

Mixed feelings

Emotions play an important role in our nursery relationships – and child development. The University of Roehampton's *Peter Elfer* explains

Despite many challenges and concerns in the current early years landscape, we can still look back 25 years and reflect on how far we have progressed in understanding the place of emotion in early years practice.

In the early 1980s, the chilling term 'multiple indiscriminate care' (MIC) was used to describe care where many young children were looked after with only fleeting interactions from many different practitioners (Bain and Barnett, 1986). There was little consistency, continuity or emotional attunement. Today, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), however variable its implementation, at least fully recognises the vital role of emotionally attuned relationships in early years practice.

This has come about partly through the work of historical pioneers like Friedrich Froebel, Melanie Klein and John Bowlby, and the pioneers of today, most of all Colwyn Trevarthen. These pioneers showed, through observations and theory, the fundamental role of emotion in early development. But it was the inspiration and advocacy of Elinor Goldschmied, drawing on the work of these pioneers, that established the principle and practice of attention to emotion in nurseries, primarily through the 'key person' role (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2011).

In this article, I want to fly three flags, which are:

- the vital importance of emotion in the lives of babies and young children
- the work of early years practitioners in responding to the

feelings of the children with whom they work, and

- a model of policy and leadership that is responsive to the demands on staff as they manage these complex emotional interactions with children and their families.

FEELING UNDERSTOOD, FEELING HUMAN

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the great pioneering educator, was one of the earliest to write vividly about the emotional power of the baby's first smile and its significance as a marker of being human, of the desire to connect with others: 'The first smile... shows that the child has reached the stage where he is becoming conscious and aware of himself... it is the way in which the child, while as yet without any means of expression, first enters into communication with other minds. The first smile is therefore the expression of an independent human mind...' (Lilley, 1967).

Melanie Klein (1882-1960), a pioneer in child psychoanalysis, followed Froebel by linking emotion (the first smile) and the development of an 'independent human mind' (thinking). She recognised that a baby's instinctual desires and the way this desire is met by adults is the basis for mental processes that underpin thinking in each of us. Just as how a baby is fed matters as much as what they are fed, so relationships within which learning occurs matter as much as the tangible activities themselves.

Children need to feel that their explorations and ideas are of genuine interest to others and worth sustained attention, both sources of pride and encouragement.



Staff at Atelier Nursery in Bath respond sensitively to children's emotional needs while they help them to learn and play

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The close relation between emotion and thought was also integral to the work of John Bowlby (1907-1990). Bowlby's theory described the deep human need to develop a particular kind of connection with others. Attachment theory has been controversial, especially in the way it has sometimes been used to argue that any non-maternal care, however good, is inevitably harmful. Attachment theory is now strongly supported by research evidence as a universal feature of human interactions, although expressions of attachment vary between cultures.

Colwyn Trevarthen recognised the importance of attachment theory, but argued that while close attachments helped children feel safe to separate and explore, the theory did not explain the motivation of young children to branch out from their loved adults to play, explore and construct their own meanings: 'Discovery of meaning is not something the child wants to do on his or her own... Meaning is made by emotions that may turn to address others, to share the fun of discovering and doing' (2005).

PHOTOS: MANDY MILFORD



 **MORE INFORMATION**

- ‘Action and emotion in development of cultural intelligence: why infants have feelings like ours’ by C Trevarthen in *Emotional Development* by J Nadel and D Muir (eds)(2005), Oxford University Press
- *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice* by H Tovey (2013), Routledge: David Fulton.
- *Friedrich Froebel: a selection from his writings* by IM Lilley (1967), Cambridge University Press.
- *Key Persons in the Early Years: building relationships for quality provision in early years settings and primary schools* by P Elfer, E Goldschmied, and D Selleck(2012), David Fulton (2nd Edition)
- Response to the Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, Department for Education (2011)
- *The Baby Room: research summary 1* by K Gooch and S Powell (2012), Esmee Fairbairn
- *The Design of a Day Care System in a Nursery Setting for Children Under Five* by A Bain and L Barnett (1986), Tavistock Institute of Human Relations
- *The Neurobehavioral and Social-Emotional Development of Infants and Children* by E Tronick (2007), Norton

‘Connectedness’, a key Froebelian principle (Tovey, 2013), can be seen as the word that runs through each of these theories. I have always found it fascinating that it is this word emphasised by the American psychologist Ed Tronick: ‘Why do infants, indeed all people, so strongly seek states of interpersonal connectedness, and why does failure to achieve connectedness wreak such damage on their mental and physical health?’ (Tronick, 2007.)

When teaching attachment theory to students, we sometimes discuss the number of contacts they have stored on their mobile phones. While we are often told they have in excess of 50, or even 100, the answer to how many they would ring in a crisis is nearly always one or two.

Even as adults, with all our ‘life experience’, we never seem to lose the reliance on very particular key people in our lives in times of need. Close, trusting and consistent relationships with particular others matter deeply to the ordinary daily well-being of most adults.

For infants and young children who do not have the experience to

manage their own feelings, the emotional experience of life is a much more turbulent rollercoaster of feelings. Babies and young children are equally powerful and passionate in expressing their emotions, including distress and anger as well as love.

The intensity of these feelings and the speed with which they can change lessens over time, but the extremes of passionate delight and desperate despair are still an integral part of early childhood.

The way adults understand and respond to these powerful feelings is vital. When children feel overwhelmed, they cannot understand the intensity of their feelings. They rely on their deep connections (attachments) to their special adults to do this ‘understanding work’ for them. Indeed, young children are very good at ‘telling’ adults about their feelings, not of course in words, but by making receptive adults feel some of what they feel.

Upset babies easily stir up feelings of upset and concern in adults. Two-year-olds’ fury, helplessness and obstinacy can easily make a tired adult feel helpless and furious too. It

is the attuned, receptive adult who can bring their own mature emotional equipment to the aid of the child.

When adults are not too tired or stressed, they are less likely to be overwhelmed by these intense emotions and can think about them and try to understand them on behalf of the child.

By allowing themselves to be emotionally ‘touched’ by children’s emotions, receptive adults may be able to understand and resolve the cause of the upset, perhaps tiredness, hunger, or loss. Babies and children who repeatedly experience this understanding work done for them gradually absorb and develop the capacity to understand and regulate their own emotions. This is the essence of emotional maturation.

FEELING UNDERSTOOD AND RESPONDED TO IN THE NURSERY

The emotional life of nursery is very different to home. While babies and children have rich opportunities for social interaction with adults, with friends, and solidarity in groups, the numbers and diversity of adults and children, the way children are grouped and the different emotions practitioners bring to their work create a complex emotional context.

As well as managing their emotions at nursery, infants and children must also cope with moving between the two social worlds of home and nursery. It matters greatly how they do this and whether they must do it more or less on their own or with adult support and understanding.

Graham, aged 16 months, taught me a lot about this. On arriving at nursery, he was both anxious about leaving his father and excited about joining his friends. Halfway between leaving his father and running towards his friends, he stopped, unsure about what to do.

The room leader seemed perfectly attuned to him, picking him up and helping him say a painful goodbye to his father before supporting him to join his friends (Elfer, 2006).

Talking to her later about her intervention, she laughed it off as ‘nothing’, something she had done countless times. What a pity that her skilful support, both vital and emotionally complex, should be so downplayed.

After lunch, Graham seemed to lose his sense of purpose, becoming listless, a bit tired and unable to ➤

engage in anything. Again, I was immensely impressed by the staff. So many times during the morning I had observed staff bringing down (containing) children's emotions by, for example, helping to resolve furious disputes about sharing resources.

Now I saw practitioners help Graham and other children to bring up (reclaim) their emotions and belief and energy in their agency – that is, their capacity to decide what they wanted to do and find the energy to make a start. It was partly encouragement, but was more subtle too than simply 'cheering up'; it recognised how any of us can experience a feeling of loss of motivation.

Finally, at the end of the day, Graham became tearful and disruptive and was clearly tired. The doorbell had rung many times as other parents, but not his parents, arrived. The staff continued to respond sensitively to him but, understandably, they were tired too.

A nappy change then marked a complete collapse for him. The team of four wanted each child to be able to manage equally with any one of them, but Graham sobbed and raged with Brigid and wanted to be held only by Vicky, his favourite member of staff.

I know the team felt they had a dilemma. How attachments are managed in nursery is at the heart of the key person approach. Should the staff in Graham's room allow his attachment to Vicky or should they stick to their policy of encouraging each child to be able to manage with any one of them? This is a complex question for all staff groups to consider and resolve, but it is only one example of many emotional complexities inherent in the work that simply get taken for granted.

HAND IN HAND

The idea of being a 'professional' has long been associated with a way of working based on evidence, being objective and dispassionate – there has not been much place for feelings. Yet for the early childhood professional, feelings, and how these are expressed and managed, are everything. Many practitioners speak of the feelings of love they have for the children with whom they work.

The early childhood practitioner, in being professional, has a double challenge. She must be able to tune into a child's feelings, be emotionally responsive and allow her own feelings to be evoked without becoming



'too involved'. In her countless interactions with different children and colleagues, she has to be alert and respond to the 'data' of her work, the minute as well as larger details of what she sees and feels.

When a child seems deeply attached to a particular practitioner, is this to be celebrated and used? Or is it a marker of 'too much attachment' and not enough independence? When a child says she loves you and wants to kiss you, what is an appropriate response? Not every parent is comfortable about their child having such close relationships at nursery. And how do settings strike the balance between the all-important 'hugs and conversations' and the boundaries of effective safeguarding?

One of the recommendations of Kathy Goouch and Sacha Powell in their work with baby room staff was for more recognition of the 'constant, physical, emotional and intellectual engagement' that the work entails (2012). It is no coincidence that settings where practitioners feel thought about and understood by their managers are the ones where staff are most likely to do this for the children.

Dame Clare Tickell, who reviewed the EYFS in 2011, understood this and the role supervision could play in enabling each practitioner to feel their personal and professional responses to the work mattered and needed to be considered as part of their reflective practice: 'Supervision is... a key part of staff support systems and a leader or manager's role. It should be an opportunity for practitioners to... receive support to help them deal with difficult or challeng-

Children enjoy themselves as they interact with their peers in the outdoor area of Atelier Nursery

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ing situations at work. Supervision should... encourage reflective practice and move away from the perception that it is merely a tick-box approach to check what practitioners are, or are not, doing' (DfE, 2011).

Supervision is a relatively new idea in early childhood practice. I have been working with pioneers of practice and leadership, like Julian Grenier, and with child psychotherapists Katy Dearnley and Ruth Seglow, to develop models of supervision that can be used in early years settings, when time is so limited. We have been working with three principles:

- A tick-box approach is unlikely to be effective in considering the emotional impact of early years work on the practitioner. While supervision needs to include attention to personal feeling at work, and its effect on practice, it is not about counselling. It must remain focused on the work with children and families and anything that directly impacts on that.
- Supervision should help a practitioner to think more deeply about their professional work, valuing what goes well but also thinking about what may be impeding best practice.
- Supervision should be part of a setting's culture, recognising that there are many dilemmas in early years work. Thoughtful reflection, including attention to emotion, may not produce simple solutions but it is an integral part of a respectful, whole-setting approach to the complexities of the work.

The evidence is now overwhelming that consistent, emotionally responsive relationships are the very stuff of early development, and early years practice. We cannot, therefore, ignore the emotional demands on practitioners of doing this complex work day in, day out.

The capacity to allow your feelings to be stirred up by the day-to-day work, while also being able to stand back and think about these feelings, is a hallmark of professionalism, not a sign of lack of it. Practitioners engaging in this demanding work have a right to have that understood, valued and routinely supported. ■

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