

Attachment and the Key Person Role

The first few months of a baby's life are important for the development of attachment. "Time spent together is crucial for a parent to tune into a baby's non-verbal signals and to feel that a personal relationship is growing through smiles, gurgles, long stares and pre-verbal exchanges of sound." Lindon (1998)

For babies who spend much of their early life in out of home settings, the relationship between a baby and a key person or persons in that setting is especially significant.

Selleck (2001) points to a growing body of literature which emphasises the importance of a continuing attachment relationship which links between key persons/practitioners who care for, play with and educate children in settings outside their homes in close association with children's significant attachment figures from home. She argues that "in the beginning, only the presence of a parent (or committed regular key person in the nursery) can provide the continuity, attention and sensuous pleasure the baby needs to make sense of all his or her experiences and set in motion the process of mental development".

Familiarity, pattern and predictability give older babies a sense of being themselves. Continuity of attention from key people who know children well, who are interpreting and responding to their gestures and cues enable children to attend to their inclinations and to play freely. From the substantial continuity of regular contact with a few familiar people, toddlers may enjoy an increasing range of relationships and activities." Rustin et al (1997)

In relation to nursery settings, the National Standards describe key persons as "providing a vital link with parents and carers and crucial in settling children into the setting". Ofsted (2001) The key person approach has been described as: "A way of working in nurseries in which the whole focus and organisation is to enable and support close attachments between individual children and individual nursery staff." "The key person approach is an involvement, an individual and reciprocal commitment between a member of staff and a family. It is an approach which has clear benefits for children and parents, the key person and the nursery." Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2002)

Selleck (2001) describes these clear benefits as follows:

- **For the baby or young child**
The key person(s) makes sure that, within the day to day demands of a nursery each child feels special and individual, cherished and thought about by someone in particular while they are away from home. It is as if she or he were 'camped out in the key person's mind' or that there is an elastic thread of attachment which allows for being apart as well as for being together. The child will experience a close relationship which is affectionate and reliable in the nursery as well as at home.
- **For parents, particularly mothers**
The key person(s) approach ensures having the opportunity to build a personal relationship with 'someone' rather than 'all of them' in the nursery. The benefits

are likely to be peace of mind, and the possibility of building a partnership with professional staff who may share with you the pleasures and stresses of child rearing. It is liaising with someone else who loves your baby or child too.

- **For the key Person**

The key person approach is intense, hard work and a big commitment. This relationship makes very real physical, intellectual and emotional demands upon the key person which need to be understood, planned for and supported by the nursery policies and management. The benefits in being and becoming a key person are feelings that you really matter to a child and to their family. You are likely to have a powerful impact on the child's well being, their mental health, and their chances to think and learn. These powers and responsibilities will touch on feelings of pleasure and pain, the joys and reliefs of partings and reunions and the satisfactions and anxieties of being key people in a child's formative early years care and education.

- **For the Nursery**

The key person approach also has benefits for the nursery as an organisation with more satisfied and engaged staff, better care and learning for the children, and a parent clientele who are likely to develop a more trusting confidence in the competencies, qualities and devotion of professional staff. There are indications that this approach reduces staff sickness, absence and develops involvement and positive attitudes to professional development within staff teams.

NB A 'key person', not a 'key worker'

The terms 'key worker' and 'key person' are often used interchangeably in nurseries as well as in other areas of social care for example in hospitals or in work with people with mental or physical disabilities. Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck draw a clear distinction between the two terms. A 'key worker' is often used to describe a role that is about liaison or co-ordinating between different professionals or between different disciplines, making sure that services work in a co-ordinated way. It is quite different from the 'key person' role which has been defined above. The term 'key worker' is also used to describe how staff work strategically in nurseries to enhance smooth organisation and record keeping. This is only a part of being a key person, which is an emotional relationship as well as organisational strategy.

The importance of the key person in the lives of babies and young children is outlined by Rosie Roberts, former Director of PEEP. She asks the following question:

Are you a specialist?

Every parent is a specialist, in relation to his or her own child. And every worker in early childhood education and care is also a specialist, in child development. The best possible start that babies and young children can have is when these two specialists come together to share their knowledge and experience and understanding with each other.

Being important people

Before birth, babies are literally attached to their mothers. After birth this very important attachment mostly continues although they are physically separate. Soon other people become important too – dads, and perhaps siblings and grandparents. These first relationships continue to be especially important whether children start to move between home and the wider world at three months or three years, or any time

in between. But spending time in a setting means that babies and young children will have new important people as well. This is very good for them, as long as they can start with a 'special' person who knows all about them and is usually around. They need their 'specialists' to be in regular communication!

Feeling safe

Babies and young children need time to make special relationships and build up trust, just like adults. These special relationships make vital foundations for babies' and young children's development: their mental and physical health, and their ability to wonder, think and learn. At home they can grow naturally, day after day, week after week, year after year. In nurseries, the main way to help these relationships to grow is to have a key person approach (described by Elfer et al 2002). Each family is given a key person at nursery who gets to know them well, and this helps everyone to feel safe. A baby or young child knows that this special person and your important people at home often do the same things for you.

- They help you manage through the day
- They think about you
- They get to know you well
- They sometimes worry about you
- They get to know each other
- They talk about you

Looking through the framework

This framework shows four aspects of babies' and young children's development: inner strength, skilful communication, competent learning, and physical and mental health. Within these aspects are the elements that make up this picture of the youngest children. Each of these elements is a different piece of the jigsaw that makes up each child's full potential. But each of these elements will only flourish in the context of special relationships. All this development can happen wherever the child is – sometimes at home, sometimes in other places, as long as the child feels secure. The framework itself offers many ways for helping special relationships to grow, as well as including other sources of information, ideas and support. (See CD ROM)

When babies and young children have this security, life becomes easier for everybody... and their strength, skill, competence and health can thrive and develop.

References

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