

# JUGGLING PRIORITIES



In a new series **Sarah Heale** examines the unique combination of demands placed upon the managers of early years settings, beginning with a look at the importance of staff wellbeing...

Talking to managers and owners of nurseries over the years, I have come to appreciate the extraordinary range of skills and knowledge needed to run a business that has nurture as its core purpose. As well as having to be a spreadsheet mastermind one minute and a nursery rhyme singer the next, managers and owners must balance the need to make money with the emotional wellbeing of children and their staff. Over the course of three articles I will look at each of these areas in turn.

I want to start by considering staff wellbeing, which for many may come bottom of the list of priorities, but which arguably holds the secret to a successful nursery. It is well documented that a mother's wellbeing affects her baby's, but historically little attention has been paid to how a key person's wellbeing may affect children in her/his care. However, it is starting to move up the agenda. The most recent version of the EYFS framework and Ofsted criteria identified the importance of the relationship between the child and key person. And a study by the University of Oxford, published in October, highlighting some negative impacts on young children of long hours in nurseries, has further fuelled the debate.

The key person's relationship with the children in her/his care is critical to children's wellbeing and future success, but what are we doing to support and encourage a responsive, sensitive relationship between the child and the key person?

Mothers have several avenues of support when their children are young. Most parents spend a lot of time talking about their babies and thinking through problems, worries, anxieties and uncertainties with close family and friends. People will ask them how they are doing and sympathise if they have a fractious baby. They also have access to formal help from doctors, health visitors, etc. Many are asked to complete a questionnaire to monitor for postnatal depression. Everyone knows how stressful it can be as a new mum. But if you are the main carer in a nursery, no one thinks of you in this way and you don't have access to this support.



## COMPLEX ROLES

Caring for a number of children of the same age with a range of different emotional needs is highly complex and demanding. This work can evoke difficult feelings - from anxiety, uncertainty, dislike, frustration and exhaustion, to pleasure, satisfaction and joy. That is why academics such as Peter Elfer are campaigning hard for supervision to be given professionally and in a timely manner to those working in childcare.

Peter Elfer, who is principal lecturer and programme convenor for the MA Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton, and architect of the key person approach, says: "There is very little space in nurseries - no time, no meeting place and, most of all, not always a supportive or conducive culture - for speaking about feelings. Nursery staff have this pivotal role and yet they're given no physical or mental space for reflection."

Also, supervision can be seen as a tick-box exercise or part of safeguarding. In fact many of the nursery staff I spoke to were resistant to it as they felt they were being 'checked up on' and therefore not trusted. It is not seen as something to help and nurture them.

Often it comes down to the culture of the nursery - whether it's one that likes to be open about emotions, both adults' and children's, or

brushes them under the carpet. Sue Chesson, owner of Skips nursery in Ightham, Kent is very tuned into emotions: "The relationships that my staff and I have with the children and their families are what make or break the business. Relationships are difficult and not always positive. The important thing is to talk.

"If you want staff to be nurturing then you need to nurture them - show you appreciate them, make sure they're not overloaded and ensure that they know they can talk freely. I have always taken a few minutes at the start of the day to find out how my staff are feeling and catch up on news. Supervision is just formalising what I was doing anyway. It's good to have the structure and the training."

Taking more than a few minutes out of the day is the challenge. Building in supervision time adds cost to a business in terms of time and physical space. But it is surely worthwhile if it helps reduce anxiety, as that can hinder a child's brain development. The charity What About The Children? (WATCH?) claims to speak for the under-threes because they cannot speak for themselves. If they could speak, I'm sure the under-threes would like to be cared for by those who are cared about.

**Sarah is the founder of Heale Consulting.**  
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