Practical Pre-School Books

The Key Person Approach

Positive Relationships in the Early Years

Jennie Lindon

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by Jenniе Lindon

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A focus on positive relationships

The early years of a child's life are especially important: the quality of those experiences set the scene for the future. Young children build a set of expectations about their personal world and their place in it. Over early childhood they need to have developed strong, affectionate, sustained relationships with a small number of people. Children's first and most enduring bond is within their own family. However, a high proportion of young children in the UK spend time – sometimes a significant amount of time – as the responsibility of non-family adults, within the different types of early years group provision and the childminding service.

The development of attachment

Babies and very young children need to develop secure emotional attachment to familiar figures over their early childhood. Strong, sustained emotional bonds are the foundations for healthy development. This section offers a brief description of a complex area of practical research; you will find more detail in Lindon (2009b and 2010b) and Elfer et al (2003).

There is very good reason to be concerned if circumstances mean that babies and very young children do not make a strong emotional attachment to a key family carer, and a very small number of other trustworthy, familiar adults. It really does seem that a template for future relationships rests on these early experiences. Young children cannot fend for themselves and their need for personal care should be met within a consistent experience of feeling nurtured. Their view of the social world is also shaped by whether important relationships are disrupted. Even the most resilient of children will give up eventually if familiar people, of whom they have become fond, disappear from daily life. Emotionally weary young children may resist getting acquainted with yet another unfamiliar person.

The initial approach to the significance of attachment developed in the mid-1940s when John Bowlby studied a group of juvenile delinquents. Looking back into their personal histories, he found that many had experienced disruption in their early family attachments. Bowlby also documented the emotional distress of children who were evacuated from English cities in the early stage of the Second World War. Consistent with the prevailing theory of the time, Bowlby interpreted the emotional disruption in terms of the children's loss of their mother. However, the evacuated children had been separated from other key family members; even siblings were sometimes allocated to different host families.

From the beginning, some child psychologists challenged Bowlby's interpretation of events. It is often unrecognised but, by the mid-1950s, Bowlby had moved from his original position that young children would suffer serious negative consequences if they were not continuously with their mother in particular. He was open to the importance of other key carers and the impact that separation from them could have on children. John Bowlby continued his research into the importance of early attachment, sometimes working with Mary Ainsworth, who explored ways to judge the strength of attachment between very young children and their mother from reactions to separation in an unfamiliar situation.

A resurgence of interest in attachment theory from the 1990s onwards has allowed for the reality that mothers are the important primary carer for many young children. However, the approach recognises that babies and children also develop strong attachments within their immediate family to their father, siblings and other relatives. Babies and young children tend to have a preferred familiar person, especially in times of upset or uncertainty. However, the young of the human species are

very social individuals under normal circumstances. The key factor for emotional security and psychologically healthy attachment is that other familiar adults, often family members, give sustained time and attention to get to know a baby or young child as an individual.

A greater understanding of how young children's brains develop has grown over the late 20th and early 21st centuries – much the same period when professionals involved with early years revisited the importance of attachment within early childhood. The human brain is highly responsive to events: the neural connections made within individual brain development are shaped by a child's experiences. What happens to children over early childhood really does matter. They build up an image of themselves, how they are treated and what they should expect in the future, especially of adults.

Even babies are working hard to make sense of their personal world. That task is made easier, and emotionally more supportive, when babies and young children recognise familiar ways of being treated. A small number of caring adults show that they believe it is worth their time to adjust to what makes this baby at ease, or dovetails with this child's interests and preferences. In contrast, fragmented and disrupted relationships mean that young children develop doubts about their own self worth. In a desperate bid for attention – any kind of attention – they often learn patterns of behaviour that bring further troubles.

The human brain works on electrical impulses plus chemicals and the balance within our body chemistry is directly affected by experiences. (You can read more about this area of research in Gerhardt 2004; Healy 2005; or Tayler 2007.) Cortisol, a steroid hormone, is important within the biochemistry of the brain. Human brains need cortisol; it is released in times of stress and helps the individual to focus on keeping safe and dealing with possible risks in an unfamiliar situation. Studies of cortisol levels have found that it tends to be raised when young children have to deal with a significant change in their familiar care arrangements. Examples have included starting at day nursery or the early weeks of primary school. The cortisol level tends to drop as young children feel more at ease. It is hard to be sure how much children are directly emotionally ill at ease, and how much they are sensitive to the emotional distress of their parent. Parents are often uneasy or even upset when settling their toddler in nursery or leaving slightly older child at school. Even very young children recognise when a loved parent is not behaving normally and the child may mirror that anxiety or distress.

Cortisol levels are the internal chemical marker of what can be seen from the facial expression and other body language of a distressed child. All children will have times when they have to cope with change. Sensitive adult support – for instance through the key person approach – enables them to face future changes with a greater sense of confidence. However, young children whose early experiences are very unpredictable tend to have higher average levels of cortisol than peers whose life is emotionally more secure. The insecure and permanently alert young children are busy trying to work out what is happening today or how to get this person's attention. Without a secure and sustained relationship – in the family home or non-family provision – even very young children expect trouble and are constantly in a state of having to look out for themselves. Their pattern of behaviour makes warm relationships with adults or other children even more problematic.

Emotional wellbeing in early years provision

In past decades young children in the UK rarely spent all their time as the sole responsibility of their mother until they started primary school. Children often spent some time with grandparents or experienced informal care from family friends. Increasingly, over threes attended part-time provision, for instance in a nursery class or playgroup. However, from the 1990s onwards there was a significant increase in different