How to...
Develop effective relationships in the early years

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The development of effective relationships in early years

In this How To Guide, we take a detailed into look some of the issues around relationships in the early years, why they are important and how, as childcare practitioners, you can foster them most effectively in your settings.

Children need secure relationships in the early years

Humans are sociable animals; we rely on our social connections for many things including our security, relationships, education and basic needs. As children, we need to be nurtured. We cannot fend for ourselves but need our parents or other primary caregivers to care for us, teach us, enable us, feed and clothe us and importantly, make us feel safe and secure.

But It's not just our physical requirements that need to be satisfied - we must also have our emotional and social needs met too, We must learn about friendships, about love, about who we can trust and who we cannot, and with that comes the need to learn how to deal with our complex emotional spectrum and what it means to us. We must discover cause and effect, our place in the world, what we can control and what we cannot; how to share, how to interact with others and - eventually - how to manage all these things independently. This, hopefully, comes with confidence, resilience, and a high degree of self-esteem - and that's where, traditionally, the parents' role comes into play.

In today's society, however, parents and children are often separated for a long part of each day due to parental work patterns, and so formal and informal childcare providers take over where parents leave off. It could be a grandparent once or twice a week, a childminder for a few hours, or a nursery school that provides 8am – 6pm care, 5 days a week. In all cases, these interactions often add up to a significant proportion of the child's weekly waking hours.

That's why effective relationships in the early years (0 – 5) are not only important, but are vital to the future wellbeing and mental health of the child, as well as their ability to develop into independent, compassionate, self-assured and productive members of society.

Most babies develop secure emotional attachments to their primary caregivers at an early age. During the first two years of a baby's life, their brain is developing and at this stage, it is at its most adaptable; so experiences and relationships formed at this time can profoundly affect the child's development.

Children who feel safe are more likely to take risks and become more independent, often feeling positive and confident about themselves and their abilities. Where early years children have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or negative and unpredictable responses from a caregiver, they are likely to not only develop an insecure attachment or insecure relationships, but are more likely to have attachment disorders or behavioural issues and potentially mental health problems. They may not learn to trust adults in positive ways and may avoid people, become anxious or distressed easily, and often refuse to engage with other people.

What is attachment?

John Bowlby developed his attachment theory in the 1950s and 60s. Since babies are so reliant on their caregivers for all their needs, he described attachment as a "deep and enduring emotional bond between two people in which each seeks closeness and feels more secure when in the presence of the attachment figure". He observed that there was not only a physical need to form attachments, but a psychological need as well.

In the 1970s, Mary Ainsworth conducted experiments known as the 'strange situation study', observing how infants reacted in a variety of 'strange' situations, such as when they were left alone, when their carer returned and when they were left with a stranger. She identified different styles of attachment and concluded that these attachment styles were the result of early interactions with their mother. These attachment styles were:

1. **Secure attachment –** a result of receiving positive loving behaviour from a caregiver

2. **Insecure avoidant attachment –** due to being unloved and rejected

3. **Insecure ambivalent/resistant attachment –** due to a carer's angry and confused behaviour towards the child

People with secure attachment show what is typically seen as a 'healthy anxiety' when their caregiver is absent, and relief when they are reunited.

She later added a fourth category of **disorganised attachment** for those toddlers who did not demonstrate a consistent coping mechanism.

Further research into attachment has identified attachment as a process rather than an event, with 3 clear phases:

1. **Pre-attachment -** the first few weeks of life when a newborn shows little or no preference for a particular person but instinctively begins to hold their carer's hand and make eye contact

2. **Attachment in the making -** is typically from 6 weeks to 6 months, when babies smile, imitate and show a preference for their main carer

3. **Clear-cut attachment –** from six months onwards when the baby shows distress, known as 'separation anxiety' when the main caregiver is absent

Subsequent research also identified a fourth stage which occurs in the pre-school years, where children understand that their carers also have needs of their own, and the child develops the ability to separate from their carer for longer. However, Jennie Lindon (2011) explains that 'their emotional security depends upon feeling that they are held in mind by an important person in their life".

Whilst there are claims that these studies have their limitations (such as they focused exclusively on the mother/child relationship), they have no doubt been influential in our understanding of child development and related policies. As more and more research into attachment is published, the dominant conclusion is that the 'amount, quality and consistency of care' is more important than the person doing the caring. (Susan Goldberg, 2000).

This research has filtered down into nursery practice, and has been combined with the work of Elinor Goldshmied, Peter Elfer and Dorothy Y. Selleck, and their work on the introduction of the 'key worker approach', focusing on the importance and development of the relationships that children make with their carers.

The key worker approach in early years settings

The key worker approach is now embedded into the statutory guidance for early years settings.

Article 1.10 of the current EYFS states:

Each child must be assigned a key person (also a safeguarding and welfare requirement - see paragraph 3.27). Providers must inform parents and/or carers of the name of the key person, and explain their role, when a child starts attending a setting. The key person must help ensure that every child's learning and care is tailored to meet their individual needs. The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate.

In childminding settings, the key person is the childminder themselves.

As stated in the EYFS, there are responsibilities associated with this key worker role and when it was introduced, some people assumed it to be a mostly organisational role, where the key worker signed children in and out of the setting, recorded observations of the child throughout the day and had the main responsibility for changing nappies and feeding them. However, the role is much more integrated with the whole wellbeing and development of the child than simply providing for their physical needs, as explained by the theories behind why they were introduced in the first place and the need for effective relationships, not just organisational procedures. It has benefits for both the key person, the child and the setting generally.

To be an effective key worker, it is vital that the role is understood in terms of forming relationships with the child and their parents/carers, because it is the relationships that will allow the child to thrive and not just survive. Without a key person approach, children may be cared for or 'handled' by numerous different people which can lead to children feeling insecure and potentially 'abandoned' since they have no special person with who they can begin to form trusting relationships.

What is a key person?

A key person is a dedicated and named member of an early years staff who is given responsibility for a small group of children. Each child may have one or two key people so that staff absences can be covered, but their main responsibility is to ensure that the children in their group feel safe and cared for, which will allow the child to develop secure attachments and all the benefits that this brings.

In their book, "Key Persons in the Nursery" (2003), Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied, Dorothy Y. Selleck argued that the key person needs to:

1. Connect to what the parents would normally do

2. Be special for that child

3. Make a strong and trusted link between the home and the setting

But what does this mean in practice and how can you create and develop these relationships in your settings?

Each setting is unique and so the response to this question will evoke different answers, but broadly speaking effective relationships to promote good attachment will need input from setting managers, parents/carers, the key persons and the child.

Promoting positive engagement and relationships with parents

For staff to be able to implement properly their role as a key person, they really need to understand where the parents are coming from and have established a good relationship and rapport with the parents in the first place. Some nurseries will conduct home visits prior to the children starting at the nursery to start the engagement process and to understand the parenting style of the parents or carers. If this is something that your setting does, then make sure you are following your safeguarding protocols and always have 2 members of staff on home visits.

Other ways to engage with parents should include:

• Promoting positive relationships between the setting and home in both formal and informal ways, for example, by inviting parents to coffee mornings, stay-and-play days, special events, parties etc, as well as making formal letters such as invoices or reports and observations, professional and positive in their approach.

• Meet and greet parents at the start and end of the day and engage in conversation with them, sharing observations and commenting on how the child has been during the day.

• Find ways to link things that are happening at home with things at the nursery, and vice versa.

• Use questionnaires to get parental feedback on how the child has settled in or when there are major changes that might be happening in the setting such as a change of room or key person.

• Communicate with parents via social media, newsletters, websites and blogs to ensure that communication is as broad and as accessible as possible.

• Put up daily bulletin boards, news sites and displays that parents are encouraged to view and engage with, being mindful of different languages spoken withing your parental group.

Develop trusting, communicative and reliable relationships which meet the needs of the child

Building a good relationship and rapport between a key person and a child is not automatic. It is not enough to assume that 'person A' will get on well with and build a rapport with 'child A' unless you train your staff well and plan your key person allocations according to the needs of the child, and in line with the training, education, and experience of your staff.

Some ways that you can help staff to develop their skills and build effective relationships that meet the needs of the child are:

- Match each child with a key person who is trained and experienced in the needs of that child. Therefore, if you have children with special educational or sensory needs, ensure that their key person fully understands the complexities that the child may face and is able to advocate for the child and their needs, to both parents, setting staff and other outside organisations if necessary.

- In a similar way to special needs, ensure that the key person can understand and cultural, religious or and family background of the children in their care, so that they can respond sensitively and appropriately.

- Foster a culture of empowerment whereby children are the centre of all practice and are empowered to do things that will help them grow rather than having procedures and checklists that are driven primarily by a business protocol.

- Make sure the key person is involved in planning the activities and curriculum for their children so that they have more ownership of the work they are doing and are able to engage in the activities in sensitive and positive ways; after all, 'what you put in is what you get out!'.

- Train your staff well in managing sensitive and challenging behaviour, ensuring they are conversant in techniques which understand that behaviour is a form of communication and that their response will have an impact on what that child learns from each interaction. For example, do they know how to validate and name emotional responses and are they equipped with ways to explain to the child how they might meet their own needs better using alternative behaviours?.

- Offer a mentoring approach to new staff to help them learn from more experienced staff and have a forum for questions and situations that may arise.

- Ensure that your staff can communicate with other staff within the setting in positive and efficient ways too. Inter-staff relationships are just as important as those with the parents/carers and child and may include things such as giving allergy information, reporting absence and accidents/incidents, and making sure that other staff understand if there are changes in a family situation that other staff need to be aware of.

The key person will also have responsibility for reporting and keeping records for the children in their care and you should ensure you have systems in place that allow them to do this without taking them unnecessarily away from their key person role, which is to interact with, nurture and look after the child. Therefore, nursery management systems and software that reduce paperwork and staff workload, are preferrable.

Observe, report and review

Finally, as a setting, it is important to note that building effective relationships takes time and is not a static situation. Family situations change, experiences teach people different things and relationships need constant work if they are to be maintained. Forming an effective relationship is not something that you can tick off on a spreadsheet and move on from. It will require constant observation for new inputs, reporting of any potential changes or problems, and regular reviews to make sure that the relationships are operating at their best. There will be challenges to overcome, from staff leaving to logistical problems, but if everyone is pulling together with one aim, keeping the needs of the child in mind, then these should not get in the way of the development and sustaining effective relationships.

References and further reading

Websites

- Early Years Foundation Stage
- What is an attachment disorder?
- Mayo clinic – attachment disorders
- Patient information leaflet on attachment disorders
- Positive relationships and key workers – early years matters
- Attachment theory and key person approach

Books and research

- *How Children Learn*. Linda Pound, Step Forward Publishing Ltd, 2005
- *Understanding Child Development: Linking Theory and Practice*. Jennie Lindon, Hodder Arnold, UK, 2005.
- *Key Persons in the Early Years: Building Relationships for Quality Provision*. Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied, Dorothy Y. Selleck. David Fulton, UK, 2003.
- *Attachment and Development*. Susan Goldberg, Arnold, London, 2000

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