



The Role of Democratic Parenting in Developing the Social Intelligence of Three Year-Old Children

Aura Ayu Devani^{1*}, Fitri Ayu Fatmawati², Ayunda Sayyidatul Ifadah³

^{1,2,3} Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Aura Ayu Devani, E-mail: auraayudevani@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how democratic parenting contributes to the development of social intelligence in three-year-old children by identifying the specific strategies employed by parents in daily interactions. Using a qualitative case study approach involving one family, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings show that democratic parenting is reflected through structured practices such as offering autonomy through choices, fostering prosocial behavior, engaging in dialogic communication, and utilizing play as a medium for guidance. These strategies effectively nurture children's confidence, empathy, and foundational social skills. The study concludes that democratic parenting is not a permissive approach but an intentional and active form of guidance that consistently strengthens the child's social intelligence. The results highlight the importance of consciously applying these practices to optimize early social development.

Keywords: *Democratic Parenting, Social Intelligence, Early Childhood.*

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INTRODUCTION

Young children, defined as those aged 0–6 years, are in the golden age period in which they experience continuous growth and development; during this stage, children require interconnected stimulation to ensure optimal developmental progress (Desmita et al., 2023; Innes et al., 2023; Yuningsih et al., 2024). There are six developmental domains experienced by young children: (1) religious and moral values, (2) cognitive development, (3) physical–motor development, (4) social and emotional development, (5) language development, and (6) artistic development (Hidayat & Nurlatifah, 2023). One of the developmental domains regulated in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014 concerning National Standards for Early Childhood Education is the domain of social development, which is described for children aged 0 to 6 years (Standar Nasional Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 2014).

This study focuses on the social development of three-year-old children who already demonstrate developmental potential aligned with the benchmarks in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014, where children begin to show prosocial

behaviors such as lending toys, cooperating, and demonstrating tolerance (Standar Nasional Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 2014). This potential is also consistent with the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 146 of 2014 on the levels of developmental achievement, which highlights children's ability to display caring behaviors and willingness to help when asked (Permendikbud Nomor 146, 2014).

According to Hurlock, social development is the potential possessed by children in their behavior, namely behaviors, roles, and attitudes accepted within their social environment, as well as their attitudes in social interaction (Suryameng & Nadila, 2022). Meanwhile, Howard Gardner states that social intelligence is one of the multiple intelligences, where social intelligence is essentially the ability to understand other people (Shofiyah et al., 2020). In line with this, Chatib explains that social intelligence is a potential that enables individuals to build relationships with people around them, allowing children to understand the feelings of others and develop empathy (Idham et al., 2023; Suarez et al., 2024). The characteristics of social development in three-year-old children include: (1) the ability to imitate the attitudes and behaviors of others, (2) the willingness to share without being asked, (3) the ability to engage in cooperative play, and (4) the ability to help others (Mayar, 2013). Correspondingly, the forms of social behavior in early childhood include: (1) friendliness, (2) empathy, (3) defiance, (4) aggression, and (5) cooperation (Ailah et al., 2025; Kusuma, 2015; Nazri et al., 2024).

Referring to Landy's stages of social behavior development in children aged 3 to 4 years, several characteristics emerge: (1) children tend to form strong friendships, (2) children begin to resolve minor conflicts with peers, such as taking the initiative to apologize without parental prompting, and (3) children develop new ideas for cooperative play such as pretend cooking, building with blocks, and assembling puzzles (Simanjuntak, 2021). Developing social intelligence in children can be done by parents or educators through positive habituation practices. There are three types of habituation: first, routine habituation, such as the 3S (greeting, smiling, and saluting) and TOMAT (please, sorry, and thank you); second, spontaneous habituation, applied immediately in response to children's behavior, such as giving rewards and punishments; and third, modeling, where parents and educators provide good examples for children (Nurlaila et al., 2025; Rahmi, 2019; Yuningsih et al., 2024).

The development of social intelligence in three-year-old children includes the emergence of self-confidence and empathy. Self-confidence is crucial for child development, as early confidence influences adolescence and adulthood by enabling individuals to be creative, express their abilities, and improve their quality of life. Self-confidence is not a genetically inherited trait but is acquired through parental guidance, environmental influence, and life experiences; therefore, self-confidence can be shaped, instilled, and strengthened through interaction and parental support (Sari et al., 2022). Likewise, empathy in early childhood must be cultivated by parents because once empathy is instilled, children will grow into individuals who care for their peers and family.

Various forms of social behavior related to empathy begin to appear in early childhood, including: (1) sympathy, which develops as children engage more in social play, requiring them to understand others' emotions; (2) empathy, which requires not only understanding emotions but imagining oneself in another's position; (3) social support, where

acceptance from peers becomes more meaningful than adult approval; and (4) shared experiences, where children realize that sharing especially toys helps them gain social acceptance (Armanila et al., 2024; Warmansyah et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021).

The development of social intelligence in three-year-old children is influenced by several factors, namely the family environment, educational environment, and community environment (Schoppmann et al., 2023; Vyshedskiy & Khokhlovich, 2022). The most significant factor is the guidance and parenting style provided by parents. Early social development begins with children interacting and playing with their parents and family members; therefore, children's ability to socialize depends greatly on the guidance and parenting they receive (Radliya et al., 2017; Simanjuntak, 2021). Children observe, record, and imitate whatever they see, making it essential for parents to model positive interactions. When children receive guidance and loving parenting, they grow with strong social qualities characterized by affection and warmth (Fuadia, 2022).

In line with these perspectives, the parenting approach characterized by affection, warmth, and firmness is reflected in democratic parenting. Democratic parenting is a method through which parents guide and nurture their children by establishing rules or boundaries that must be followed, while still allowing children the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings and to engage in positive activities within mutually agreed-upon limits, thereby fostering confidence and independence. Children are also taught to take responsibility for their actions (Dhani et al., 2023). The forms of democratic parenting include: (1) providing opportunities for children to be independent, (2) involving children in decision-making, (3) maintaining a warm parental approach, (4) allowing children to choose their actions while under parental supervision, and (5) being realistic about children's abilities without placing pressure on them (Azizah, 2019).

Other characteristics of democratic parenting include: (1) establishing rules based on reasons that can be accepted and understood by the child, (2) giving guidance on behaviors that should be practiced and maintained or avoided, (3) creating a communicative atmosphere between parents and children, and (4) fostering harmony within the family. Based on these characteristics of democratic parenting, which play a significant role in shaping children's social development, the researcher was motivated to examine the role of democratic parenting in the social development of a three-year-old child (Azizah, 2019; Dhiu & Fono, 2022; Sinansari & Hasibuan, 2021). This aligns with the field observations conducted on May 17, 2025, in Paciran Village, involving a single three-year-old participant from an educated family that applies democratic parenting in daily interactions.

Although previous research has examined the influence of democratic parenting on children's social development, existing studies have primarily focused on older early-childhood groups, particularly those aged 4–5 years, and were conducted within broader population settings such as village communities. Prior findings consistently show that democratic parenting supports children's social competence, including cooperation, tolerance, and positive peer interaction (Aslan, 2019; Husna & Suryana, 2021; Nurfahma et al., 2024; Syahrul & Nurhafizah, 2022; Verani et al., 2022). However, limited attention has been given to how democratic parenting operates within the developmental context of younger children, especially those at the age of three, when foundational prosocial behaviors are just beginning

to emerge. This study therefore addresses that gap by offering an in-depth examination of democratic parenting practices within a single-family case involving a three-year-old child, providing a focused and nuanced understanding of how early prosocial behaviors—such as sharing, caring, and helping are shaped through day-to-day parent–child interactions. This emphasis on early developmental specificity and the micro-contextual analysis of parenting practices constitutes the novelty of the present research.

The purpose of this research is to describe in detail the forms of democratic parenting applied by parents, through which their three-year-old child has already demonstrated behaviors such as sharing toys, showing care, and willingly helping others. It is hoped that this study will provide insights useful for parents, educators, and readers in nurturing children to grow with affection, warmth, and strong social character.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method. According to Sugiyono, qualitative research is used to examine natural settings and aims to describe and explain the research object in detail. Qualitative analysis is grounded in factual data and is inductive, allowing patterns to emerge that may lead to the formulation of hypotheses. Consistent with this perspective, Bodgan and Biklen highlight several characteristics of qualitative research: it is conducted in natural settings, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, it produces descriptive data, and it places greater emphasis on processes rather than outcomes.

Case Study Approach

A case study approach was employed to explore the research phenomenon within a specific timeframe and context by collecting rich, in-depth information. The role of the case study researcher is to uncover underlying meanings and reveal phenomena that may initially appear subtle or unobservable. This approach was selected to provide a deep understanding of the child's social development and the application of democratic parenting within the family setting. The researcher acted as the main instrument and was directly involved in gathering data through observation, interviews, and documentation. Although the researcher interacted closely with the participants, full immersion into their daily routines did not occur. The researcher's direct presence in the field allowed for participatory observation, establishing rapport with the informants and enabling the collection of detailed and authentic data.

Research Subjects

The research subjects consisted of one family residing in Paciran Village, Lamongan Regency. The selection was based on the research focus concerning the implementation of democratic parenting and the child's social intelligence. The participant was a three-year-old child referred to as "AZK," whose parents practiced democratic parenting. Informants were selected purposively to ensure their relevance and ability to provide comprehensive information aligned with the research objectives. The study took place over three months,

from May 17, 2025, to August 17, 2025, encompassing pre-research activities, observations, interviews, and documentation.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study was an assessment grid for evaluating the social development of three-year-old children, adapted from the standards outlined in Permendikbud No. 147 of 2014.

Table 1. Social Development Assessment Grid for 3-Year-Old Children

(Permendikbud No. 147, 2014)

Variable	Development Aspects Assessed	Indicators
Social intelligence abilities of 3-year-old children	a) Self-confidence	a) Dares to make decisions b) Willing to play with new peers
	b) Empathy and concern for others	a) Helps peers in difficulty on their own initiative b) Shares toys or food willingly with peers and family
Parent–Child Interaction	a) Direct verbal stimulation	a) Parents model sharing and helping behaviors b) Parents involve children in cooperative tasks c) Parents guide children with positive communication, e.g., asking permission before joining play
	b) Parental responsiveness	a) Parents act as active listeners when children talk about social experiences b) Provide direct assistance when children face difficulties c) Help children understand others' emotions
	c) Play interaction	a) Parents accompany outdoor play b) Engage in role-play c) Build with blocks or solve puzzles together

These indicators align with the social development profile of the child studied and illustrate how democratic parenting contributes to early social intelligence.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were carried out both participatively and non-participatively to capture children's social behavior and parent-child interactions in natural settings. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to explore parents' perspectives on democratic parenting and their child's social development. Documentation, including field notes, photos, and daily activity records, served as supporting evidence to reinforce the credibility of the data obtained.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which involves three interconnected stages. In the first stage, data reduction was performed by selecting, simplifying, and categorizing raw data to focus on essential information relevant to the research objectives. The second stage involved presenting the data in organized forms such as narrative descriptions and thematic matrices, allowing the researcher to observe emerging patterns and relationships. The final stage consisted of drawing conclusions and verifying them continuously by comparing findings against field evidence to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated how democratic parenting practices contribute to the development of social intelligence in a three-year-old child (C1). Through in-depth interviews and sustained observations, key themes emerged related to confidence, empathy, and prosocial behavior, which are understood as foundational components of early social intelligence. These empirical findings are strengthened by relevant theories and previous studies to provide deeper insight and academic rigor.

Development of Confidence

Confidence Through Independent Decision-Making

Interview data indicate that C1 was given frequent opportunities to make simple choices independently—an essential early marker of self-confidence.

P1 explained:

“After bathing, when we are preparing to go out, I prepare two suitable outfits—a pink one and a light-blue one. I ask the child to choose which outfit to wear. The child chose the pink one and explained that it looked cute and had a nice color.”

(Interview with P1, 2 August 2025, 10:00 WIB)

This finding reflects the core principle of democratic parenting, which emphasizes guided autonomy. Allowing children to make decisions within safe boundaries helps them develop initiative and a sense of internal control over their choices. This aligns with (Masriani & Liana, (2022) argument that parents foster children's confidence by valuing their decisions, listening to their opinions, and creating opportunities for them to make choices independently.

Moreover, Vygotsky's (2021) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) also supports the idea that children grow when adults provide opportunities for guided participation. By offering two outfit choices rather than imposing a single option, parents create a scaffolded environment where decision-making is manageable and developmentally appropriate.

In another example, P2 described how decision-making was fostered in the context of weekend routines:

"Every weekend we make time for family activities... I present options—whether we should visit a playground or visit a grandparent. I ask the child every day for three days, reminding that the decision cannot change the day before departure." (Interview with P2, 2 August 2025, 10:30 WTB)

This strategy also reflects Baumrind's assertion that democratic parenting combines responsiveness with high expectations, encouraging children to be autonomous while understanding the consequences of their choices. The consistency practiced by the parents reinforces Erikson's psychosocial stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt, where children aged 2–3 learn to develop confidence when caregivers allow them to make simple decisions while providing emotional security (Erikson, 1950).

Thus, both interview excerpts show how democratic parenting supports internal motivation, persistence, and responsibility key elements of confidence and early social competence.

Confidence in Social Interaction: Playing With New Peers

Confidence was also demonstrated in C1's ability to engage with unfamiliar peers.

P1 shared:

"At school, the child meets many new friends... My child usually needs about five minutes to observe and then approach peers—typically those with similar play preferences." (Interview with P1, 2 August 2025, 10:30 WTB)

This pattern reflects the gradual process by which young children build confidence in social environments. The five-minute observation period reflects a developmental process described by Rubin and Coplan, where children engage in onlooker play before transitioning into associative or cooperative play. It is a normal pattern of social engagement in early childhood and indicates social readiness rather than social withdrawal.

The finding also aligns with Groos' classical theory that play functions as a form of practice for real-life social and cognitive challenges (Wahyuni & Azizah, 2020). By being encouraged to explore social interactions freely, C1 develops socio-emotional resilience and the confidence needed to engage with peers, a skill that correlates strongly with later social competence and problem-solving abilities.

Furthermore, research has shown that children from democratic households tend to exhibit higher levels of social engagement, cooperative behavior, and adaptability in peer interactions because they are accustomed to expressing preferences and participating in dialogue at home. These theoretical insights provide strong validation for the present study's findings.

Development of Empathy and Prosocial Behavior

Helping Others and Sharing

Empathy defined as the ability to understand and respond to the feelings of others emerged as a significant theme in the data.

According to P1:

“We instill empathy by giving direct examples approaching someone who is hurt, crying, or sad... When the child has food, we encourage sharing with others... Sometimes the child refuses if not in a good mood, but we continue practicing it consistently.” (Interview with P1, 2 August 2025, 10:45 WTB)

This reflects a parenting approach grounded in modeling and repetition. According to Bandura’s social learning theory, children learn prosocial behavior primarily through observing adult behavior. When parents consistently demonstrate compassion, sharing, and emotional responsiveness, children internalize these behaviors naturally.

Hanifa & Hidayah, (2025) findings further support this, noting that empathy develops through deliberate routines that allow children to repeatedly experience and practice caring behaviors. The child's occasional refusal to share, described by P1, is developmentally typical for three-year-olds and indicates ongoing learning rather than a lack of empathy. Democratic parents respond not with punishment, but with patient reinforcement consistent with Baumrind’s model of warm and supportive parenting.

Additionally, studies in early childhood education show that empathy developed at age 3–5 predicts later cooperative behavior, conflict resolution skills, and classroom adjustment. The child’s emerging ability to respond to peers’ distress reflects early signs of emotional intelligence.

Teaching the Value of Helping

C1's prosocial actions were further strengthened through consistent involvement in simple helping routines.

P1 explained:

“I teach helping behaviors through simple routines... for example, tidying up toys after playing... or sharing food with a sibling... I believe consistency will eventually show results.” (Interview with P1, 2 August 2025, 11:00 WTB)

This mirrors Beaty's description of how prosocial behavior emerges through meaningful interactions where children participate directly in routines involving cooperation and mutual assistance (Khairunnisa & Fidesrinur, 2021). Research by Eisenberg & Fabes also suggests that young children become more inclined to help when adults narrate and explain the importance of helping, which appears to be reflected in P1’s approach.

Routine-based teaching also aligns with the concept of embedded instruction, where prosocial habits are learned not through lectures but through everyday experiences. These findings confirm that democratic parenting provides a fertile environment for empathy and cooperation to develop naturally.

Encouraging Cooperative Behavior

Cooperative behavior was deliberately nurtured in ways that respected the child's emotional readiness.

P1 stated:

"The best time to teach cooperation is when the child is calm... because when tired or sleepy, the child resists cooperation." (Interview with P1, 9 September 2025, 09:30 WIB)

This shows an understanding of children's emotional regulation patterns. According to Denham's model of socio-emotional competence, cooperation requires emotional stability; children who are tired or overstimulated cannot cooperate effectively.

This supports Amelia's view that parental sensitivity knowing when to introduce social tasks is essential for shaping strong social development (Amelia, 2022). Democratic parenting emphasizes responsiveness rather than force, allowing cooperation to be taught through positive, emotionally supportive interactions.

Communication as a Tool for Social Intelligence

Modeling Positive Communication

The study found that positive communication was intentionally modeled by caregivers to strengthen C1's social understanding and interpersonal skills. Both P1 and P2 described their approach:

"We demonstrate polite expressions such as saying please, thank you, sorry, and excuse me... so that the child sees and hears them every day and imitates them naturally." (Interview with P1 and P2, 9 September 2025, 10:00 WIB)

This reflects Bandura's (1985), *social learning theory*, emphasizing that children internalize communication styles primarily through imitation. When caregivers consistently model respectful communication, children develop linguistic, emotional, and interpersonal competencies simultaneously.

Febriani et al., (2023) also asserts that parents are the primary moral and communicative role models in early childhood, and consistent exposure to positive dialogue helps shape children's character and social intelligence. Research in early childhood communication adds that early modeling of polite language increases children's capacity for cooperative play and conflict resolution. Thus, positive communication by caregivers in this study functions not only as a linguistic model but also as a moral and emotional template for the child's broader social interactions.

Parents as Active Listeners

Empirical findings also show that caregivers practiced **active listening**, which further enhanced C1's confidence, narrative skills, and comfort in expressing emotions. P1 described:

"When the child is telling a story, we stop our activities and listen carefully... asking follow-up questions and giving encouragement so the child feels appreciated." (Interview with P1, 9 September 2025, 10:30 WIB)

This approach aligns with Fabiani and Krisnani's findings that active listening from parents builds children's self-esteem, encourages expressive ability, and strengthens their understanding of social relationships (Harti, 2023). From a developmental psychology perspective, active listening affirms the child's voice, fostering secure attachment a cornerstone of healthy social development according to Bowlby's attachment theory. Moreover, research on parent-child communication highlights that children who experience attentive listening develop stronger emotional regulation and social responsiveness (Desmita et al., 2023; Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021). Hence, the ability of the caregivers in this study to pause and fully engage becomes a significant developmental support mechanism.

Parental Guidance in Social Challenges

Direct Support When the Child Faces Social Difficulties

The findings also reveal that caregivers provided direct emotional and behavioral guidance when C1 faced challenges in social situations. According to P1:

"Sometimes when the child feels shy or hesitant, we motivate and reassure them that social interaction is not frightening. At first I accompany the child to approach others, and gradually the child adapts and feels comfortable."
(Interview with P1, 16 August 2025, 09:00 WIB)

This reflects Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, particularly the stage of *initiative vs. guilt*, where children aged 3–6 must be supported in taking initiative without being punished harshly for mistakes (Erikson, 1950). Such parental reassurance helps prevent excessive guilt, enabling children to develop initiative, courage, and social competence. Developmental studies also show that children who receive sensitive scaffolding when navigating new social environments are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors and emotional resilience. Thus, the caregivers' supportive approach directly contributes to strengthening C1's emerging social intelligence.

Helping the Child Understand the Feelings of Other

Another significant finding relates to the caregivers' efforts to develop C1's emotional perspective-taking.

P1 stated:

"When the child takes another child's toy, I ask gently why they took it and whether they asked permission. I also ask: 'How would you feel if someone took your toy?' This helps the child understand others' feelings." (Interview with P1, 16 August 2025, 09:30 WIB)

This practice mirrors Eisenberg's model of empathy development, which emphasizes guided reflection to help children connect actions with emotional consequences. Asking reflective questions helps the child internalize moral reasoning rather than simply obeying commands. This finding also aligns with Erikson's emphasis on early initiative: caregivers who respond gently help children develop moral awareness without creating excessive shame (Kamilla et al., 2022). Such reflective questioning supports the early formation of *affective empathy*, which later predicts cooperative behavior and social competence.

Social Development Through Play-Based Interaction

Outdoor Play and Social Interaction

The role of outdoor play in strengthening C1's social skills was also evident. According to P1:

"On weekdays we let the child play in the yard with peers... on weekends we take the child to a playground where there are many peers to interact with."
(Interview with P1, 16 August 2025, 10:00 WIB)

This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's *ecological systems theory*, which highlights the importance of microsystem (home, yard) and mesosystem (home–playground connection) interactions in shaping children's development (Dharma, 2023). Exposure to varied social environments allows children to practice social rules, negotiate play roles, resolve conflicts, and understand peer dynamics. Studies in early childhood education consistently demonstrate that outdoor play enhances social competence because it encourages negotiation, collaboration, and empathy through natural interactions. The findings confirm that democratic parents deliberately create rich social exposure opportunities to support social intelligence.

Role Play Between Parents and Child

Role-play activities emerged as another crucial strategy in the development of C1's social intelligence.

P1 described:

"We often join the child in pretend play... If the child plays as a cook, we act as customers and comment on the 'food.' This increases confidence, language skills, and closeness with the child."
(Interview with P1, 16 August 2025, 10:30 WIB)

This is supported by Armstrong's view that role-play nurtures expressive abilities, enhances confidence, and strengthens children's social skills through imagination and dialogue (Sitorus, 2021). Pretend play also aligns with Vygotsky's concept of symbolic representation, where children learn social rules and emotional roles through imaginative scenarios. Such engagement allows children to explore empathy, cooperation, and leadership in a safe environment, highlighting democratic parents' active role as play partners rather than passive observers.

Cognitive and Social Development Through Puzzle Play

Finally, caregivers also supported C1's social and cognitive growth through structured play activities such as puzzles.

P1 recounted:

"We sometimes play puzzles together... asking whether the child finds it difficult and guiding the order of the pieces. Puzzle play helps build concentration, patience, and critical thinking." (Interview with P1, 16 August 2025, 11:00 WIB)

Puzzle play encourages persistence, turn-taking, and shared problem-solving—components closely linked to early social intelligence. According to Kurniawati, puzzle

activities enhance symbolic thinking, which indirectly supports children's reasoning and cooperative behavior (Natari & Suryana, 2021). In the current study, puzzle play served as both a cognitive and socio-emotional tool, as parents used it to guide problem-solving while maintaining supportive communication.

CONCLUSION

The consistent and intentional implementation of democratic parenting has proven effective in supporting the social intelligence of a three-year-old child, particularly in the domains of confidence and empathy. This development is facilitated through a series of proactive, child-centered strategies, such as providing opportunities for decision-making, encouraging social interaction, involving the child in cooperative activities, and modeling prosocial behaviors including helping, sharing, and positive communication. These practices strengthened by the parents' active involvement in various forms of play—foster both the child's independence and sensitivity toward others. Accordingly, this study affirms that democratic parenting functions as an active and purposeful guidance process that lays a strong foundation for social intelligence from an early age.

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