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In the first of a new series focusing on the care of the youngest children, **Ann Clare** explores how early years practitioners can create an environment in which babies feel emotionally secure...

way to

wellbeing

We all know that if we are not emotionally secure we feel vulnerable and are unable to concentrate and thrive. If this affects us as adults, with our wealth of experience and knowledge, consider how much harder it is for a baby placed in a daycare setting where the adults and surroundings are strange. Separation from an attached figure can have a traumatic impact on a baby. Day nurseries work hard to ensure that this separation anxiety is minimised by establishing a key person system, but this on its own is not enough.

In order to get the emotional environment right for babies in daycare from the beginning, practitioners need to know the backgrounds of the children in their care. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development explains that we have to see the child at the centre and then look at all the influences that concentrically affect their life. These influences are predominately those of the parents and then the extended family, but also include the community that the child lives in and the wider society, which includes both the economic and political climates of a moment in time.

Today, some of these hidden influences which impact on a young child's wellbeing may be the current political and economic policies; growing unemployment, which creates pressures on families, and in particular working mothers, single parent families and the pressure for young children to be taught too formally too soon. In daycare settings it is therefore imperative that practitioners get to know the babies and young children in their care by understanding how their families 'work' and where they come from. Practitioners need to talk in depth to parents, not just to ask about their personal and individual care needs, but also what their likes and dislikes are. They need to know about the make-up of the immediate and extended family and the influence they have on a young child, the surroundings and their homes: do they have access to a garden, do



they spend part of their lives with their grandparents, how many siblings do they have, and all such relevant information.

Emotional history

In order to gain this knowledge practitioners in day nurseries need to consider making home visits to families so that they can have a better understanding of the child's personal background. This is not about prying and making judgements but about having a deep understanding. Many day nurseries may feel that this is too intrusive, so they should consider methods other than the familiar registration form. One way is to give parents a disposable camera, asking them to use half of the film to take photographs of people, places and objects which form part of the baby's emotional history; these can then be used to create a personal book for the baby which they can refer to whenever they wish during their time in the setting.

Once armed with this knowledge practitioners can then begin to support and develop the way in which they ensure that the babies in their care become emotionally secure. One way in which this can be achieved is by looking at the experiential learning of Ferre Laevers.

Laevers developed the Leuven scales of wellbeing and involvement. His description of children with high levels of wellbeing as enjoying life to the full shows how babies and young children will thrive if their emotional needs are being met within the setting. As it is so important to get the emotional environment

Managing change

Times of transition in an early years setting can have a particular impact on children's wellbeing. In large day nurseries where children are grouped chronologically, they are moved through the rooms with little regard to the emotional bonds that they have established. Nurseries are mindful of the physical development of babies and so move them when they are steady on their feet; when you consider that this could mean some babies are making their first transitions within two months of starting at the setting, their emotional wellbeing is going to be at a low.

I would like settings to consider why these constant room and relationship changes have to take place. Why do babies have to be moved because they can now

walk? In a family home you will have mobile and non-mobile babies in the same environment so why not in a day nursery? Is this all because of health and safety? There are ways in which these issues can be overcome by creating spaces within rooms for babies who may be vulnerable whilst still giving them the opportunity to engage with their familiar adults, peers and older role models.

The relationship between peers is another important factor when considering transitioning young children through a setting, too. Practitioners need to consider the friendships that have been established and move children through in familiar groups – not just because they have reached two years of age, but because a group of children can socialise, play together and be comfortable in each other's company.

Further reading

- Bronfenbrenner, U *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard University Press, 1979)
- House, R (ed.) *Too Much, Too Soon? Early Learning and the erosion of childhood* (Hawthorn Press, 2011)
- Laevers, F *The Innovative Project Experiential Education* (Centre for Experiential Education, 1994)
- Roberts, R *Wellbeing from Birth* (Sage, 2010)



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ANN CLARE

findoutmore

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right for babies and young children this tool can be used as an observation measure where practitioners can assess when wellbeing is either high or low.

The practitioner needs to evaluate when the wellbeing is low by looking at the elements of the day when this occurs. For instance, is a child distracted and lacking in self-confidence at certain times during a day and yet at other times, as Laevers describes, “like a fish in water”. What is happening at these different times? Is it because a familiar and much-loved adult has left the room? Is it the close proximity of some peers? Is it at the end of the day and this particular baby’s parents are always the last to collect him? If we look at these incidences we can ensure that at these times we give the baby additional support in the form of physical cuddles, or endeavour to provide them with the resources and activities that they are particularly interested in.

Companionable learning

Another useful tool in supporting the emotional wellbeing of babies and young children is seen in the work of Rosemary Roberts. She

advocates a theory of wellbeing which she calls ‘companionable learning’ and identifies five companionable learning principles:

- **Companionable attention** – those things that a baby or young child needs.
- **Agency in companionable play** – play where children develop a sense of self and their position in relation to others.
- **Anchored children** – all those times where the physical presence of the companion is a necessity.
- **Companionable apprenticeship** – those episodes of play when children are involved in ‘real life’.
- **Children’s personal time and space** – those times when, just like adults, babies need space for themselves, to be on their own.

These principles could be used when planning for babies so that their emotional wellbeing is given status. For example, when looking at the physical environments for very young children it is important to create one which is home-like. The EYFS advocates the use of domestic furniture within baby rooms, but I frequently have to search for a comfortable chair where an adult and a baby can bond together and snuggle in.

How often do we plan activities for babies which revolve around ‘real life’ experiences or ‘companionable apprenticeship’? We need to consider that at home a baby would be sharing household activities with their parents: hanging out the washing, emptying the dishwasher, making the beds, preparing the

meals. All of these activities give babies the opportunity to feel a part of the nursery ‘family’ as well as giving them experiences and language which will help them to develop the skills and vocabulary for learning. These familiar activities will ensure that a baby feels emotionally secure as well as giving learning opportunities.

We can help to ensure that the emotional wellbeing of babies is secure by planning our environment with this as the core element. As Rosemary Roberts suggests, babies and young children like to have time on their own, a place where they can be still and reflective. Why is it that we rarely consider that, just like adults, babies like to be on their own? It is not bad practice to sit alongside babies and not interact. When interviewing mothers about times when their child likes to be on their own they talk of the time first thing in the morning when their baby wakes up and is content to babble to him or herself, to be on their own. All too often in day nurseries we over stimulate young children because we feel that this is the right thing to do and it demonstrates that we are working. It is sometimes difficult to manage times for this quiet reflection because the routines of the day dictate what is to happen, and young children are rapidly moved from one activity to another.

If we place emotional wellbeing at the heart of all that takes place within a nursery then the very young children in that setting will thrive because their emotional wellbeing is high, and as a result they will be on the pathway to learning.