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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Perspectives of preschool children in England with speech and language needs in the development of evidence-based activities

Jane Coad^{1,2}  | Sam Harding³ | Helen Hambly⁷ | Naomi Parker³ | Lydia Morgan³ | Julie Marshall^{4,5} | Susan Roulstone^{3,6}

¹Children and Young People Health Research Group, School of Health Sciences, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham University, Nottingham, UK

²School of Health and Life Sciences, Coventry University, UK

³Bristol Speech and Language Therapy Research Unit (BSLTRU), Southmead Hospital, Bristol, UK

⁴Manchester, Health Professions Department, Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

⁵School of Health Sciences, University of Kwa ZuluNatal, Durban, South Africa

⁶School of Health and Applied Sciences, The University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE), Bristol, UK

⁷Healthwatch Cornwall, Truro, UK

Correspondence

Professor Jane Coad, Children and Young People Health Research Group, School of Health Sciences, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham University, Nottingham NG7 2HA, UK.

Email: jane.coad@nottingham.ac.uk

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Abstract

Background: The existing evidence is limited in terms of perspectives of preschool children with speech and language needs and their views on activities used to support their needs. This paper discusses a stream of work from the interdisciplinary research programme known as “Child Talk,” based in England, UK. The overall purpose of this work stream was to gain the perspectives of preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and 11 months, with speech and language needs, to use in the development of an evidence-based framework of activities.

Methods: Twenty-four preschool children with a variety of needs from diverse backgrounds took part. An observational methodology was used to capture children's experiences. Children were filmed during a series of sessions, with innovative head-mounted cameras worn by the children and supported by researcher field notes. Framework analysis was used to analyse the data based on the body movement, vocalization, and visual attention of the children during these sessions.

Results and Conclusions: Results included that children expressed enjoyment and engagement in the activities. The children expressed themselves and demonstrated their focus “multimodally” through combinations of body language, vocalization, and visual attention. These modalities were present across all contexts and children. It highlights the importance of encouraging participation in preschool children and consequently this innovative piece of work has national and international importance.

KEYWORDS

child development, qualitative research methods, speech and language activities, young children

1 | INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This article discusses one stream of work, the Children's Groups, drawn from “Child Talk” an inter-disciplinary research programme

based in England, UK. “Child Talk” aimed to develop an evidence-based framework to support the decision-making of speech and language therapists in England as they design and plan interventions appropriate to the needs of individual preschool children aged 2 to

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5 years and 11 months, with primary speech and language impairments, and their families. The need for early identification and effective intervention for these children continues to be a U.K. Government policy priority because of the link between children's early speech and language skills and their broader well-being and outcomes in later life (Bercow, 2018; DfE, 2017; Scottish Gov, 2014; Roulstone et al., 2012b).

Traditionally, the perspectives of children regarding the services and care they receive were frequently provided by their parents, carers or indeed professionals (Roulstone & McLeod, 2011). This practice has been challenged by international policy (World Health Organization, 2008), and researchers and practitioners (Coad & Hambly, 2011; Horne et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2017). More recently in the United Kingdom, professionals are now required to take account of children and young people's views (Gov.uk, 2014a; Gov.uk, 2014b). This places an obligation upon professionals, including speech and language therapists, to find ways of determining the views of the children and young people with whom they work. Better understanding of their perspectives enables professionals to ensure treatment is tailored to the individual's context which in turn should lead to improved patient engagement and thus to improved outcomes (Horne et al., 2013).

Consequently, a growing number of studies have explored the views of children with developmental speech and language disorders regarding their everyday lives (McCormack, McAllister, McLeod, & Harrison, 2012; McCormack, McLeod, McAllister, & Harrison, 2010), their preferred outcomes (Roulstone et al., 2012a, 2012b), and their quality of life and well-being (Lyons & Roulstone, 2018; Markham, van Laar, Gibbard, & Dean, 2009), and a small number have focused specifically on children's views of speech and language therapy (SLT) services that they have received (Merrick & Roulstone, 2011; Owen, Hayett, & Roulstone, 2004; Palikara, Lindsay, & Dockrell, 2009). Palikara et al. (2009) used structured interviews with 54 young people who had been diagnosed with specific language impairment and had received SLT during their school life. Of these, approximately half reported that they had received SLT at primary school, whereas nine reported that they had received this support during their secondary schooling. Understandably because it was some time since they had received SLT, few provided more specific comments on the support they had received although some perceived it to be beneficial. Merrick and Roulstone (2011) reported on the discourses adopted by children with a range of speech, language, and communication needs. Using the children's own drawings and illustrations of children in communication contexts, they conducted unstructured interviews with 11 children between 7 and 10 years of age. The children's discourses about SLT reflected a perception of the control and authority of the therapist; nonetheless, they regarded cooperation as a matter of their own choice. The children reported what they perceived they had learned in therapy sessions and saw therapists as helpful to their learning. The earlier study by Owen et al. (2004) was conducted with 12 participants aged between 6 and 11 years. Children were presented with materials and activities that they had used in therapy, as well as illustrations of children in a variety of

Key messages

- The evidence is limited in terms of perspectives of preschool children with speech and language needs and their views on activities used to support their needs.
- The innovative methods used helped the research team to explore/observe and interpret the children's feelings, which were analysed
- The study has application for all professionals at all levels of training and career who work with preschool children.
- Use of the developed framework could help all professionals explore a child's perspective on the process of intervention.

communication situations as a context for a semistructured interview. These children enjoyed their SLT sessions although they had ideas about changes that could be made to improve them. Although some understood them in terms of improving their speech, others saw them in terms of helping their general learning and performance in school, and others were not at all clear about the purpose of the sessions.

What is worthy to note, is that all these studies of children's views of speech and language therapy services have all involved children already in school, and although they provide useful insights into a child's perspectives on the therapy process, we cannot assume that the experiences of preschool children receiving therapy will mirror those of their older counterparts. However, there are limited studies where the view of children under 4 years have been sought (McCormack et al., 2010). Arguably, this may be because often treatment or therapy is delivered with parents/carers and within families. In this study, we believed that improving our understanding of a young child's perspective on therapy activities may facilitate explicit discussions about how therapy is best delivered. This paper consequently reports the findings of a study that explored preschool (aged 2 to 4 years) children's experience of activities that are commonly used within SLT interventions in the United Kingdom.

This article aims to address two research questions:

1. How do preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and 11 months experience the intervention activities used by speech and language therapists?
2. What factors influence whether or not preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and 11 months access, engage with, and/or actively participate in approaches used by speech and language therapists?

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Methods

Methods used to explore the perspectives of older children and young people have included interviews and discussion-based methods

(Einarsdóttir, 2007). However, these verbally based approaches may not be the most suitable for preschool children because young children's level of language and cognition is likely to make it difficult for them to reflect on and communicate their experiences verbally (Boehm & Weinberg, 1997; Garbarino & Stott, 1989). Further, direct questioning is often unproductive with young children. Dockrell and Lindsay (2011), for example, point out that specific questions can be subject to response bias where children give the answer they perceive to be expected by the adult. For children who have speech and language impairments, understanding the questions may also be problematic.

Nonetheless, it is possible to gain a perspective on children's experience of situations through a variety of ways. For example, Flewitt (2005) reported that 3-year-old children expressed their views "multimodally" through body language, facial expression, and gaze as well as talk. Researchers have used methods such as arts-based and play-based methods (Coad & Hambly, 2011; McLeod, 2011a, 2011b) as well as observational and ethnographic approaches (McKechnie, 2000; Press et al., 2011). An observational ethnographic approach has also been used with older children who use alternative and augmentative methods of communication (Wickenden, 2011).

Ethnographic qualitative approaches are commonly situated in real-life contexts and use participant observation techniques, which the researcher can use to be an unobtrusive part of the situation (McKechnie, 2000; Wickenden, 2011). In the ethnographic encounter, the researcher is conscious of the different cultural contexts but is seeking a "dense description" of the event (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A common SLT context for preschool children might be a clinic setting with a single therapist, a parent, and the child. However, it was felt that participant observation in this context might be quite intrusive, and preschool environments were thus chosen.

For this study, we used a combination of play-based activities, field notes, and use of film including the children wearing their own head cameras known as Kiddicams (see Figures 1 and 2). Special "therapy-type" sessions were developed and set up in order to provide groups of preschool children with experiences of SLT intervention

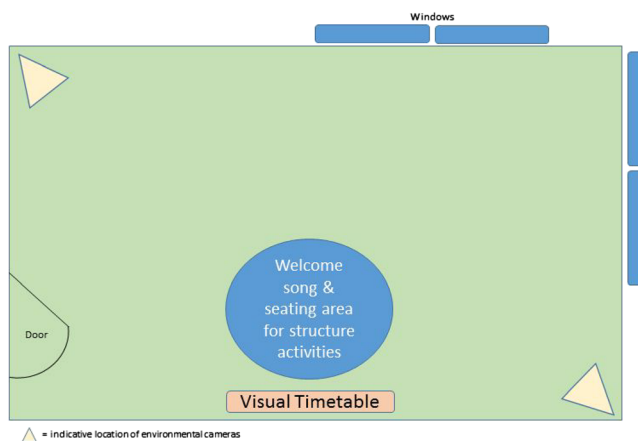


FIGURE 1 Environmental set up [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 2 Wide-angle head-mounted kiddie cam [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

activities. These groups did not offer tailored therapy as might have been offered in a real therapy group but were designed to reflect the range of interventions reported in practice based on survey data (Roulstone et al., 2015). Activities were varied by using picture resources or real-world objects, familiar or unfamiliar items. The resources and activities selected were tailored to reflect each particular group members' developmental stage and abilities by speech and language therapists on the research team. The team believed that the use of an ethnographic approach, novel to the context with preschool children, would enable the children's views to be communicated.

2.2 | Participants

We contacted two local children's centres and one nursery class and invited them to participate in the study. Table 1 gives an overview of the characteristics of the populations accessing the children's centres/nursery and living in the postcode for each setting. Sites were referred to as Sites 1 (Rural), 2 (Suburban), and 3 (Urban). Inclusion criteria required children to be aged between 2 and 5 years and 11 months but not currently receiving SLT. Early years practitioners identified children who fit the inclusion criteria and sought consent from parents or legal guardians and assent from the children at each session. Early years practitioners also helped ensure that each group was of similar ages, from a range of backgrounds and locations.

Each setting was asked to establish two groups of four children. Settings were encouraged to recruit children with a range of abilities, but with concerns about their speech and language, although had not previously been seen by SLT, and to construct two groups with children who were known to each other and were of a similar ability level.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics by site

Site	Social Grade ^a	Ethnic Groups ^b	Deprivation ^c	Pseudonym	Age (months)	Gender	Ethnicity	Sole/birth order
1	33.9% Upper Middle Class	94.4% White English	52.7% No deprivation	Sara	36	Female	White British	Sole
				John	36	Male	White British	Sole
				Saul	36	Male	White British	3/3
				Giles	36	Male	White British	2/2
				Ella	36	Female	White British	2/2
				Charlotte	48	Female	White British	3/3
				Sally	48	Female	White British	2/2
				Rich	48	Male	White British	2/3
				Median	36	4 M/4F		
2	36.9% Working Class	87.5% White English	34.0% No deprivation	Harry	39	Male	White British	4/4
				Ted	41	Male	White British	2/3
				Jade	28	Female	White British	Sole
				Christopher	26	Male	White British	2/2
				Natasha	26	Female	White British	3/3
				Michael	29	Male	White British	1/2
				Terry	41	Male	White British	2/3
				Malcolm	44	Male	White British	2/3
				Median	34	6 M/2F		
3	40.6% Working Class	37.7% White English	23.6% No deprivation	Alton	30	Male	Black Caribbean, British	1/2
				Lilly-Anne	30	Female	White British	2/2
				Shakera	40	Female	Black African, Somali	Sole
				Jazz	47	Female	Bangladeshi, British	Sole
				Tajo	34	Male	Black Caribbean, British	Sole
				Bow	38	Female	White British	Sole
				Arend	45	Male	Asian, British	2/2
				Rob	45	Male	Asian, British	3/3
				Median	39	4 M/4F		

^aThe social grade is the socio-economic classification used by the Market Research and Marketing Industries, most often in the analysis of spending habits and consumer attitudes. Originally developed by the National Readership Survey to classify their readership, they are used by many organizations and companies for market research. The figure shown is the largest category of social grade represented in the zip code where the children were recruited.

^bThe figure shown is the percentage of the largest ethnic group in the zip code of the area where the children were recruited.

^cThe dimensions of deprivation used to classify households are indicators based on four selected characteristics. A household is deprived in a dimension if they meet one or more of the following conditions: (a) Employment—where any member of a household, who is not a full-time student, is either unemployed or long-term sick; (b) Education—no person in the household has at least Level 2 education, and no person aged 16–18 is a full time student; (c) Health & disability—any person in the household that has general health that is “bad” or “very bad,” or has a long-term health problem; (d) Housing—the household's accommodation is either overcrowded, with an occupancy rating – 1 or less, is in a shared dwelling, or has no central heating. A household is deemed as being deprived in none or one to four of these dimensions in any combination. The figure shown is the percentage of the largest deprivation category in the zip code of the area where the children were recruited.

The sample across the three sites consisted of 24 children (14 Male; 10 female) between the ages of 2 to 5 years and 11 months (median average of 37 months), in six groups. These six groups of four children represented a range of (parent/carer identified) cultures and ethnicities; details are given in Table 1.

2.3 | Intervention activity groups

All children were seen for four sessions, with all groups being completed within a 6-week timescale. Groups were led by one of two experienced facilitators, supported by two research assistants. The first session with each group acted as a pilot to establish working

patterns between the research team and setting staff and to try out the data collection processes.

Using data from a previous survey about current practice with preschool children (Roulstone et al., 2015), the most commonly targeted goals and activity types were identified. These were then arranged into three programmes using SLT activities, which targeted the following skills: (a) prelanguage skills such as attention, listening, turn taking, and symbolic play; (b) early language such as following simple instructions, developing use of phrases, and extending vocabulary; and (c) phonological awareness skills. Each of the groups experienced all of the programmes over the duration of their four sessions.

Additionally, the group sessions were either highly structured with scheduled activities and a visual timetable, led by the speech and language therapist or unstructured groups following the child's lead, offering a number of activities for the children to choose from and move between, with the therapist moving with the child to implement intervention strategies through play. Activities were varied by using picture resources or real-world objects, familiar or unfamiliar items. The resources and activities selected were tailored to reflect each particular group members' developmental stage and abilities by speech and language therapists on the research team. Details of the activities are provided in Table 2.

2.4 | Data collection and organization

All sessions were video recorded with two cameras, located to capture the children's interaction within the room (see Figure 1).

At least one additional Kiddicam was worn by one of the children (see Figure 2). The intent was to generate video data from a "child's eye view," to gain insight into the children's experiences, from their

perspective. Field notes were also recorded by at least one of the researchers present to act as an observer.

Researchers also debriefed on the session as soon as the children had returned to their preschool class. During the debrief, researchers reflected on the activities, and observations were made and recorded. Potential changes to improve data collection and interactions with the children were discussed, and how this would impact on the child's experiences of the session were hypothesized. The iterative reflections and amendments were then integrated into the next group.

More than 72 hr of videotaped material was collected through a combination of the two environmental cameras and the Kiddicams being used in each of the six groups and four sessions per-group. One member of the team (S.H.) edited all video files to synchronize the various video perspectives together so that viewers could watch the same event from multiple views. The synchronization was achieved using Digital Replay System Software, which allows interrogation of the child's viewpoint by having both environmental perspectives and view from the physical level of the child, providing insight into their head movement and what was in their line of sight.

2.5 | Analysis

Framework analysis was used, with preliminary categories generated by the research team following the initial group sessions and influenced by the background literature as reported in this paper (Spencer et al., 2003). Data were made anonymous with pseudonyms generated by two of the research team members. A review of field notes and discussion amongst the team at this point focused on how

TABLE 2 Details of the childrens groups including aim of intervention and examples of resources

Children's groups	Purpose of the intervention	Example games/resources	Task variables
Communication skills group (age 2–3 years)	Good looking/attending, good listening, good turn taking, understanding emotions, pretend play	Musical instruments, Simon Says, Animal toys and their noises, bubbles, parachute game, dolly and food/care items, pass the ball	Structured/unstructured Familiar/unfamiliar objects, familiar/unfamiliar pictures
Language skills group (age 3–4 years)	Following child's lead in play, waiting, expanding and adding words, naming items, Derbyshire language scheme, introduce 'who' and 'where'	Language levels: a selection of "characters"—teddy, doll, animals, positional items, for example, toy, furniture, and objects, for example, cup, plate, toy food, baby's bottle, brush, and sponge Who/where/what games, using stories, dressing up items, professions and objects they use, animals and locations they live	familiar/unfamiliar objects, familiar/unfamiliar pictures, culturally relevant (multiethnicities)
Speech sound group (age 4–5 years)	Rhyme, syllable clapping, individual sound identification, sound identification in words, introduction to blending	Sound lotto, Rhyming fruit salad, nonsense rhyme monster, posting game, syllable lily pads	Structured/unstructured, familiar/unfamiliar objects, familiar/unfamiliar pictures, culturally relevant (multiethnicities)

the children were communicating their experiences of the activities, and three categories were identified: body language, vocalization, and visual attention. These became the thematic framework, which informed the rest of analysis although at all points; researchers were open to novel categories (Smith & Firth, 2011). Analytical processes involved the following:

1. Synchronized video files were watched and verified for every session. Flow charts segmented by time and activity were produced constructing a detailed written overview of the activities, child actions, and behaviours and content themes (Ash, 2007). Our field notes for each section were also added to the charts.
2. The first author (JC) purposely selected 10 varied sessions from across the full data set. The sessions were selected to represent a range of speech, language and communication activities, and across sites (rural, suburban, urban).
3. From the selected 10 films, two members of the team (SH; HH) generated codes from one session of the video footage independently. A third team member (JC) verified coding and resolved any discrepancies. The three researchers then coded all the remaining nine films.
4. Once all data sets were coded and analysed, preliminary categories and themes were refined to form the final three categories of body language, vocalization, and visual attention.
5. The remaining films were then watched and matched to the three categories.

2.6 | Ethics

Approval was received from a National Research Ethics Service Committee (reference number 11/SW/0228). Due to the age of the participating children, it was not possible to obtain consent; however, assent was given in the form of the children agreeing to take part in any given activity and by parents or legal guardians in the form of written consent. Children were encouraged to engage and to re-engage as necessary. However, if children continued to display a desire to stop, it was taken as a removal of assent, and the child was looked after by a member of staff from the setting until the end of the session when they were collected by their parents/guardians.

Children were encouraged in turn to wear the Kiddicams, and a game was instituted to support the process of wearing and turning on the camera. Cameras were removed or offered to other children where any child declined or showed discomfort.

3 | FINDINGS

Framework analysis resulted in three preliminary categories of body language, vocalizations, and visual attention to examine the way that children expressed their perspectives. Additional dimensions were issues relating to the children's experiences of engagement and

participation in SLT activities, which were incorporated into each of the three categories.

3.1 | Body language

Body language included any position or movement of the body that reflected something of the child's perspective, including the "position" and orientation of children's bodies, movements associated with general "body activity and movement" and "fidgeting" (see Table 3). Body language varied considerably as a direct response to the activities. Some children whose body language initially reflected reluctance or caution then became more relaxed in repeated sessions of the same activities or as they became more familiar with the adult facilitators. Others were able to join in confidently from the start:

One of the adults asks Terry to take the picture off the visual timetable [that was introduced at the start of the session]. He takes a while to respond and then shuffles on his bottom to the timetable, stands up and takes the picture and gives it to the adult. He then puts his hand in his mouth and runs back to his seat—his facial expression is one of uncertainty/self-consciousness, head still slightly bent down (Field notes Site_2 Session 1).

Children's confidence and attitudes towards the activities were apparent in the various "positioning" of their bodies in relation to activities, other participants, and researchers. For example, in one session, musical instruments were introduced for the children to play. Most of the children in the group interacted with the instruments, suggesting enthusiasm and interest, but one particular child appeared to be "deliberately not taking part" (Field notes; Site_1, Session 1). This was displayed through him moving slightly backwards to be out of the circle, being "reluctant to take part in the running" (Field notes; Site_1 Session 1), taking a few steps when encouraged but otherwise standing still or walking, and using reduced levels of eye contact with the adult facilitator.

Children expressed emotion more explicitly through *facial* expressions and *body movements* such as clapping their hands or bouncing on to their knees. The *size*, *strength*, and *completeness* of children's "body movements" gave some indication of children's confidence in participating. Increases in the size and strength of movements were characteristic of children being confident and energetic during activities; this was more frequent where participation was simultaneous, rather than in turn taking activities, and within unstructured (child-led) sessions. Children often appeared to grow in confidence over time, demonstrated in increased clapping or running faster.

Common across all activities was the presence of "fidgeting." These small movements usually of the hands and feet usually occurred when children were watching or listening to another person (Table 3).

TABLE 3 Body language categories identified as communications of the perspectives of preschool children

	Categories	Subcategories
THEME Body Language	Body position	Orientation Openness of body Extensions Proximity to object, group, or activity
	Emotional expression	Facial expressions Whole body movements
Size of movement	Body	activity/movement
	Strength of movement	
	Completion of movement	
	Fidgeting	Handling objects Repetitive movements

TABLE 4 Vocalization theme used to explore preschool children's perspective of speech and language therapy activities

	Categories	Subcategories
THEME Vocalizations	Quality	Loudness Speed
	Child initiated	Questions Communicating wants and needs Commenting Declaring ability
	Responses to SLT or facilitator	Completeness of response Repetitions Expressing support
	Nonverbal	Expressing emotion Expressing needs Commenting

Abbreviation: SLT, speech and language therapy.

3.2 | Vocalizations

Children's perspectives were evident through the "quality" of vocalizations (loudness, rate), the number and type of "child-initiated" vocalizations, children's responses to other vocalizations, and "nonverbal vocalizations," such as giggling. Often, children's vocalizations signalled the child's attempts at interaction and seeking relationship with the facilitators and went alongside making eye contact with that person. Table 4 displays the different aspects of vocalization that were noted.

The quality of "vocalizations," in terms of loudness and speed, provided another indicator about children's confidence to participate. Children were initially quite during structured SLT activities as highlighted below:

When challenged to talk, Christopher put his chin on his chest and did not look at the person asking him to speak. (Putting things in tube. Site_2, Session 4: 00:18:09.884)

Saul speaks confidently and loudly "a pig," "oink oink," "it's a chicken," "ba ba," "moos," "cow" "horsey horsey," "ney ney." (Animal masks. Site_1 Session 3: 00:13:37.571).

"Children-initiated" vocalization to ask questions, to communicate their needs, to comment, and to ask to participate. For example, children named objects that they wished to play with, or if they needed help adjusting their Kiddicam, they attracted the facilitators by vocalizing. As children became more familiar with activities and with the speech and language therapist, they "responded" *more quickly*. For example, some children gently mouthed the words of the introductory song, which was sung each week (the "Hello Song"). They wished to participate in the song but seemed unsure or unconfident. Other children sang along as highlighted below;

All children sat quietly while the speech and language therapist sang to each group member by name as part of the hello song, none of the children joined in with the words or actions. John asked "what's that there" about something behind Lydia. Saul then joined in with the actions for the song when the song moved on to singing "hello" for the adults present. Giles joined in with singing "hello" to the speech and language therapist, the last person being sung to. He sang quite loudly (Site_1 Session 3: 00:05:04:881)

Children also *expressed their feelings and needs* and also *commented* on their experiences through **nonverbal vocalisations**. One of the children (Ted) had his "Woody" toy with him in the group. Ted used Woody to draw attention and used Woody to indicate that he wanted to select a toy from the bag. Christopher drew a plastic monkey from the bag and Ted made the monkey noise. Ted went on to make the noises and movements of the animals as they were drawn. (Site_2 Session 1: 00:39:54.242)

All the children readily held hands with adults and formed a circle. They all looked up at the adults round the circle. All the children were smiling and rocking in and out, several children made small noises as they swung their arms. (Site_2 Session 4: 01:13:14.070)

3.3 | Visual attention

"Visual attention" refers to the direction and movement of children's gaze. This included children "watching the adults" and "other

TABLE 5 Visual attention themes used to explore preschool children's perspective of speech and language therapy activities

	Categories	Subcategories
THEME Visual attention	Watching SLT	Watching talking Watching movements
	Making eye contact	During activities Before speaking
	Watching other children	Turn taking General monitoring
	Focus on objects	
	Looking away from activity	Looking down General monitoring At another specific object or activity
	Switching attention	Between eye contact and object Between another and own activity

children," "making eye contact," and "focusing on objects." Observation of children's visual gaze was assisted by analysing video footage from the Kiddicam (Table 5).

Children spent a lot of time "watching the facilitator" particularly in the structured groups. Their attention suggested purposeful listening, indicating an interest in what she was *saying and doing*. The focus of attention switched to "objects" that were involved in the activity when mentioned or gestured to by the adults. For example, during the activity where children were listening to animal noises, children's visual attention shifted between soft toy animals matching the noises and the therapist's face.

Attention shifting between faces and objects was observed during unstructured group sessions where children self-selected the activities and played with different objects independently. This switching of attention suggested that children sought the therapists' affirmation, reassurance, and shared participation in play.

The children "watched each other" during turn taking activities in both structured and unstructured groups. Children would also reposition themselves to better watch another child as they played and interacted with a facilitator or therapist. Children would glance around the room to *monitor* what other children were doing. In unstructured groups, children who were curious about the activities of other children would stare at the other children. It appeared that the child observing was seeking a cue from the players to indicate they could join them. If this was forthcoming, they would move to play with the same toy or copy what another child was doing.

Sometimes children's visual attention focused on a specific activity, and at other times, children would scan around the room, as if monitoring if anything else of interest was occurring. Many children would also look away from the activity leading the facilitator to attempt to regain their focus

All attentive, except for John ... distracted by other things in room. (*Magic, Site_1 Session 3: 00:03:09.521*)

John was momentarily distracted by someone off camera, but refocused on his drawing as the other children continued to chatter to the therapist about their colouring in. (*Site_1 Session 3: 00:33:56.209*)

4 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the preschool children appeared to enjoy the activities, and the majority was engaged in all the activities. Children tended to be more relaxed and confident and expressed enjoyment through smiling and laughter when participating in activities simultaneously with other children, compared with turn taking activities; although as the turn taking activities became more familiar to children, children's confidence and enjoyment of these increased. We have set out the discussion as two main issues: first, the factors that influenced the children's participation and second, the issues relating to the three categories of body language, vocalizations, and visual attention.

4.1 | Factors influencing participation

Factors that influenced the children's participation, which resulted in increased confidence, enjoyment, and engagement, included familiarity with activities and therapists. Some children who appeared reluctant or cautious subsequently became more relaxed in repeated sessions of the same activities or as they became more familiar with the adult facilitators. Type of activity also impacted on participation and was evident through increased initiated vocalizations and a wider range of body language during activities. In these observations, children participated simultaneously, such as in unstructured play, compared with structured activities where the child had to wait their turn to play an instrument or choose a toy. Examples of behaviours indicating that the children were more relaxed included giggling and laughing, clapping hands together, and running around the room. On occasions, more cautious children appeared to draw confidence and cues from other children who were already engaged in an activity or making vocalizations.

4.2 | Factors influencing categories of body language, vocalizations, and visual attention

Flewitt (2005) suggested that views of children were "multimodal" and identified four categories: body language, facial expression, gaze, and talk. The work presented herein defined three categories of body language, vocalizations, and visual attention. These clearly overlap with the work of Flewitt (2005) and provide a useful framework for observing and interpreting how children were experiencing the activities. Observation identified a range of emotions such as boredom and excitement. Using the categories identified as a prompt or checklist could support the explicit reflection on children's experiences of SLT sessions. One would expect a speech and language therapist to be

taking account of these aspects of children's behaviour all the time as part of their monitoring of how the child is engaging with a session. This study helped to focus primarily on those observations, making them explicit as a way of understanding intervention from a child's perspective. Further, this could support discussion with parents about the signs of their children's engagement with activities at home. This is particularly important where parents are trying to implement SLT strategies in the everyday interactions with their children.

Data revealed the dynamic nature of children's perspectives and factors that may influence the levels of interaction ("ebb and flow") observed in the children throughout the series of therapy sessions. There was a suggestion in our data that in the unstructured (child led) activities, children's body language showed relaxed movements, and there was much louder vocalization suggesting that the children were more confident in these contexts. We also noted there was less turn taking, active listening, attending and more interruptions, fidgeting, and watching of other children compared with structured groups. Conversely, in structured groups, we observed more active listening and watching what the adult was doing and saying. The familiarity of the activity was also influential, leading to body language and vocalizations associated with confidence and willingness to engage with the activity. However, we did not quantitatively record this, for example, using simple counts, so to explore this would require further research.

A challenge the team considered was the potential of unequal power relationships. The young children could have perceived the adult researchers as authority figures or "strangers" and, as a consequence, have been wary, so strategies were planned to minimize the power differential (Punch, 2002; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). These were such things as using forenames for the researchers and ensuring they were physically at the same level as the children including when playing on the floor. Two other challenges around consent and engagement in the activities were also considered in this research. The team had consent from parents and adult guardians prior to the event but aimed to ensure that the young children were empowered in agreeing to take part. The study was conducted in the context of play groups and environments that were well-known to the children, and the team helped them feel comfortable in especially in the settling down, welcome songs, and explanations. The team considered the issue of potential coercion in terms of engagement with the activities. Managing the group was a fine balance between wanting the children to engage with the activities and balancing it with letting them sit out and respecting their desire not to participate.

Observations regularly picked up the children's fidgeting (Baker & Cantwell, 1982; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2000). A common interpretation of this might be that this signalled a lack of attention; however, the extensive analysis of the video concluded that the children were listening and engaged while fidgeting. The embodied cognition literature emphasizes the central role the body plays in mediating cognition (Wilson, 2002). In this context, one potentially fruitful way to view fidgeting is as an "embodiment" of the act of sustaining attention. Fidgeting may also help individuals sustain attention by increasing physiological change and arousal (Farley, Risko, & Kingstone, 2013). Sarver, Rapport, Kofler, Raiker, and Friedman (2005) purport that

slight physical movements "wake up" the nervous system thus improving cognitive performance in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Although our study was a small group of diverse young children with varying speech and language ability, our observation of children's fidgeting, apparently supporting prolonged engagement, would support some of the findings of Sarver et al. (2005). Kofler, Raiker, Sarver, Wells, and Soto's (2016) meta-analytic review suggests that gross motor activity is influenced by environmental factors in general and cognitive/executive functioning demands in particular, but the group of children under investigation in the current study requires more detailed study. In our activity groups, we built in a range of sitting and movement-based activities; no efforts were directly made to stop children fidgeting during any activity.

We believe that the methods we used facilitated participation of the preschool children. Using participant observation to explore children's experience of activities resulted in rich descriptions of the children's actual behaviours and the way that those behaviours signalled the child's engagement with the activities. This kind of observation differs from the diagnostic and assessment made in SLT, where the purpose is to identify the children's language and communications interactions and evaluate them relative to developmental norms and diagnostic criteria. The approach also differs from quantitative observation methods where a priori schema is used to guide and quantify observations. However, using ethnographic qualitative approaches with a participant observation approach was time consuming and required skills in detailing and interpreting the children's behaviours drawn from the many hours of video material. Furthermore, in using such approaches, we are aware that "access" also depends very much on the skill set and resources of the individual/team of researchers. It is worth noting in this study we were able to use the grant to support excellent resources and a large team of national experts.

The study has investigated children's views using observation and interpretation of children's body language, attention, and vocalizations. This was a response to the ongoing challenge of establishing the views of children who are unable to fully express themselves through spoken language. We believe that the approach proved a useful method for understanding preschool children's engagement with different activities and their confidence. It also provides some understanding of children's enjoyment of activities, particularly at the extremes of emotions. However, it was harder for researchers to interpret children's experiences where movement and expression was minimal, and there is a limit to the understanding of children's "experience" that can be achieved through observation. Nonetheless, the method was particularly useful for understanding children's engagement with and enjoyment of activities over time.

5 | CONCLUSION

Being able to demonstrate that the views, preferences, and perspectives of children receiving SLT have been taken into account is now a requirement of practice. This is not only from a moral and legal perspective but also part of the evidence-based practice paradigm. With

respect to preschool children, this is a challenge because the commonly used verbal techniques are less suited to this age group. The approaches described and discussed in this article have potential for practitioners in any field engaging with preschool children, as well as researchers wanting to investigate children's perspectives on or responses to therapy activities. This important national study suggests that in general, children engage in and enjoy a range of different SLT activities. It highlights the importance of familiarity in encouraging confidence and participation and suggests that activity structure may be an important consideration for SLT practice. This article shares a real-life example of eliciting young children's views using a flexible approach in order to encourage active participation and highlights the importance of encouraging this groups participation. Consequently, this innovative piece of work has national and international importance in child-focused settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

ORCID

Jane Coad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1043-5935>

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