

“Even one change of key person can be traumatic...”

Continuing her series on attachment, **Sarah Heale** addresses the challenges delivering strong practitioner/child relationships can present to management...

As with any business strategy, implementing a sound attachment policy will only work if it is ingrained in an organisation's goals, philosophy and culture, and if it has the buy-in and support of the senior managers. For attachment to be successful, children's needs have to be at the heart of the business. And values of trust, respect and love need to govern not only the relationships with the children but how managers lead and how practitioners interact with each other. If practitioners are treated sensitively then they are more likely to treat the children sensitively. I looked at this last month with the issue of supervision.

Anne Meade, who was the architect of New Zealand's widely admired equivalent to the EYFS 25 years ago, now runs her own nursery, Daisies, in Wellington: "To be truly child-centred," she says, "you need to burn the rosters and follow the child's personal rhythms for sleep and food. Staff at Daisies only take breaks when the baby is in the 'want nothing' zone."

At Daisies they talk about 'bubbles of care' to mean a moment when a key person is having special time with their child. No one is to pop the bubble unless absolutely necessary – a great demonstration of their values in practice.

Structure

A big consideration is whether to manage by age groups or by family groupings. From an attachment point of view, family groupings are appealing as there is less frequent change of key person, but it can be difficult to manage ratios and shift work. Small children can get 'lost' and their needs forgotten in groups of older children.

Where you manage by age group, e.g. have a baby room, a one-year-old room, etc., there is more frequent change of key person as a child moves to a different room, which can be unsettling for the child. Additionally, you don't

get the benefit of peer learning and support.

Kidsunlimited – which has a comprehensive attachment strategy – has come up with a halfway house arrangement. Where possible, they separate under-twos from over-twos, meaning that there is no more than one key person transition for children during their time at nursery. Caroline Wright, head of early years at kidsunlimited, says, "We find that the children are a lot more confident with fewer key person transitions. The younger ones don't become overstimulated by the older ones as we use room dividers to create small, intimate zones when the babies need some quiet time."

WATCH? would argue that even one change of key person can be traumatic, especially if the child has been with the key person for a long time. The changeover needs to be done gradually and with sensitivity, so that the child doesn't feel a sense of loss.

Key person approach

Many of the recommendations from the latest Canterbury Christchurch Baby Room project centred around 'positive relationships' and 'talking' as being two keys for babies' development. Neither – it seems – can be assumed to be occurring naturally in nurseries, which means that management need to foster these elements in their practices and in staff training.

What constitutes good or poor relational experiences is subjective, and as adults we can only observe and guess what a baby is experiencing. In addition, parents will have different expectations of loving care and how close the relationship between their child and the key person should be. But given this mix of views, the one thing we would probably all



about the author

Sarah is director of charity What About The Children? and founder of Heale Consulting. Visit whataboutthechildren.org.uk

agree on is that care should be more than just nappy changing and feeds, and that frequent, sensitive one-to-one communication (both verbal and non-verbal) with a baby is essential.

One interesting initiative that kidsunlimited has is for the relationship between Mum and the key person to become as close as family. There is a detailed induction process and the key person will give information about him/herself as well as vice versa. The key person is encouraged to give a hug when greeting Mum. This is because they understand that the child will take cues from Mum about how to relate to the key person. Psychologists call this social referencing.

Change management

So if you are a nursery looking to reorganise for attachment, what are the next steps? It needs to be approached as a change management project and given appropriate time and resources. And as well as considering the 'hard' side to business, for example, strategy and operations, I would argue that the 'soft' factors such as leadership and culture are equally – if not more – important. If you can get all these things right, not only will the business benefit but the children and their future wellbeing will too.

Next month I will look at what parents may demand as they become more aware of the importance of attachment.

