



## Key messages

In many respects, a childminder is automatically a key person for the children they care for. In an early years setting, it is of course much easier to care for children by teamwork and organising the key person approach needs careful planning and development. The most important points to keep in mind are:

- Being clear about why the Key Person Commitment is so important, and why working in this way matters so much to children.
- Planning for effective practice including heads and managers finding time to support practitioners by listening regularly and carefully to their experiences.
- Being prepared to take time to develop the key person approach.

## What the Key Person role means

### For the baby or young child

The key person makes sure that, within the day-to-day demands of the setting, each child for whom they have special responsibility feels individual, cherished and thought about by someone in particular while they are away from home.

### For parents and close carers at home

The key person ensures they have the opportunity to build a personal relationship with individual children rather than all children as a group in the setting. The benefits are likely to be peace of mind for parents, and the possibility for them to build a partnership with professional staff who may share with them the pleasures and stresses of child rearing. It provides an opportunity for them to liaise with someone else who loves their baby or child too. Sometimes parents speak about having to choose between being part of their child's day, and knowing the details of how she or he spends time. The key person can make sure that parents do know about their child's day and do not have to miss out.

### For the key person

The key person approach is intense, involving hard work and a big professional and emotional commitment. However, the benefits of being and becoming a key person are 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 opportunities to think and learn. These powers and responsibilities will bring feelings of pleasure and pain, the joys and relief of partings and reunions and the satisfactions and anxieties of being the key person in a child's formative early years.

### For the setting

The key person approach also has benefits for the early years setting as an organisation, making staff feel more satisfied and engaged, providing better care and learning for the children and their parents. Parents 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 and absence and develops involvement and positive attitudes to professional development within staff teams.

## Some concerns

- The key person approach does not mean that attachments with parents will be undermined. This concern seems to be based on the idea that there is a fixed amount of attachment to go round and if children have more of it in the setting, there is bound to be less at home. In fact, it seems to work the other way round: attachments at home and in the early years setting can support each other.
- The key person approach does not mean that the key person should be with their key children all the time. No parent does that and children need, and of course benefit from, interactions with other adults and children in the early years setting.
- The key person approach does not mean that children are not allowed to make close relationships with other adults. Children often choose who they want to be attached to and these choices should be respected. Exactly how children and the key person are linked needs careful thought in the early years setting.

## Why the Key Person is important

The quality of care young children receive makes a huge difference not only to the quality of each day they spend in a setting but also to their long-term future.

What matters most in 'achieving quality' is carers who are 'attentive, responsive, stimulating and affectionate'. Most practitioners try to be this for all the children they work with. However, being realistic, it is very difficult to offer all these things to all children and this makes huge emotional demands on practitioners. But the key person approach makes such relationships with children more possible and manageable to achieve for each child.

We do not need to rely on research to understand why a key person is so important to babies and young children when they are away from their main carers. It is sometimes said that the mobile phone, apart from its practical convenience, has been so successful because it enables us to keep in touch with the people who matter to us most. The key person helps the baby or child keep in touch with the idea that they are kept in mind, thought about and cared about, by their home carers and by the key person. This experience of reliable adults who remain attentive, affectionate and thoughtful is an enormously important experience. Graham's story below shows how essential a key person is to children, especially when they are tired and distressed.

### Graham's story

Graham is 15 months old and goes to nursery full time (8 am to 5.30 pm) four days each week. Graham seems to love nursery, running in each morning, delighted to see his friends. He is resilient, showing his ability to manage, especially in the earlier parts of the day, with energy, exuberance, exploratory power and some rebellious spirit. He is cared for by a very sensitive, patient, caring, consistent team of four staff who work harmoniously together.

These staff put a strong emphasis on working interchangeably as a team. They believe strongly that any one of them should be able to do anything for any child at any time. They want to avoid children making individual attachments and when one of them leaves the nursery room, she does it quietly, just slipping out.

Graham copes well with this warm, affectionate team care where he has to share the attention of the staff equally with the other children. He seems to manage this most of the time throughout the day but sometimes shows his resentment by small acts of destructiveness, throwing things, or sweeping toys off shelves.

However, towards the end of the day, when he is tired, Graham is very insistent on the individual attention of Vicky. He finds it particularly hard when other children are collected but he is still waiting for his Dad or Nan to arrive. Sometimes he tries to block the door so that parents cannot leave and he has to be gently moved to one side. At this point in the day it does not take much for Graham to cry and this is what happens when Vicky changes his nappy. But it is only when she has finished and puts him back down on the ground that he gets really upset, crying and sobbing uncontrollably. Vicky is on to the next child's nappy, though, and Graham is comforted by Brigid. He does not want Brigid, he wants Vicky, and although Brigid tries to comfort him and distract him, he cannot be consoled. But Vicky cannot attend to Graham, partly because she is changing another nappy but mostly because this is not how they work as a team and they want to actively discourage these expressions of preference by children. So Graham must stay with Brigid.

What can we learn from this observation of Graham and what he wants?

Graham does not need to be with a key person all of the time. He loves his friends at nursery and being part of a group with them for snacks, meals and story times. Membership of the group also seems to help him feel safe and confident. However, towards the end of the day, especially when he is tired, he does need a key person. Although this team would prefer to be a key team rather than key individuals, Graham has clearly decided that Vicky is the one member of staff he feels really safe and secure with and he wants to be comforted by her. It is not always possible in nursery for children to have the key person they have a close relationship with, but when it is possible, it is important that children should have that experience. It is not that the other members of the team are not competent or caring towards Graham, and Brigid does the very best she can. But it is Vicky he wants, and being child-centred means noticing that and responding to it.

### **Challenges and dilemmas – how close is too close?**

These quotes are from staff in nurseries each working with the key person approach:

- 'I think babies need to have somebody in nursery like their mummy... they need the warmth and the comfort and somebody that they can cuddle up to, that will take them for walks, sing songs to them and who's just going to allow them to be when they want to be just as when they're at home... instead of worrying about setting up activities...'
- 'There's that fine line... yes it's nice to give them a cuddle but a quick cuddle's nice, not a 20-minute cuddle... when I was at college I was taught about sitting children on your laps, not to do that and I thought, well... children of that age can become too reliant on a member of staff and you go to lunch and or home, they are still there with other staff so they need to be able to gel with all members of staff so by passing that around equally...'
- 'They're going to need cuddles and kisses if they're away from their mum and dad for nine hours a day. But you've just got to be careful that you don't baby them too much... But it's hard. You can't say to anyone how much you think you should sit them on your lap, you've got to think as a person yourself...'

Which of these views is closest to yours?

These different views of the key person role are actual quotations from experienced practitioners and represent common views about roles and relationships with young children. They could easily be held by the staff of neighbouring nurseries or even staff within the same nursery. Often, an early years practitioner might say that she does not know what the other practitioners in her team really think about how the role should be implemented. The question 'How close is too close?' in professional relationships between practitioners and children lies at the heart of professional discussions on practice. That is why it is so important to think about the feelings and points of view of practitioners as well as the feelings and points of view of parents and children. In the next section, 'Reflecting

on practice', two short scenarios indicate the kind of discussions practitioners would need to have to consider the impact of the key person role on an anxious parent or on a five-year-old child, both coming with particular backgrounds and circumstances.

### **Reflecting on practice**

Imagine what your setting seems like to a parent and their young child when they first arrive. It may seem busy, friendly, noisy, lively, exciting and fun to you.

- How might it seem to an anxious parent and their young child of 18 months who has just experienced a violent family break-up?
- How might it seem to a five-year-old who has been living in one room with a parent who is depressed and makes little conversation?

### **Time to talk and listen in groups**

Sometimes, heads and managers say that their office door is always open, so that if a member of staff needs to come and talk to them about a problem, they can do so. This is valuable but it is not enough. It risks seeing talking as something that only happens when there is a problem. For the key person approach to work really well, it is important that staff teams have time to talk together in the way described below.

'The key point is the need for regular "work discussion" groups where the only agenda is the opportunity for each worker in turn to discuss their work with children and their own feelings about the work. This is not "therapy", but a disciplined professional exercise. [Nursery] staff and childminders who have this opportunity are likely to relate better to the children, be less stressed, and have less time off for sickness.'

(Dilys Daws, Consultant Child Psychotherapist, Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust)

Of course it is very difficult for some settings to find this time when staff are working shifts and so do not necessarily finish work at the same time for meetings. But many nurseries do manage to find a way to have this talking time regularly and find it an essential and integral part of making the key person approach work well.

In the following section, a practitioner describes her experience of the value of supervision, which is individual time for discussing professional relationships in the nursery.

### **Supervision – time to talk and listen individually**

'I wasn't familiar with supervision until I came to work at [the centre] as a seconded deputy. Previously I'd worked as an Early Years Coordinator in a school in a very challenging area of [a large city] where there was a desperate – and unmet – need for the opportunity to reflect on children and issues of concern in regular carefully managed, confidential, professional meetings. At [the centre], members of the staff team (secretaries, nursery nurses, teachers, students, project manager and deputies) have at least a monthly two-hour meeting with their line manager. This is seen as so valuable that nothing is allowed to compromise it – in the rare circumstances that a meeting has to be cancelled it is immediately rescheduled. Although certain aspects, like discussion of children who are on either the Special Needs Register or the Child Protection register – form part of every month's agenda, there is also scope to focus on areas identified by either the worker or the line manager. We use this forum to look at issues like relationships with other staff members, children and parents, areas for development, and, if needed, it's the opportunity to have a good grumble about anything and everything to do with work. The supervisors are carefully trained in a range of supervision and counselling techniques and there is a negotiated contract (including a complaints procedure). Because of its obvious impact

on self-esteem and sense of personal worth, the process plays a vital part in the good working relationships between staff, parents and children and it can have a therapeutic role... Supervision (which should not be confused with appraisal or staff meeting) in my experience has a wholly positive effect on the well-being of the team. In turn, this impacts on the life of the Centre and the relationships we have with children and parents’.

(quoted in Elfer et al., 2003, p.58-59)

### **Secure attachment and the demands it may bring**

You hear it said sometimes in nursery that a child starting at a setting who settles easily and without distress is a good child. Yet distress should not be seen automatically as a bad sign. Distress can be a very normal and natural response for children when they are parted from the people they are most used to and that they love. In the following extract, it is clear how easily this can be misunderstood:

‘On Tuesday this week, Tina was on her way to work in the Baby Unit, when she had a car accident. She wasn’t badly hurt, although the car was a write-off, but she’ll be off for a couple of days. Joseph is only just one and he’s so linked himself to Tina. He just wouldn’t settle when he arrived this morning and although I tried to cuddle him, he just went all stiff – I know he just wanted Tina – not me. It was horrible for him and it’s a horrible feeling too when they don’t want you. You have got to work hard in nursery to get the children to be used to all the staff and to be able to manage with all the members of the team. You can see the problem if they get too attached to one person’.

(quoted in Elfer et al., 2003, p.6)

Does Joseph’s story show the dangers of the key person approach?

It is better to think about this scenario as showing challenges rather than dangers. The word danger implies risk and harm and of course there is no danger in this sense for Joseph. He is upset that Tina cannot be available to him and that means a challenge for him and for the other practitioners in Tina’s nursery. But although missing someone special when they cannot be available to you is painful, especially for a baby or young child, and no practitioner would chose to see a child upset, it would be far worse for a child not to be allowed to make any attachment to a special person in nursery. Even as adults, missing our own key people can be a painful experience but very few of us would avoid special relationships altogether in order to avoid the pain of separation.

Goldschmied and Selleck (1996) describe a ‘triangle of trust and communication’ between the parent or carer, the child and the key person, which incorporates trust, attachment, guilt, intimacy, anxiety, comfort, rivalry, doubt and loss.

### **Taking time to develop the key person approach**

Another theme that practitioners have found essential to keep in mind in thinking about the key person approach is the importance of allowing time for it to develop. In the following section, the nursery manager describes the way her staff implemented the key person approach in their nursery, persevering to overcome obstacles and finding huge benefits.

#### **Two- to three-year ‘apples’ room**

‘As the Manager, I along with the supervisor of the two- to three-year-olds would like to share with you some of the changes that have been implemented and the effects that this has had on the children, the staff, the parents and the overall running of the ‘apples’ room.

Within the nursery we worked to a key worker system which probably the majority of childcare practitioners today still work to. Each child had a key worker who carried out observations on them.

That key worker would plan for their children's individual needs and develop them socially, emotionally, intellectually, culturally and physically.

The key workers knew their children, and the children's abilities, and we as key workers could take the appropriate steps to help our children move forward and develop skills further, however during a visit from the under-threes training and quality advisor we discussed ways of taking the key worker role one step further for the development of both the nursery staff and the children. We felt we could build on the relationships between child and key worker and at the same time help our children become more confident.

We implemented a new system where the key worker became the key person. The key person is responsible for their children. They greet their children, feed their children, change their children's nappies, and in turn bond with their children.

Within the two- to three-year age group the staff were apprehensive about this new idea and some staff said it would not work, but all the staff were willing to try and use the techniques to the best of their abilities.

To start, things were slower as all staff had to find a routine that worked best for them as individuals and also as a group within the room. We however persevered with the new system and we feel this has had amazing effects on the running of the room and the nursery as a whole.

Within the two- to three-year room, the staff were concerned that the system may fail in the absence of individual key people, due to their key children being without their main supporter. At this time sickness and absence levels within the nursery were quite high and we as a team did not want this to affect the children's learning and development.

We therefore implemented a 'buddy' system where in the absence of a key person, their buddy would step in as a familiar support rather like a 'deputy' key person. However, since the key person approach has been in place, the sickness and absence levels have improved considerably. On speaking to individual staff members regarding sickness and absence the majority of staff had the same impression, that staff simply did not want their key children to lack their support and therefore endeavoured to be there for them each day. This has been apparent in the strong relationships that have been developed between key children and key people.

The relationships that have been created are amazing not only between child and adult but also between the staff team as a whole. The staff morale has been boosted due to everyone experiencing these changes together and the need to work closely, to ensure the day-to-day running was as smooth and consistent as possible.

To keep momentum going, within the two- to three-year room we have also implemented a system of praise where all staff have the opportunity to write positive comments about their colleagues' practice for all to see. This technique has also proved very effective and staff are genuinely keen to get into work and put 100% effort into their work, as they are being recognised for this.

The pace of development has also improved. An example of this is a young child who was toilet training and progressing at a steady rate. The child had various staff members who would encourage him to use the toilet facilities and the child would be praised effectively. When the key person approach came into play, the child had the benefit of knowing he had the support of the person he had the strongest bond with, as well as her praise and encouragement. As a result the child has more confidence in his own abilities and now uses the bathroom facilities expertly.

Due to the staff knowing their children's likes and having a broader understanding of their needs we find it easier to plan for our children taking into consideration what they may hope to achieve from the activities. We as key people have observed our children in various areas of the nursery and have recorded when the children have lacked involvement and well-being. We have looked at the two- to

three-year room through the children's eyes and have changed the room to benefit the children, and involve them more.

We feel that considerable changes have been made within the two- to three-year room, all of which have had fantastic results on the morale within the room, and the well-being of the children...

Throughout the changes, we have been fortunate enough to have the support of our parents. They have been enthusiastic about the new developments, and spoke positively about the changes that have occurred. The parents have also expressed that they feel they gain more information and support regarding their children's progress within the room. They too have built up strong relationships with the key person, and this is all beneficial to their child(ren).

We as a team would recommend that other childcare settings take on board these changes and how they have worked for us. Although at first we doubted the success, we are thrilled to have gained so much from it, and have been delighted at the progress both we and the children have made.'

Nursery Manager and two- to three-years Supervisor

### **The key person approach and three- to five-year-olds**

As children get older, sustained individual attention is more difficult but also becomes less necessary for most children. Nevertheless, it is still important to ensure key person principles continue to underpin practice and even ratios for three- and four-year-olds of 1:8, 1:10 or 1:13 means that this is still possible. The crucial element is ensuring that the children are able to begin and end their day or session in a key group with their key person. This helps to develop a sense of belonging and connection not only with the key person but with the other children too. At this age the role of the children in offering each other security, through friendships and in the sense of community of small groups, is increasingly important.

Another key aspect is the key person's role in linking with parents. As with younger children, parents always want and are entitled to opportunities to talk about their child with the adult who is spending time with them outside the home. The key person is responsible for their group's learning and development, for ensuring that no child gets overlooked and that every child is well known to at least one adult and does not get lost in a pattern of serial care.

Dorothy Selleck (2001) (see below) has written of the dangers of serial care, the opposite of key person practice.

### **The key person approach versus serial care**

For each child in the early years, between beginning in the baby room to entering a Key Stage 1 class, it is important to challenge the pattern of relationship that really amounts to serial care. Serial care has come to be accepted as the normal and acceptable transitions on to, and between, for example childminders → daycare → preschool → nursery class → Reception class → 'wrap-around'. Of course transitions may be unavoidable and necessary if for example parents move home. However, even without such major family changes, it is commonplace for a child to experience as many as six or more transitions and probably many more serial carers before the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

(Selleck, 2001, pp. 78-95)

The key person role in Reception classes for four- and five-year-olds is more difficult. However, in many Reception classes there will be more than one adult, such as a teaching assistant, working with the teacher. It should then still be possible to share the welcoming and greeting of children and apply the same principles of consistency, knowing each child well and building a close relationship with parents and close carers.

## References

Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E. and Selleck, D. (2003) *Key Persons in the Nursery: building relationships for quality provision*, David Fulton Publishers, London.

Goldschmied, E. and Selleck, D. (1996) *Communication Between Babies in their First Year*, video and booklet, National Children's Bureau, London.

Selleck, D. (2001) 'Being under three years of age: enhancing quality experiences' in Pugh, G. (ed.) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years Third Edition*. Paul Chapman Publishing, London.

## Further resources

DfES (2006) *Personal, social and emotional development training materials – birth to five*, SureStart, London.

Elfer, P. (2003) 'Close Encounters: the task of remaining professional under the emotional pressures of nursery work', *Nursery World*, 30 January.

Hopkins, J. (1988) 'Facilitating the development of intimacy between nurses and infants in day nurseries', *Early Child Development and Care*, pp.33, 99–111.

Manning-Morton, J. and Thorp, M. (2006) *Key Times: a framework for developing high quality provision for children from birth to three*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.

Selleck, D. (2006) 'Key Persons in the Early Years Foundation Stage', *Early Education*, Autumn.

Siren Films (2004) *Attachment in Practice*, Siren Films and Video Ltd., Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Siren Films (2007) *Life at Two: attachment, key people and development*, Siren Films and Video Ltd., Newcastle Upon Tyne.