The Pyramid of Participation: The Representation of the Child's Voice in Psychological Advice

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Overview

The three key principles which underpin the Code of Practice have been highlighted by a number of authors in this edition. We must have regard to:

- *the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person and their parents;*

- *the importance of the child or young person and their parents participating as fully as possible in decisions and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions;*

- *the need to support the child or young person and to help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, preparing them effectively for adulthood.*

(SEND Code of Practice 2014, p. 8.)

These principles clearly lay out the EPs' responsibilities in terms of listening to the child and ensuring that they have a voice as regards their SENs. These principles not only apply to EPs but to all those who are involved in the construction of the Education Health and Care Plans. The importance of involving children and young people in the assessment process has been advocated by EPs for many years (Gersch 1996). More recently, EPs have written about the importance of Person Centred planning (Sutcliffe & Birney 2014). Buck (2015) has highlighted the opportunity for EPs to reconstruct psychological reports with the new Code, though his particular focus is not on the representation of the child's views. The purpose of this paper is to present a model which would allow EPs to develop their practice in ensuring the child's voice is represented in their EHC Plans.

The origins of this article came from reading and analysing 21 Psychological Advices written by trainee EPs (TEPs) on their final year- three placement. These reports came from sixteen different services in London and the South East of England. All these reports had been anonymised before analysis and had been part of the audit of TEPs' placement portfolios.

Analysis of these reports and reflections on the other articles in this journal were the basis for conceptualising a pyramid of representation. This pyramid was also stimulated by Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation (see Vingerhoets and Wagner in this issue). Hart's ladder helps professionals think how they can move upwards, to ensure that professionals move beyond seeing service users' involvement as tokenism and into actual participation. However, movement in this pyramid is conceptualised as downwards, to where there is a wider base and a solid foundation for understanding the child and young person.

Issues to Consider

When these 21 reports were initially analysed four particular issues were highlighted.

How are reports labelled?

Most of the reports were entitled *Educational Psychological Advice (or Information) for the EHC Plan Assessment* (N = 16). However, a number were titled differently, exemplified as follows.

- *Educational Psychology report*

- *Request for EHC Plan Assessment*

- *Record of EP Involvement*

These titles indicate the differences between services in how they are viewing the EP's written input.

Does gender affect voice?

There were considerable more reports on boys (n = 17, 81%) than girls (n = 4, 19%). Whether this is an artefact of the small sample or an indication of gender differences is a matter for consideration by the profession.

At what age are these children?

The children were aged from 2 to 12. There was a bulge at age 4 and another smaller one at 10 and 11. (It should be noted that, as all reports were anonymised, some ages were estimated from the year group the child was in).

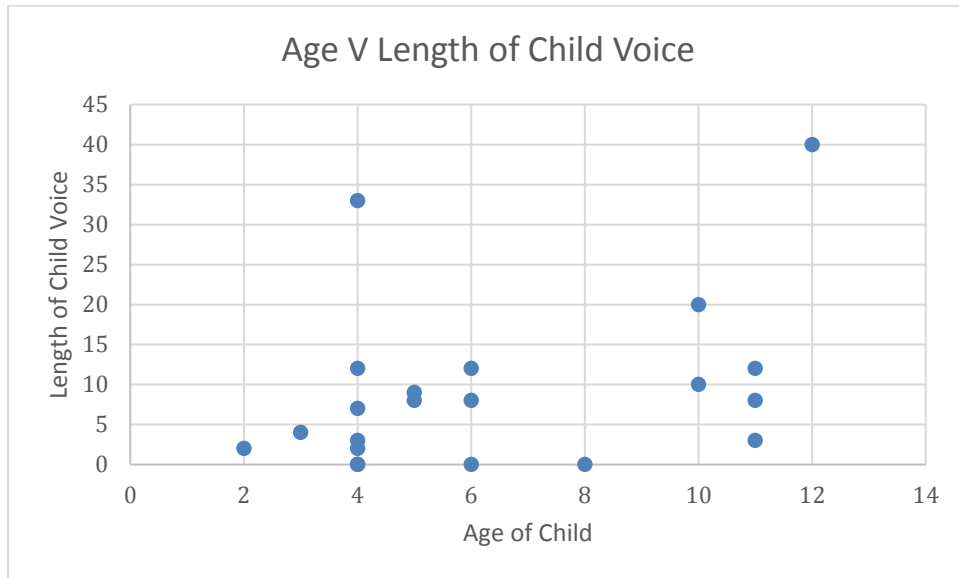**Table 1. Age**
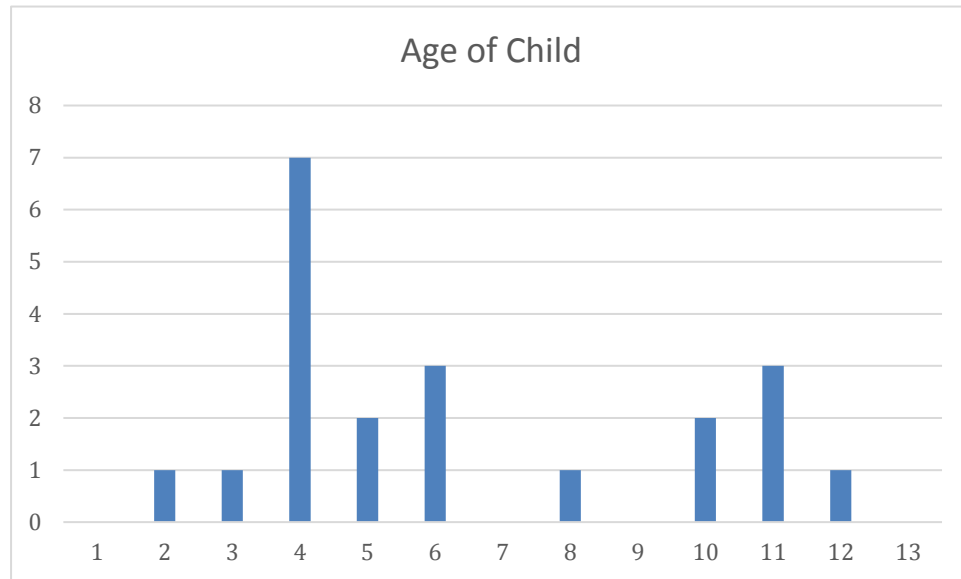
Length of child's voice

The reports ranged in length from five to sixteen pages (see Table 2). There are approximately 450 words per page. So for example a ten page report will be approximately 4,500 words long. A fifteen page report is 6,750 words (approximately 20 per cent are over this). It is in this context that the voice of the child will be considered.

Table 2. The length of the report

Pages (approximate words per page 450)	Number of reports	
1–5	1	5%
6–10	8	38%
11–15	8	38%
15+	4	19%
Total	21	100%

The Child's Voice was between 0 and 400 words. This is represented in Table 3, where the length of the contributions is plotted against age (with numbers rounded up or down to the nearest 10). Though the oldest child was given the 'longest voice', it should be noted that there is not a correlation between age of child and length of voice. There were a number of children aged ten and over who were given a voice of under 100 words.

Table 3

Age V Length of Child Voice

(scatter plot: Length of Child Voice (y-axis, 0 to 45) versus Age of Child (x-axis, 0 to 14))

This initial analysis of some of the issues has simply highlighted that reports may be conceptualised in different ways and that, though reports are often very lengthy (some over 5,000 words), the voice of the child is only a very small part of most reports — and in many is either non-existent or very brief.

However, the reports also highlighted different ways TEPs were engaging with the issue of trying to give the child a voice in the context of their service and supervisors' ways of working. In the next section, these ways have been put into a pyramid, to try to capture the different ways in which EPs are finding ways to help the child express their views.

The Pyramid of Participation

In terms of a process for moving forward, it is helpful to think about a three-dimensional pyramid of participation (see Figure 1). There are three dimensions to this.

1.   The **Degree** of Participation is based on Hart's model and is about moving down through the pyramid (the vertical dimension) in terms of the importance given to the child's voice and whether it is acted upon.

2.   The **Areas** of Participation concerns areas in which EPs gather information (the horizontal dimension). For example, is voice given to simply their likes and dislikes or their views on the Provision that is being proposed?

3.   The **Depth** of Participation is about the techniques and strategies that EPs use to gather information (the movement towards the centre of the pyramid). For example, are children simply asked their views or are more sophisticated strategies used to help them think about and express their views?

Ideally, EPs will help children's participation by moving their practice in all three directions: that is by degree, range and depth. However, they can also improve the participation of children by moving in any one of these directions. At each level, in terms of degrees of participation, the EP may also move along the horizontal plane (helping them participate around different aspects of the situation and also towards the centre in terms of using techniques to get deeper, richer, information from the child or young person.
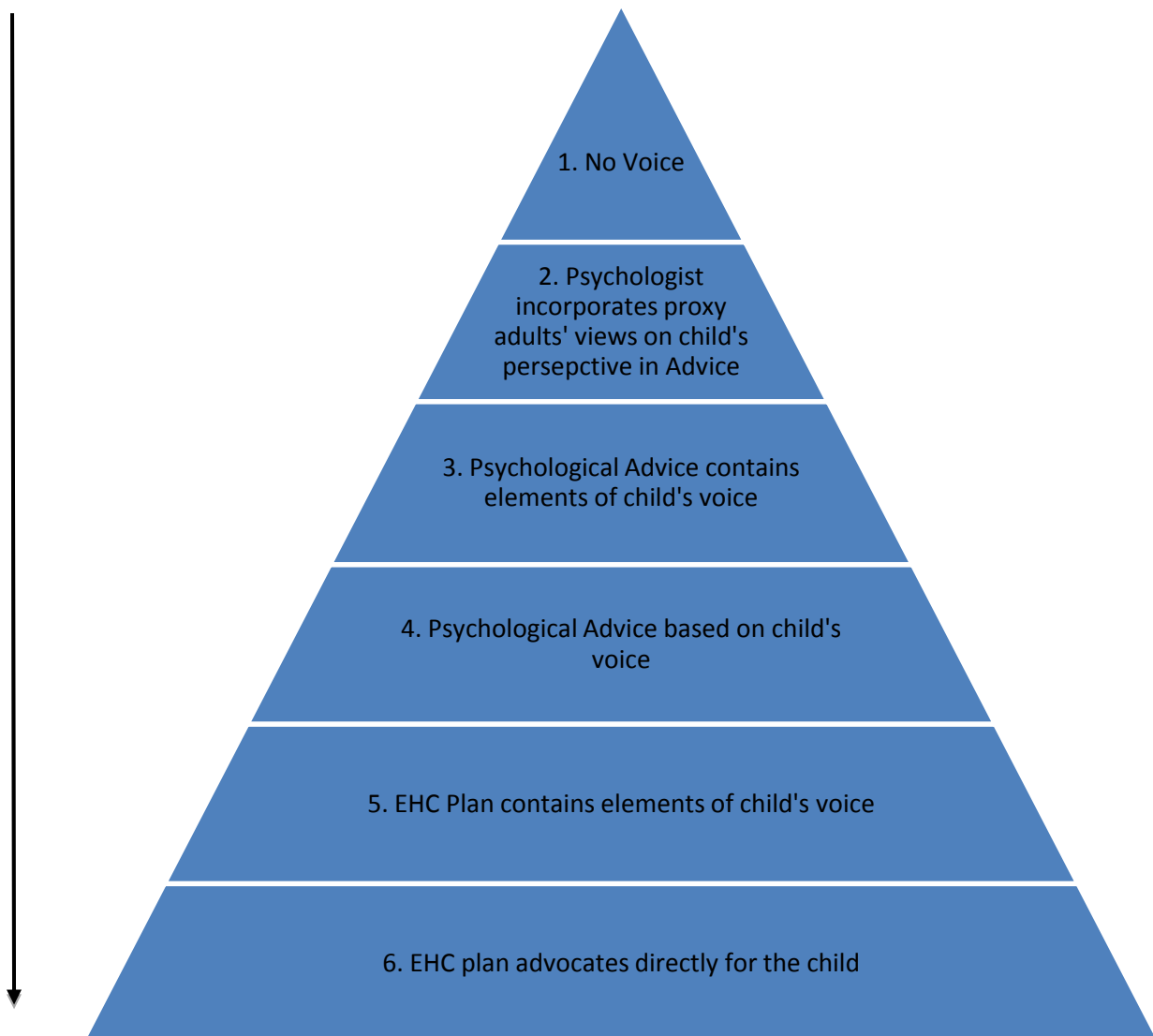
Figure 1. The Pyramid of Participation

The Degree of Participation

Depth
of
Participation

The Areas of Participation
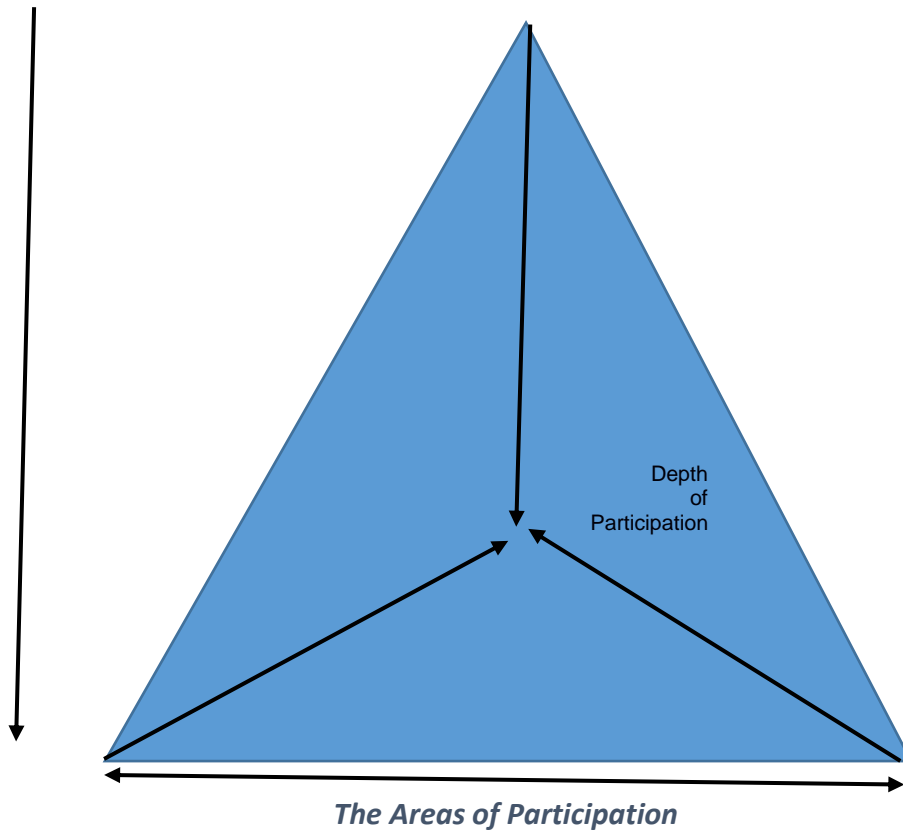
In terms of degrees of participation, Hart's model has been reframed to place it firmly within the EHC plan process (see Figure 2).

In terms of degrees of participation, the EP's representation of the child's voice needs to move from their assessment/consultation with the child through their Advice to manifestation in the EHC plan. The TEP reports which stimulated this model do not by definition contain information on the final plan. It may be that, in most services, level 4 — Psychological Advice based on the child's voice, is a realistic height of expectation without a major change in culture in Children Services. However, working with Young People from 18–25 may be an opportunity to show how to put their voice centre stage.

Figure 2. The Degree of Participation

1. No Voice

2. Psychologist incorporates proxy adults' views on child's persepctive in Advice

3. Psychological Advice contains elements of child's voice

4. Psychological Advice based on child's voice

5. EHC Plan contains elements of child's voice

6. EHC plan advocates directly for the child

The Psychological Advice on four of the 21 children gave no mention of the child's views (all boys). In addition, another five of the reports only reported on how the adults who knew the child saw them (Level 2).

> *Due to E's social and communication difficulties as well as the fact that he does not know me in person it was considered that E's mother was the most appropriately positioned to share E's views. (Degree Level 2).*

If this pattern is repeated by more experienced EPs, it suggests that, despite the code's recommendations, a large number of children are still being given no voice in Psychological Advice. Adults, including parents, are still being asked to speak on their behalf.

The areas of participation

The areas of participation are the range of areas in which the child is given a voice to participate (see Figure 3). This can be represented by different sides of the pyramid. Each side can be seen to represent a different area where the child can be given a voice.

In terms of range, the following areas may be helpful to think about.

Area 1: Likes and dislikes

A common focus for reports is on what the child likes and dislikes in school. This is prevalent in the first few levels in terms of degree of participation…

While it was not possible to obtain L's views directly, parents reported that L loves puzzles and is interested in train sets. (Level 2, Range 1).

Mrs B and the nursery report that A enjoys playing with trains and cars… (Level 2, Range 1).

Area 2: Easy and difficult

It is helpful to find out what the child finds easy and what they find difficult in school. This may be about their progress but also about what is working well for them — and not so well.

His staff at his current setting and his mother report that he is happy and settled. He likes fruit, cars, singing, dancing, messy play and being stroked, and is good at the routine for bedtime and table manners. (Level 2, Range 1 and 2)

When asked "How is school?" J said "Good". He told me that he likes school because "I see my friends every day", reporting that he enjoys V (additionally resourced provision) and mainstream class equally. (Level 3, Range 2)

Area 3: Learning and development

It is important to know what they are learning and what areas they are getting support in.

X was not able to answer specific questions in relation to his learning and the type of support he might want or require…

Area 4: Support for learning

This area is about thinking ahead to what support would help them in the future. This requires an understanding of what support could be available.

P says that the things that work for him are his table, when he gets help from an adult and going on his iPad. He says that things do not work for him when his LSA is not with him. (Level 3, Range 4)

EPs can move the child's participation from simply what they like and dislike to what the child finds difficult in class (their Special Educational Needs) and how they think they can be helped. The final area is giving them a voice around the outside Provision that may be brought in. It is worth considering how many children actually know what alternatives for Provision are available and being discussed at other levels of the system.

This range of four areas is relevant for all levels of degree of participation.

Figure 3. Areas of Participation

Likes and Dislikes

Easy and Difficult

Learning and Development

Support for Learning
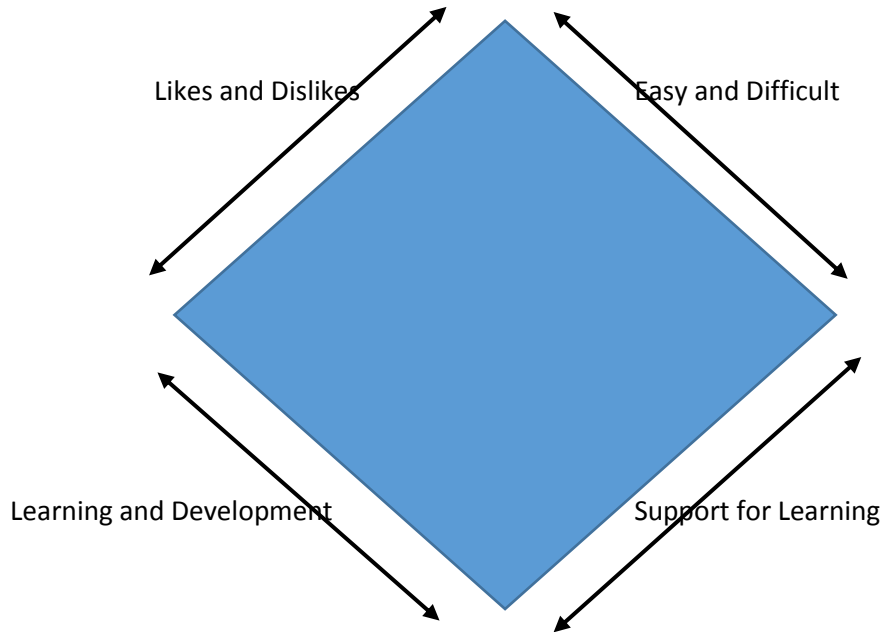
The depth of participation

The final dimension of the pyramid is the depth of participation. This can be viewed as movement towards the centre, so that the EP has a range of ways of gaining a deeper or richer understanding of the child's views (see for example Alrai — this issue). This is where many of the techniques familiar to EPs come into play. These mostly revolve around levels of conversation, but additional techniques may also be used. It is the dimension where the specialist skills required to help children who have difficulties communicating are used (see Howarth's article in this edition).

> *I worked with Z using Talking Mats in order to gain his views of school. He was asked to sort the cards into three piles: those things he liked, did not like and was not sure about. Z also added a section for things he really liked. His results can be seen in the picture below…*

Surface depth: Observation

Many reports contain information on an observation of the child. This was often reported within a section entitled The Child's Views.

> *From observation, L appeared content in his playgroup setting and seemed aware… (Level 2, Area 1, Surface Depth)*

> *Through observation of Y, discussion with his parents and nursery staff, I concluded the following regarding Y's likes and dislikes… (Level 2, Area 1, Surface Depth)*

> *From observation and consultation with Ms S and A's key worker, A appears to enjoy music and musical activities, playing in the home corner, cutting and sticking, playing with play dough, looking at books and interacting with adults and peers. (Level 2, Area 1, Surface Depth)*

Social depth: Informal conversations

TEPs reported on unstructured discussion with the child. Again, this was usually around likes and dislikes. They were considered informal if they did not focus on any aspects of the child's Needs or Provision in school.

> *D told me that he likes playing with his Xbox and that he also likes dogs and dinosaurs. He seemed to like knowing his routines, and he was aware that I was meeting his mum the same day. (Level 3, Area 1, Social Depth)*

> *A was able to tell me that what she liked doing at school was "sit on the carpet and painting". (Level 3, Area 1, Social Depth)*

Solution depth: Structured conversations

These are conversations where the EP is problem solving or solution thinking, to help the child move forwards. The EP may use specific techniques, such as the 'miracle question' or a 'How/How' drawing, to help the pupils structure their thinking.

Y showed me some artwork she had created during the session with Mrs X which explored her epilepsy. She explained that her picture showed static inside her brain. (Level 3, Area 3, Solution Depth)

Psychological depth: Respect, authenticity and empathy

These are conversations that are opening up 'unseen' aspects of the situation (see Thorne and Gersch in this issue). The EP may use art and creative techniques to get a deeper understanding of the child's needs, as well as Personal Construct Psychology or projective techniques.

I asked N which Blob was most like him, and he identified the Blob person what was climbing the tree. N told me this is because he has to do his exercises every day. He said that the exercises made his muscles strong but he has mixed feelings about doing them, and would not necessarily say that he enjoys doing them. (Level 3, Area 3, Psychological Depth)

The EP is using the conversation to open up new and different ways of seeing the issues.

Discussion

The Pyramid of Participation should be placed within the context of contemporary practice around the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people. Buck's (2015) important paper asks EPs to reconstruct their reports. He complains that all too often EP's reports are not psychological ones. The importance of psychology in reports is also central to the work done by Crane and her colleagues (see Crane in this issue). Positioning the EP as having a central role in listening to and facilitating the child's views would get to the heart of being psychological again (see Hussain in this issue).

A helpful framework for viewing this is the Johari window both in terms of the breadth and depth of the Psychological Advice.

Figure 4. Johari's Window (Luft 1969)

	Known to Child	**Unknown to Child**
Known to EP	Open	Unseen
Unknown to EP	Hidden	Unknown

Within Johari's framework the role of the EP is not simply to report on what is already Open, i.e., known to the child, their parents and the other professionals. Providing information that is already Open and known to everyone is a waste of time and energy. The psychological focus should be to open up the Hidden and Unseen areas, thus reducing the size of the Unknown area. The Hidden area is opened up by listening to the child, using the Psychological Depth of participation to ensure the child is able to express their views. The Unseen area is opened up, expanding the range of areas that you want them to think about — not only what they like and dislike about school.

An interesting distinction can been made between summative and formative reports. The former are written as a record on how things are (an objective record of the evidence of the child's needs and the provision required to meet those needs). This can be contrasted with the latter, which are part of a process which is designed to make change happen. If this is the case then Psychological Reports need to offer an alternative narrative about what is going on, which foregrounds psychological insight into the child's world, and what will help them to develop.

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