A
fter 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?**

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The first three years of life shape a human’s mental, emotional and physical health for life – and quite out of proportion to the later years of childhood.

**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 she 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 is 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-twins from 1:3 to 1:4 then take action: write to your MP or sign the petition at tinyurl.com/TNMGCpetition