

Glimpses of the Inner World of a Toddler

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Abstract

This paper is a recollection of the moments in which we, as parents, could glimpse the rich inner world of our toddler son Advait. We reflect on his engagement with animals, birds, nature, music, dance, language, and food. We also share an account of his autonomy, self-assurance, metacognition, and 'fear of missing out. Though we don't position ourselves as academics, psychologists, and educators in this writing, our parenting experiences note that perhaps we give children very little credit for their intellectual, emotional, and kinaesthetic capabilities in our theories and practice. Therefore, possibly there is a need to expand and even radically re-envision our theories of child development to account for these rich inner lives of children.

We are privileged parents to a two-year-old bright and curious toddler. We call him Advait. In this paper, we write about the moments where we could get a glimpse into the rich inner life of Advait as parents. This spontaneous urge to write about his inner life comes from his ongoing excitement about animals. We often take Advait to gardens where he enjoys looking at birds, squirrels, dogs, peacocks, trees, flowers, fountains, and ponds. He usually pays attention to what other people, particularly children, are doing. But, it is animals and birds that capture his attention the most. His excitement and happiness in these moments fill us with joy as parents. Therefore, as we write this narration, we position ourselves more as delighted and wonderstruck parents and not as scholars, researchers, and educators who primarily examine children's experiences through theories and concepts.

Even as a few months old baby confined at home during the pandemic, Advait would look intently at the pigeons, crows, and dogs. As soon as we started stepping out with him when he was about 5-6 months old, he took a fancy for squirrels, eagles, sparrows, and parrots. Being out on sunny winter mornings in gardens, he enjoyed tracing the flights of birds, their chirping and singing. He keenly observed the colourful flowers in the parks and started tracing the movement of squirrels on the trees and in the grass. As soon as he turned a year old and could walk, he started chasing butterflies and running after pigeons and squirrels. In these moments, he

is so immersed in the experience that he does not care about mosquitoes or uneven ground, of which he is otherwise acutely aware. It is this absorption in-the-moment that captures our attention. He is also fascinated that many animals and birds in the park drink water from the same pond and eat from the same bowl. He has not yet seen animals killing or eating each other.

Dogs have a special place in Advait's life. He calls them 'dodo'. He started playing with a puppy named Sky when he was about two months old, and Sky was a few weeks old. His very first plush toy was a puppy he identified as Dodo. Later, he played with many more full-grown dogs at relatives' homes and parks. He shares a level of comfort with dogs to the extent that he finds the presence of dogs comforting in an otherwise unfamiliar home. He thinks of dogs as his friends and often orders them around with great confidence. Once he saw two dogs fighting in Sunder Nursery, a pet-friendly park in Delhi. He immediately started arbitrating the tussle by ordering both the dogs to shut up and sit down. However, soon he understood that the dogs were in no mood to stop, and he retreated to the safety of his pram. As he started getting older, he realised that not all dogs are equally friendly, and therefore, he proceeds with caution now. But, we have observed that Advait's response does not stem from fear. Instead, he navigates the unfamiliar with caution without losing his curiosity and sense of wonder. His love for dogs and other animals and birds became evident on a

trip we took to a lakeside resort in the foothills of the Himalayas when he was about a year and four months old. There were many dogs in the Resort, and he loved spending time around these dogs to the point where he exclusively wanted to stay outdoors. He paid particular attention to the different kinds of chirping and tried locating the birds on trees. In addition, he would be on a constant lookout for cows and dogs on the roads during our travels.

He has recently been fascinated with peacocks, and a nearby park, where peacocks are in abundance, is his favourite place for an outing. Before he saw peacocks in real, he was vaguely familiar with peacocks through a book with many colourful drawings of peacocks. He had his first glimpse of a peacock when he was about one and a half years old. He spotted a peacock in the bushes on his outing to Sunder Nursery. On his next visit to the same place a few days later, he could see peacocks moving around at leisure. He was thrilled, to say the least. He remembered the encounter for many days and continued recounting the experience to everyone at home. He would especially look out for peacocks on all subsequent visits and be disappointed if he did not spot them. Suddenly, the dogs and squirrels became less fascinating for Advait. Perhaps, it was due to the novelty and beauty of peacocks. His interest was further piqued when we discovered another park where peacocks and peahens are abundant. They are spotted easily, running around, sometimes dancing, or perched on trees. Ever hopeful, Advait enjoys running behind these peacocks and peahens as they fly or run away each time. Maybe running toward these creatures gives him some sense of agency and excitement. He often collects the fallen feathers of peahens with the hope of finding a fallen feather of a peacock one of these days. His perseverance in these moments amazes us as parents.

Music, and songs too, capture Advait's imagination in a big way. Initially, we would sing lullabies and songs to him on the swing at home. This was his favourite place to fall asleep. Then, as he grew about a year old and started picking up words and tunes, he began humming

with us. Gradually, he started singing with us and by himself. As he is about two years old now, he remembers and identifies many lullabies, songs, and rhymes we sing to and with him in English and Hindi. Now, for a couple of months at least, he demands the particular piece he would like to be sung or played at a given moment. Then, he readily joins us in singing that song to him. Interestingly, he often corrects himself, his grandparents, and us on the specific tune, pronunciation of words and even the lyrics of the songs that he likes. Moreover, he sometimes stops and corrects us when we, by chance or intentionally, replace a word with another. We wonder if this is a demonstration of his metacognitive abilities.

Advait is big on dancing too. For him, mostly, it is an expression of his happiness and excitement. While he would move to the tunes of music as a baby, he danced for the first time with others when he was about eight months old. On the occasion of a party, we organised to celebrate his birth. He keenly observed what others were doing around him and then started grooving to the tempo of the music. He also has some favourite songs that he likes dancing too. In the last month, he sometimes spontaneously breaks out into a specific sequence of steps with great enthusiasm, and we all, including Advait, identify it as 'victory dance'. The act of naming something seems vital to Advait as perhaps that concretises the experience as something special in his imagination and experience.

Likewise, concerning food, he remembers the names of the dishes, fruits, or vegetables he likes. Croissant and pizza are two such dishes that he finds particularly fascinating. These are the dishes he likes naming when someone asks him about what he ate, even when he has not eaten either. Maybe he remembers and reminisces on the times when he ate these dishes with us on an outing. Maybe remembering these times give him joy. It is incredible for us also to see him assert his autonomy and choice while we feed him every day. He precisely states the items he would like to eat from his plate. He is particular about every bite he eats and wants the precise combination he has specified. He keenly

investigates the content of every spoon to make sure it is as per his specification before eating it. He swings and sways whenever he enjoys a particular food and says ‘achha!’ to convey his delight. Likewise, he had begun to express his distaste and dislike for food items by spitting them out and stating that ‘it is not achha’. His sense of like and dislike and pleasure and displeasure is not just limited to food. A couple of months back, he touched the garment’s fabric, felt its texture and noted that it was “bahut achha”. These instances make us think that probably we don’t pay enough attention to this pure sensual pleasure of eating, touching or drinking something. Advait, on the other hand, is closely engaging the world through his senses and seems to be immersed in the delight these experiences bring.

Another such sensual experience for Advait is playing with water. These days, he finds different ways to be in the water—turning on the taps, having a bath multiple times a day, watering plants on the terrace in the evening or drinking water from every bottle at home. He likes getting his clothes wet, and perhaps, he also enjoys the touch and feel of water. He would spend a lot of time playing in his bathtub, trying to catch water in his hands. Even before he turned a year old, we discovered his fascination with water bodies. As a baby, he liked dipping his feet in the pond. He is usually delighted around a water body where he can spot ducks, swans, and birds. He is especially interested in fountains and gets sad at the sight of a non-functional fountain. The first trip we took with Advait was to a lakeside resort, and he had a great time. We plan to repeat the visit soon, as he is a little older now, and he may be able to enjoy it in many more ways now.

Another interesting phenomenon that we have witnessed with Advait is his tendency to stay in the mid of action and excitement. We observed this for the first time when he was barely six months old. During Diwali celebrations at home, when the extended family and friends would stay back till late, Advait would not sleep despite being exhausted. He would cry when we tried putting him to bed. He wanted to be with

everyone even when he was dozing off, and in fact, he would find ways to stay awake until everyone had gone off to sleep. The same tendency continues, as the only way to put him to bed is first to assure him that everyone at home has gone off to sleep. The closest possible explanation for this to our mind is Advait having something like a ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO) on the excitement, play and stimulation that life has to offer in any given moment. Naturally, he is fond of celebrations and family get-togethers and likes recounting these events later in the form of stories. These recounting and narrations have taken the shape of learning moments for us. He has learnt many new words and expressions based on such experiences through the stories we tell him. The story of his visit to the zoo and the peacock park seems to be his favourite by far.

We marvel at his excitement for every visit we make outside the house. He participates in getting his diaper bag ready, wishes to dress up as soon as possible, and even chooses the car he wants to go out in these days. He is riveted to the scenes of the world outside from the very moment he sits in the car. He keeps on naming the things he sees, and sometimes, he just starts humming songs to himself. It is fascinating for us as parents to see the world through his eyes in such moments. He takes nothing for granted, lives in the moment, and takes every experience to broaden his imagination. These are the moments when we, as adults, realise that we have so much to learn and re-learn. He becomes our inspiration.

One may wonder if these parents’ recollections have a meaning beyond their personal life. One may even think if there is an academic relevance to these musings. In conclusion, we would like to opine that as academics, psychologists and educators, we give children very little credit for their intellectual, emotional, and kinesthetic capabilities in our theories and practice. If we were to put aside our preconceived notions, we would notice that they have much richer and more complex inner lives than we reckon. Their engagement with the world is far more sophisticated, intense, and agentic than we currently believe. In fact, in our view, we need to

expand and even radically re-envision our theories of child development to account for these rich inner lives of children.