

# The National Strategies

## Early Years

### Guidance: the key person in reception classes and small nursery settings

Julian Grenier, Peter Elfer, Julia Manning Morton, Dilys Wilson and Katie Dearnley

#### Introduction

**Theme:** Positive Relationships

**Principle:** Children learn to be independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.

The new Early Years Foundation Stage is bringing in an important new requirement from September 2008: each child in a nursery setting or reception class should be allocated a key person.

Sometimes a 'key person' is understood to be a person to co-ordinate observations and record-keeping for the child. Whilst an administrative system like this may be an important part of the way you work in nursery or reception, it is **not** the same as a key person system. A key person system is not principally about administration and record-keeping.

#### A key person is:

- a named member of staff who has more contact than others with the child
- someone to build relationship with the child and parents
- someone who helps the child become familiar with the provision
- someone who meets children's individual needs and care needs (e.g. dressing, toileting etc)
- someone who responds sensitively to children's feelings, ideas and behaviour
- the person who acts as a point of contact with parents.

In a large, free-flowing nursery setting, this is important because otherwise children can be cared for indiscriminately by ten or even more adults, without developing a particular relationship with anyone. Considerable research indicates that the outcomes for children in settings like these are not good: it is a system of group care that can lead to anxiety, aggression or withdrawn behaviour.

In a smaller nursery or reception class, children do not have to cope with so many different adults. But it will be helpful to think about certain points of the day, like lunchtime: are the children in the EYFS assigned to the care of specific adults at times like these? How is the transition managed? Who gives children extra help if they need it at times of transition like this?

Other elements to consider (which are part of the key person approach in smaller nursery settings and reception classes) are:

- how do parents and carers work with staff during the settling-in period?
- how do staff make sure that children feel secure when the time comes to say goodbye and stay in the nursery or reception class without the parent or carer?
- how are care routines like toileting, getting dressed or changed, eating, resting or sleeping managed for children so that they feel personalised, not institutional and uncaring?
- how are children comforted when they feel distressed or tired?
- if children's behaviour is challenging, how do you ensure that a limited number of staff who have a trusting relationship with child manage difficult incidents?

In the rest of this document, we have tried to summarise some of the important aspects of the key person approach. There is more information and guidance on the EYFS DVD and website. We think it is useful for practitioners to consider the principles and rationale behind the approach and how these can best be put into practice in each nursery setting or reception class. We think it is important that staff discuss and think about this and use professional judgment, rather than try to follow a single prescription.

### **Why have a key person?**

Can you remember or imagine what it is like to be at a party or an important meeting where you don't know anyone, or travelling alone in unfamiliar city, how comforting and reassuring it is if the party host, chair of the meeting or travel guide, introduces you to people you can join with, explains what the agenda is or shows you where the important places are. It is helpful to us all, when in a strange situation, to have someone we can rely on to interpret unfamiliar experiences for us until we feel confident to manage the situation on our own. Even then, if we feel unwell, unsure or overwhelmed, knowing that there is someone there whom we can ask for help if necessary, is reassuring and can enable us to tackle something on our own that we might otherwise avoid.

This is what key people do for their allocated group of children. Young children need to know that someone in particular keeps them 'in mind' while they are away from their parents. When they have someone who gets to know them well and supports them with in interacting with others, their confidence and well-being is supported.

### **What does having a key person mean for children?**

As adults, we value the people we are close to in our lives because they understand us well, accept our good and bad sides and give us their time and attention when we need it. Young children also need familiar and trusting relationships in order for them to develop emotional well-being.

The people we feel close to are the people we may feel most anxious about losing. They are also the people with whom we can express our feelings. Therefore young children may show their need to feel secure through clinging to their parent or key person and being uncooperative with people they do not

know well. They may protest when their parent or key person leaves them and show their distress by rejecting comfort or distraction, becoming aggressive or defiant or withdrawing and not engaging in activities. Though difficult to manage, these are ordinary ways in which children respond to separation and anxiety. In these situations, children benefit from having a key person who can accept their emotions and respond with understanding.

This does not mean condoning negative or anti-social behaviours but by acknowledging the feelings that may underlie such behaviours such as anger, anxiety, distress or jealousy gives children the message that we empathise with their difficulties even when we do not approve of their method of expressing them. Providing vocabulary for feelings will support children to become aware of their emotions.

By adopting a key person approach that emphasises the centrality of 'loving and secure relationships' to their practice (EYFS 2007), practitioners are supporting children to feel good about themselves and be confident. When children feel like this, they are more likely to be able to engage in more complex and creative play, freely access a broad curriculum and take risks in their learning through guessing, experimenting and making mistakes.

### **Being tuned in**

The key to effective early years practice is knowing the children in your group really well. This enables you to start with what the children already know and are interested in rather than what you think they should be taught. Deep knowledge and understanding of individual children comes from spending time with your key children at play, good information sharing with parents and close and regular observation. Therefore effective implementation of the Key Person Approach includes observing your key children regularly and analysing the information to both increase your understanding of the children and also to provide evidence for the records of your key children's developmental progress. Learning what your key children's conversations, play and behaviours mean will enable you to better understand the connections they are making in their learning and to engage in sustained shared thinking (EYFS, Learning and Development: Creativity and Critical Thinking).

### **Being available and responsive**

Young children understand much by observing our body language and facial expressions and will interpret these according to their previous experience, sometimes in ways that we do not intend. Therefore it is important that we make it clear to children that we are available to support them through what we do as well as what we say.

By sitting at the children's level and being involved in their play, you will show that you are available to them to come to as they need and, especially for new children, by drawing their attention to interesting things around them and smiling and nodding as they explore you will support their explorations and independence, thereby providing a secure base. It is often tempting to move away from an activity once children are 'settled' but for new children or children who find peer interactions challenging, this can be very disruptive so

practitioners need to be sensitive to when their presence and involvement in play is necessary.

### **Being consistent**

In small nursery and reception classes, where there are two members of staff working as a close team, there are good opportunities for children to experience consistent interactions and expectations. This kind of experience is important for children moving between the worlds of home and school where the environment and routine is very different.

All children benefit from the emotional security that familiarity of people, places and experience brings. This can often be overlooked in the organisation of play and lunchtime sessions, when suddenly children are expected to engage in very different routine activities with a different group of staff. Such changes in familiarity and routine can raise the stress levels of all children, though most will be able to use their existing emotional and social skills to adapt quickly to new situations. For some children such as those with additional emotional, social or learning needs, or who are newly arrived in the community and learning English as an additional language, the stress caused by frequent changes of practitioner (such as playtime, lunchtime, PE), may result in either distress or negative behaviour. Thought needs to be given to the organisation of these times so that children are given time to become gradually familiar with all the relevant practitioners, the routines and the environment over an extended period of time.

### **Liaising with parents**

To support children's sense of well-being and belonging, practitioners need to develop close working partnerships with parents in which there is mutual respect and trust. By learning about and understanding each family's customs, the practitioner can extend their knowledge of the individual child to provide effective care and learning opportunities. This means sharing information about children's:

- emotional needs, for example, any fears or worries the child has
- physical needs, for example, the degree to which the child can dress and use the toilet independently
- language and cultural heritage: can the practitioner use important words in each child's home language and are they knowledgeable about significant events in the child's cultural and religious life?

It is important to spend time with your key children's parents regularly, sharing observations and information and gathering ideas for future plans.

### **Settling in**

Starting at nursery or school can be stressful for children. They are in a strange and perhaps overwhelming environment, meeting several new children and adults, encountering unfamiliar toys and experiences, and then the person they rely on most leaves them. Settling new children into a setting successfully, with minimum distress is probably one of the most skillful and challenging things a practitioner does. It can be a fraught time for parents and children. For practitioners too, memories of their own separations and losses in life make this an emotionally charged time. For all these reasons, it can be

tempting to cut short or even dispense with settling-in times. Whilst some children might cope with the sudden loss of their parent or carer in this way, others may not. They may be damaged by the experience.

An effective settling-in system gives parents, children and practitioners sufficient time to get to know each other well before children are separated from their parents. An agreed settling in policy might include:

- advance planning of admissions
- home or initial visits
- periods of time when parents support children as they get used to the nursery or reception class
- special planning for the first day
- ways of supporting children and parents at the point of parting, and re-uniting
- guidance for parents on ways to help children at times of change.

### **Dilemmas**

The key person approach is not simple to implement. Sometimes dilemmas arise. As with all good early years practice, the best way to address these dilemmas is through observation and discussion, and making a professional judgment.

In order to be able to respond sensitively to children's feelings, practitioners need to be sufficiently open emotionally to be able to understand those feelings and yet also retain their own sense of 'adulthood' in order to hold the child's distress. Sometimes adults can find themselves responding to children's demands 'in kind'.

Some examples of this are:

- feeling overwhelmed by the crying of unsettled children who themselves are overwhelmed by being in school
- getting impatient when toddlers become frustrated

These are times when it is useful to take a step back and talk with colleagues about what is going on for the child, and think about how the adults can provide help, and set appropriate limits if necessary.

Practitioners need to understand that in order to be healthily independent, a child needs to be able to express dependency at vulnerable times.

This is an emotionally demanding and skilful area of practice that some practitioners find overwhelming and so avoid becoming close to children. Yet those that are able to be available, sensitive and responsive to their key children can take pride in knowing that not only are they contributing positively to the quality of their key child's mental model of relationships for the future, they are also assisting healthy brain development and learning abilities.

Research indicates that an effective key person approach leads to:

- better-satisfied and engaged staff
- improved care and learning for children
- parents who feel confident about the quality and devotion of professional staff.