

“Nurseries need to reassure parents...”

Sarah Heale looks at what mums and dads may demand of practitioners as they become more aware of the importance of attachment...



Although parents have a more natural and intuitive understanding about attachment to their child, many nurseries have a better understanding of the theory when it comes to childcare. Part of the role of practitioners has been to explain to parents the importance of the relationship between the child and key person.

But some parents can feel uneasy about the key person getting close to their child. In a recent study, Dr Jools Page, who coined the phrase ‘professional love’, asked six mothers of babies under a year old whether they wanted professional carers to love their babies. One mother, in particular, had “struggled with the idea of her son being cared for by one person and moved her son from the childminder to a nursery...because she was worried that she would somehow lose her role in her son’s life.”

These views were echoed in a WATCH? poll of mums with under-threes (2012). A third of them said that “social and educational opportunities” were more important to them than “a close and loving bond between child and carer” when making a choice about childcare.

But are these parental views driven by ignorance or denial? Jasmina Haigh, manager of kidsunlimited nursery in Carshalton, said, “You have to be really careful when telling a parent that a child reached a milestone at nursery like taking their first steps. A lot of parents get really upset that these important things can happen when they are not there.”

Not only do nurseries have to explain to parents why a child under-three needs loving care when away from their parents, they also need to reassure them how the nursery provides this. Like the mother highlighted above, many parents will think a nursery is the worst childcare option when it comes to attachment. There is research which shows that nurseries can be detrimental to a child’s physical and emotional health because close relationships with adults can be harder to

forge than in a home-based setting. So as the debate about attachment and childcare becomes mainstream, there will be greater scrutiny of the strategies used in nurseries, in particular the key person approach.

Be prepared

To put you on the front foot, below I have outlined the advice that WATCH? will soon publish to help parents choose the best childcare for attachment. How would you answer these questions if a potential new customer put them to you?

QUESTIONS TO MANAGERS:

- What systems and processes are in place to support attachment and foster a strong relationship between the child and the key person?
- When my child reaches certain age milestones will she/he have to change key person?
- What percentage of the time will my child be without her/his key person?
- How does the nursery induct new children?
- Can I stay with my child until he/she is attached to the key person?
- Do staff go on attachment training that provides them with a firm understanding about infant brain development and attachment?
- Does the nursery use controlled crying techniques or do you try to comfort a crying child immediately?
- Is positive discipline used or are punishments given for misbehaviour?

If your nursery does have answers to these questions, but they do not feature in your marketing materials, then you may want to think about how they could. If your answers are likely to turn a parent off – e.g. 30 per cent of the time they will be without their key person and there’s no training on attachment – then you probably need a root and branch review of your attachment strategy with a view to changing policies, procedures and culture.



about the author

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Below are some qualities which WATCH? advises parents to look for in the key person. How would you and your colleagues measure up?

HOW TO OBSERVE KEY PERSON INTERACTIONS:

- Does she look into the child’s eyes and communicate on their level with a comforting tone of voice?
- Does the child seem to enjoy the key person’s company?
- Does she hold and cuddle the child?
- Does she seem to understand the child’s needs and respond accordingly?
- Is she soothing when the child is distressed?
- Does she use positive language and encourage the child?
- Is she using gentle discipline if the child misbehaves?

Looking at your nursery through the lens of a parent who is knowledgeable about, and looking for, a nursery with an ‘attachment kitemark’ gives you a different perspective. It may trigger some of the management changes I touched on last time, e.g. reducing key person switches and ‘burning the rosters’, or at least helping change the philosophy and culture.

My final article, in the next issue, will be looking to the future and how the issue of attachment in nurseries is likely to progress over the next few years.