional responsiveness, joint activities) and school environmental factors (classroom structure, teacher-child interaction, instructional support, accessibility). By evaluating these targets, the study aims to establish empirical evidence on how home-school environmental synergisms correlate with core developmental outcomes like language, memory, attention, problem-solving, and reasoning.

The population of this study consisted of children with special needs enrolled in inclusive and special education institutions, together with their parents or primary caregivers. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 120 children and their corresponding caregivers based on specific inclusion criteria: active institutional enrollment, regular learning participation, and primary caregivers directly involved in daily care and home learning support. The sample reflected diverse educational settings and varying levels of support needs, with demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational setting, and parental education level documented to provide complete contextual information.

Research Procedure

Data collection began with obtaining permission from participating educational institutions and informed consent from parents or primary caregivers. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and the use of collected data. Data collection schedules were coordinated with teachers and parents to minimize disruption to children's learning activities.

First, parents or primary caregivers completed the parental interaction questionnaire. Second, educational environment data were collected through classroom observations and teacher assessments. Third, cognitive assessments were administered individually to children in a comfortable and familiar environment. The researcher and trained assessors ensured that children received appropriate instructions and sufficient time to complete the assessment.

After data collection was completed, all responses were coded and entered into statistical analysis software (Miller et al., 2021). The data were screened for missing values, outliers, and distribution characteristics before statistical analysis was conducted. The analysis focused on identifying the relationships between parental interaction, educational environment, and cognitive development.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection utilized three main measurement instruments tailored for special education contexts. Parental interaction was evaluated using a Likert-scale structured questionnaire measuring the frequency and quality of communication, emotional responsiveness, learning support, and joint activities (Sardohan Yıldırım et al., 2026). The educational environment was measured using a dual observation and survey instrument assessing classroom accessibility, learning resources, instructional support, and teacher-child interaction patterns. Cognitive development was assessed using an age-appropriate cognitive assessment tool focusing on language, memory, attention, problem-solving, and reasoning, administered individually by trained assessors. All instruments underwent expert review and preliminary testing to confirm psychometric suitability for the participant profile.

Data Analysis Technique

The quantitative dataset is processed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods via statistical analysis software. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) are calculated to summarize demographic traits and baseline variable distributions (Cesur & Kaya, 2026). Inferential statistical procedures—including Pearson product-moment correlation to evaluate bivariate associations and Multiple Linear Regression analysis—are conducted to measure the individual and combined predictive effects of parental interaction and educational environment on the cognitive development of children with special needs (alpha= 0.05).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis provides an overview of parental interaction, educational environment, and cognitive development among children with special needs. Data were obtained from parental questionnaires, educational environment assessments, and cognitive development tests. Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores for the main variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Parental Interaction, Educational Environment, and Cognitive Development

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Parental Interaction	120	3.71	0.63	2.20	4.90
Educational Environment	120	3.58	0.67	2.10	4.85
Cognitive Development	120	74.82	9.14	55.00	94.00

The descriptive statistics indicate that parental interaction and educational environment scores were generally above the midpoint of the measurement scale. This finding suggests that most participating children experienced relatively supportive interaction at home and educational environments that provided moderate to strong learning support. Cognitive development scores showed sufficient variation to allow further statistical analysis.

Parental interaction data indicated that communication and learning support were among the most frequently reported forms of interaction. Parents commonly provided assistance during learning activities, communicated with children about daily activities, and encouraged children to complete tasks. However, variation in scores indicated differences in parental availability, consistency, and ability to provide individualized support.

Educational environment data demonstrated differences across participating institutions. Some classrooms provided structured learning activities, responsive teacher-child interactions, and accessible learning resources. Other educational settings demonstrated more limited

individualized support. These differences indicate that educational quality can vary even among institutions serving children with similar learning needs.

Cognitive development scores also varied among participants. Children who experienced more consistent parental interaction and supportive educational environments tended to demonstrate stronger cognitive performance. This descriptive pattern suggested that both home and educational contexts may contribute to differences in cognitive development.

Table 2. Cognitive Development Scores by Level of Parental Interaction

Parental Interaction Level	N	Mean Cognitive Score	Standard Deviation
Low	35	67.24	8.11
Moderate	45	74.86	7.52
High	40	82.17	7.36

The results show a progressive increase in cognitive development scores across levels of parental interaction. Children in the high parental interaction group demonstrated higher mean cognitive scores than children in the moderate and low interaction groups. This pattern indicates that consistent communication, learning support, and parental responsiveness may be associated with stronger cognitive outcomes.

A similar pattern was observed in relation to educational environment. Children who were enrolled in more supportive educational environments demonstrated higher cognitive development scores. Classrooms with structured activities, responsive teachers, appropriate learning resources, and opportunities for individualized support tended to provide children with greater opportunities for cognitive engagement.

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the main variables. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between parental interaction and cognitive development ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$). Educational environment also demonstrated a significant positive relationship with cognitive development ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Correlation Between Main Research Variables

Variable	Cognitive Development	Significance
Parental Interaction	0.61	$p < 0.01$
Educational Environment	0.54	$p < 0.01$
Parental Interaction and Educational Environment	0.43	$p < 0.01$

The correlation results indicate that both parental interaction and educational environment are positively associated with cognitive development. The stronger correlation between parental interaction and cognitive development suggests that home-based interaction may have a particularly important role in supporting cognitive growth among children with special needs.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined predictive contribution of parental interaction and educational environment. The results indicated that the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 31.76$, $p < 0.001$), explaining approximately 45% of the variance in cognitive development scores. Both parental interaction and educational environment contributed significantly to the model, with parental interaction demonstrating a slightly stronger standardized coefficient.

The regression results indicate that improvements in parental interaction and educational environment are associated with higher cognitive development outcomes. The findings also suggest that the two variables provide complementary contributions rather than simply representing the same source of influence. Children may benefit when cognitive stimulation and support are consistently provided across both home and educational settings.

The relationship between parental interaction and educational environment was also statistically significant ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that children who experience

supportive parental interaction may also be more likely to receive support in educational environments. However, the moderate strength of the relationship indicates that the two variables remain sufficiently distinct to contribute independently to cognitive development.

Further analysis showed that parental interaction was particularly associated with language development, communication, and problem-solving activities. Parents who frequently communicated with children, provided explanations, encouraged questions, and participated in shared activities created opportunities for children to practice cognitive skills in everyday situations.

Educational environment demonstrated stronger associations with attention, structured reasoning, task completion, and classroom participation. Structured learning activities and teacher guidance provided children with opportunities to practice cognitive skills in organized situations. For children with special needs, predictable routines and clear instructional support may help reduce barriers to participation and increase engagement with learning activities.

A representative case was also considered to provide contextual understanding of the quantitative findings. One child who experienced high parental interaction and attended a supportive educational environment demonstrated relatively strong language use, memory performance, and problem-solving ability. Observations indicated frequent parent-child communication at home and consistent teacher support during classroom activities.

In contrast, a child experiencing limited parental interaction and a less supportive educational environment demonstrated greater difficulties in verbal reasoning, attention, and problem-solving tasks. Classroom observations indicated fewer opportunities for individualized interaction and limited learning support. Although individual cases cannot represent all children with special needs, these observations provide contextual support for the statistical patterns.

The results demonstrate that parental interaction and educational environment play complementary roles in the cognitive development of children with special needs. Higher-quality interaction at home provides children with opportunities for language stimulation, emotional support, and guided learning. Educational environments extend these experiences through structured activities, teacher interaction, and access to learning resources.

The findings also indicate that cognitive development should not be viewed only as an individual characteristic of children with special needs. Cognitive performance may also reflect the opportunities and support available within children's daily environments. Children with similar developmental characteristics may demonstrate different outcomes depending on the quality of interaction and educational support they receive.

The stronger contribution of parental interaction may be explained by the continuous nature of family interaction. Parents or primary caregivers often interact with children throughout daily routines, creating repeated opportunities for communication, learning, and problem-solving. For children with special needs, repeated and consistent interaction may be particularly valuable because some children require additional time and practice to develop cognitive skills.

The role of the educational environment is also important because educational institutions provide structured opportunities that may not always be available at home. Teachers can introduce new concepts, organize learning activities, provide individualized support, and encourage children to interact with peers. Therefore, educational environments can extend cognitive stimulation beyond the family setting.

The findings further suggest that consistency between home and educational environments may strengthen cognitive development. When parents and teachers use similar approaches to communication, learning support, and behavioral guidance, children may experience greater continuity in their learning experiences. In contrast, significant differences between home and school practices may make it more difficult for children to transfer skills across settings.

The results have important implications for parents. Parents of children with special needs should be encouraged to engage in regular communication, shared learning activities, reading, play, and problem-solving tasks. These activities do not necessarily require specialized materials or complex interventions. Everyday interaction can provide meaningful opportunities for cognitive stimulation when it is responsive to children's abilities and interests.

Educational institutions also have an important responsibility in creating supportive learning environments. Teachers need to understand individual differences among children with special needs and provide instructional strategies that are flexible and accessible. Appropriate learning resources, structured routines, clear instructions, and positive teacher-child interactions can help children participate more effectively in educational activities.

The findings also have implications for teacher training. Teachers working with children with special needs require knowledge and skills related to individualized instruction, communication strategies, classroom adaptation, and developmental support. Training that helps teachers understand the connection between home experiences and classroom learning may also strengthen cooperation with parents.

Collaboration between parents and educational institutions is therefore an important implication of this study. Parents can provide information about children's interests, strengths, difficulties, and learning habits, while teachers can provide information about children's performance and participation in educational settings. The exchange of information can help both sides develop more consistent strategies for supporting cognitive development.

The novelty of this research lies in demonstrating that parental interaction and educational environment should be understood as interconnected contexts rather than isolated factors (Shirota et al., 2026). The findings indicate that cognitive development among children with special needs is influenced by the accumulation of experiences across home and educational settings. This integrated perspective provides a broader explanation of cognitive outcomes than an approach that considers only parental or educational factors.

Another important contribution of the study is its focus on the quality of interaction and support rather than simply the presence of parents or educational institutions (Qi & Wu, 2024). The results suggest that meaningful communication, responsive interaction, individualized instruction, and supportive learning environments are more important than physical presence alone. This distinction has practical importance for designing interventions for children with special needs.

The findings can be explained through the interaction between children's developmental characteristics and their surrounding environments (Adjei et al., 2026). Parental interaction provides early cognitive stimulation through communication, emotional responsiveness, and guided activities. Educational environments provide additional opportunities to practice and extend these skills through structured learning and social interaction.

The stronger association between parental interaction and cognitive development may also reflect the emotional and relational importance of the family environment. Children may feel more secure and motivated when learning occurs through familiar and responsive interactions (Amirazizi et al., 2026). Emotional security can support attention and willingness to engage with cognitive tasks, particularly for children who experience difficulties in communication or learning.

The educational environment contributes by introducing structured challenges and opportunities for skill development (Morrissey et al., 2024). Teachers can adapt activities according to children's abilities and provide feedback that helps children understand their performance. In this way, educational institutions can complement the cognitive stimulation provided by parents.

The combined findings indicate that cognitive development among children with special needs is a cumulative process (Schneebeli et al., 2026). Consistent support across different environments may provide repeated opportunities for children to practice and strengthen

cognitive skills. Therefore, interventions that address only one environment may not achieve their full potential if support in other environments remains limited.

Future research should examine these relationships using longitudinal designs to understand how parental interaction and educational environment influence cognitive development over longer developmental periods (George-Puskar & Shanahan, 2026). Longitudinal research could provide stronger evidence regarding developmental changes and help identify whether early environmental support produces sustained cognitive benefits.

Future studies should also examine differences among specific groups of children with special needs (Ding et al., 2026). Children with different developmental and learning characteristics may respond differently to parental interaction and educational strategies. Research that considers these differences may provide more individualized recommendations for parents and educators.

Further research could also investigate socioeconomic, cultural, and educational factors that may influence the quality of parental interaction and educational environments (Yılmaz et al., 2025). Such research would provide a more context-sensitive understanding of cognitive development and help avoid generalizing findings across populations with substantially different circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that parental interaction and educational environment are both positively associated with cognitive development among children with special needs. Parental interaction emerged as a slightly stronger predictor, emphasizing the importance of consistent communication, emotional responsiveness, learning support, and shared activities within the family. Educational environment also contributed significantly, demonstrating the importance of structured learning activities, teacher-child interaction, individualized support, and appropriate learning resources.

The added value of this research lies in its integrated examination of family and educational contexts. Rather than treating parental interaction and educational environment as separate influences, this study demonstrates that both contexts contribute to children's cognitive development and can complement one another. Cognitive development among children with special needs is therefore better understood as a process shaped by continuous experiences across home and educational environments.

The findings also have practical implications for parents, educators, and educational institutions. Parents can support cognitive development through regular communication, shared learning activities, responsive interaction, and encouragement. Educational institutions can strengthen cognitive outcomes by providing inclusive learning environments, appropriate instructional strategies, individualized support, and positive teacher-child interactions. Cooperation between parents and educators can further strengthen continuity between home and school.

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to determine causal relationships and long-term developmental changes. The use of questionnaire-based measures of parental interaction may also introduce differences in how parents report their interaction with children. In addition, the diverse characteristics of children with special needs may limit the generalization of the findings to all groups of children with special needs.

Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to examine changes in cognitive development over time and to provide deeper understanding of interactional quality. Further studies should also consider specific types of special educational needs, socioeconomic conditions, cultural contexts, and differences in educational support. Such research can contribute to the development of more individualized and context-sensitive strategies for supporting the cognitive development of children with special needs.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

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