

# On the Application of Picture Book Reading Therapy to the Psychological Intervention of Single-Parent Children Aged 5-6

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## Abstract

Emotional regulation has a critical influence on an individual's mental health and personality. In the long run, negative coping styles will create antisocial personalities. In recent years, the data on single-parent families has increased significantly, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of single-parent children. Without positive guidance of adults, children are usually unable to get rid of the negative effects brought by single-parent families, let alone acquiring good emotional development. Therefore, given the age development characteristics of children aged 5-6 and the anxiety and loneliness behavior of single-parent children aged 5-6, this study selected some picture books that these children could understand as the therapy medium, and preliminarily proposed a reading plan. Based on the revised Spence (2001) Preschool Children Anxiety Questionnaire and the UCLA Loneliness Scale Questionnaire, the anxiety and loneliness scores of 20 children in the experimental group and the emotional scores of 20 children in the control group were continuously compared. Finally, a four-stage picture book reading therapy suitable for single-parent children aged 5-6 was established, its four stage tasks including anxiety and loneliness recognition, self-awareness building, anxiety and loneliness settlement and peer sharing".

**Keywords:** picture book reading therapy, psychological intervention, single-parent children

## 1. Background Information

### 1.1 Prevalence of Psychological Issues of Single-Parent Children

According to the *2015 Statistical Communiqué on the Development of Social Services* released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of PRC, in recent years, people's self-awareness has become more and more intense against the backdrops of fast-growing society. Public opinions have changed gradually, and the family divorce rate is getting higher and higher with the age of divorce growing younger. Based on the general increase in divorce rates, the number of single-parent children has risen significantly. Given years of follow-up research by various scholars on the single-parent children's psychological issues, it is found that for these children, the lack of parental love and the influence of social opinions will have a certain degree of impact on their physical and mental health which are effectively reflected in their behaviors and language, resulting in indelibly and critically negative impact on their personality and mental health.

Then, when single-parent children have long-term negative emotion venting, and even develop constant loneliness and anxiety, how effective and proper the guidance was that educators and guardians give should be the first to be considered.

### 1.2 The Positive Effect of Picture Books on the Psychological Development of Children

Clinically, picture book reading therapy has been used to treat many symptoms such as aggressive behavior in children, nocturia, self-harm, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, mood and behavior disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, autism, and post-traumatic stress. Practice has proved that picture book reading has a positive effect on intervening in children's psychological issues. However, when we searched for keywords such as "picture book reading therapy for children", we found that there were only 5 articles, out of which picture book reading therapy for psychological issues such as anxiety and loneliness in single-parent children was not mentioned.

Considering existing research, we found that it was obvious that picture books have a positive effect on improving children's mental health, but there is a lack of picture book reading therapy research on psychological

issues such as anxiety and loneliness in children. Therefore, we plan to study the effect of picture book reading therapy on psychological interventions for single-parent children aged 5-6 years by distributing psychological questionnaires.

## **2. Definitions of Core Concepts**

### *2.1 Picture Books*

A picture book is a literary work that tells a story, with pictorial symbols and simple symbols of words as the main media.

### *2.2 Picture Book Reading Therapy*

Picture book reading therapy is a form of therapy that helps oneself or instructs others to properly cope with physical, emotional, or social problems by reading specific picture books.

### *2.3 Psychological Intervention*

Psychological intervention refers to the process of changing the mental state and behavior of the objects to an expected state through purposeful activities with a basis of psychological theories.

### *2.4 Single-Parent Children*

Single-parent children refer to groups of children who are cared for by his or her father or mother alone as the guardian due to divorce, loss of father or mother, separation, his or her parent being unmarried, etc.

## **3. Literature Review**

“Picture book reading therapy” is internationally associated with “reading therapy”. Reading therapy was first applied to clinical use, mainly to help psychopaths reduce anxiety, depression and other negative emotions. Until 1964 it began to be applied to children in dealing with a wide range of issues including school bullying, phobia psychology, dyslexia, aggressive behavior, multicultural sensitivity, daily life issues and so on. The purpose of reading therapy is mainly reflected in two aspects, one of which is to optimize the reader’s emotional feeling, improve and cure psychological issues, and establish a good spiritual world. The other is to help readers resonate with the characters and storylines in the reading materials after reading, discussing and listening, hence inspiring ways and means to solve their own problems and meet their own needs. So that their behavior and performance will be adjusted to help them achieve the purpose of personal progress.

Given international research, we can see that more and more researchers and educators are paying attention to the role of picture book reading in improving the mental health of children. They generally believe that reading therapy has a positive and significant effect on improving the psychological status of readers and correcting the behaviors and attitudes of readers. Some specific and targeted research cases will provide strong method guidance, including the selection of picture books, the psychological journey of children when reading picture books, and corresponding data collected and analyzed in previous experiments. However, no research on the use of picture book reading therapy was conducted before to solve negative psychological issues such as anxiety and loneliness in single-parent children aged 5-6. Therefore, it is of strong operability and great significance to intervene in the negative psychological status of single-parent children aged 5-6 through picture book reading therapy.

## **4. Significance of the Study**

### *4.1 Theoretical Significance*

This study will enrich the research theory of picture books to a certain extent due to the high correlation between the content, theme, and graphics of the selected picture books and the age and psychological characteristics of children aged 5-6.

Secondly, this study will obtain appropriate intervention strategies after practicing this therapy and comparing the data collected before and after this study. Such practices will enrich the research of picture books in terms of psychological intervention.

### *4.2 Practical Significance*

First of all, the psychological status questionnaire developed in study will more accurately and clearly reflect the real psychological situation of single-parent children aged 5-6.

Secondly, the negative psychological status of single-parent children aged 5-6 cannot be ignored, out of which anxiety and loneliness are more common psychological issues. This study will positively alleviate the psychological issues in children with picture book reading therapy, especially for single-parent children aged

5-6.

Finally, picture book reading therapy is a task that children aged 5-6 can complete independently. It features less obstacles and easy promotion. Targeted picture book reading programs will provide parents and teachers with specific interventions and guidance suggestions in terms of picture book reading therapy, which can provide reference for children's psychological education.

## 5. Research Objectives

- (1) Explore the effect of picture book reading therapy on the improvement of negative psychological status of single-parent children aged 5-6.
- (2) Sort out a specific scheme of picture book reading therapy that can effectively and scientifically alleviate the anxiety and loneliness of single-parent children aged 5-6.

## 6. Research Details

- (1) Understand the specific manifestations of psychological issues such as anxiety and loneliness in single-parent children aged 5-6.
- (2) After revising the *Preschool Children's Anxiety Questionnaire* compiled by Spence and the Chinese version of the *UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire*, a specific questionnaire was developed that can effectively evaluate the anxiety and loneliness of single-parent children aged 5-6.
- (3) Select targeted picture books given the psychological status such as anxiety and loneliness in single-parent children aged 5-6, and formulate a picture book reading intervention plan.
- (4) After the comparison of the questionnaire data, namely psychological status, collected from the experimental group and the control group before and after reading, it was confirmed that picture book reading therapy can effectively support the intervention of negative psychological status in single-parent children aged 5-6, hence the improvement of picture book reading therapy program.

## 7. Research Methods

This study is based on the theory of reading therapy and psychological development of children. At the same time, it follows the rules of physical and mental development of children, the principle of maximizing the interests of children, the principle of interest, and the principle of consistency. The research methods include literature review, questionnaire, experimental-control group, and case study.

**Literature review:** This study will comprehensively and correctly study the psychological intervention of picture books to children by reading, analyzing and sorting out relevant literature materials.

**Questionnaire:** It refers to the method of compiling the survey items including loneliness and anxiety into questionnaires, distributing them to parents, asking parents to fill in the answers according to the performance of children, and then collecting, analyzing data from the questionnaires before studying.

**Experimental-control group:** This study will purposefully control certain conditions or create reading situations to cause certain mental responses in the subjects.

**Case study:** It refers to a research method that identifies a specific object out of the targeted research objects, before investigating and analyzing, and clarifies its characteristics and its formation process.

## 8. Research Activities

Given children's interest in picture book reading, this study focuses on the psychological issues of anxiety and loneliness in single-parent children aged 5-6, and alleviates children's negative psychological issues and helps children develop good physical and mental health through teachers' picture book reading guidance and parent-child reading methods.

The research will be carried out in three aspects including picture book selection, questionnaire design, and pre- and post-experiment data analysis.

### 8.1 Research Plan

- (1) Formulate the *Children Anxiety Questionnaire* and the *Children Loneliness Questionnaire*.
- (2) Questionnaires on the psychological status of children was distributed to 120 parents with single-parent children aged 5-6, who are from the experimental group, in a bid to collect data of the psychological status of single-parent children.
- (3) Among the 40 children with the highest scores in anxiety and loneliness, 20 children were randomly selected

to form the experimental group, and the other 20 were randomly selected to form the control group.

(4) Develop picture book reading therapy plans, including different picture book selection considering psychological situations and content-based key questions after reading. Subsequently, the picture book reading was carried out for the children in the experimental group, while children in the control group did not do the picture book reading.

(5) Distribute questionnaires to the two groups again, collect data, and finally compare the data collected before and after the reading.

(6) Given the data feedback, the picture book reading plan will be improved accordingly.

### 8.2 Research Design

In this study, the equivalent group method was applied with data collected before and after the reading. Picture book reading scheme was selected as the independent variable, while the children's anxiety and loneliness level as the dependent variables. The *Children Anxiety Questionnaire* and *Children Loneliness Questionnaire* were used as the measurement tools to explore the influence of picture book reading therapy on children's psychology. Before the picture book reading intervention, we will distribute a loneliness and anxiety questionnaire to the parents of 120 single-parent children aged 5-6, record the psychological status level of the children before the intervention, randomly select 20 children as the experimental group among the 40 children with the highest anxiety/loneliness level, and randomly select 20 children as the control group, and carry out picture book intervention for the experimental group. Then two sets of data after the reading intervention will be compared to illustrate the intervention effect of picture book reading. After the first questionnaire, a 40-minute specific picture book reading will be initiated 2 times a week given the psychological performance of the children. 30 days later, the questionnaire measurement will be carried out again in a bid to conduct data comparison, hence the conclusion.

Independent variables: Picture book reading therapy plan, that is, a specific 40-minute picture book reading activity will be conducted 2 times a week for children in the experimental group. After reading, parents narrate the key questions about the content of the story provided by this study, and ask the children to answer them, so as to activate the role of the children in summarizing the core elements of a story.

Dependent variables: Scores for the *Children Anxiety Questionnaire* and the *Children Loneliness Questionnaire*.

### 8.3 Research Tools

#### 8.3.1 Children Anxiety Questionnaire

Given the specific performance of single-parent children aged 5-6, the *Anxiety Questionnaire for Preschool Children* compiled by Spence (2001) will be revised accordingly, which will be filled out by the guardian. It is planned the questionnaire will be specified into five dimensions including separation anxiety, social phobia, generalized anxiety, somatic injury anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive neurotic disorder in children. The total anxiety score of each dimension will be measured in a 5-point scoring method (the larger the number, the higher the frequency). The higher the overall score, the more serious the anxiety problem.

#### 8.3.2 Children Loneliness Questionnaire

Given the specific performance of single-parent children aged 5-6, the Chinese version of the *UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire* will be revised, which tests the loneliness level in children with 11 positive questions and 9 negative questions, and measures them on a 4-point scoring method. The higher the score, the higher the level of loneliness.

### 8.4 Experimental Plan Preparation

#### 8.4.1 General Design

We will use specific parent-child reading methods, with different picture book scenarios and targeted questions, to transform children's understanding of anxiety and loneliness, and reconstruct their self-awareness. After the first questionnaire, given the performance of children's psychological issues, a 40-minute specific picture book parent-child reading will be initiated 2 times a week, and targeted questions and answers. After 30 days, the questionnaire was conducted again, and the data were compared, hence the conclusions.

According to the influencing factors of the psychological status such as anxiety in children, the experiment was divided into four stages, and the picture book reading tasks of each stage were designed as follows:

Table 1. Four-stage task table for picture book reading therapy

Stage	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Task	Recognizing anxiety and loneliness	Establishing self-awareness	Dealing with anxiety and loneliness	Peer sharing
Objective Dimension	Recognizing anxiety	Recognizing loneliness	Understanding strengths	Understanding weaknesses
			Learning to wait	Having courage to express
				Sharing things
				Sharing emotions

On the basis of specifying the tasks for every stage, specific materials for the experimental plan were selected according to the following selection principles:

The picture is clear, attractive, and the theme is clear.

The text is concise and clear. The reading value is high, and the meaning is easy to understand.

It meets the imagination level and life experience of children aged 5-6.

Its story content and themes are consistent with the preset stage objectives.

According to the four-stage design of the book-reading therapy, the overall parent-child reading syllabus is depicted in the following chart:

Table 2. Four-stage picture book reading schedule

Stage Task	Target Dimension	Picture Book	Flow of Query
Stage 1	Recognizing anxiety	<i>Jenny is scared</i>	
Recognizing anxiety and loneliness	Recognizing loneliness	<i>Big Bear has a little problem</i>	
Stage 2	Understanding strengths	<i>Little Green Wolf</i>	Flow 1: Recalling story content
Establishing self-awareness	Understanding weaknesses	<i>My Colors</i>	Flow 2: Sorting out storyline
Stage 3	Learning to wait	<i>Little Fire Dragon Spock</i>	Flow 3: Empathizing
Dealing with anxiety and loneliness	Having courage to express	<i>Lonely Little Black Dot</i>	Flow 4: Exploring results Flow 5: Concluding
Stage 4	Sharing things	<i>Whose moon is it?</i>	
Peer sharing	Sharing emotions	<i>How did you get so lucky today?</i>	

#### 8.4.2 Specific Action Plan

The mission of the first stage is to provide children with a sound understanding of anxiety and loneliness and to set a good basis for the successful conducting of book-reading therapy in the later stages.

Table 3. Picture book reading therapy stage I-specific action plan table

Week	Picture Book	Objective	Detail
Week 1	<i>Jenny is scared</i>	Recognizing anxiety: Understand the story and inspire children to find ways to respond positively and feel safe when confronted with things that frighten them or make them feel unhappy.	Jenny was always happy. One day, something unfortunate happened, and everyone was scared. Mom and Dad told Jenny she can tell them how she felt. Sadness and misfortune always happen, but life goes on.
Week 2	<i>Big Bear has a little problem</i>	Recognizing loneliness: Understand the importance of listening and expressing from <i>Big Bear has a little problem</i> , and learn to boldly express your understanding and thoughts in clear language while listening to what others really want to say.	Big Bear recently had a little trouble. He felt a little lonely, but no one was willing to spend a little time listening to what he was about to say. What was not needed was given to the Big Bear out of people's sole speculation. Just when the Big Bear had little courage to speak, an unremarkable fly appeared.

The task objective of the second task is to guide children to reconstruct their perception of themselves. Understand the strengths of oneself and what his or her uniqueness is. At the same time, let the children understand their own shortcomings while being true to themselves. Then they will know that everyone has advantages and disadvantages, hence easy acceptance of the imperfect ones.

Table 4. Picture book reading therapy stage II-specific action plan table

Week	Picture Book	Objective	Detail
Week 3	<i>Little Green Wolf</i>	Understanding strengths: Let children read the story, know that everyone is unique. As long as you are true yourself, you will be happy.	In order to blend in to look like its friends, the self-rejecting little green wolf did everything to turn himself grey, but failed time and time again. In the end, it, once downhearted, regained its confidence with the help of the little fairy.
Week 4	<i>My Colors</i>	Understanding weaknesses: Let children learn that there are many differences between different things, and what is different from others is not necessarily a shortcoming, so you should learn to accept your unique existence.	The chameleon was distressed because he didn't have his own color, and he always turn to the color of a place wherever he went. One day, he met another chameleon, and they agreed that since they could not change the actual conditions, they would change the color of their bodies together.

The third Stage's Task objective is to use picture books instructing children to learn strategies dealing with anxiety and loneliness, and to apply them to real life.

Table 5. Picture book reading therapy stage III-specific action plan table

Week	Picture Book	Objective	Detail
Week 5	<i>Little Fire Dragon Spock</i>	Learning to wait: Let children learn that everything has a perfect time and requires us to be patient. It will eventually become what we desired to be after a long-awaited period.	Spock was a small fire dragon, and he was in big trouble. He was unable to control the flames he spewed. Even after a lot of practice he still failed to control. He began to develop anxiety, but eventually he realized what he needed was patience and waiting.
Week 6	<i>Lonely Little Black Dot</i>	Having courage to express: Let children learn that you can't lack the company of friends in your life, and learn to speak your inner-feelings bravely.	The little black dot felt very lonely and he always played alone. One day, he finally gathered the courage to say, "Can we be good friends?" The brave little black spot ended up making many good friends.

The goal of stage 4 is to allow children to correctly overcome negative emotions while learning to share good things with others, and share their emotions upon their perceptions.

Table 6. Picture book reading therapy stage IV-specific action plan table

Week	Picture Book	Objective	Detail
Week 7	<i>Whose moon is it?</i>	Sharing things: Let your children learn to share good things with others and experience the joy of life through sharing. Let the child know how easy it is to deal with similar situations in life.	The little nest mouse lived alone in a wheat field, and the moon in the sky was his only companion. One day, a cold wind swept through the wheat field and the moon disappeared. The little mouse was in a hurry to find his friend, the moon. The duck said that the moon was in the pond every night. The little nest mouse disbelieved and followed the duck to the pond. The moon was not there at all. The squirrel said the moon was on the treetops, but at this time they couldn't find a shadow of the moon there...
Week 8	<i>How did you get so lucky today?</i>	Sharing emotions: Let your children recognize the benefits of sharing emotions with others in a peaceful, intimate story. And try to interpret the joy of sharing emotions from a child's perspective.	Wild Wolf Uru found many small pigs in the nap forest. He felt lucky and decided to ask his good friends to share with him. And his friends were happy to share the delicacies they found in the nap forest. Uru has a bad memory and easily get distracted, so that he can barely remember the pigs. Then, the pigs finally woke up and were happy for the good luck of the day.

At the end of each parent-child reading, parents will follow the process below to ask questions to help children summarize the content and enhance their feelings.

Table 7. Parent-child questioning strategies for picture book reading therapy

Flow	Ask Content-based Questions
Flow 1	What happened in the story?
Recalling the story content	What does this story tell?
Flow 2	What did the character(s) do?
Sorting out storyline	How did the character(s) feel? Why would the character(s) think in that way?
Flow 3	Have you ever had experienced the same thing?
Empathizing	How would you feel?
Flow 4	How'd it go?
Analyzing results	Why is there such a change?
Flow 5	What does this story tell us?
Concluding	Do you think the character(s) did the right thing? What would you do if it were you?

Based on the above experimental plan, in the next stage, we will introduce the picture book reading therapy to children from 20 families in the experimental group. Then we will collect corresponding data, and make a final data comparison analysis.

## 9. Achievements of the Study

### 9.1 Cognitive Finding: Anxiety/Loneliness Manifestations in Children During Disease Isolation

Children with emotional symptoms such as anxiety and loneliness, i.e., total score on the scale  $\geq X + SD$ , were sorted out of 120 children taking the anxiety questionnaire and 120 children taking the loneliness questionnaire based on the norm tables provided in the study, which showed that 40.35% of the children had developed anxiety/loneliness. We randomly selected 20 children with high levels of anxiety or loneliness as the experimental groups based on their family circumstances and scale data. The performance of the 20 children from the anxiety/loneliness experiment group was generally as follows:

#### 9.1.1 Separation Anxiety

When parents have to leave out of necessity, children will show irritability and are unable to do things or play confidently. Children who can sleep alone at night will refuse to sleep alone, hoping that adults can accompany him/her. When children find that an adult is out of sight for a longer period of time, they immediately look for him or her and follow the adult once they find him or her.

#### 9.1.2 Repeat Themselves

During emotional outbreaks, children become anxious and ask adults "why" almost every day. "When can I...". Children may feel frustrated, disappointed, or even angry when they receive a negative or uncertain response from an adult. Under the repeated questioning of children almost every day, parents' patience is also gradually diminishing, with their answering changing from initial patient response and explaining to neglecting. In the face of such a response, children's anxiety level will increase.

#### 9.1.3 Step Back and Forth

Children don't want to sit down and play quietly or complete tasks assigned by their parents, sometimes walking back and forth in the living room or bedroom, and making a whisper of impatience. Some children, with parental reminders and help, are able to successfully divert attention, stop striding back and forth, and get involved in games or tasks. Some children become more agitated when they hear their parents' reminders, hence moving back and forth faster or making more impatient sounds. This condition manifests itself more frequently in the middle and later stages of emotional outbursts.

#### 9.1.4 Strike Objects

The main manifestation is that the children will develop a daze state during the game, and sometimes it is accompanied by the movement of hand-pinched fists hitting his body, the tabletop and the ground, etc. When playing with toys, they will also hit each other with toys. When watching TV or learning videos, children will



watch them while beat with their hands intermittently. When eating, they often beat the table or bowl with chopsticks or spoons. When adults do not intervene, the behavior lasts longer. When an adult is playing with children, the children prefers to do the punching.

#### 9.1.5 Narrow Interests

The main manifestation is that children start to ignore general toys and become interested in things that are not toys, such as paper and bottles. They often take the bottle alone to observe and explore for a long time, usually ten minutes or so, or even a few hours. At the same time, they are not interested in the main features of the item, such as its shape and color, but are more interested in non-main features. They are extremely interested in small features such as the pattern on these items.

#### 9.2 Operational Finding

In this study, covariates were measured before the distribution of the *Anxiety Questionnaire for Children* and the *Lonely Child Questionnaire*. Covariates were analyzed using the picture book reading therapy as the independent variable, and the *Anxiety Questionnaire for Children* and the *Lonely Child Questionnaire* as the dependent variable. The results are as follows:

Table 8. Summary of analysis of covariance between experimental and control group on the *Childhood Anxiety Questionnaire*

Source of Changes	SS	df	MS	F	Group Type	Adjusted Average
Intergroup (Group Type)	1360.573	1	1360.573	11.306**	Experimental group	154.82
In Group (Deviation)	2036.359	17	119.785		Control Group	129.18

According to the data in the table, the scores of children in the experimental group and the control group were significantly different.  $F = 11.306$ ,  $P < 0.01$ , that is, the scores of children in the experimental group and the control group on the *Child Anxiety Questionnaire* were significantly different due to the application of picture book reading therapy. The picture book reading therapy had a significantly positive effect on the reduction of the anxiety level of children in the experimental group.

Table 9. Summary of the analysis of covariance between the experimental group and the control group on the *Lonely Child Questionnaire*

Source of Changes	SS	df	MS	F	Group Type	Adjusted Average
Intergroup (Group Type)	44.361	1	44.361	7.383*	Experimental group	20.23
In Group (Deviation)	110.091	17	6.475		Control Group	19.82

According to the data in the table, the scores of children in the experimental group and the control group were significantly different.  $F = 7.383$ ,  $P < 0.05$ , that is, the scores of children obtained from the *Children Loneliness Questionnaire* in the experimental group and the control group were significantly different due to the application of picture book reading therapy. And the picture book reading therapy had a significantly positive effect on reducing the loneliness level of children in the experimental group.

## 10. Benefits of the Study

### 10.1 Effective Alleviation of Negative Psychological Emotions of Single-Parent Children Aged 5-6

In this study, a group of 5-6-year-old single-parent children form an experimental group, where children could read the selected picture books, connect the characters and plots in the picture books with themselves and summarize the core elements. Then they obtained the strength and methods to get out of negative emotions such

as anxiety and loneliness. This study has helped children obtain healthy psychological development.

### *10.2 Reference of Targeted Strategies Aimed at Pre-school Psychological Education for Teachers*

Teacher's awareness and intervention capacity for children psychological development has been strengthened. Teachers can use the questionnaire to evaluate the psychological status quo of children, such as anxiety and loneliness, in a timely and effective manner, to understand whether there are any deficiencies in the psychological development of children. The picture book reading therapy developed in the study can be used as a reference for teachers to create their own plan, the reference including book selection, book-reading guidance, pre- and post-experimental assessment methods, and data analysis.

### *10.3 Active Application of Educational Theory*

An increasing number of studies on the application of picture Book reading therapy to children, including the correction of aggressive behavior, the promotion of emotional and intellectual development, and the enhancement of children's interpersonal skills, are based on research that promotes children's development in the general social context. The particularity of this study compared with previous studies lies in the fact that it is aimed at single-parent children aged 5-6 who have developed anxiety and loneliness. The plan and strategy are more suitable for this group of children and are more targeted.

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