

# *Early Intervention Experience and Enlightenment of Preschool Children with Disabilities in the United States*

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**Abstract:** With the continuous development of special education in China, early intervention has gradually received attention, but at present, China has carried out fewer early intervention projects, and the sustainability is poor; Moreover, the number of public preschool special education institutions in China is limited, most of them exist in economically developed cities, and there are few preschool special education institutions in rural and underdeveloped areas, resulting in many special children losing the opportunity to receive professional early intervention. Private preschool special education institutions need to be strengthened in terms of faculty, fund and teaching level. The development of special education in the United States is early. After long-term development, the early intervention for special children in the United States is in a steady development stage, which has important reference significance for the implementation of early intervention for special children in China. This paper analyzes the relevant issues of early intervention for special children in the United States from the historical process of early intervention in the United States to the basis and methods of early intervention in the United States, and puts forward some corresponding suggestions in combination with the actual situation of the development of special education in China.

## **1. Introduction**

China's early intervention started later than the United States, but in practice, China's early intervention and the United States' early intervention experienced a similar development transformation. The problems encountered in the development of early intervention in the United States are likely to be the problems that China is facing or will face in the development of early intervention. At present, the research results on the development history of early intervention in the United States are mainly scattered in special education textbooks in colleges and universities and related academic journal papers. Monographs systematically studying the development history of early intervention in the United States have not been found. The research content of journal papers mainly focuses on macro history introduction, laws and regulations, etc., which is not comprehensive enough. The content and structural system of the textbook are relatively large, including the general situation of the development of special education in many countries in the world. However, the early intervention in the United States is only part of a chapter, and the introduction to the development of early intervention in the United States is relatively short. In

contrast, the theme of this study is oriented to the study of the history of early intervention in the United States. The objectives of the study are more centralized and comprehensive, and the structural system is more coherent and systematic.

Taking historical time as a clue, this study systematically analyzes the development process of early intervention in the United States and the core factors and related issues that promote its reform, so as to show the inherent development patterns and characteristics of early intervention, so as to provide some useful experience and enlightenment for the current early intervention reform and development in China. The significance of this study is mainly reflected in theory and practice. This study helps to reveal some inherent patterns of special education, further expand the research field of American education history, and provide useful experience and lessons for the reform and development of special education in China.

## **2. Historical Development of Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities in the United States**

The earliest development of early intervention for children with disabilities in the United States is deaf education. In 1870, Clark school, the first school for oral deaf children in the United States, was established in Massachusetts, which initially stipulated that only deaf children aged 5-10 should be enrolled in school, and the length of education is 10 years. Afterwards, the school also enrolled a small number of deaf children after the age of 3 for oral rehabilitation training. <sup>[1]</sup> Blind education in the United States was initiated by Dr. John Dix Fisher in 1832 to establish the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Dr. John Dix Fisher believed that the intelligence level of blind children was equal to that of normal children and they were fully capable of receiving education. In 1848, Samuel Gradley Howe founded the first school for children with intellectual disabilities in the United States. <sup>[2]</sup> The education in this experimental school for 5-year-old children can be regarded as the beginning of early education for children with intellectual disabilities in the United States.

In the first half of the 20th century, with the public's awareness of the disabled and the importance of early identification and early intervention for disabled children, some kindergartens (public and private) and childcare schools began to accept disabled children into kindergartens. For example, a private nursing school in Massachusetts receives blind, deaf and mentally retarded children. From 1958 to 1966, the number of disabled children in nursery schools and kindergartens increased by 8-10 times, and the number of children in nursery schools and kindergartens increased from 7,774 (1958) to about 53,800 (1966). However, at that time, the types of children accepted in kindergartens were limited, mainly with mild disabilities, most of them are children with language disabilities. <sup>[3]</sup>

## **3. Early Intervention Characteristics of Preschool Children with Disabilities in the United States**

### **3.1. Hierarchical and Diversified Placement**

The placement of children before the age of 3 is as follows: (1) Home; (2) Specially designed living environment; (3) Relevant service agencies; (4) Normal infant activity place; (5) Hospitals; (6) Child care centers; (7) Others. Home accounts for more than 80%. <sup>[4]</sup> Preschool education for disabled children after the age of 3 is mainly through the following forms: special kindergartens, ordinary kindergartens, special preschool classes attached to institutions, etc. It is worth noting that due to the long-term implementation, the concept of integrated education has been deeply rooted in the hearts of people.

Most children enter ordinary kindergartens for integrated education, and only a small number of

extremely severe children receive rehabilitation in relevant institutions. Among them, children aged 3-4 enter preschool and prekindergarten; At the age of 5, children enter formal kindergartens. Although children with disabilities are placed in ordinary kindergartens, they can get an individualized education plan to guide their rehabilitation education, so as to ensure the effect of early intervention and education.

What is particularly worth learning from is that the United States makes full use of the support of families and communities to provide great early intervention support and guidance for low-age children.

### **3.2. Comprehensive Policy Support System**

At the conference on child health and protection held by the White House in 1930, the early intervention and education of preschool disabled children received attention across the whole country for the first time. The General Assembly adopted the Children's Charter, which specifically points out all children, especially children with disabilities, should be diagnosed and intervened early. Through early intervention and education, all children should have the opportunity to become the pillars of society rather than the burden of society and families. <sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, it is emphasized that special education is a legal part of education and should be committed to serving more special children. Therefore, the education and medical departments must make greater efforts in diagnosis, intervention and education.

The promulgation and implementation of two important acts have played an important role in promoting the development of early intervention for preschool children in the United States. One is The Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The other is the Education for All Handicapped Children Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1975, which listed the special education and related services provided by disabled children as free education. It put forward six principles <sup>[6]</sup>, including zero rejection, non-discriminatory assessment, appropriate education, minimum restrictive environment, appropriate verification procedures and parental participation, which promoted the rapid development of special education in the United States.

However, the act only covers disabled children aged 3 to 21 who are guaranteed to receive free and appropriate intervention and education. Disabled children under 3 years old are not included in the act. <sup>[7]</sup> In 1986, the U.S. Congress amended the act and passed Public Law 99-457, which proposed the Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities. States are required to gradually establish comprehensive and multidisciplinary early intervention plans with full coverage and multisectoral cooperation to provide adaptive family rehabilitation services for children and families with special needs under the age of 3. At the end of September 1994, all states in the United States began to fully implement this intervention plan. <sup>[4]</sup> In 1990, the United States Congress promulgated the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Since then, this act has been amended many times. By the third quarter of 1994, under the supervision of the act and the efforts of each state, the United States had fully implemented early education for special children aged 0-5. <sup>[8]</sup> At present, the latest version of the amendment is Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. <sup>[9]</sup> It is worth mentioning that each revision retains and strengthens the provisions of the early intervention plan for children with disabilities.

In the United States, the binding force of laws ensures the right of preschool special children to get early comprehensive education and rehabilitation.

### **3.3. Reasonable Funding Support & Guarantee System**

In 1968, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act clearly proposed to increase relevant funding projects for special education, establish education centers for disabled children, and recruit

special education workers. PL 9-4 57, revised in 1986, proposed to provide public appropriate and free education for all disabled children, which provides economic support for preschool disabled children to receive early education. More than 50% of the funds for special education shall be borne by the local government where the special education school is located. These funds are mainly subsidized to special children in three ways: First, the government's direct investment in schools and related institutions is subsidized according to the number of children; Second, the funds are used to purchase relevant rehabilitation education services or invest in relevant preschool education projects; Third, subsidies are directly distributed to families in need in the form of specific projects.

In addition to the special education funding dominated by governments at all levels, social donations are also an important source of funding. With the support of policies and the continuous attention of the public to special education, more and more social forces such as foundations and churches have increased their contributions to special education. For example, education vouchers for children with disabilities enable disadvantaged children to receive more subsidies, and children can exchange education vouchers for relevant education or rehabilitation service support. <sup>[10]</sup>

### **3.4. Active Social Groups and Parent Organizations**

At the beginning of the 20th century, some organizations for safeguarding the rights and interests of disabled children appeared in the United States. Most of these organizations were spontaneously established by parents. In 1933, the first parents' organization for disabled children in the United States appeared in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. Affected by this, social organizations with parents as the main body developed rapidly.

By the middle of the 20th century, many local regional organizations expanded into national organizations. From the 1940s to the 1950s, more and more famous people began to pay attention to the education of disabled children, among which the most famous was the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. It was founded by the famous American statesman Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and his wife in 1946.

The appeals and advocacy from these groups and organizations have made the American society more and more recognize the educational value of disabled children, it has influenced and promoted the States and the Congress to formulate, revise and implement relevant laws to ensure the right to education of disabled children, and has continuously extended the age at which disabled children receive education to a younger age.

## **4. Enlightenment on Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities in China**

The early intervention of preschool special children in China is still in its infancy. Learning from the advantageous experience can be a good reference for the implementation of early intervention of special education in China.

### **4.1. Arrange Reasonable Placement**

Learning from the experience of the placement of preschool disabled children in the United States, in China, we arrange different placement for children of different ages. Children aged 0-2 mainly rely on family intervention, which requires institutions, special education schools, hospitals and communities to provide door-to-door teaching and guidance; Children aged 3-4 receive preschool rehabilitation mainly based on early intervention. The main resettlement places are rehabilitation institutions and early intervention resource centers; Children aged 5-7 go to ordinary kindergartens with integrated education.

## 4.2. Improve Legislation and Increase Government Support

Developing preschool education should not only include kindergarten education at the age of 4-6, but also cover age of 0-3. Special education schools should also serve as guidance centers for preschool education and family rehabilitation of disabled children.

## 4.3. Encourage the Development of Social Groups

The government and special education institutions should strengthen the guidance. First of all, change the parents' concept, so that parents can lead their children out of the house. At the same time, the government should encourage, support and guide the establishment of more parents' organizations. Relevant associations can be established with the community as the unit, so that parents' voices can be heard.

## 5. Conclusion

Early detection, early diagnosis and early intervention can better help special children reduce the adverse consequences caused by physical and mental disorders, so that the defects of special children can be compensated and corrected to the greatest extent. Therefore, providing strong support for preschool special education and ensuring that preschool special children can get more services and help plays an important role in the development of the whole special education. The United States has provided a variety of placement methods, a complete policy support system, a reasonable funding support system and funding security system, and a comprehensive support service system for preschool special children. The experience of the United States has important reference significance for the early intervention of preschool special children in China. Combined with the actual situation of the development of special education in China, this paper puts forward three suggestions: First, the children placement should be settled in stages according to age; Second, improve laws and regulations and increase government support; Third, encourage and support the development of social organizations.

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