

“We have a responsibility to create a happy and relaxed atmosphere...”



An emotionally aware staff team is central to providing a nurturing environment for children, says **Cath Hunter...**

The quality of the professional relationships between staff in early years settings can create either a supportive and effective team or a workplace characterised by conflict. To achieve the former, the relationships must incorporate open and honest communication, along with mutual respect and appreciation. In turn, they can be modelled for children, with obvious benefits for their development. Conversely, if a staff team aren't happy and working in harmony together, it can result in disharmony between the children. Some children are very tuned in to relationships and will recognise atmospheres and behaviours through the verbal and non-verbal interactions of staff that can make them worried and anxious.

Good communication

To build and maintain supportive professional relationships, practitioners need to be emotionally aware. This involves being able to recognise and acknowledge both their strengths and areas to improve on, and accept feedback from their colleagues. However, this isn't always easy to do and can cause tension between members of staff.

It's important, therefore, for staff to explore how they communicate with each other, both verbally and non-verbally, for example, do you sigh or complain if you're asked to work with a particular person? It's beneficial to keep checking yourself and how you respond and react to situations. An honest appraisal of the real reasons behind your behaviour can help to diffuse situations and make them easier to manage. If you are leading a team, you also need to consider situations that may occur during the day that can cause anxiety or stress for others and ensure that these are responded to in a professional manner and not transferred on to the children.

It can also be hard not to bring our responses to experiences outside of work into work with us. For example, if you're late for work because your car wouldn't start, you may find your frustration surfacing during the



day. Having an awareness of this risk will help to ensure that it doesn't impact on either your relationships with the children or your colleagues.

Try using a self-awareness checklist that you ask yourself on your journey to work every morning:

- What am I bringing to work with me today?
- How may this impact on the staff and children in a positive or negative way?
- What can I do with these feelings so that they don't impact on my work?

Emotional vocabulary

There are endless opportunities throughout the day to reflect and share experiences about how we feel about situations as they occur. For example, if a member of staff is absent this can be shared with the children and the potential feelings acknowledged by saying, "It feels sad when Sally is not in and we all miss her." It's useful to consider situations that we may find difficult to manage as adults, such as working in a different room or with another member of staff, and ask ourselves how the children may feel about this.

As adults we have developed language skills that enable us to share our thoughts and feelings. Children's language skills are not as highly developed and they need us to provide them with the emotional vocabulary to help them learn to articulate their feelings. For staff, developing self-awareness will help them to avoid using dismissive phrases such as 'don't be silly' which discount a child's feelings and can exacerbate their fears. The greater their self-awareness, the better staff will feel and the more they will be able to provide children with the emotional vocabulary they need.

Meeting children's needs

Adults working in childcare settings have a responsibility to create a happy and relaxed atmosphere for children. It's a demanding job, and in order for staff to work most effectively and give their best, they need to feel happy and fulfilled. It's important that they feel they are making a difference and that they are an essential part of the team.

Settings need to be emotionally safe for staff in order to be emotionally safe for children. This involves staff being able to discuss challenges openly and honestly, and ask for and accept support when it's needed. The increased awareness of practitioners' own feelings can result in increased awareness of the children's feelings: the more staff are able to develop understanding of their own behaviour and wellbeing, the better equipped they are to meet those needs and respond accordingly to the children in their care.

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Emotional awareness

FIVE POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO CONSIDER...

- The more aware you are of your behaviour, the easier it is to change it.
- Think of how you communicate verbally and non-verbally to adults and children.
- Share emotional vocabulary with children so they are able to develop their own.
- Develop a habit of using the self-awareness checklist each day.
- Accept and provide support to your colleagues.