

## Key Person

# Positive relationships: Key people - part 1 - Handle with care

*Each child in a group setting must be assigned a key person. In childminder settings the childminder is the key person. A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.' So says Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, p15, 3.4.*

All this sounds like good common sense, but what does it mean in practice? And how can settings make sure that their key persons approach is built on sound understanding of the importance of attachments and a real commitment to developing positive relationships with children and their families?

## Key person

'Key person' was the term used by Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson (People Under Three - Young children in daycare, 1994) to describe pioneering work in nurseries that attempted to provide children with 'a person to whom they can relate in a special way' (p37).

It is the particular nature and warmth of the relationship that marks the difference between a key person and a 'key worker', whose main responsibilities are usually administrative and across multiple agencies.

Each practitioner has a small group of children allocated to them, so that they can pay particular attention to the emotional and physical well-being of those children.

## Key person approach

The term 'key person approach' is described in Key Persons in the Nursery (Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied, Dorothy Selleck, 2003) as an organisational method that ensures every child has 'one or two adults in the nursery, (who) while never taking over from the parents, connect with what parents would ordinarily do: being special for the children, helping them manage throughout the day, thinking about them too - all of which help a child to make a strong link between home and nursery'.

Having a second person as 'back-up' is important, as it is impossible to guarantee the availability of the key person at all times.

## Paired and shared key caring

Sally Thomas (Nurturing Babies and Children Under Four) suggests using the term 'key caring' because it focuses on the relationship, rather than the role of the practitioner.

She advocates 'paired and shared key caring' as a way of ensuring the very best attentive and nurturing care throughout a child's time in a setting. This partnership would ideally see an

experienced practitioner matched with someone with less experience and the two would share the 'key caring' and remain the key people until the child left the setting.

This key caring role means that the same adults take responsibility for the elements of a child's day that have the most impact on their emotional well-being. These include:

- home visits and establishing good relationships with parents and families
- handovers and transitions - greeting and settling children on arrival/farewells and smooth handovers at the end of sessions
- personal care routines - meal times, nappy changing, toileting, rest times.

### **Well-being and development**

Without a key persons approach, a child is likely to be 'handled' by any number of staff during a session and over their time in the setting.

If you have ever been in hospital, totally dependent on others for your care, you will probably know how stressful it is to be attended to by a range of different people, with no continuity of care or attention. Think how much worse that must be for a baby.

Elinor Goldschmied urged us to never forget that 'a child, and particularly a young and almost totally dependent one, is the only person in the nursery who cannot understand why he is there. He can only explain it as abandonment, and unless he is helped in a positive and affectionate way, this will mean levels of anxiety greater than he can tolerate' (People Under Three, p37).

This is why the key persons approach isn't just about reducing the number of 'handlers' a child experiences. Care routines, in particular, provide special times for key adults to relate to children in playful, affectionate ways that help build the secure attachments essential for children's well-being and brain development.

As the relationship grows, the child's key people are better able to 'tune in' to their needs, their moods and enthusiasms and provide the intuitively nurturing responses that are essential if a child is to feel safe and secure.

This doesn't mean, however, that a child is restricted to being just with either of their key people and the other children in their care. Feeling safe enough to explore and interact with others in the setting is very important, and more easily achieved when a child knows the security of being 'held in mind' by their key people.

### **Secondary attachment**

This 'tuned in' relationship mimics in many ways the bonds of attachment that children have in their families. However, it is essential to stress that in no way does it undermine the primary attachment a child has with a parent. It forms one of the several secondary attachments that a child needs to be able to thrive and cope when away from home.

### **Challenges and implementation**

Often the objections to the key persons approach focus on ways in which it is considered unrealistic, in terms of practitioner time and availability.

A true key caring approach, however, doesn't attempt to achieve the impossible task of having one adult constantly available to the child. It seeks to minimise the amount of needlessly stressful situations that a child is exposed to.

It cannot be denied that an approach that depends on quality relationships isn't easy to implement. Because it is an 'approach', rather than just an operational system, it isn't simply a matter of assigning groups of children to practitioners and managing rotas for care routines.

A huge amount of discussion and planning needs to take place before such an approach can get underway. Just as importantly, the discussion needs to continue over time, as the players in the key person triangle - the children, their parents and the practitioners - overcome the challenges and build the relationships that bring benefits for everyone.

## **Positive relationships: Key people - part 2 - Rest assured**

**Implementing a 'key caring' approach may seem daunting, but practitioners need to understand its benefits for everyone, explains Anne O'Connor.**



A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.' (Positive Relationships 2.4, Key Person)

### **BENEFITS**

The benefits of a 'key caring' approach can be profound.

**For babies and children,** having a close and affectionate relationship with one or two adults who are responsive and emotionally available to them, away from home and family, provides the reassurance and comfort they need to feel safe. Knowing they are cherished and 'held in mind' by their key people amid the hustle and bustle of daily life in a setting gives them the confidence to explore and develop independence.

**For parents,** the approach makes sure that they also feel reassured and confident about their child's experience of being cared for away from home. It provides the opportunity to build a partnership with someone else who is fully committed to their child's well-being and, with the parents' help, will become familiar and 'tuned in' to their child's particular needs and motivations.

**For the key person,** the benefits from this intense and demanding approach are to be found in the satisfaction and fulfilment that comes from being someone who really matters to a child and their family, and who is recognised for their professional commitment and the impact that they have on a child's future development.

**For the setting,** there are growing indications that increased practitioner involvement and job satisfaction not only reduces staff absence and turnover, but also leads to improved care and learning for children, and greater confidence and 'client satisfaction' among parents.

## CHALLENGES

But what about the challenges? Implementing such an approach, and making sure it is done well, creates hard work for both managers and staff. Practitioners and parents alike have many real concerns about the challenges of key caring, and these are often used to justify a 'watered-down' approach, or downright resistance! However, most of these concerns stem from serious misunderstandings about the approach. For example:

**'It is not possible to be available all the time for every child.'** That's right, it isn't possible - not even for parents. But a true key-caring approach doesn't attempt to achieve the impossible task of having one adult constantly available to each child. It seeks, instead, to minimise the amount of needlessly stressful situations that a child is exposed to. And it is from the security of these safe relationships that a child learns that unavoidable separations, though sometimes painful, can be tolerated and managed.

**'What happens when staff leave?'** It is natural to worry that it is wrong to encourage children to attach to staff who might leave the setting before the child does. But the realities of life, and certainly of school later on, make this inevitable. Once again, the emotional well-being and security that comes from repeated experiences of being cared for and 'held in mind' will help build the resilience and positivity that enable a child to cope with loss and transition. Also, having a partnership of two key carers, rather than just one, reduces the impact of individual key people leaving or being absent for any length of time.

**'Children need to relate to other adults and children.'** But the key people approach is not about restricting the child to one adult and a small group of children. The key carers provide a safe base which is built on a caring and affectionate relationship. When they have confidence in that relationship, children are better able to explore and interact with others, because they know reassurance and comfort are available whenever they need it. However, children are less likely to take risks and explore if they don't have that security behind them.

**'But what about teamwork?'** Again, the point of key caring is not to abandon the principles of teamwork and collective responsibility, but is more to give high priority to the individual care and attachments that children need in order to thrive. Key caring does not prevent a practitioner from supporting, helping or otherwise engaging with children who are not in their own group, nor from planning or preparation as a member of a team.

**'It's too much of a responsibility and blurs the boundaries between personal and professional involvement.'** This is an issue that does need serious consideration. Being a key carer for a child involves intensive hard work and commitment, and the complex responsibilities bring with them very real physical, emotional and intellectual demands. Managers and head teachers need to recognise this, giving the support, supervision and mentoring that practitioners need if they are to fulfil these responsibilities well - and without damage to their own well-being. Particularly important is reviewing relationships with children and families and providing guidance on professional boundaries, making sure practitioners are clear about where their role begins and ends. Practitioners will have varying concerns and anxieties relating to their individual experience, so there need to be frequent opportunities for individual and group discussions about all aspects of the role.

**'It will undermine the attachments children have with their families.'** Luckily, attachment is not something that comes in a fixed amount, where having more of it in the setting means there must be less of it at home. Research suggests exactly the opposite - having strong attachments at home seems to make it ultimately easier to develop attachments at nursery, and these relationships are in no way undermined by an increased number of secondary attachments. Attachment relationships at home are likely to be supported by good secondary attachments in nursery. This is significant where there are risks that can affect the primary attachment relationship (for example, post-natal depression, health issues, bereavement, etc; see Nursery World's Attachment series).

This triangle of relationships between the child, their parents and the key carers, is at the heart of the approach. The key person is not only helping the child to know that they are 'held in mind' by their parents and by the key carers, but, just as importantly, keeps the child's parents firmly in mind for the child, emphasising that no matter how close a child might get to their key person, they will never be more important to them than their parents and family.

## **Positive relationships: Key people - part 3 - Good relations**

**Strategies to engage the third partner in the key person approach - the parent - as a child enters and settles in to nursery are explained in our continuing series on key caring by Anne O'Connor**



*The key person 'should help the baby or child to become familiar with the provision and to feel confident and safe within it, developing a genuine bond with the child (and the child's parents) and offering a settled, close relationship,' says the Statutory Framework for the EYFS, p37.*

### **TRIANGLE OF RELATIONSHIPS**

The bond with a child's parents is just as important to the key person approach as the relationship with the child. This triangle of relationships, between the key carers, the child and their parents, is what makes the approach so effective. But it's not easy.

It takes time and effort to build and maintain true reciprocal relationships, and there are many challenges to be overcome along the way.

Sometimes this is as much about a shift in thinking and mindset as it is about the practical and emotional difficulties involved. Although 'partnership with parents' has been advocated for a long time, it often doesn't translate into meaningful practice.

There can be added complications in the private sector, where parents are also 'customers' and where commercial pressures can impact on the time and flexibility allowed for settling and relationship building.

Rather than being something that gets in the way of business, however, a nurturing, key caring approach, with home visits and flexible settling procedures, should be seen as a major selling point and an important factor in customer satisfaction. Let's not forget that the children are 'customers' too!

### **HOME VISITS**

Home visits are obviously a great way to begin the process, but they must be handled very sensitively to make sure that the relationship gets off to a good start.

- Reassure parents that the visit is voluntary and that other arrangements can be made for those who do not wish to be seen at home.
- Two people should visit, at least one of whom should be a key carer for the child. One adult should focus on the child, while the other chats with the parent/s.
- Don't overwhelm parents with too much information. Stick to a few significant points at this stage and allow plenty of time to chat about the child and their needs and motivations.
- Although the purpose of a home visit is not to make judgments about a child's home and family background, it is a wonderful opportunity to begin to understand the context of the child's life, and to tune in to what is important to them.

## **PARENT CONCERNS**

You will need to explain how the key person approach works, and respond sensitively to parents' anxieties and concerns.

- Remember that you will probably have to revisit these concerns again over time, in order to build and maintain their confidence in the approach.
- Reassure parents that their child will not become attached to their key carers at the expense of their attachments to parents and family members.
- Explain the 'triangle of relationships' to parents and the importance you place on their involvement.
- Inform them of the systems of supervision and review which need to be in place, to ensure that managers guide and support key carers in the professional aspects of the approach.
- Tell them about the procedures for handover routines and other strategies (for example, photos, videos, written observations, link books, regular meetings and reviews) that will make sure that they are kept up to date, not just about their child's progress, but also their daily well-being and significant moments.

## **SEPARATION TIME**

Separating from their children is always a big concern for parents, though they might have different ways of showing it.

- Whether or not parents display obvious distress, or they appear over-casual and uninterested, these are all valid ways of coping with the difficult act of parting. Inevitably, the child will absorb these emotions from their parents too.
- A fundamental feature of the key person approach is that it helps both parents and children to manage these feelings, by acknowledging and validating the emotions as well as providing thoughtful and personalised ways of handling the separation. This can't be done in a 'one size

fits all' kind of way; it is the personal touch that makes all the difference, not just to the settling experience itself, but also to the confidence that the parents have about their choice of setting.

## **PAIRED AND SHARED CARING**

Paired and shared key caring has obvious advantages in building relationships with parents.

- Sally Thomas suggests that key carer partnerships should match young practitioners with more experienced, possibly older partners. Although both will have an equal share in responsibility for a child, this kind of pairing can provide the parent with the option to confide in someone closer to them in age, if desired.

- Paired and shared key caring increases the likelihood of a key carer being available to parents at both ends of the day, as well as reducing the impact of staff leaving or continued absence.

## **OTHER STRATEGIES**

Other strategies that support the involvement of parents and families in the key person approach include:

- Provide quiet, private spaces for confidential chats.

- Make sure that waiting areas are comfortable and welcoming, but also think about other aspects of your environment, organisation and communication routines that affect how welcome parents feel in your setting.

- Make sure that families know their home languages are valued and that they are seen and heard around the setting.

- Provide a pleasant space where parents can spend time comfortably in the early stages of settling in, when they might leave the child only for a brief time. Provide drinks, music, reading material and so on to help soothe anxious nerves!

- Have an inexpensive digital camera available to loan to families so that they can help make a photo album for each child, with images of family members and familiar things. Show parents how you use these to help reassure the child and keep their family and home life in mind, while they are away from them.

- Similarly, invite families to contribute to a child's records with photos, drawings and comments from home.

- Think carefully about the comments you make to reassure parents. 'She missed you but settled well after a few minutes' is more comforting than 'She was fine the minute you left.'

- Likewise, 'He did some painting and he ate up all his dinner' ceases to be helpful if heard every day. Use your observations to share significant moments and experiences that you know will help the parent to feel involved in their child's day.



- Ask existing parents to help compile a booklet or video explaining how the key person approach works in your setting. They are well placed to know exactly what other parents are likely to be anxious about!

## **Positive relationships: Key people - part 4 - All part of the job**

**Those having responsibility as a key carer need to be honest with themselves about the emotional and personal demands of the role as they tune in to individual children, says Anne O'Connor.**



*'The key person should meet the needs of each child in their care and respond sensitively to their feelings, ideas and behaviour, talking to parents to make sure that the child is being cared for appropriately for each family.'* (Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, p37)

This is a fairly straightforward statement about the role of the key person - and it could be argued that this would be expected of anyone working with children.

However, what sets the key person approach apart from conventional 'serial care' (in which any number of adults may have responsibility for a child over the course of a day) is the very special nature of the close relationship that is promoted by key caring.

Although the organisational aspects of the key person approach might be different in individual settings (including childminders in the home), there are certain fundamental responsibilities that should be the same for everyone working as a key carer, regardless of their environment.

### **SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP**

Building a special, reciprocal relationship is the primary responsibility and, because it is based on the very best attentive and nurturing care, it enables the key people to 'tune in' to each of the children in their group. To carry this out well, key carers need to:

- find out as much as possible from parents about the child's emotional responses, their routines and motivations
- combine this information with a good understanding of child development in order to provide consistent, individualised care and appropriate play experiences
- liaise closely with previous and future carers to support the child and their family through the transition when children are moving between settings. This means more than just passing on records of development. It is the little details - of a child's routines, their habits, motivations and dispositions - that are important in the early stages of getting to know a child and preparing the environment for them
- 'tune in' to children's need for security and their motivation for independence, by providing a safe base from which to branch out and explore, as well as being someone to whom they can return when they need comfort and reassurance
- interact with key children, using touch, eye contact, body language, smiles and warmth of voice to show that you are physically and emotionally available to them
- understand and provide safe containment when a child is distressed or experiencing strong emotions by acknowledging feelings and allowing children to express them, rather than dampening them down

## **PHYSICAL CARE**

Taking responsibility for a child's physical care, including changing, mealtimes, rest and handover times, is another fundamental part of the key caring relationship. To do this well, key carers need to:

- recognise the impact these routine times of the day have on the emotional well-being of babies and young children
- handle children with respect and sensitivity, giving them your full attention and not rushing through the process
- make the most of personal care routines as a time for nurture and attachment building, through affectionate physical contact and playfulness
- focus on the child and the quality of the interactions between you, including eye contact and non-verbal communication as well as conversations and chat
- talk to the family and make sure that you adopt the same approaches to toilet training (for example) and tune in to the individual ways children behave when they need the toilet, or are feeling tired or hungry

- tune in to the child's (and parents') needs around transitions at the beginning and end of the day. Find out what works best for them and do what you can to provide the reassurance and support that helps make handovers less traumatic for both of them.

## **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

There is no denying that key caring is a complex and sophisticated approach. It is hard work being a key person, and the role is intense and demanding emotionally. Practitioners have a personal responsibility to look after themselves and be honest about the challenges. To do this well, key carers need to:

- find time to reflect on the role and talk through issues and concerns regularly with key partners, colleagues and managers
- be aware of how aspects of key caring might trigger emotional responses relating to your own experiences (as a child or as a parent, perhaps) or challenge your pre-conceived ideas about parenting and bringing up children
- be supportive of other team members and ready to respond flexibly so that they can best meet the needs of their key children (for example, when a child is distressed, or needs lots of attention)
- be honest with yourself and colleagues about the challenges the role brings. Be open to the emotions and feelings (good and bad) thrown up by relating so closely with individual children and their families
- be clear about the need for adequate supervision and mentoring that the role demands. This is essential to ensure accountability and maintain professional boundaries, and needs to be in place from the start. Be assertive about your needs - and entitlement - to this very essential feature of the approach.

## **Positive Relationships: Key people - Part 5 - Time to act**

**Adopting a key person approach requires careful preparation and organisation by the staff team in any setting, as well as reviewing practice once they have started using it, writes Anne O'Connor.**



For many people the principles of the key person approach make good sound sense, but establishing and maintaining the approach presents such a daunting challenge that they are reluctant to implement it fully, falling back on a half-way house of named 'key workers' filling out records and meeting with parents. And in a way, they are right - this isn't an approach that should be entered into without a great deal of reflection, forward planning and problem-solving.

It's certainly not something that settings can implement overnight by changing timetables and rotas or job descriptions. Without the opportunity to reflect on the approach, to consider all the challenges and embrace all the principles, it will still be nothing more than a system that ticks a few requirements but doesn't bring profound benefits to children, their families or the practitioners who work with them.

## **PREPARATION**

Where the approach works well, settings have given themselves lots of time to explore in advance what it will mean to their practice.

- Provide opportunities for all staff to attend training sessions and to share feedback with colleagues.
- Training and reflection should emphasise the importance of relationships and the 'triangle' of child, parents and key people.
- Invite a 'critical friend' to provide support, guidance and challenge as you assess your current provision and to maintain this as you work through the process.

- Make visits and consider the wide variety of ways in which other settings make the approach work. What particular aspects and features of your setting will need to be taken into account to make it work for you and your families?
- Very often, once the training and reflection process has begun, practitioners find that they approach their current ways of working with a new insight. This, in turn, triggers lots more questions about the new approach and the challenges it may bring.
- Being able to talk about and solve problems arising with these issues before the approach is in place will build confidence in everyone.
- Building commitment and a shared vision is important in ensuring that everyone is open to the possibilities that a new approach will bring.
- Keep parents involved with the reflection and planning process by talking it through with them and responding to their questions and concerns.
- But don't hold off for too long - good leadership is about knowing when the time has come to act on all the planning and reflection.
- Regular review and evaluation should be part of a successful key-caring approach anyway, so there should be no unreasonable expectations about it being immediately perfect for everyone.

## **ORGANISATION**

There are obvious staffing implications in taking a key caring approach.

- Once statutory requirements are met, settings will have to decide whether there is scope for improving on these in order to meet the needs of their families and children.
- Decide how best to organise age groups. One of the drawbacks to single-age rooms is that it can increase the number of transitions a child has to experience. Some settings have found that a more natural division occurs between 'under-threes' and 'over-threes' and then create relatively open-plan areas within each of these.
- One way of removing the problems of transition from room to room, or across areas, is for the key person to move with their children, and to stay with them throughout their time in the setting. This is a powerful way of nurturing secure attachments and can have profound benefits for children's all-round development as well as their emotional well-being.
- Creating 'family groups' across the entire age range is another way of addressing this, obviously used to good effect by childminders. A vertically-aged group may present some challenges, but it can be an ideal way of providing personalised care and realistic relationships.
- Weigh up the best way of deploying staff and how many children will be allocated to each key group.

- Not everyone needs to be a designated key person. Think about giving team leaders a commitment to build wider relationships, so that they can step in to support and cover when a key person is absent. They provide the 'safety net' to ensure that the system is manageable in all eventualities, and can mentor and support less experienced staff at the same time.
- Creating partnerships or 'paired and shared caring' between key people, where they can build relationships across their groups, also makes it easier to deal with shifts, absences and so on, as well as providing support for each other and greater security for parents.
- There are good examples of paired childminders who are able to provide the ultimate in key caring by being able to support each other and provide different aspects of personalised care. This might involve a family partnership working together, such as a husband and wife or other family members, or two individual childminders working closely together as a team.
- In reception classes where there is a teacher and more than one assistant, it can work well if the assistants are given key person responsibility and the class teacher assumes the role of partner for each of them. Ideally, this leads to a greater quality of personalised care for children, and the teacher benefits from the depth of knowledge of children's individual needs the key people can provide.
- Make sure everyone is clear about their roles and explore in advance some of the scenarios that might happen. Talk about possible solutions to problems and situations and ensure everyone understands the lines of management, mentoring and supervision.
- Review the provision regularly and be ready to adapt it flexibly when necessary, but don't lose sight of the principles and non-negotiable aspects of the approach. Even where circumstances don't allow you to put the ideal provision in place at first, it is still worth holding on to the vision. Make the most of every opportunity to move practice forward to a true and effective key-caring approach.