A key person approach: someone special for each child

How key person works for us, our families and children at Lake Street Community Playgroup, Oxford

By Catherine Morey, Early Years Professional
Our setting

- Lake Street Community Playgroup was founded in 1969 by parents and is part of the private, voluntary and independent childcare sector.

- In 2005 the Playgroup moved to a permanent, purpose designed building at ground level, with a large outdoor space.

- The children attending Playgroup range from 2 years to 4 years of age, with most being between 2-3.5 years old. The group caters for up to 24 children each session and serves about 40 families a week.

- There are four key members of staff each morning, who each have a group of key children and there is usually a 5th member of staff plus a parent helper.

- There is plenty of space indoors and out and both are divided into various smaller areas.
Background

- Key person approach became a statutory requirement with the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008.

- At the heart of a key person approach is the theory that babies and young children need to form a few, strong attachments: “Attachment theory” was established by the work of psycho-analyst John Bowlby and the psychologist Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s.

- The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE) concluded that: “The quality of the interactions between children and staff were particularly important; where staff showed warmth and were responsive to the individual needs of children, children made more progress”, Sylva,K et al, 2004.
What the EYFS says

- Positive Relationships 2.4 Key Person
- Secure attachment
- A key person helps the baby or child to become familiar with the setting and to feel confident and safe within it.
- A key person develops a genuine bond with children and offers a settled, close relationship.
- When children feel happy and secure in this way they are confident to explore and to try out new things.
- Even when children are older and can hold special people in mind for longer there is still a need for them to have a key person to depend on in the setting, such as their teacher or a teaching assistant.
Shared Care

- A key person meets the needs of each child in their care, responding sensitively to their feelings, ideas and behaviour.
- A key person develops good relationships with parents making sure that the child is being cared for appropriately for each family.
- A close emotional relationship with a key person in the setting does not undermine children's ties with their own parents.
- Careful records of the child's development and progress are created and shared by parents, the child, the key person and other professionals as necessary.
Dependence - Independence

- Babies and children move from dependence to interdependence to becoming independent adults.

- Children's independence is most obvious when they feel confident and self-assured: with family, or with friends and familiar carers such as a key person.

- Babies and children are likely to be much less independent when they are in new situations, such as a new group or when they feel unwell or anxious.
What the research says

- Peter Fonagy: researcher in early attachment describes the brain as a: “social organ.”

- Sue Gerhardt writes: “Our minds emerge and our emotions become organised through engagement with other minds, not in isolation.”
Sue Gerhardt: Why love matters

- Sue Gerhardt “Why love matters, how affection shapes a baby’s brain”, 2004
- “in essence, our early experiences form characteristic ways of relating to other people and of coping with the ebb and flow of emotions which are not only psychological predilections but also physiological patterns.”

She argues that
- “many aspects of bodily function and emotional behaviour are shaped by social interaction. For example, the poorly handled baby develops a more reactive stress response and different biochemical patterns from a well-handled baby”
Time together…

- Peter Elfer developed concept of a key person approach based on knowledge of attachment

- “islands of intimacy” — E. Goldschmied. This time is different from group times: more like family time where there is a common relationship bond.

- Recommended reading: Elfer, P, Goldschmied, E and Selleck, D, 2003, *Key persons in the nursery; building relationships for Quality Provision*
Playgroup’s approach

- Partnership with parents
- The environment: key bases
- Snack time – islands of intimacy
- Record keeping: written and photo
- Evaluation – well-being and involvement
- Logistics – e.g. Staff deployment, colour coding!
Key bases
Why we have key bases

- To welcome at the start of a session and to say goodbye at home time
- To provide a smaller area: safe, homely, cosy space for a small group of key children
- To help key person and their key children to get to know each other
- To help children get to know one another in a small group
- To provide a space suitable for small group work with the key person
- A place to find a familiar adult and familiar toys
- To promote conversation with mothers, fathers, carers and staff
Group time
Partnership with parents
Key base provision
Snack time

- Snack time is time together in a key group
- Colour coded tables!
- Time for conversation
- Time to develop key relationships
- Creating “islands of intimacy”
The End. 2011
Charity number 1041121. Ofsted number 133988

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Appendix 1: Each key base contains the following elements

- **Books**: attractively displayed and in good order: non-fiction and fiction, near to sofa
- **A CD player**
- **Soft toys**: on the sofa (big, medium and small, family groups)
- **Dolls**: in a cot or basket where they go to bed each day
- **Fine motor skills** resources e.g. threading, tongs and pasta, peg puzzles, small world characters
- **Some small world** people or animals or scene
- **Graphics table**: notebook/diary, sharpened pencils, pencil sharpener, two telephones (for shared conversations)
- **Maths**: number books, poster or number line, simple number games or puzzles, size/shape resource (e.g. pink tower)
- **Home corner**: items in labelled baskets or shelves according to type: food, cups and plates, pots and pans. Categories you’d find at home.
- **Pictures**: of the children and their families displayed at child height
- **Familiarity**: decide where things live and return to same places: show the children where to replace thing (labelling helps)
- **Special or favourites**: toys identified as special to individual key children