



(Extract From) All about...Developing Positive Relations With Children

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The Individual Child

What we now call the keyperson approach was first described as 'care assignment' in a report by the Tavistock Centre, 'The design of a daycare system in a nursery setting for children under five'. The first part of the report, which recounts observations of the lives of young children in a typical nursery, makes for grim reading. The staff feel absolutely overwhelmed by the demands being made of them.

One nursery nurse describes herself as 'encumbered all about with crying ones who are pushing the others away'. Another comments, 'It's hard for a child being in the nursery, it's we, we, we, all the time, not you. It must be very difficult for a child to fit in being an I and not a we.' Care assignment, later called keyperson working by Elinor Goldschmied, was all about rediscovering the child as an individual in the nursery.

The keyperson approach is generally taken to mean that a small group of children is assigned to be overseen by a particular adult - with that adult compiling observations and reports, and liaising with the parents. This is a very inadequate understanding of the approach, which should be fundamentally about the commitment to providing consistent care and emotional support to each child, as an individual, throughout the day.

Taking this approach means that a child experiences an adult who is 'tuned in', who can develop a special and personal history with the child. In impersonal nurseries, anyone and everyone changes nappies, at a time which is convenient to the organisation. Children may be processed across the nappy changing table like tins of beans travelling along the checkout at [a supermarket].

Where there is a thoughtful keyperson system, it will almost always be the keyperson who changes the child's nappy. The keyperson will know about how the child likes to be told that a nappy change is needed, and may have special rituals and perhaps a special song for nappy changing time.

A keyperson changes a nappy in the context of a relationship with the child. If just anyone changes nappies, wipes noses and rocks children to sleep, then there are no special relationships. The care of the children becomes just another task alongside mopping floors and cleaning tables.

Some children will respond to this type of impersonal care by appearing to be 'good' in nurseries, and settled. They know what to do in order to get at least a little bit of positive attention, but they are often rather passive and institutionalised. There is something lifeless about them, a lack of aliveness and quickness in their body language. Some other children respond to this type of care by seeming to be unreasonably difficult, demanding, or aggressive. They literally fight for attention.



Sensitivity and Openness

The many excellent books about the keyworker system will help practitioners understand its importance and how to implement it. But I hope one point is clear from this guide - that developing positive relationships with children in nurseries is not simply about the personalities of staff members.

To be able to develop good relationships with young children, practitioners must have the sensitivity, openness and capacity to enjoy their company and manage their demands. But there is much more to it than this. It requires consistency and a whole-staff approach. Nothing undermines a staff member more than when their careful work with a child is dismissed as 'fussing' or 'spoiling'.

On the other hand, there may be legitimate concerns about whether a staff member is providing the consistent emotional support and care that young children need. Such concerns need to be addressed in the context of a clearly stated approach to working closely and intimately with the children.

Keyperson work requires organisational flair. It is not easy to organise staff rotas and breaks around the emotional needs of children. But alongside well-managed shifts, rotas, breaks, staff leave and sickness, it is important that individual staff can bend and shape the organisation of the day when they judge it necessary. What will happen at lunchtime, if a member of staff knows that one key child is feeling too vulnerable to be taken to the table and become one of four or more children wanting attention from just one adult?

There is no simple answer to dilemmas like these, which is why keyperson working is not a quick makeover. It is a process that requires staff to have an openness to noticing children's needs, and requires managers and heads to give staff the autonomy they need to adapt to the children and alter routines as necessary. No nursery can meet a child's every need, but we can work towards creating nurseries that are 'good enough' for every child.

Relating to a Child in Distress

Recently at Kate Greenaway Nursery School, a child came in quite distressed and was received by his keyperson. In the next few minutes, a whole host of events happened in the room. Another child came in needing support; someone else bumped her head; a child scattered equipment about the place. But throughout, the rest of the team helped the keyperson and managed the situations as well as they could.

The keyperson sat, quietly, with the child as he finished his bottle. She soothed him as he cried, without trying to jolly him out of his sadness.

The child became more relaxed and snuggled into her, still upset. The room was a mess, but the child was absolutely as safe and secure as he could be, and a little while later fell asleep. When he woke up, it was again his keyperson who sat quietly with him and helped him to manage the first moments between sleepiness and wakefulness.

She waited for some time before gently helping him put on his clothes. She sat and let him watch the play that was unfolding in the nursery until she saw he was looking around and taking an interest. Then she gently introduced him into the flow of the room.



Tuning In

Open and Honest

I think that to develop positive relationships with children, adults must begin by trying to be open, genuine and honest. Although I like being with young children, it is also important for me to face the fact that children can sometimes be difficult, hard to like or aggressive, and can make demands that feel quite unreasonable.

When I first read Anna Freud's description of her nursery in London as a 'community of savages', I was shocked - and yet also, in a sense, refreshed. We are all a mass of muddled feelings and good intentions. Our capacity to love and be loved is messed up with envy, aggression and hostility.

Young children have much less social experience, and less capacity to make their own choices, and as a result their conflicting emotions are often much nearer the surface, and more directly troubling. When children in the nursery cry inconsolably or throw a tantrum, they stir up lots of difficult feelings in me - and in any of the adults who are spending time with them.

The approach that I am advocating depends on each of us, as practitioners, trying to manage our responses and emotions in a way that is helpful to the children. I am convinced that all nursery staff are emotionally affected when, for example, a child is often tearful. It may stir up feelings of unhappiness from their own childhood; or it may make them think about times when their own children are distressed. I think it is important for them to stop for a moment and reflect: how am I feeling? What is this doing to me?

Crying Babies

This moment of 'tuning in' can be helpful in unexpected ways, because young children often throw out emotions that they find impossible to deal with themselves. A moment of tuning in to our own responses may help us to think about what emotion a child is throwing out.

Crying babies can make our heads spin, leaving us feeling lost, useless and hopeless. Stopping and addressing this can help us to understand something of the emotions of the baby.

Similarly, when children hurt others, especially if they hurt a child who is younger or more vulnerable, we can often feel a strong surge of dislike or anger.

Again, tuning into this feeling can help us in two ways. First, we can realise that we must control ourselves and respond calmly to the situation.

Second, it might help us understand something about the child who is doing the hurting, who may feel angry about something, or feel rejected and unliked.

I think it is essential, in seeking to develop positive relationships with young children, to accept children's emotional expressions - whether these are positive or negative - and to seek to understand them.

Practitioners also need to use the skills they have developed from experience and training: communicating in a way that is appropriate to the child's development, remaining calm, ensuring that an orderly environment is maintained for all the children in the group.



Finally, each individual practitioner needs support and feedback from others in the team. I try to ask questions like: is it just me, or does everyone find this aspect of a child difficult to manage? I need to be open to the fact that my response is more about me, than it is about the child.

I need to find out whether others have a better way of managing the situation. As a team, we need to ensure that we are being fair and consistent.

A Difficult Start to the Day

A two-year-old boy, Kobi, came into nursery clinging to his mother's legs, with his face pressed against her trousers. He did not look at his keyperson or any of the other children. Kobi's keyperson sat on the floor next to him and his mother. She knew that his mother had to get off to work soon and that she must be feeling worried and upset in case there was going to be a difficult scene.

The keyperson had spent several weeks, when Kobi first started, helping him to settle in gradually. She knew that he would accept comfort from her when upset. The keyperson suggested to Kobi's mother that the situation should be managed clearly and honestly. Kobi's mother sat next to the keyperson and handed Kobi to her, saying goodbye and giving him a kiss. Kobi was angry as his mother left.

The keyperson did not try to distract Kobi, but said soothingly, 'I know that was really difficult and you must be feeling very sad.' She lifted Kobi up and carried him. Kobi did not look around the nursery and cried very loudly, burying his face into her, so that she knew he was accepting comfort from her.

After five minutes he started to look around, so she held him more loosely so he could turn his body around more freely. She sat with him on her lap and he watched the other children playing. The keyperson did not try to engage Kobi in any play, but watched and continued to soothe him. A few minutes later he joined another child in playing with the Duplo.

He kept his coat and rucksack on for a further hour and the staff, knowing he got comfort from this, did not intervene. The keyperson arranged for the nursery secretary to telephone his mother at work with the message that he had settled in and was playing.

Comment

In this example, the keyperson has accepted Kobi's feelings at every stage, and allowed him to express them. The adult's acceptance of a difficult feeling can help the child to accept it too - acceptance being the first part of the process of Kobi's developing ability to manage emotions for himself.

Kobi's keyperson could have rejected his emotions, saying something like 'You're a big boy to cry like that'. Then Kobi might find it difficult to have any sureness about how he was feeling. He would feel sad, for the good reason that he had been parted from his mother, but others would seem to be saying that it is wrong to feel like this.

When children have repeated experiences like that, they can develop a kind of false front to the world, presenting the feelings that others seem to want, not the genuine feelings from within. Children with these kinds of experiences in nurseries can seem to 'fit in' and do what is expected, while showing little real interest in anything, little creativity, and little inventiveness.



Points for discussion

- Do you acknowledge and accept children's emotions, even when this is uncomfortable for you?
- Do you wait and watch for children to signal that they are feeling calmer and more settled, rather than trying to distract them and hurry them into activities?
- Do you show sympathy to upset children by picking up on their body language - in other words, using soothing and quiet tones and small gestures, rather than being loud and exuberant when a child is sad?
- Have you thought about how different children have different ways to be settled? Do you know which children like to be held, and those who like to be left alone? Which children are best settled by being around their peers or by finding a comforting experience to join in?

When Children Are Unkind To Others

Jabad is a four-year-old boy. He is running in the nursery garden when he spots Shamima, a younger child who has special needs. Jabad pushes Shamima over and kicks her while she is on the ground.

The staff member outside goes calmly but swiftly over and holds Jabad by the hand to move him away and stop him. She comforts Shamima and helps her gently to her feet. She points out to Jabad how Shamima is still crying and feeling sad, and asks if Jabad can think of any way to help. Jabad agrees to get a tissue.

When Jabad comes back, the staff member encourages Shamima to say, 'Don't kick me again' to Jabad. The member of staff repeats the boundary clearly, telling Jabad that 'There is no kicking in nursery' and telling him that he will have to wait a couple of minutes with her before he can continue to play.

Jabad is upset now. The member of staff sits quietly with him, and then a few minutes later she helps him to join in with the water play.

Comment

In this example, the keyperson has helped Jabad to understand the impact of his behaviour on another child. She has encouraged him to empathise with the hurt child, and she has been clear that a boundary has been crossed and that this has a consequence - he will lose some of his freedom to play for a few minutes.

The member of staff has not asked Jabad 'Why did you do that?' - a question that, as a four-year-old, he is not developmentally able to answer. Nor has she demanded a formal apology, which may be grudging and insincere. The keyperson knows that Jabad has a difficult time at home with his young parents, who are isolated and lacking in confidence, but she also knows that Jabad needs to understand the boundaries at nursery.

Once everyone has calmed down from the original incident, she gives him some extra attention and support at the water tray, showing him that he can gain positive attention and approval from adults.



By showing that she can manage his behaviour, that she is not overwhelmed by his act of unkindness, the staff member has helped Jabad to see himself as someone who is capable of positive as well as negative behaviour. Jabad is not a bad person. Appreciating the whole of his personality, she helps him to see his aggression as just part of his personality, not the whole story; and something that can be managed, not something that takes over.

Points for discussion

- When a child's behaviour is nasty and unreasonable, are you able to consider whether there may be a reason or explanation for this from the child's point of view?
- Can you communicate your ability to manage the situation, with a calm and firm response? Can you show that you are not rejecting everything about the child?
- Do you take account of children's developmental stage when managing difficult incidents? Younger children cannot really understand the consequences of their actions, or easily wait and share. They need adults to help them begin to understand social conventions, in a way that is clear and also sympathetic

FURTHER READING

- Key Times: a framework for developing high-quality provision for children under three years by Julia Manning-Morton and Maggie Thorp (Camden EYDCP and the University of North London)
- The design of a daycare system in a nursery setting for children under five by Alistair Bain and Lynne Barnett (The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations)
- People under three by Sonia Jackson and Elinor Goldschmied (Routledge)
- Key persons in the nursery: Building relationships for quality provision by Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied and Dorothy Selleck (David Fulton)
- Relationships and learning: caring for children from birth to three by Anna Gillespie Edwards (National Children's Bureau)

Grenier, J. (1999) *All about...DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN*. Nursery World, 16th September. Pages 12-13