

**Children's Views:
What the Children of Bright Eyes Nursery Think
about the Play and Learning Opportunities
Available in their Setting**

by

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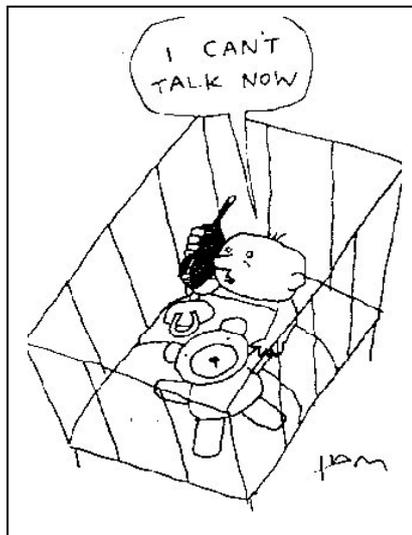
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Abstract

This short paper reports young children's views on the nursery service provided in Sure Start Coventry South East. It forms a follow-up to the caregiver survey of the views, beliefs, understandings and practices related to early learning, language and play of 65 team members and 51 parents from four Coventry Sure Start programmes. Techniques used were based on a Daycare Trust (1998) study that invited children to suggest ways for making teddy enjoy nursery and on the Mosaic Approach (Clarke and Moss, 1998) where several methods were used to collect multiple perspectives on children's educare experiences. Children seemed very satisfied with their nursery provision and it was clear they enjoyed having their views valued and listened to:

"I'll draw a smiley face for teddy ... and I'll draw my name"



Acknowledgements

Specific thanks to the children and staff of the pre-school room at Bright Eyes Nursery, Sure Start Coventry South East.

The research was undertaken as part of the evaluation of Sure Start Coventry and was funded by the four Sure Start Programmes in Coventry. Principal investigators were Chris Coe and Nick Spencer, with Maria Stuttaford as a named researcher. Carol Aubrey was a co-investigator, with Sarah Dahl as a researcher on the project. The study would not have been possible without the co-operation of the many respondents who agreed to participate.

1. Introduction

The four Sure Start local programmes in Coventry commissioned The University of Warwick to conduct the local evaluation of each of them. One aspect of this evaluation concerned a survey of the views, beliefs, understandings and practices related to early learning and play of 65 team members and 51 parents from four Coventry Sure Start programmes (Dahl and Aubrey, 2004). In terms of the Sure Start target related to accessing good quality play and learning opportunities, to help progress towards early learning goals, the survey showed that the majority of both team members and parents were aware of the importance of the full range of typical pre-school activities.

It was important, however, to elicit the views of the ‘consumers’ themselves – the children. Moreover, it was thought that the children who attended the Sure Start Coventry South East (SSCSE) nursery were ideally placed to be able to give an opinion on the play and learning opportunities provided by the local programme. Although there are now two nurseries in the local programme, the second nursery was only just opening at the time the data collection was carried out and, therefore, the children had not been attending long enough to have a view about the pre-school they were attending and the quality of the activities provided.

2. Context

It is increasingly being recognised that young children have rights of their own, including the right to voice opinions and influence decisions in matters relating to their own lives. It is also being realised that young children have the competence to understand, reflect on and offer a view about aspects of their lives, including the educare they receive. In order to do this effectively and in an ethically appropriate manner, it is important to use a variety of methods and make them as practicable as possible, so that speech is not a barrier. The younger the child, the greater the importance of strategies that engage children’s interests, minimise adult dominance and are developmentally appropriate.

Work carried out by the writers (Aubrey and Dahl, 2005; and Aubrey and Dahl, *in press*) highlights that there is evidence to suggest that interviews with young children are enhanced by the use of activity-based techniques. Age, gender and family circumstances will also be an influence. Descriptive analytical studies in the family, educare and social welfare context suggest that a range of multi-method techniques is

being employed to access children's views and that these may be beginning to influence decision-making.

With such young children it is important to avoid traditional 'question-answer' approaches and provide a range of tools including toys, drawing and photographs to elicit their ideas. In this case, providing a teddy helped children to construct a narrative around their nursery setting.

3. Questions

The question this part of the evaluation raised was:

- What do the children who attend the SSCSE Nursery, Bright Eyes, think about the nursery that they attend and the activities provided for them?

4. Methods

4.1 Participants

Children between the ages of 2 years and 4 years, who wished to participate were asked for their views. Nursery staff, familiar to the children, were also present within the room and, at times, asked or reiterated the questions posed, for the children.

4.2 Materials

In order to be able to gain the views of the children it was important to have pre-prepared questions that would allow them to voice their views to a teddy/newcomer to their setting:

- What will Harrod (the teddy) like about coming to nursery?
- What will he *not* like?
- Is there anything else that Harrod needs to know in order to have a good time at nursery?

Also used was a digital voice recorder and 'post-it' notes in order to record the responses made by the children; a teddy bear; paper and colouring utensils for the children to draw aspects that they liked or did not like about nursery and a digital camera for them to photograph the various activities/areas within the nursery that were important to them, in answer to the questions asked.

4.3 Procedures

First of all, consent was sought from the nursery staff and the parents of the children who were potentially to be involved. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Due to the age of the children it was thought most appropriate to conduct a participatory style of research. The researcher, a qualified early years practitioner, armed with a teddy bear named Harrod, attended the nursery for a day. The researcher was introduced by the nursery staff to the children as someone who had come to look at what the children did at nursery. Techniques were based upon a Daycare Trust (1998) study that employed multi-method approaches by inviting suggestions for making teddy enjoy nursery, offering paper and pens to make drawings and a polaroid camera to take pictures. Ensuing conversations were then tape-recorded. Similar approaches have been adopted elsewhere. One in particular is the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001). (For a review of the literature pertaining to multiple methods for interviewing young children see Aubrey and Dahl, 2005; Aubrey and Dahl, *in press*).

After being present for a little while, allowing the children to become familiar with the 'new person', the researcher sat in a corner with the teddy bear and voice recorder. Within a short time children, intrigued, came and spoke to the researcher. The researcher showed the children the voice recorder and allowed them to investigate how they could hear their voices played back to them. Once this had been done, the researcher introduced Harrod the bear to the children and explained that he was going to be attending a nursery 'just like this one' and could they tell him about it. Once consent from the children who had joined the researcher was obtained, the children were then asked if what they said could be recorded on the voice recorder. Once they agreed to this the children were asked the three questions, which were also elaborated upon as was necessary for the children to be able to understand what was being asked. Responses were collected on the voice recorder.

Children were also asked to draw pictures of things they liked and disliked about nursery. They were also given opportunities to take, or direct the taking of, pictures that reflected aspects of the nursery that, again, the children liked and disliked.

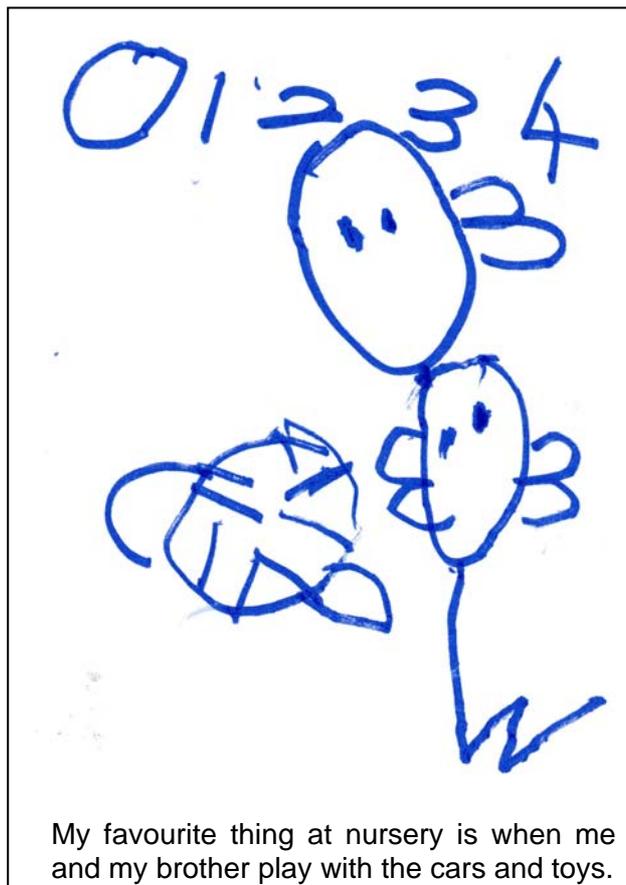
4.4 Analysis

The comments made by the children, in response to the questions asked, were transcribed and then analysed for themes, issues and any surprises that may have been uncovered. The drawings and photographs were considered in relation to the verbal responses to see if the children's view, over the three different experiences were similar.

5. Results

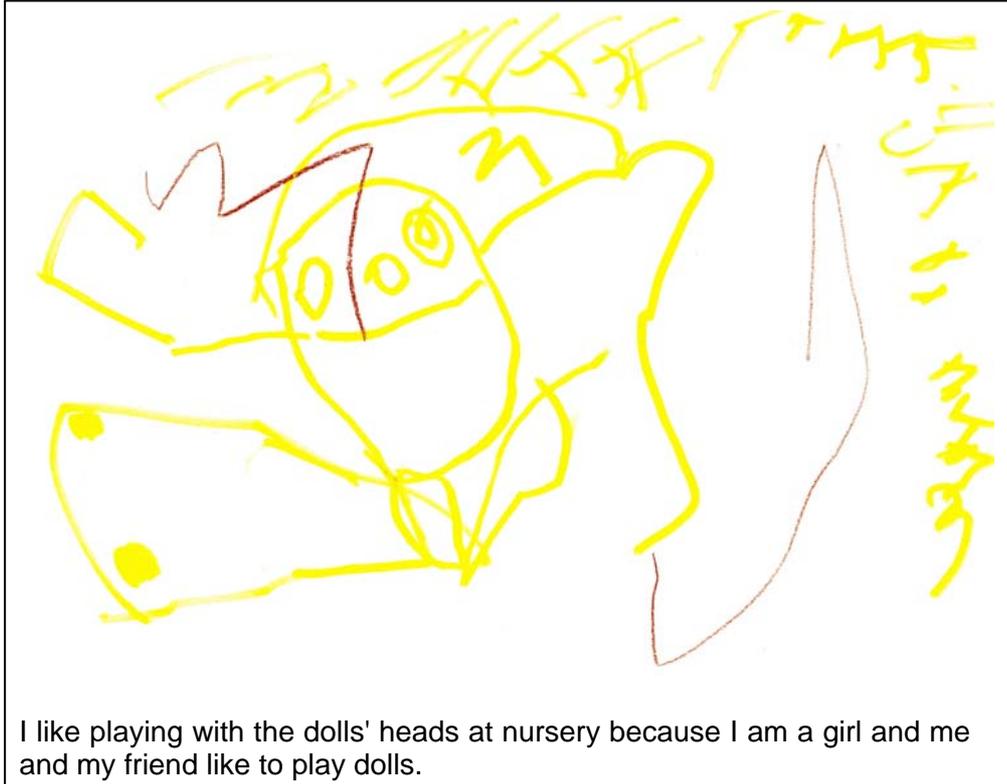
The answers provided by the children revealed that the nursery allowed them to experience a great variety of activities. These included painting, reading stories/looking at books, puzzles, playdough, taking photographs, playing games, creating 'All About Me' booksⁱ, playing with toys and role-play. What made all of these activities even better was that they had the freedom to choose what they did.

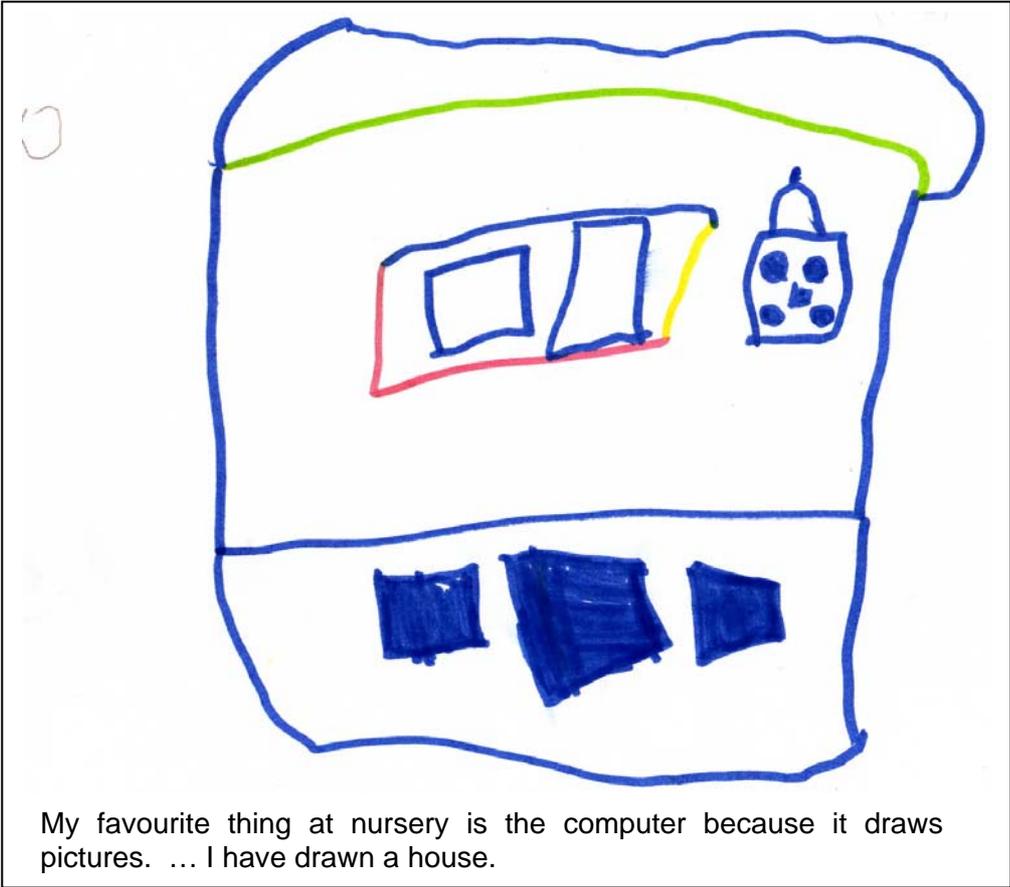
Playing games, everything! And playing in cars and playing toys; ... we play snow.



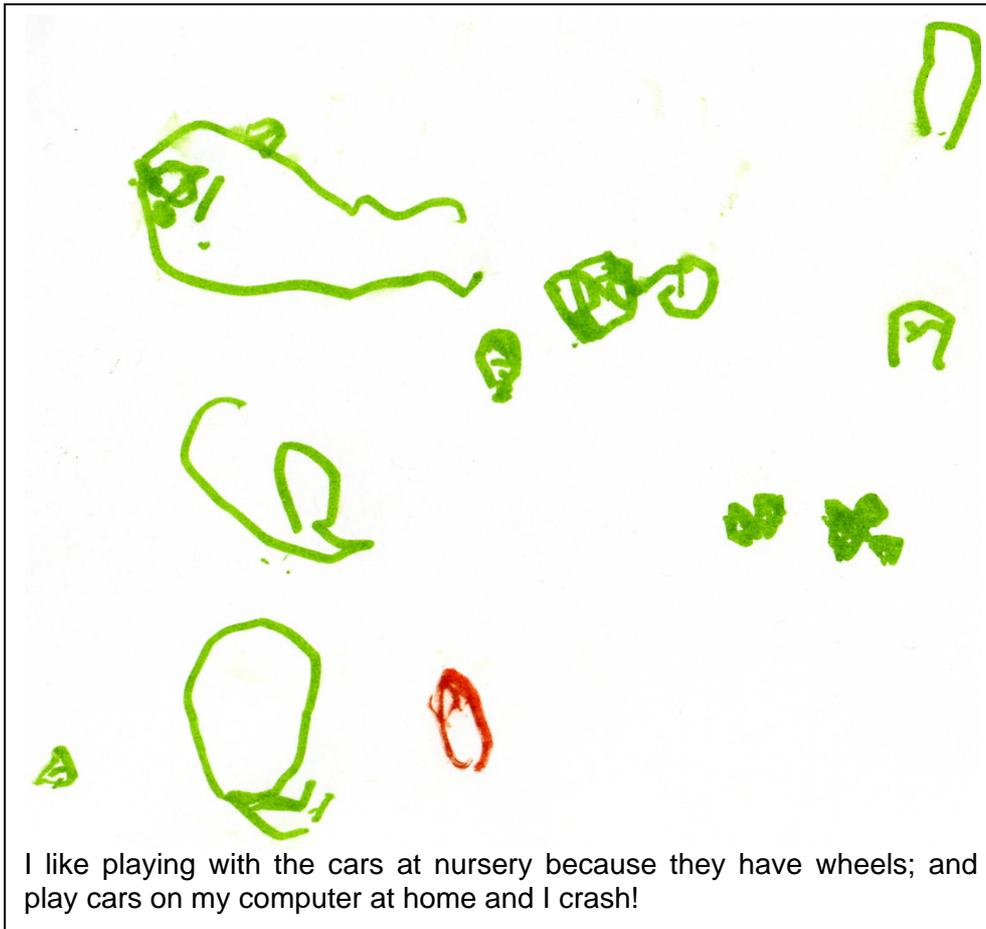
My favourite thing at nursery is when me and my brother play with the cars and toys.

ⁱ 'All About Me' books were photograph album-type books. Each child had their own one which had a picture of them on the front, with their name. Inside they were filled with pictures that the children chose, for example, pictures of the child participating in various activities and pictures of family members (including pets).





One child, describing what he liked to do at nursery related his experience to what he did at home.



They also had the freedom to experience different venues for their play. They had the opportunity to use other areas of the nursery (rather than just staying in the toddler room) and the outdoor environment was frequently used, in all weathers. In fact, the day that the interviews were conducted it snowed and the children were whisked outside to play in it.

It's been snowing ... I like snow.

We go outside and play.

The children also enjoyed meal and snack times at the nursery, with one child stating: 'I have dinner here'. Several children mentioned that they had fruit at nursery, as a snack. One child summed up his/her feelings toward this aspect beautifully:

I like eating.

At this, the researcher asked when the child liked eating. Again, another direct response:

Now!

The children appeared to appreciate the routines put in place by the staff. A register was taken at the beginning of each session. The children also explained: 'we put our apples on the tree'. Immediately after register the children were able to place their name (stuck onto an apple shape) onto a board (shaped as a tree) to indicate that they were present. Also, there was a washing routine before the children ate.

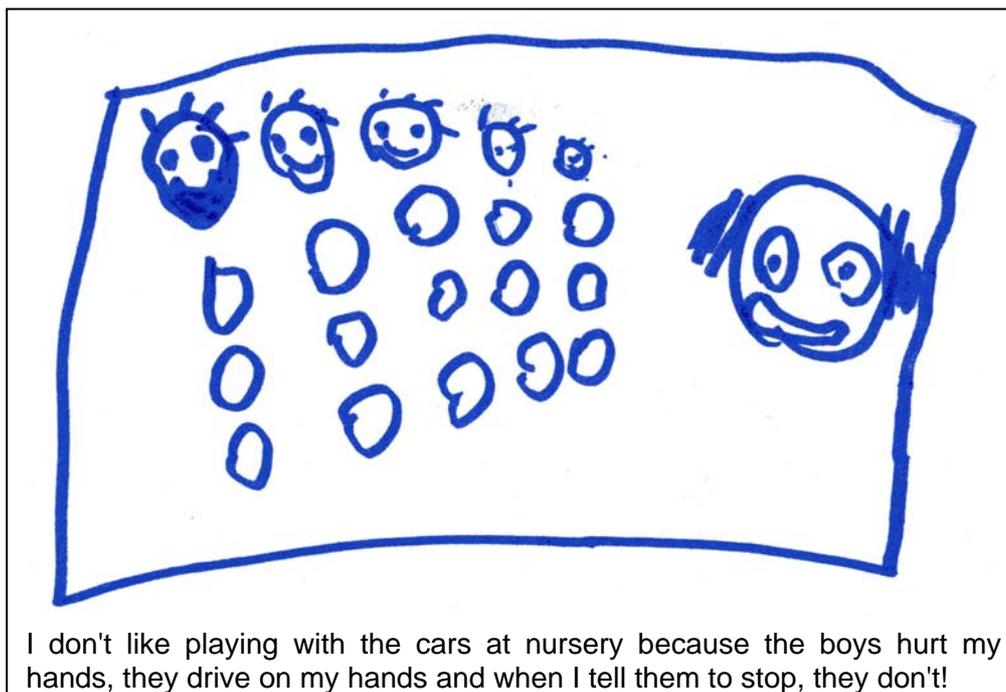
We wash our hands for lunch ... and we wash our hands for fruit.

The social aspect of the nursery was also highlighted. It was a place where the children felt that they had 'loads of friends'. In addition to this the children felt safe. One child explained that they were not smacked there.

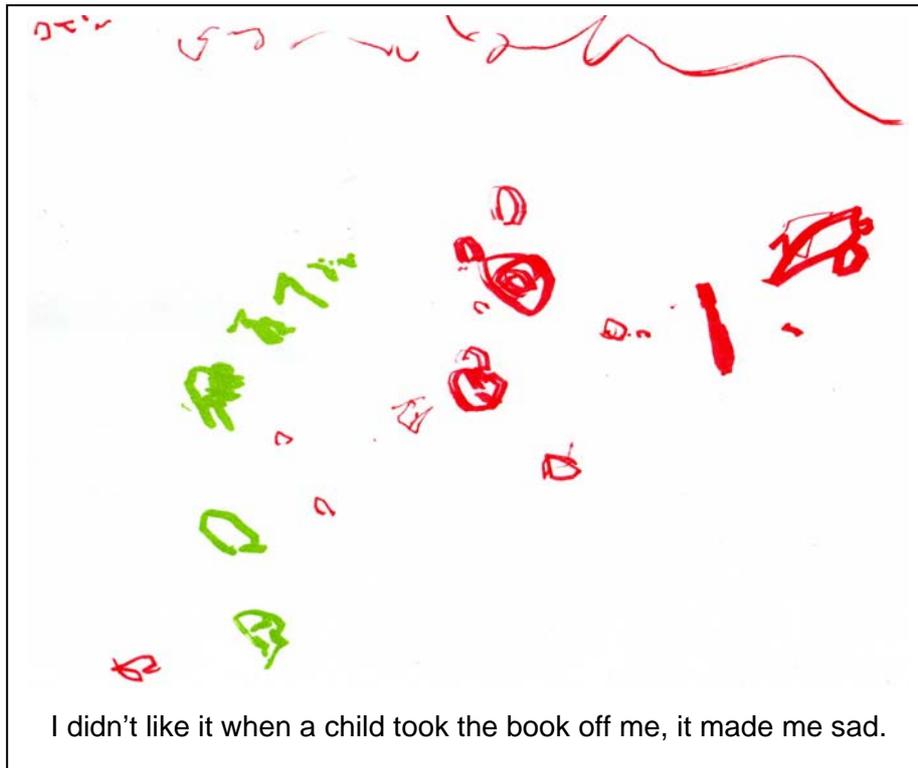
One child enjoyed when his father came to the nursery, presumably to pick him/her up and take him home. It was not ascertained whether or not it was normally the child's father that picked him/her up or whether this occurred occasionally.



A few negative aspects were mentioned. One child said that banging his/her head was sad. Others talked about other children being unkind. One child explained that one of the other children had hurt him/her. This child was said to have been 'whacked' in the nose and it hurt. It was not possible to deduce whether this was accidental or not. One child, when drawing a picture, talked about getting hurt when playing with others.

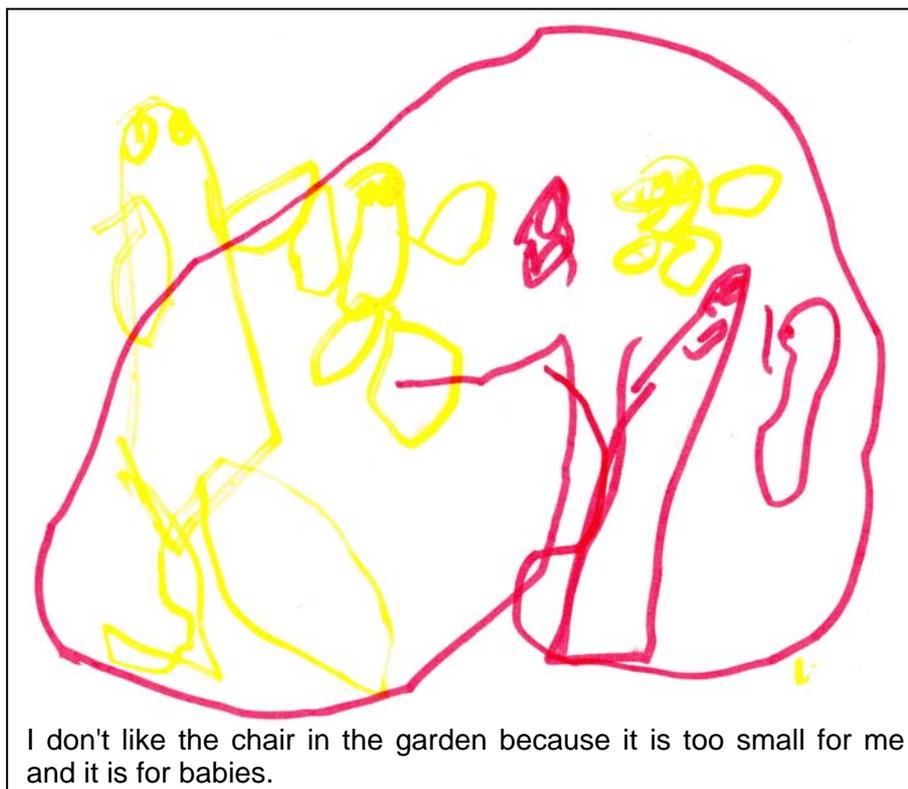


One other child reported that a child had snatched a book from him/her and how this made him/her feel.



I didn't like it when a child took the book off me, it made me sad.

The only other negative comment concerned equipment that was for other younger children attending the nursery. This child insisted that she was too 'grown up' for it.



I don't like the chair in the garden because it is too small for me and it is for babies.

Finally, one child, so keen for teddy to share the apparent enjoyment of the nursery that he experienced, expressed the following:

I'll get a crayon, Ill get a piece of paper and I'll draw a happy face for teddy ... and I'll draw my name.

6. Discussion

Regardless of the method employed to extract views from the children, it was found that, overall, the children were very satisfied with the nursery they attended. This was evident in the answers that they provided.

Not all young children are as yet asked for their views on services they receive though their involvement increases with age. The impact these opinions have on policy, however, may be less certain. Children want their views to be listened to and treated with genuine consideration, nevertheless, and may not necessarily even be upset or offended by questions probing sensitive areas (Aubrey and Dahl, 2005; Aubrey and Dahl, *in press*).

7. Conclusions

The children were very happy to talk to and explain their satisfaction with their nursery provision. Not only was the researcher able to access their perceptions but, in so doing, was able to create a powerful learning experience that was enjoyable and meaningful.

8. References

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