

“Professional love should be as close to parental love as possible...”

Continuing her series, **Sarah Heale** considers the emotional challenges of implementing attachment in nurseries, and why it's vitally important to overcome them...

Relationships and loving care sounds simple enough, but scratch beneath the surface and it raises all sorts of issues for management and key people.

For example, “If I’m attached to a child, will the child feel sad if I can’t be there due to my shifts or holiday days?; “How will this affect my colleagues who have to deal with that?; “Will I feel sad when the child has to move on?; “How will the parents feel if I get attached to their child?; “As a manager with several part-time staff, how can I make the shift pattern work?; and so on.

Intimate relationships with other people’s children are complicated, not least because of child protection issues. And yet we’re being told it is best for the children – secure attachment is what will ensure that they thrive. So don’t we owe it to them to give it a go?

Without attachment...

We have to get attachment right in early years settings, as well as in the home, because there are both short- and long-term negative consequences if we don’t. The brain develops something like fourfold in the first three years, and it is consistent loving care which fires this growth.

The loving relationships that under-threes have with their carers are the key predictor of development, particularly social and emotional and – as we’re increasingly realising – their physical health as well.

If a child does not have loving relationships in infancy, results can be physical, mental and emotional problems in childhood, and later life, such as asthma, skin disorders, inflammatory disorders, depression and difficulties forming relationships. Brain development is happening all the time, not just when a child is with their parents, so carers have a huge influence over, and responsibility for, the way the infant brain develops.



‘Professional love’

Dr Jools Page had many years of experience working with babies, young children and their families, in both practice and in key policy-making roles, before she became an academic at the University of Sheffield. In her recent research, Page has been examining notions of love and care with mothers and with nursery practitioners too. She has developed the term ‘professional love’ as a way of describing the type of reciprocal relationship which some professional carers might establish with babies and young children. Professional love is not about becoming a surrogate mother but about building a professional relationship that complements the mother-child relationship in a way that always upholds the rights of the child as central to everyday practice.

“In my experience and in my research,” Dr Page says, “I have learned that early years practitioners have strong feelings about the children for whom they are responsible. The important thing is being able to talk about these emotionally laden feelings with a manager or supervisor, and that requires thoughtful leadership and a culture of planning a safe, regular and respectful space to talk about complex issues such as professional love.”

WATCH? would go further and say that professional love should be as close to parental love as possible – even if that’s uncomfortable for the parents. If you’re working with little ones you should have warm, compassionate feelings towards them. But if you have particular issues with a particular child or generally find that regulating infants’ emotions is difficult then the new supervision requirement should help.



about the author

Sarah is director of charity What About the Children? and founder of Heale Consulting. Visit whataboutthechildren.org.uk

Supervision

Many nursery managers will already be providing a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear, but the approach has now been formalised. Dr Peter Elfer, principal lecturer and programme convenor for the MA Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton, runs training courses in supervision for early years practitioners.

“When the government took up the Tickell recommendation, they gave it a bit of a safeguarding steer,” he explains. “Clearly it is an important part of supervision to check that the person being supervised does not have any anxieties or concerns about practice in the setting. But supervision is, of course, much more than a checklist of whether you are doing your job right.

“Supervision should be neither clipboard or counselling but tread a fine line between being a bureaucratic checklist and a session on the couch. A manager needs to help the practitioner to think about the emotions that are evoked in working closely with young children.”

It makes sense that the people looking after the people in society who need the most support also need support themselves. WATCH? welcomes this development.

Having talked about the emotional challenges of attachment in nurseries, next issue I will talk more about the management challenges and look at some examples of best practice.