

“It’s about love and consistency...”

Sarah Heale of charity WATCh? begins a new series into the crucial role secure attachment plays in children’s development and wellbeing...

After years in the wilderness attachment is back and is featuring in the latest Ofsted criteria. But you’d be forgiven for thinking you’d imagined the whole thing after the government’s announcement on ratios. Developing meaningful relationships with three under-two-year-olds is hard enough, but with four it is difficult to complete more than just the basic tasks.

What About The Children? (WATCh?) promotes the importance of secure attachment in the early years and the vital role that consistent, loving care plays in brain development. It is not supportive of the *More Great Childcare* proposals because it believes that the quality of relationships between carers and children will be affected for the worse – regardless of qualification levels.

With the introduction of the new EYFS framework some progress had been made on attachment. The switch to the phrase ‘key person’ from ‘key worker’ has put a greater focus on relationships. This will now be jeopardised with higher ratios. But does that matter? Why is the relationship so important in a nursery setting? Isn’t that where Mum and Dad come in? After all, intimate relationships with other people’s children are complicated – not least because of child protection issues.

This article is the first in a series on attachment. This issue, we will look at why secure attachment is so important. In subsequent issues, we will look at what the challenges are in achieving attachment in nurseries and how they can be addressed, as well as some examples of best practice.

What is attachment?

The term attachment is used to refer to the emotional relationships between a baby and the people who spend the most time caring for the baby. It provides the baby with a comforting sense of security and safety.

From six months onwards (peaking at around 12 months and tailing off between the ages of two and three) a baby exhibits attachment behaviours. He shows a desire for closeness to the primary attachment figure (usually Mum) in a variety of ways:

- following her with his eyes or moving himself to be close, especially in new situations;
- separation anxiety when the attachment figure is not present;
- crying if she leaves;
- excitement on her return;
- clinging behaviour on her return as if he fears she will leave again;
- fear of strangers.



Multiple attachment figures

Of course, infants will form attachments to other caregivers who love them. Current thinking suggests that some relationships are more important than others, with the primary attachment figure at the top of the pyramid, then a couple of people in the next tier and a few more in the next, and so on. The attachments will get weaker as you go down the pyramid. The infant will do better – i.e. in his/her development – with one or two strong attachment relationships rather than several weaker ones.

In fact, research suggests children seem to do best when they have at least three adults who consistently send the message, ‘I care about you’. Researchers theorise that spending time with non-parental caregivers – a grandparent, a daycare teacher, a family friend, a doting aunt – helps infants learn to read different facial expressions and expand their ability to take the perspectives of others.

Why is attachment important?

There is now little doubt that the first three years of life shape a human’s mental, emotional and physical health for life – and quite out of



QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS...

"With the outpouring of neuro-scientific information and the research built around it, we have more opportunity than any previous generation to understand that babies' very first relationships from Day One are crucial to building both the structure and the function of their brains and nervous systems and to realise that the physical, social and emotional development that goes on in the first year or two is the foundation of everything that's to come.

"It is the quality of their relationships with loving adult attachment figures - particularly parents but also other carers - which determines how the brain develops, particularly its social and emotional functioning. Frequent changes of carer, or lack of intimate emotional contact with those who are responsible for providing care, can cause stress and insecurity that permanently affects an infant."

Penelope Leach, child psychologist

proportion to the later years of childhood. The third birthday is a milestone, because brain development is about 90 per cent complete, speech is established and separation from the main carer becomes easier. New horizons open up: friendships can be formed, preschool education becomes relevant, and independence is a new skill to try out.

We now know that it is consistent, loving care that enables all this to happen. It fires the links between brain cells (particularly in the emotional centre of the brain) which allow the brain to grow. There are many ways synaptic links are fired, but in the first few years it is loving communication and attunement between child and carers that is key. The relationships that under-threes have with their carers are the key predictor of development - social, emotional and physical.

What does attachment look like?

These are the four key features in 'psychology speak':

Affect synchrony: the carer's ability to pick up cues from the infant and adapt her/his behaviour accordingly. E.g., if the carer sees the baby is unhappy she will pick up the baby, speak soothingly to him. It causes stress for the infant if the carer misreads the cues and becomes either too intrusive or too withdrawn, i.e. a carer who persists in trying to engage the baby when he is obviously turning away or pulling away from her increases the child's distress.

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Mentalisation: the process of interacting with the infant as a sentient being with desires, intentions and thoughts - in addition to caring for the child's physical needs. So a carer who sees a baby kicking his legs and making eye contact might say, "Do you want to play?" or "Are you ready for your bath?"

Mirroring: the carer's skill in reflecting back to the infant an approximation for what her infant is feeling. Good carers tend to make exaggerated happy and sad faces at little ones, making them easier to imitate and building on the baby's basic innate understanding of emotional communication.

Containment: the carer's ability to take on a child's overwhelming feelings and make them more manageable for the infant. The carer may use touch, speech or gesture to convey to the infant that they understand what they are going through.

In layman's terms that means...

- Spending considerable time each day one-to-one: talking, cuddling, making him laugh.
- Calming the infant when he's stressed - using eye-to-eye contact with gentle murmured conversation to soothe.

■ Over time, developing an understanding of his communication attempts and responding accordingly.

And to make the message even plainer, it's about love and consistency.

What does it mean for me?

In a nutshell, carers have a great deal of influence over a child's development and future wellbeing. Like the builder who says - rather than "laying bricks" - "I am building a cathedral", so an early years practitioner should say - rather than "changing nappies" - "I am building our future society".

If you disagree with the proposed increase in adult:child ratios for under-twos from 1:3 to 1:4 then take action: write to your MP or sign the petition at tinyurl.com/TNMGCpetition



about the author

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