

Staying

Professor **Cathy Nutbrown** of the University of Sheffield details the concept of attachment and the key person in early childhood settings...

Close

Jane was working with three-year-old Allen and four-month-old Naomi. Allen wanted Naomi to hold a set of plastic keys. Jane gently reminded Allen that Naomi was allowed to choose what she played with (she seemed to prefer to suck her soft bunny at the time). Jane said to Allen "She can choose; she doesn't have to play with the one you like. You like to choose, she likes to choose as well". Jane knew Allen so well that she was confident that this explanation would help him to understand that babies have opportunities for choice as well as children who were older.

Allen recognised this assertion and went away. He returned with a small selection of toys which he put at the side of baby Naomi: "There – now she can choose".

Being with warm, responsive adults is vital for young children; these close relationships assist their all round learning, behaviour and development. It goes without saying that happy, secure children learn better, and closeness and emotional wellbeing is good for young developing brains! What's more, where young children can 'stay close' to an adult carer, it's often easier for them to be separated from their parents – and, in fact, it has been argued that it is good for babies' and toddlers' social development to develop close attachments to several people.

Attachment is at the core of the 'Key Person Approach' promoted by Peter Elfer and colleagues, which places high importance on close and specific relationships between practitioners, children and parents (Elfer et al 2003). This is not the mother-child



attachment promoted by Bowlby in the 1950s, but a modern version of attachment theory which promotes closeness between babies and their professional carers.

Attachments between children and their carers have, for years, led some early childhood practitioners to shy away from close attachments with children – the fear being that parents would shun the idea that another person outside the family has a close relationship with their young child. However, the skilled and sensitive key person can – and should, for the good of the child – allay such fears. As Anna Gillespie Edwards puts it in the National Children's Bureau's Relationships and Learning: Caring for children from birth to Three: "Some practitioners may be anxious about assuming a parental role or even of taking some of the love properly due to the parent. It is safe to say that even very young babies will not

confuse their carer with their parent and they are more likely to suffer from the lack of a close personal relationship at nursery".

What does a key person do?

Nadia was seven-months-old. She was sitting in her high chair eating a plate of pasta and peas. Using her left hand she carefully picked up each piece of pasta with her fingers and ate them until only the peas were left on the plate. Then she ate the peas, one at a time, picking up each one with her fingers and looking at it closely before putting it in her mouth. Lunch lasted much longer for Nadia than it did for some of the other children in the group, but her key person knew that Nadia needed to take her time and focus carefully and quietly on her food. The adult knew, because she had spent so many mealtimes with Nadia, that this was a part of the day not to be hurried but to be quietly and calmly enjoyed!

The 'key person' is a member of the staff team designated to work with, and care for, specific children and to liaise with their parents, forming a triangle of important relationships between child and practitioner,



Positive and close relationships with adults are crucial for all children; such closeness should be encouraged, not feared

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Further reading

The issues surrounding 'attachment' and the 'key person' are explored in detail in the following books...

- Elfer, P, Goldschmied, E and Selleck, D *Key Persons in the Nursery: Building relationships for quality provision* (David Fulton, 2003).
- Gillespie Edwards, A *Relationships and Learning: Caring for children from birth to three* (NCB, 2002)
- Goldschmied, E and Jackson, S *People Under Three: Young children in Day Care (2nd edition)* (Routledge, 2003)
- Goldschmied, E and Selleck, D *Communication between babies in their first year* (NCB, 1996)
- Nutbrown, C and Page, J *Working with Babies and Children Under Three London* (Sage, 2008)

and practitioner and parent alongside the parent/child relationship. Many settings identify a 'key person' who can provide continuity of care for each baby and young child, and lessen anxiety around separation from their parents (Nutbrown and Page, 2008).

Where a setting has adopted a Key Person Approach, the same practitioner works with the same babies and children each day, feeding, changing nappies and interacting with them in a close, respectful and dignified manner. She or he will observe 'their' children closely, identifying their wants, needs and interests and meeting them appropriately, whilst ensuring that the views and needs of the child are uppermost throughout their time in the setting, that the pace of the day suits them, and that important things are shared with parents.

Policy matters

Adopting the Key Person Approach in a setting means careful and thoughtful consideration of policies to support, children, practitioners and parents.

Safeguarding and communication

policies, as well as policies on learning and development, need to address the role of the key person. This includes policy issues relating to physical contact and intimacy between practitioners and children – where closeness is encouraged and everyone understands that this is part of professional, high-quality provision. Clarity around attachment and relationships between practitioners and children means that parents are involved in and assured that their children's all round needs are attended to on a very personal level.

Adults who are 'in tune' with children are better able to support their learning, and it could be argued that the provision of a key person should be afforded to children as a matter of right. Indeed, reflecting on the implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for provision for young children, Jools Page argues that the Key Person Approach is essential if children are to feel secure and loved in their early years settings (Nutbrown and Page 2008).

find out more

Cathy Nutbrown is Director of Studies in Early Childhood Education at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. Further discussion of the issues of 'attachment' and the 'key person' can be found in Cathy's book, *Key Concepts in Early Childhood Education and Care (2nd edn)*, published by Sage 2011. To receive 20% off of your copy, visit www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book234324 and enter the code UK11RO001 before September 5th.

