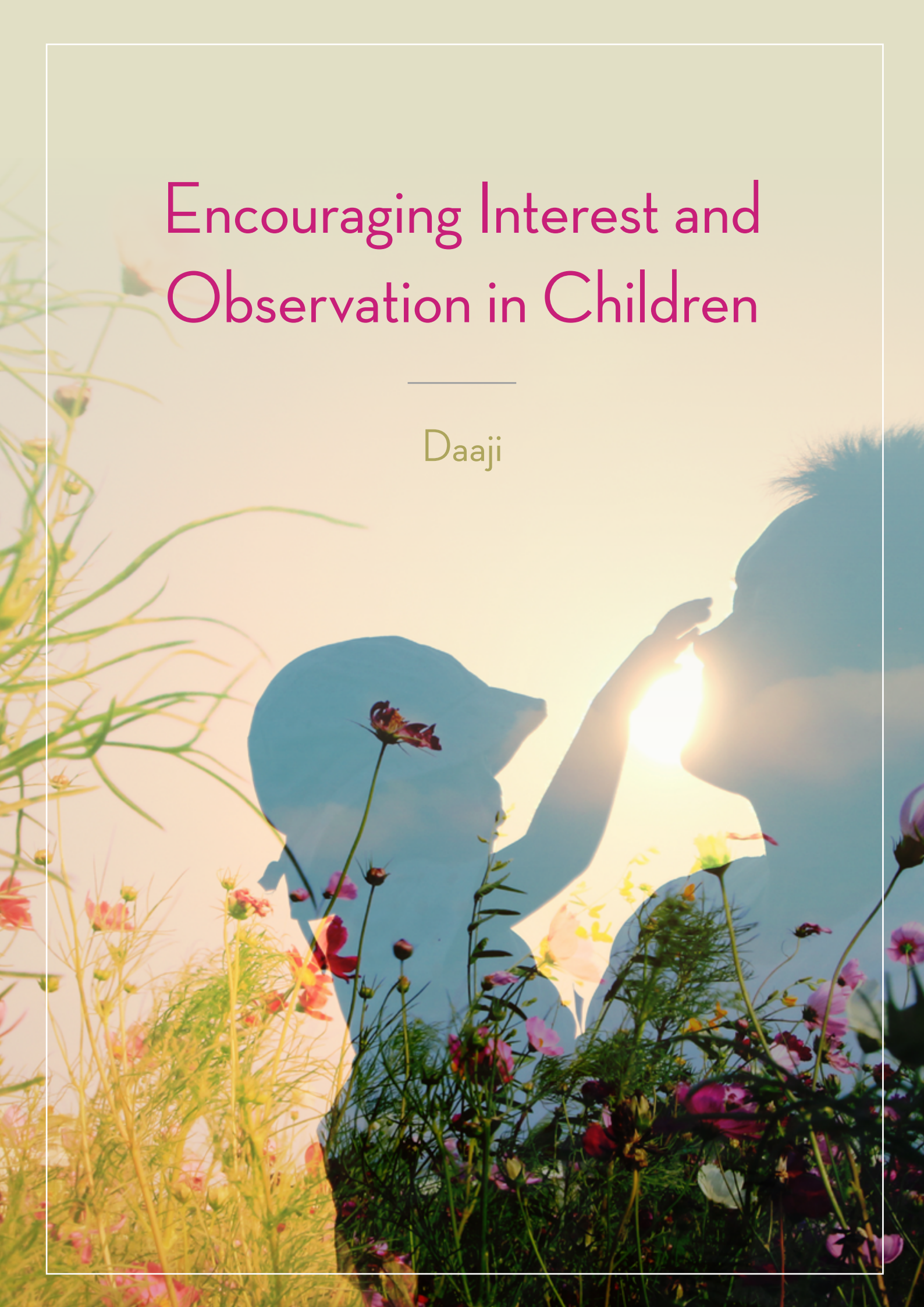


# Encouraging Interest and Observation in Children

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When someone asks, “How are you?”, what is your response? Do you always say, “Oh, I am great,” even when you are not? It’s food for thought: Do we take the time to be observant before answering such questions? Do we connect with how we truly feel? And do we express exactly what we have observed? Is it necessary to express it fully to others?

## Simple Activities

One of the most important things we can do for our children is encourage them to cultivate the habit of observation before expressing themselves or coming to any sort of conclusions. Two of the most important tools for learning anything in life are to observe and to take interest, and they are inter-related. Taking interest often comes first – if you are interested in something you will observe and learn. Then again, sometimes being observant generates its own interest. It can work both ways, so it is like a positive feedback loop – the more interest you take, the more you are likely to observe, and the more interest is then generated.

There are ways to encourage our children to embrace their capacity to take interest and observe from an early age. **The first is to be a role model: Children take interest in those things that we find interesting – especially small children.** They observe us, and that creates



indirect interest. As they become older, it's a different matter; they take interest based on their own inner voice. While they are growing up, however, this ability to copy the interest of others, and observe accordingly, creates a destiny.

**The second is to teach them to actively exercise their senses by asking them questions.**

The moment children start to consciously learn things, perhaps by the age of two onwards, encourage them to listen. Sit quietly, silently, with your little ones, and ask them to observe what is happening around them: "Do you hear any birds?" "Close your eyes and listen again: Do you hear anything else besides the birds?" "How many birds do you hear?" You can also ask them, "What do you see around you?"

Help them to develop a sense of direction, by becoming aware. When I am walking around the campus of Kanha Shanti Vanam where I live, I often take my granddaughter with me. She is two and a half now, and at every crossroads I ask her, "Should I go right or left? This way or that way?" She will choose the correct direction every time. So, by repeatedly asking her in which direction I should go, she remembers that "Next time my grandfather is going to ask me again." This keeps her mind very alert.

Sometimes I take her to the terrace and ask her, "Is it morning or evening?" Initially I made two lines on the terrace: when the sun is on one side it is morning, and when the sun is on the other side it is evening. Now, she doesn't need to look at the lines any more. She knows whether it is morning or evening, and she is able to say, "The sun will rise this morning from this side," or "The sun will set on this side." So her sense of direction has been developed from a very early age. Even some adults fail to know which side the sun rises from their own apartment. They scratch their heads and make an effort to calculate before saying, "Oh! It rises this side."

Teach them to actively exercise their senses by asking them questions. The moment children start to consciously learn things, perhaps by the age of two onwards, encourage them to listen. Sit quietly, silently, with your little ones, and ask them to observe what is happening around them.



Also, when you go for an outing, or visit someone's home, and your young children are with you, ask questions after returning home: "What did you see?" and "From which direction did you enter that home, from the east or the north?" "How many sofas did you see? What colours were they?", "What was the colour of the wall and the ceiling?", "What were the family members wearing?" and "What were the children who live there talking about?" Take some interest in what messages they were trying to convey through their conversations.

When you are walking with your little ones, let them inhale the fragrance of the flowers you see on the way, without plucking them. Let them experience the differences in fragrance from flower to flower. Let them feel the touch of various leaves in the garden, as well as of various fabrics in your home – the fabric of the sofa, the fabric of your trousers or your dress, the fabric of your jacket. Encourage them to feel, so that they learn to differentiate through their sense of touch. This also helps in the development of their brain. They will be able to recollect and develop a finer sense of touch, smell, sight, and so many other things.



**The third is to encourage their creativity and originality.** For example, when they are really happy and jovial, children often make up their own songs. I have been observing that children make up songs very fast, and it is fun to see. Ask them, “Tell me about this song. Why is it so funny? Is it funny, or are you funny yourself?” Other children may like to draw or to paint, or to make things out of recycled materials you collect.

**The fourth is to let them explore their feelings, emotions and moods.** Gradually, the patterns start emerging from inside, and all the various moods that colour everyday life. You are exposing children at an early age to the nuances of their emotions and moods, which can sometimes affect them to the extent of physically making them tired. Sometimes they cry, and after they cry, they say, “I feel very tired.” So, by asking questions, and revisiting them, you are highlighting their feelings.



## The Progression

Gradually, little by little, you can upgrade your observation sessions. In the beginning, start by asking, “What can you hear? What can you see?” Then, move to: “What did you feel during that conversation?” At any given moment, ask them, “How are you feeling right now? Not just the passing thoughts, but your inner state? How peaceful are you, how calm are you, how still are you, how happy are you, how joyful are you, how blissful are you?” There is a spectrum of these feelings. Even most adults cannot differentiate between happiness, joy and bliss, but when we take interest these differences will help us to understand what is going on with our inner evolution. And such things are learnt very easily with interest and observation. When children are encouraged to continue to pay attention, even when they do not know the words, they will be able to say, “This state you are calling bliss is lighter; this state you are calling happiness is heavier; and this state you are calling joy is somewhere in between.” Similarly, if children are feeling sad, help them to find the spectrum of sadness.

They will slowly learn to master their awareness of the various feelings; that is the direction we want to go. Now and then, you can specifically ask, “My dear, are you feeling tired? How does it feel to feel tired?” When they are really, really tired and you ask, “Are you tired?”, they will answer “Yes,” and they will know, “Oh, this is tiredness.” They will be able to express it. When they are really fresh and happy, you can ask a very specific question: “How does it feel to feel really fresh?” It is again well noted by their inner trans-sensory faculties. When you ask a specific question at the right time, it hits the mark.

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## Going Deeper Still

From the beginning, we inspire our children how to observe, starting with the outside world. Later on, we encourage them to reflect on their thoughts, and then on their feelings. Still later on, as they become teenagers, ask them to observe their breathing patterns: “How are you breathing – fast or slow?” Ask them to observe their breathing when they are happy and when they are angry. Ask them to observe which nostril is breathing more dominantly: “During various times of the day, how do your nostrils behave?” Don’t give them answers, but let them observe and make a note of it in a journal: “At this time of the day, I noticed that the right nostril was more dominant,” or “The left nostril was more dominant.” Then they will be able to study the patterns emerging in their notes.

Then, we ask them to feel whether they are radiating energy or absorbing energy at any given moment, especially once they learn to meditate. This is a subtler thing again. Eventually, later on, the emphasis shifts to observing the emptiness inside when they meditate: “As you go more and more into your spiritual dimension, try to observe the emptiness within you; see how empty you are.” At this stage they are transcending feelings.



Children learn to use the senses to observe external things. Then they expand their capacity by turning the same skills inward, to observe thoughts, feelings, emotions and moods. Then they expand their capacity still further to observe breathing, energy patterns and vibrations within. And eventually they expand their capacity to explore beyond energy to emptiness.

So, there are levels and levels of observations, dimensions and dimensions from which to see, from which to feel. And this simple training can begin very early. First, children learn to use the senses to observe external things. Then they expand their capacity by turning the same skills inward, to observe thoughts, feelings, emotions and moods. Then they expand their capacity still further to observe breathing, energy patterns and vibrations within. And eventually they expand their capacity to explore beyond energy to emptiness.

Every child is different. Our role is to inspire them. For example, when I am sitting in my chair meditating, my granddaughter will say, “Shh, dada is meditating,” and she will quietly sit outside. This is also a type of training. When children see you meditating, they will try to mimic you. It is a beautiful sight to see. I often advise my friends, “When your children are three or four years old and they try to copy you meditating, take a photograph and keep it in their room. As they grow up, you can say, ‘Once upon a time, you were interested in meditation. Try to see how you feel it now.’” They will connect with themselves emotionally and maybe take up meditation in a serious way: “I was doing it when I was three years old, four years old. Let me try it again now.” This will inspire them as well.

In essence, let’s see how we can inspire our children to take interest in various aspects of life. When they take interest, they will observe, and through observation they will finally conclude.

