

“Words like ‘love’ need to become commonplace...”

As the attention of policy makers shifts away from the emotional needs of children, the sector must not forget the importance of attachment, says

Sarah Heale...

As I conclude this series of articles on attachment I'm inclined to look towards the future and ask what attachment in nurseries will look like in five to 10 years' time.

Currently, the DfE seem to be steering away from the emotional dimensions in the early years and towards the 'schoolification' of this unique period of life. This is worrying from an attachment point of view as under-threes sitting at desks are not going to develop the loving bonds with adults so necessary for optimal brain development. After all, Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, highlighted the importance of interaction and relationships to learning in the early years; for him, learning is an act of social interaction.

In addition, there is no reference to emotion or emotional wellbeing in Ofsted's most recent annual early years report (2012). And safeguarding advice can sadly conflict with attachment policies. In the EYFS 2012 safeguarding and welfare requirements section, "excessive one-to-one attention beyond the requirements of their usual role and responsibilities" is given as an example of inappropriate behaviour by a practitioner. This is completely at odds with another part of the same document, which states the need for the key person to have "a settled relationship for the child and build[ing] a relationship with their parents".

Into practice

Although some nursery chains – like kidsunlimited and Co-operative Childcare – have made great strides in putting attachment at the heart of their policies, the gap between theory and practice is sometimes too wide. Making close relationships with the babies and young children of others can often be difficult and demanding. Practitioners need time to talk these interactions through. No one, however experienced or qualified, is likely to do this work



well if the emotional demands of the work are not well recognised by managers. Shift work, staff turnover, room changes and children spending long hours in nursery are all further challenges to the key person philosophy.

Peter Elfer, principal lecturer and programme convenor for the MA Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton, and architect of the key person approach, says: "We need a turn in early years policy to give serious and renewed attention in policy to the emotional dimensions of nursery organisation and practice".

Elfer also calls for professional reflection – individually and in groups – including reflection on the emotional aspects of their work. This would enable staff to share and learn together as well as develop the confidence to negotiate what constitutes 'good quality' for them and what is entailed in facilitating it.

Changing culture

The sophisticated emotional work required to manage these interactions is only just being recognised in policy. A new statutory requirement in the English and Welsh Early Years curriculum (DfE 2012) for all staff to have access to regular opportunities for professional reflection is an important step forward. When staff feel cared about and understood, including their emotional responses to the work, both positive and negative, they are more likely to be more attentive and responsive to individual children and families. This is the culture we need to aim for.

But beware the difference between theory and practice. It is easy to talk a good 'attachment game' and have the policies in place, but if it is not embedded in the culture, then what really happens at the coalface will



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always remain unchanged. Close relationships involve a lot of emotional energy, and some nursery cultures avoid attachment as it creates more work and inevitably results in children being treated differently. This culture of seeing needy children as 'attention seeking' or labelling cuddling as 'not proper work' is damaging to children's mental health.

Andrea Leadsom, Tory MP and leader of a cross-party group that wants a commitment from David Cameron and Nick Clegg to move £40-million a year of government spending from older children to under-twos, says, "Very often the least qualified staff are looking after the youngest children. The very young girls who are least trained won't necessarily realise that gazing into babies' eyes, mimicking their expressions [and] saying 'I love you' is really important to their brain development."

We need to fight to change the language used by practitioners. Words like 'love', 'respect' and 'emotion' need to become commonplace. Practices such as controlled crying and harsh discipline need to be phased out. It may sound like an unrealistic Utopia to think that nurseries will all be like that in five years' time, but it is one that WATCH? will continue to champion – for the children's sake and for society's sake.