

The Key Person Approach

Positive Relationships in the Early Years

by Jennie Lindon

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A focus on positive relationships

The early years of a child's life are especially important: the quality of those experiences set the scene for the future. Young children build a set of expectations about their personal world and their place in it. Over early childhood they need to have developed strong, affectionate, sustained relationships with a small number of people. Children's first and most enduring bond is within their own family. However, a high proportion of young children in the UK spend time – sometimes a significant amount of time – as the responsibility of non-family adults, within the different types of early years group provision and the childminding service.

The development of attachment

Babies and very young children need to develop secure emotional attachment to familiar figures over their early childhood. Strong, sustained emotional bonds are the foundations for healthy development. This section offers a brief description of a complex area of practical research; you will find more detail in Lindon (2012 and 2012a) and Elfer et al. (2003).

There is very good reason to be concerned if circumstances mean that babies and very young children do not make a strong emotional attachment to a key family carer, and a very small number of other trustworthy, familiar adults. It really does seem that a template for future relationships rests on these early experiences. Young children cannot fend for themselves and their need for personal care should be met within a consistent experience of feeling nurtured. Their view of the social world is also shaped by whether important relationships are disrupted. Even the most resilient of children will eventually give up if familiar people, of whom they have become fond, disappear from daily life. Emotionally weary young children may resist getting acquainted with yet another unfamiliar person.

The initial approach to the significance of attachment in children's development started in the mid-1940s when John Bowlby studied a group of juvenile delinquents. Looking back into their personal histories, he found that many had experienced disruption in their early family attachments. Bowlby also documented the emotional distress of children who were evacuated from English cities in the early stage of the Second World War. Consistent with the prevailing theory of the time, Bowlby interpreted the emotional disruption in terms of the

children's loss of their mother. However, the evacuated children had been separated from other key family members; even siblings were sometimes allocated to different host families.

From the beginning, some child psychologists challenged Bowlby's interpretation of events. It is often unrecognised but, by the mid-1950s, Bowlby had moved from his original position that young children would suffer serious negative consequences if they were not continuously with their mother in particular. He was open to the importance of other key carers and the impact that separation from them could have on children. John Bowlby continued his research into the importance of early attachment, sometimes working with Mary Ainsworth, who explored ways to judge the strength of attachment between very young children and their mother from reactions to separation in an unfamiliar situation.

A resurgence of interest in attachment theory from the 1990s onwards has allowed for the reality that mothers are the important primary carer for many young children. However, the approach recognises that babies and children also develop strong attachments within their immediate family to their father, siblings and other relatives. Babies and young children tend to have a preferred familiar person, especially in times of upset or uncertainty. However, the young of the human species are



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Focus children in Garfield reception class

The reception team have three focus children each week and the detailed planning for those days is led by the interests of those children. Every child has the opportunity to be a focus child each term. The process starts at the end of the previous week when a sheet goes home with next week's focus children about 'Ruby's Special Week'. Parents are invited to complete the sheet with their child and include the current interests of their son or daughter, any recent family events and subjects on which their child has been keen to ask questions.

The week starts with this sheet and from the Monday, each reception teacher, supported by their colleague in that class, plans immediately on the basis of this child's expressed interests. The longest gap in reacting to a child's interests is a day later, for events that need a bit of prior organisation. (Up until 2009 the team made plans for the following week on the basis of this week. However, they found that the gap was enough that individual interests had already moved on.) Each of the focus children is featured on the special board in reception class. Their chosen interests and experiences are documented on the board, building up over the week.

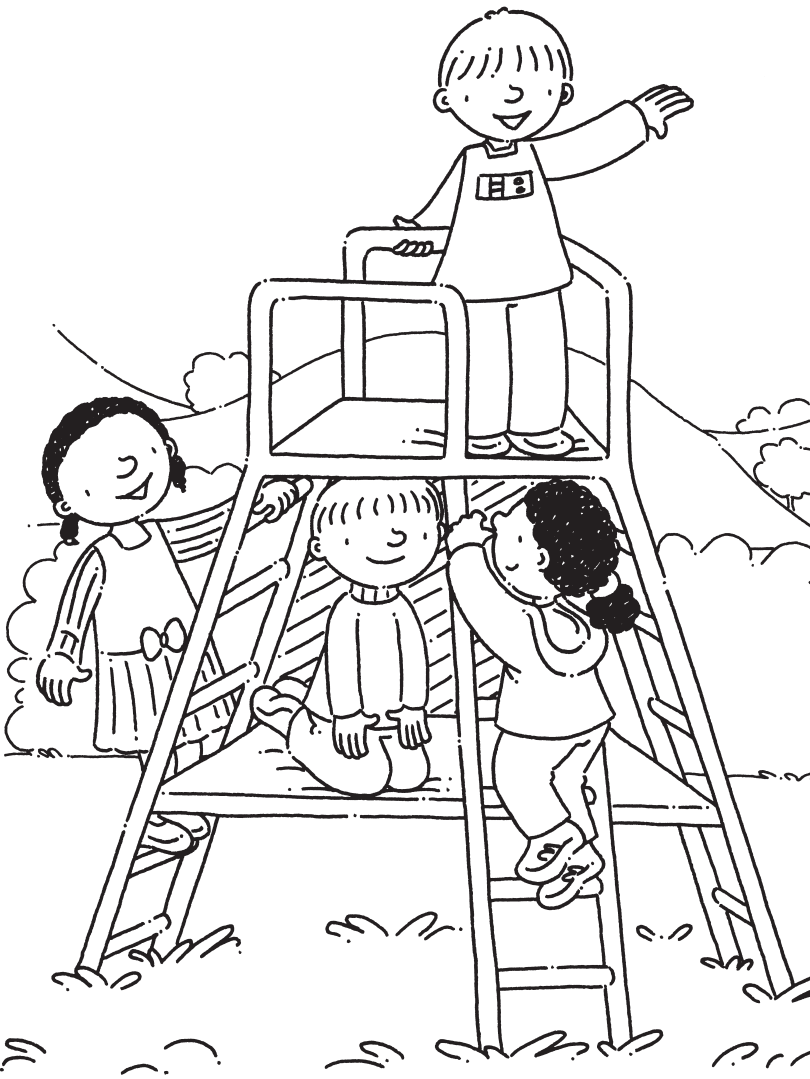
The Garfield children enjoy free flow, with the exception of come-together times for each class at the beginning and end of each morning and the afternoon. The personal projects of the focus children are especially highlighted in these shared group times.

On the morning of my visit I watched as one reception key group enjoyed looking at a sequence of photos projected onto the screen, showing a recent trip out to the park. Jaleel, who was the focus child, had been interested in making a river. Through the photo presentation, Jaleel chose to sit comfortably on the adult's lap, as they talked through the narrative, photo by photo. The practitioner added a few open-ended questions and other children recalled the highlights of this outing for everyone. Then Jaleel outlined his plan for the day: to explore how to make dirty water clean. The practitioner had found a science book with a possible experiment and Jaleel chose his companions for this exploration.

Close adult involvement is focused on the chosen enterprises of the focus children. A narrative observation early in the week and continued close attention guides the adults in their involvement in the play, conversation and chosen special experiences of the focus children. What has been learned from each child's special week forms part of their ongoing personal record, in which the team continue to highlight the developing skills and next steps for this child.

Each child's special week is also written up into two pages (laminated), with selected photos organised

into their special learning story. Headed 'Ruby's Week', this account belongs to the child and family and highlights the future, as well as capturing the special experiences of the week. The child's teacher writes brief personal comments led by wording like: 'Ruby, I noticed on Monday that you really enjoyed ... (what the adult helped to organise)' and 'You showed me (or other people) that you could...'. The two page record summarises the events with, 'In your special week, you...' as well as the adult's view, 'I was especially impressed with how you...'. In friendly, straightforward language (which can be read out loud to the child and shared with parents) the record suggests next steps, such as, 'Maybe you would like to...' or 'I will help you with...'.



Leading the key person approach

Childminders have to face and resolve many of the issues experienced by early years practitioners who work in group provision. However, additional issues arise in group provision, because the key person approach needs to be established as a consistent pattern of practice – sometimes over a large setting. To assess how the key person approach works in your setting see the questionnaire on page 35.

A system that works for children

The senior team in group provision have to establish an atmosphere that supports the key person approach. Managers have to know the statutory requirements of the EYFS but, of course, the rationale given to staff is not that ‘we have to do it’. The explanation, and continued support, for the importance of close relationships with children and families rests on the developmental knowledge described in the first section of this book. Reflection on how best to establish and maintain a key person approach leads a senior team to consider many aspects of how their provision is run. At any point as you read through this section, you might like to look at the questionnaire on page 35 and consider where your setting stands on the system that backs up the key person approach.



Look closer: Kennet Day Nursery

The senior team of Kennet have considered how best to place a key person approach at the centre of their practice. One decision was to make the role of key person central to the job description for all practitioners.

- From the outset it is clear to applicants for posts at Kennet that in order to be the key person in the nursery for some children you will establish and maintain a high-quality relationship with these children and oversee their development in key areas: emotional, intellectual, social, physical and linguistic. You will establish and maintain good two-way communication with their parents/carers on all aspects of the child's development and care, bridging the gap between nursery and home. You will support other staff with the care and development of their key children and families, acting as a buddy for other staff members and supporting with the planning and communication for the best outcomes for children.
- This role is further clarified in the description of the responsibilities of the post: being the key person for

Links to your practice

The rationale for any particular way of organising the key person approach has to rest on ensuring it works for the children. No early years provision, nor any member of the workforce, should choose their priorities by what seems easier, quicker or more efficient for adults. Practical issues or concerns have to be resolved with the children's best interests at the centre of any decision.

The senior team of Randolph Beresford Early Years Centre support a large staff group in their daily practice and thoughtful review of that practice. They sum up their approach with: “The child first; everyone else afterwards”.

Both sole practitioners and teams can benefit from watchwords to guide choices when you have to balance the needs and preferences of adults as well as children's wellbeing. You can still be flexible, but not to the point where young children slip down the list of priorities.