INTRODUCTION

Early childhood inclusion should provide the opportunity for children with and without disabilities to develop positive relationships and a sense of belonging and membership (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). Research suggests individual characteristics of preschool children with disabilities, such as degree of disability, age (Aguiar, Moiteiro, & Pimentel, 2010), and sex (Diamond, Hong, & Tu, 2008) are related to social acceptance. Boys with disabilities seem to be at increased risk for social rejection, because it is more likely for a girl to choose a child with disabilities to play with (Diamond et al., 2008), and preschoolers tend to form same-sex friendships (Vaughn et al., 2001). Furthermore, some evidence suggests preschool children with disabilities that influence social problem solving and emotional regulation, such as developmental delay and autism are more likely to be socially rejected (Odom et al., 2006). In this study, we hypothesized that children with sociocognitive disabilities are more likely to be socially rejected than children with physical disabilities or other disabilities and these effects are moderated by children’s sex and age.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and forty eight children with disabilities (110 boys), aged between 43 and 95 months (M = 67.59, SD = 11.83), attending inclusive preschool classrooms from the area of Lisbon. As indicated by classroom teachers, 48 children had developmental delay, 37 children had autism spectrum disorders, 10 children had cerebral palsy, 9 children had speech or language impairment, 8 children had rare disorder, 6 children had multiple disabilities, 5 children had Down syndrome, 5 children had no diagnosis, 4 children had ADHD, 3 children had orthopaedic impairment, 2 children had hearing impairment, 2 children had learning disabilities, and 2 children had other disabilities.

RESULTS

Figure 1. (Dis)ability Profiles Based on Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (Ward’s Method)

We tested moderation effects of children’s age and gender in separate models. However, interaction effects were not found.

DISCUSSION

Children with sociocognitive disabilities were significantly less accepted by peers in inclusive preschool settings, than children with physical disabilities, which suggests that they might be at increased risk for social rejection. These findings are congruent with previous research (e.g., Odom et al. 2006) and partially confirm our hypotheses. We expected moderating effects of age and sex, which were not confirmed. However, age had a negative direct effect on social acceptance, as previously reported by Aguiar and colleagues (2010), suggesting older children with disabilities might have increased difficulties in ensuring peer group acceptance. As expected, individual characteristics of children with disabilities influence their social experiences and can hinder social inclusion. Based on these findings early childhood education and intervention professionals should prioritize social inclusion interventions for older children and for children with (even relatively moderate) combined difficulties in social skills, problem behavior, reasoning, and communication. However, more research is needed, as variables addressed here only account for a small amount of variance in social acceptance of children with disabilities in inclusive preschool settings.

Measures and procedures


Social acceptance: z-scores of sociometric ratings obtained during individual interviews, where children sorted the photographs of all classmates into 3 different boxes: like to play a lot (3), like to play sometimes (2), and do not like to play (1).