

# Understanding Childhood through Conversations with Young Children

**Ms. Vishakha Kumar**

*Ph.D. Scholar, CIE, University of Delhi*

## **Abstract**

*This paper, explores the possibility of understanding childhood from the perspective of young children. The participants of this mini study were children from two and a half to six years of age group. The findings are based on informal interaction with them while they were engaged in play in a park located in their vicinity. The paper draws from anthropological and sociological researches with children which make a strong plea to give space to children's voices. In the course of this mini study, it was found that children not just observe other children but they also observe adults and can understand the complexity of the differences. They make a lot of effort to make sense of the world around them and try to provide probable explanations for what they observe.*

*Keywords: Gender, childhood studies*

My two-year-old son was asked by a visitor whether he was a boy or a girl? At first, he ignored the question, pretending to be disinterested. When the same question was repeated, he stared back at the gentleman and said 'baccha hoon' (I am a child). This response stunned all of us because we did not realise when he had acquired such an understanding. He often looks at infants and toddlers younger than him and refers to them as 'chota baby' (small baby). Now he is two and a half years old and I often pose this question, 'bache kya karte hai?' (what do children do?) and he replies 'shaitani karte hai, rote hai, mumma ki godi mein jaate hai' (children are naughty, they sit in their mother's lap and they cry). I also see that he wants to play with children of varying age groups ranging from one to six years. He gets very excited when he sees other children in the park and prefers their company to the company of adults. Some of these responses propelled me to delve deeper into the experience of being a child.

This paper is inspired by anthropological and sociological researches with children. Towards the end of 1980's there was a movement to document authentic experiences of a child and to understand what it means to be a child. There are two instances that made me ponder whether adults can ever understand the epistemology of children. The first is of a three-year-old child, Vasistha, who is my neighbour. He is a very energetic child who plays enthusiastically in the park located in our vicinity. He has a seven-year-old brother who plays in the same park. The elder brother is entrusted with the task of taking care of the younger one. One day, as the elder brother was busy in his play he forgot to take notice of his younger brother. Vasistha ran outside the main entrance of the society towards a busy road. He was caught just outside the gate by some resident of the society. They tried to deter him from venturing out but the moment he was brought in, he swiftly ran out again leaving the others in a fix. Finally, after much effort he was caught and

lifted in order to get him back to his mother. He howled and cried as he was forced to go inside. He was resisting adult authority and raising his voice against, what seems to be, his deep desire to see for himself the world outside the enclosed space of his 'society'. These are the everyday occurrences where adults enforce embargos on young children in the name of ensuring their safety. It is parents who make all major decisions for children including what they should wear, eat, play, when they should sleep, when they should wake up and when they should get ready for school.

The second instance was when I was playing with my two-and-a-half-year-old son and a five year old girl in the corridor of our flat. While they enthusiastically threw a ball in all directions, I was more concerned that the ball should not go anywhere near the staircase. I did not want them to run down the stairs, fearing that they might topple. Despite the fact that all three of us were engaged in play, I was mostly worried and cautious while the other two were laughing with joy and excitement. I felt that as an adult I failed to participate in their sense of joy and happiness. I began this study as a response to one large question: how can adults study children and their understanding of the world?

Recent anthropological and sociological researches conceptualise the child as a social actor who has much to say about the world around them. Like women's voices, the voices of children and their representation has largely been ignored in research. Anthropology suggests that children can be encouraged to speak using ethnographic and participatory methods of research. At the same time, it is also emphasised that merely allowing children to speak may not be enough. Children's perspectives may also contribute to an understanding of the social world. The biggest question is then, who is a child? Very often the usage of terms like child and childhood is done to represent a cohort. Heather Montgomery (2009) argues that for any anthropologist studying childhood there can be no universal child. Child and childhood must be understood within their own contexts. She refrains

from offering any definition for childhood and states that it is a very diverse and pliable construct. Montgomery is criticised for treating childhood as a social construct; denying it the material substrate. Her work denies childhood some universal features which cut across cultures. Despite criticism, she offers a socio-cultural perspective that makes a strong plea to understand the child in context, and acts as a caution against overgeneralisation.

Other researchers working in the sociology of childhood have also argued that, while conducting research and approaching the topic of childhood, we have to also understand multivocality that emerges from the diversity of class, gender, culture, caste etc. (James, 2007; Mayall, 2002). This paper draws its basic framework from James Alison's paper 'Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices, Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials.' He argues that in the quest to give voice to children, anthropologists have ignored some conceptual and epistemological problems concerned with authenticity and the diversity of children's experiences.

### **Background of the Study:**

This paper is a result of my continuous engagement with children ranging from ages two and a half to six, especially from the park located in our society. I take my two-and-a-half-year-old child to the park. While overseeing him I also observe other children at play and interact with them, and sometimes on their insistence, I also participate in their play. I also interact occasionally with the children of domestic helpers who work in the same society. During these conversations, I contemplated the fact that these children stay in a similar locality but are separated from one another by social class, interwoven with age, religion and gender differences. This study was planned to present the perspectives of these children, ranging from ages two and a half to six years, about the world around them. To initiate conversation, I asked some basic questions such as, 'Who is a child?' or 'What does it mean to be a child?'. I also asked them what they enjoy doing, how they are different from grown-ups, what is it

that they can do and adults can't do and what do they think they will do when they grow up.

### **Sample:**

I engaged in conversation with fourteen children. Four of them were not very communicative and just spoke in monosyllables, whereas ten of them were able to articulate their ideas more clearly. Out of these fourteen, eight were from the upper middle and middle classes and six children were from a lower socio-economic level, whose mothers worked as domestic helps in the same society. All these children reside in East Delhi, separated from each other by merely a road, but they live in totally different conditions. The children from the lower socio-economic level resided in one room rented homes located in a Gujjar-dominated village.

### **Introduction of the Participants**

#### **Participant 1:**

He is a four-and-a-half-year-old boy who is an only child. His father works in Gurgaon in a multinational company and his mother is a web content developer. Over the last one year I have observed this child grow to be a very talkative and energetic child, who enjoys music, cricket and all forms of outdoor activities. His parents take a lot of interest in his upbringing. He also suffers from enlarged adenoids. Due to his propensity for catching a cold and cough frequently, his mother keeps him from venturing outside the house. She feels that he catches infections faster than other children. I conversed with him while he was engaged in painting with water colours.

#### **Participant 2:**

She is a five-year-old girl who is an only child. She lives with her extended family in a two-bedroom house. She is a talkative girl who frequently picks fights with boys in the park. For the last two years, I have observed that her mother sends her to the park alone in the evening since she takes tuitions. The girl seems to be comfortable with being alone

in the park, while other children are accompanied by nannies, grandmothers or parents.

Participant 3: She is a five-year-old girl who is an only child. She lives in a joint family with her parents and grandparents. Her parents are software developers and her mother left her office job after P3 was born to take care of her. P3 is a very playful girl who can be seen running around the park. She has several friends in the housing society.

#### **Participants 4, 5 & 6:**

They are six sisters and one brother. The eldest of them got married last year and stays close by. Now the younger two sisters work as domestic helps. Their mother also cleans utensils in a few houses and also makes garlands out of ribbon, flowers and pearls, at home. When I visited their home, there were five children, ranging from four to six years of age, playing together. One was a five-year-old male child, Participant 4 (P4), who was playing there with the other children of this family. P4 had just come from a village (he could not recall the name of the village) and was not registered in any school so far. His mother had arranged for some tuition nearby so that he can adjust in school once his name is registered. The remaining children were comprised of four-year-old twins, who were youngest in the family. The youngest girl (P5) was talkative and eager to share her views. Her twin brother was also part of this discussion though he was busy playing, laughing and running around. He spoke intermittently. Their elder sister (P6) who is five years old was also present in this discussion. She was extremely quiet and only spoke when she was asked something in particular. She stood still, next to me, throughout the conversation.

#### **Participants 7, 8 and 9**

P7, 8 and 9 are a six year old girl, four and a half year old girl and three year old boy respectively. Their mother works as a domestic help in the same housing society. The eldest daughter studies in a neighbourhood Government school, the second girl will also go to the same school eventually, but the mother wants to send her son to a private

school. The mother leaves for work early in the morning while her younger son is still asleep. The elder girl leaves for school in the morning. P8, the younger daughter, is assigned the task of caring for her younger brother while their mother is at work. She gives him food when he wakes up and plays with him till their mother gets back. When the elder daughter comes home she takes care of her younger siblings.

### **Participants 10 & 11**

The two girls in conversation are both six years old and are close friends. They go to different schools but they met in park when they were almost a year old. Since then they, as well as their mothers, became friends. They both attend elite schools in Delhi and participate in various activities. The parents of Participant 10 and the mother of Participant 11 are from the National Institute of Design. Besides school, the two girls also go for various other activities such as football, music, dance etc. Both of them are very passionate about football and often discuss it.

### **Participants 12 & 13:**

Participant 12 is a five year old girl who has a three year old younger brother (Participant 13). She always accompanies her brother to the park and ensures that he is engaged in play with her. She is protective about him. Her parents also ensure that the brother never ventures out of the home unaccompanied, because according to them he is more prone to getting hurt. The brother is a very energetic and enthusiastic child. The girl is usually quiet and speaks only to people she is familiar with.

### **Participant 14:**

She is a five year old girl, who is an only child. She does not come to the park very often but sometimes comes along with her grandmother. Both her parents work in a multinational company and come home late in the evening.

### **Data presentation and Analysis:**

I engaged in conversation with my participants

in the park located inside the housing society in East of Delhi, and at their homes. I also visited the homes of some of the children who resided in the nearby village. Some of them had visited the housing society earlier. Domestic helps do not bring their children along with them on a regular basis. To initiate discussion I raised some questions. They were asked to describe what the term ‘child’ meant to them. On the basis of their responses they were asked whether they see themselves as a child. They were also asked to express their views on what differentiates children from adults. Finally, they were asked what is it that they enjoy doing and what is it that they would like to do when they grow up? The children were also curious to know about the purpose behind my asking them such questions. This curiosity was more evident in children from upper-middle class, as compared to those from lower classes; though all children who participated in this study seemed curious. I took children from varied socioeconomic classes to capture the influence of social context on the experiences of children. The themes that emerged from the children’s responses are as follows: -

#### **A. Notion of who a child is: -**

Most children considered the ones younger to them as children. One participant also described children in terms of physical attributes, such as children are chubbier and eventually when they grow up they become thin. In the course of conversation most children jumped from the notion that they have grown up to the view that they are still children. The three and four year olds were more prompt in saying that they are children and children are mainly engaged in play. They all explained their experiences in terms of what children do; such as play, eat food, help their mothers at home, etc. Girls who were above five years of age from lower socioeconomic families said that they help their mothers at home.

Participant 1 (P1): '*Bache bahut golu hote hai aur baad mein jab wo baat nahi sunte toh wo patlu ho jate hai*'. (Children are very fat and later when they don't listen they become thin).

Researcher (R): '*Tum bade ho ya bache ho?*' (Are you a child or a grown up?)

Participant 1: '*Main bada ho gaya hoon. Main four and a half ka hoon aur ab five ka ho jaonga. Mera budday aa raha hai.*' (I have grown up now. I am four and a half and now I will turn five. I will soon celebrate my birthday).

Researcher: '*Ab hum tumhe bada kahenge ya bacha kahen?*' (Should I call you a grown up or a child?).

Participant 1: '*Aap bacha keh sakte ho.*' (You can call me a child.)

Participant 1: '*Bache jaise one year*' (Children are one year old).

Participant 1: '*Chote bache cartoon dekhte hai.*' (Young children watch cartoons).

Participant 3(P3): '*Bache hum hote hai.*' ( We are children).

Researcher: '*Kya karte hai?*' (What do you do?)

Participant 3: '*Khelte hai, padhai karte hai aur kya, park mein khelte hai.*' (We play, study and play in the park.)

Participant 2 (P2): '*Bache kaam karte hai, khelte hai, padhte hai, nahate hai, khate hai.*' (Children work, play, study, bathe and eat).

Researcher: '*Kya aap bacha ho?*' (Are you a child?).

P2: '*Nahi.*' (No).

R: '*Aur kya aap bacha ho ya bade ho gayi?*' (And are you a child or have you grown up?)

P6: '*Abhi main choti hoon.*' ( I am still a child).

Children who were three to four years old discussed children and adults in terms of the activities they performed. The activities included playing, sleeping, going to school, doing their homework etc. Four to six years olds discussed the issue of gender as well. Two of the participants, participants 2 and 10, posed a question upon being asked who is child, whether I was talking of a male child or a female child. When I asked them whether the two are different their response was affirmative. Then they described how boys and girls play different games. Participant 2 also said that she is a girl. When I further inquired whether boys and girls are different she said yes they are different. However, when I tried to probe into the differences, she got a bit confused. First, she said boys play football and girls play badminton. Later she said some girls also play football and boys play both. Probably, she had some thoughts which she found difficult to articulate. She also stated that her mother told her that the two are different.

P2: '*Main toh badi hoon. Main yeh bhi seekh gayi hoon.*' (I am a grown-up. My name is P2. I am a girl).

R: '*Kisne bataya?*' (Who told you?)

P2: '*Mumma ne.*' (My mother).

R: '*Ladke ladki mein kya farq hota hai?*' (What is the difference between a boy and girl?)

P2: '*Khelte hai, doodh peete hai, football khelt hai.*' (Boys play football, they drink milk and play).

R: '*Aur ladkiya?*' (And girls?)

P2: '*Badminton khelti hai.*' (They play badminton)

R: '*Ladke nahi khelte?*' (Boys don't play badminton?)

P2: '*Ladke khelte hai par who football bhi khelte hai.*' (Boys play but they also play football.)

P4: '*Bache school jaate hai, khelte hai, khanna khate hai.*' (Children go to school, play and eat food).

R: '*Aur kya karte hai?*' (What else do they do?)

P4: '*Pani peete hai, khees khate hai, cartoon bhi dekhte hai.*' (They drink water, eat bovine colostrum and watch cartoons.)

R: '*Tum bacha ho?*' (Are you a child?)

P4: '*Haan.*' (Yes).

R: Who is a child?

Participant 10: There is a boy and there is a girl... you know...just like grown-ups. Even grown up have boys and girls. Like you are a girl.

Participant 10: Girls play Barbie, they also play Elsa games. Boys play football. Both of us also play football. I go to music class.

Participant 11: I go for gymnastics and ballet; I play chess, theatre, football.

Researcher: So are you a grown-up or a child?

Participant 10: We are big girls and children also.

Children from lower socio economic levels did not explicitly say that girls and boys are different but some of them exhibited resentment against the differential treatment. A girl exhibited aggression towards her younger brother by physically beating him, till someone intervened. Participant 5 confessed that she feels bad that no one brings gifts for her but they get flowers or a small toy for her twin brother. She also feels that her brother gets more love and affection from their mother as compared to her. After making a lot of effort to sleep next to her mother she has started sleeping next to her elder sister because the brother gets that privileged place. Participant 5 is more vociferous and also expresses her anger. But Participant 6, who is one year older than the twins, does not express what she feels. She said that though she wants to sleep next to the mother, she has resigned to sleeping with her elder sister or her paternal uncle whom she refers to as 'ma'. She feels closer to her uncle because he plays with her and also brings things to eat from the market for them. The expression of disgruntlement in these young girls can be seen as an indication of voice. The elder sister told me that participant 6 often fights with her to get her attention. With the help of her anger she is able to express that she does not agree with what her elders are doing. However, this voice is ignored by the elders who dismiss it as a joke.

The participants also described what they like doing in their spare time. From their responses it was evident that children from lower socioeconomic families exhibit a stronger sense of exploration as compared to that of children from middle class families. The former reported that they climb stairs and go to the terrace. Despite getting hurt by tripping over stairs, they continue to explore. One of the reasons could be that adults are not present throughout the day and thus chances of constant monitoring are comparatively less.

### B. Notion of Work:

Most children differentiated adults from children by stating that the two engage in different activities. While children primarily go to school and play, adults go out for work outside the house, either to offices or to people's homes to do chores or to work in shops or to do domestic work such as cooking, cleaning etc. Participant 1 most explicitly described how children and adults are both engaged in some form of work. He includes all that he does in school such as prayers, reading writing in the domain of work, which exhausts him. The differentiating point is that his father goes to office, and he has to go to school. Second difference is that his father comes late and he returns before him in the afternoon. He also associated school with children and says that he goes to school because he is a child.

Girls from lower socioeconomic families stated that they help their mothers at home in such activities as mopping the house, washing dirty utensils, making the bed and also bringing food from nearby Anganwadi. Children who have younger brothers, irrespective of whether they are from the upper or lower class, are assigned the task of taking care of the younger siblings, especially if the younger sibling is a male child. In cases where the mother works as a domestic help, girls usually feed their younger brother and take care of him till their mother returns home.

Children also acknowledged that besides playing they also have to go to school. One five year old said that when she grows up she will understand why she has to go to school. She conveyed that at present going to school does not make sense to her but she expressed the possibility of understanding its significance in future. Most children said that they did not like going to school every day, though there are times that they like going to school also. Boys are more frequently sent for additional tuitions as compared to girls. P4 said that P5 and P6 are good in studies but they are not sent for tuitions.

Participant 1: *Papa office jate hain. Main school jata hoon kyunki main chota hoon.* (Papa goes to office. I go to school because I am younger.)

Researcher: *School kyun jaate ho?* (Why do you go to school?)

Participant 1: *Taki main padhoon, kheloon, prayer karoon, seekhoon, itna sab karna padta hai. Ek baar maine itna kaam kiya ki main thak gaya. Saari hawa meri plus kar di.* (So that I can study, play, learn to pray, learn. I have to do so much work. One day I worked so much that I got tired. I got totally drained.)

Researcher: *Kya kaam kiya?* (What kind of work?)

Participant 1: *Papa seedhe raat tak aate hai itna kaam karte hai. Main bhi bahut kaam karta hoon par main shayam tak aa jata hoon.* (Papa comes home at night. He does so much work. I also do a lot of work but I come home in the evening.)

Participant 13: *Bade kaam karte hai.* (Grown ups do work.)

Researcher: *Bache kaam nahi karte hai?* (So you mean that children do not do any work?)

Participant 13: *Karte hai, shaitani karte hai.* (They do, they are naughty.)

Participant 12: *Bache khelte koodte hai bade nahi khelte hai.* (Children play and grown ups don't play).

Participant 13: *Bade kaam karte hai Bache khana khate hai.* (Grown-ups work and children eat food.)

Participant 2: *Bache khelte hai aur jo first class mein hote hai wo padhai bhi karte hai, nursery class ke nahi padhte.* (Children play and the ones

who are in class 1 they study. But if you are in nursery you don't have to study.)

Participant 14: *Bade hokar humein pata chalega ki school kyun jaate hai.* (When I will grow up then I will know why we go to school.)

Researcher: *Abh acha nahi lagta?* (You don't like going to school now?)

Participant 14: *Acha lagta hai kabhi kabhi.* (I like it sometimes.)

R: *Bache kya karte hai?* (What do children do?)

P3: *Kaam karte hai.* (They work.)

R: *Kya kaam karte hai?* (What kind of work?)

P3: *Likhate aur padhate hai, Isko 3 good hai, usko 2 good aaye.* (They read and write. He has got 3 times good in his copy and he got twice.)

R: *Asking the girl. Aur tumhe kitne good aaye?* (What about you?)

P3: *Main bas school padhti hoon tuition nahi padhti. Nepali jaata hai aur yeh jaata hai.* (I just go to school. I do not go for tuitions. Nepali goes for tuitions and the other boy also goes.)

R: *Aapko kya pasand hai karna?* (What do you like doing?)

P6: *Class mein jaana pasand hai, padhna aur khelna, pakadam pakdai aur chupan chupai.* (I like going for the class, I like studying, playing hide and seek.)

### C. Notion of adult authority:

Participants of this study, during the conversation, expressed that adults have the authority to scold and hit them when they do not comply with their

instructions. They also reasoned that when they do something naughty elders scold them and even beat them but they cannot do vice versa. It was also evident that besides parents; elder sisters, uncles, aunts and teachers also assert their authority in different ways. Expressing anger by scolding or beating them is one such way. School teachers also assert their authority by distributing rewards and punishments in accordance with the performance of the children. Sometimes children also retaliate, but elders are able to subdue them because of greater strength, and by threatening them with withdrawal of certain benefits. Children from the lower classes reported more incidents of physical aggression and anger in comparison to middle and upper class children.

Children also see adults as those who assign them tasks to be performed. These tasks could be to clean up their room or help in household chores or taking care of their sibling.

Participant 1: *Mumma daat sakti hai woh main nahi kar sakta.* (Mummy can scold me but I can't do that.)

Researcher: *Kyun nahi daat sakte?* (Why can't you scold her?)

Participant 1: *Badmashi bache karte hai toh mumma ko nahi daat sakte.* (Children are mischief makers so they can't scold mummy.)

Researcher: *Agar mummy badmashi karein?* (What if mummy does something mischievous?)

Participant 1: *Mummy koi badmashi nahi karti.* (Mummy never does anything mischievous)

Researcher: *Papa kartein hai?* (What about papa?)

Participant 1: *Haan karte hai.* (Yes he does.)



Researcher: *Unko daat padti hai?* (Does he get a scolding?)

Participant 1: *Husband ko toh itni daat padti hai. Main aur mummy mil kar daatte hai, itna daatte hai. Itni shaitani karte hai papa.* (Husbands get so much scolding. I and mummy scold him a lot. Papa does so many mischievous things.)

Researcher: *Bade ho kar kya kya karooge?* (What will you do when you grow up?)

Participant 1: *Mumma ka kaam.* (I will do mumma's work.)

Researcher: *Kya kaam?* (What work?)

Participant 1: *Jaise ki mumma kahe ki papa ke saath khel sakta hoon. Mumma kahe ki jamao toh jaama sakta hoon. Jab main bada hongya toh main magic karoonga.* (Such as mumma will tell me to play with papa then I will with him. Or mumma will tell me to arrange my things and I will be able to do that. When I grow up I will perform magic.)

Participant 1: *Bache bikhera karta hai aur bade jamaa ke rakhte hai.* (Children dirty the room and elders clean it up.)

P4: *Maarti hai madam.* (My teacher beats me.)

R: *Maarti kyun hai?* (Why does your teacher beat you?)

P3: *Mujhe bas ek baar mara par isko toh bahut maarti hai. Yeh 1-2 nahi sonata.* (I got beaten only once. But he gets frequent beatings because he does not remember counting.)

P4: *Yeh didi daat-ti hai aur ma bachati hai. Yeh maarti hai.* (My sister scolds me and my paternal uncle saves me. She also beats me.)

R: *Kaun data-ti hai?* (Who scolds?)

P4: *Didi aur mummy daat-ti hai. Main pau se maarti hoon bhai ko.* (My mother and sister scold me. I also hit my younger brother with my feet.)

P4: *Isse ma acha lagta hai, mujhe bhi ma pasand hai. Wo maarta hai mujhe.* (She likes our paternal uncle, I also like him. He beats us.)

R: *Phir bhi pasand hai?* (But you still like him?)

P4: *Woh cheez lata hai. Kurkure bhi lata hai. Biscuit bhi lata hai.* (He brings sweetmeats and savouries for us such as 'kurkure' and biscuits.)

R: *Kya karte hai bache?* (What do children do?)

P 12: No response

R: *Aap kya karti ho?* (What do you do?)

P12: *Jo mummy kahe wo karti hoon.* (I do whatever my mother asks me to do.)

R: *Apne man se kuch karti hai?* (What do you do on your own?)

P12: *Haan jab ghar pe hoti hoo kabhi bistar bicha deti hoon ya jhadoo kar deti hoon.* (Yes when I am at home I make beds or broom the floor.)

R: *Aur kya karti hai?* (What else do you do?)

P12: *Aur kabhi gas dho deti hoon.* (I also clean the cooking gas.)

#### D. Notion of who are adults :

Children see adults as different from them. They see them organising the home, cooking, and going out to work. Children also observe that adults and children have different modes of entertainment; such as children enjoy watching cartoons while adults like going to theatre, watching daily soaps or films. Most children observed that adults do not play like children. One of the participants said

that adult women apply lipstick and that probably changes the way they think. Once girls become aunts they stop playing like children. Adults prefer to sit and talk, which children find boring.

Participant 1: *Bache bikhera karta hai aur bade jamaa ke rakhte hai.* (Children mess up things and grown-ups organise things around them).

Participant 11: They go for theatre.

R: Who is grown up?

Participant 10: Like you?

R: Like me!

Participant 10: Girls can't play football. Like kicking around. Big girls can't play football...Big aunts can't play football.

Participant 11: My mumma can't play football.

Participant 10: Because they are aunts.

Participant 11: She is not an aunt she is my mumma.

Participant 10: Because they put lipstick and in the body lipstick goes in their head and their mind goes change.

Participant 11: My mumma does not put lipstick. She was a tomboy.

R: What do grown-ups do?

Participant 10: They just walk and talk, eat and sing and do boring things. Nothing that you like.

R: Children do interesting things?

Participant 10: Yes.

R: What else do grown-ups do?

Participant 10: They eat lots of food because they are so big.

### **E. Role they envision for themselves when they grow up:**

The participants in this study envision different roles for themselves. Most children saw themselves taking on the roles that their parents performed, such as cleaning the house or cooking food. Boys as well as young girls saw themselves taking on similar roles when they grow up. At this stage there seemed to be greater identification with the mother. Boys as well as girls said that they would do what their mothers do. Secondly, children also felt that they will gain proficiency in whatever they are interested in doing, such as playing football, cricket or skating. Finally, they also had dreams to take varied roles such as that of a doctor, rickshaw puller, magician etc. Some children also expressed that when they grow up they would eat and do whatever they feel like. It was evident that children saw adults as those who take their own decisions and act in any way they want to. In contrast, children find themselves in a subordinate position where they have to follow the instructions of adults. In this power play children also assert their will by crying, hitting younger siblings or throwing a tantrum.

Researcher: *Bade ho kar Participant 1 kya kya karoonge?* (What will you do when you grow up?)

Participant 1: *Mumma ka kaam.* (The work my mother does.)

Researcher: *Kya kaam?* (What work?)

Participant 1: *Jaise ki mumma kahe ki papa ke saath khel sakta hoon. Mumma kahe ki jamao toh jaama sakta hoon. Jab main bada honga toh main magic karonge.* (Like mumma will tell me to play

with papa and then I will play. When mumma will say that organise your things I will do that.)

R: Jab bade hogi toh kya karोगी? (What will you do when you grow up?)

Participant 3: Khana banaongi. (I will cook.)

R: Abhi kya kaam karti hai? (What work do you do now?)

Participant 3: Padhti hoon. Hum log kapde nahi dho sakte, unka job nahi kar sakte. (I study. We can't wash clothes and we can't do their job.)

R: Aap kya bana chahogi? (What will you like to do when you grow up?)

Participant 6: Doctor.

R: Kya karte hai doctor? (What do you think doctors do?)

Participant 6: Ilaaz. (Treatment)

R: Aap jaati ho doctor ke paas? (Do you visit a doctor?)

Participant 6: Sui lagate hai. (Yes, he gives an injection.)

R: Tumhe dar lagta hai? (Are you scared?)

Participant 6: Nahi. (No.)

### Conclusion:

This small study brings forth the lived experiences of the children. It also breaks the myth that children are unable to articulate their experiences. Children not just observe other children; they also observe adults and can understand the complexity of the differences between the two. They make a lot of effort to make sense of the world around them and try to provide probable explanations

for what they observe. For instance, a six-year-old girl explained that her brother clings to the mother and is shy because he cannot remember faces that he sees less frequently. Another girl said that the reason why adults cannot play football is because they wear lipstick. These naïve explanations indicate that children hypothesise about why things are the way they appear. It also opens up the possibility of using children as research participants and representing their voices in theorising. When children are probed and asked certain questions they express deeper understandings of the social world around them, than what people expect. They are capable of expressing those feelings and thoughts, provided they are heard.

This study also indicates that the terms child and childhood are contextual. They cannot be used as overarching terms for all those who are in a certain age bracket. Some children are assigned responsibilities very early and they become caretakers. Others enjoy extended time and opportunities for exploration. These varying opportunities may augment or impede their process of development. What is more pressing is that children must be heard and understood from their perspectives. Irrespective of their social class, the young children who participated in this study have a voice that makes them cry, yell, shout and beat others to express their anger. However, the social processes may suppress this voice later and socialise them comply with the norms.

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