

5 things to know about...

Practitioner emotional self-regulation



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1 Emotional self-awareness: adults who reflect on their emotions are more able to support children with theirs.

Emotions are powerful. Working with young children is emotionally complex.

Children provoke a lot of emotions in adults, some of them difficult. It is important that practitioners recognise when this is happening and how it impacts them and their work.

If a practitioner finds a certain emotion – let's say excitement or frustration – too difficult to bear and process, they will not be able to help the child process it either.

Similarly, if an adult unwittingly relies on being needed, it may prevent a child from separating from them.

Emotional self-awareness is key to the work of supporting children with their emotional lives.

2 Reflective practice is essential: all staff need time to discuss the complex emotions involved in their work.

We all have our blind spots, however 'emotionally conscious' we think we are. This is one of the reasons why practitioners need to engage in some form of professional reflection. It is essential for their wellbeing and that of the child.

One of the ways children communicate feelings is by stirring those feelings up in the caregiver. It is not at all easy for practitioners to face this, day in day out. They need a supportive forum in which to examine this.

The staff at Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre engage in *Work Discussion*. This is a version of 'supervision', which is a statutory requirement in the EYFS. In *Work Discussion*, staff reflect on the emotions they experience during their work. This process helps them to understand their responses.

The sessions also enable practitioners assess whether they are able to handle the emotions roused by a particular child or situation. If a practitioner is struggling, they will not be able to offer the necessary support to the child and will need a back-up plan. This is a common occurrence and not a measure of failure or incompetence.

3 Demonstrating healthy emotional regulation: the interactions and behaviour of practitioners affects children.

Young children are strongly influenced by their environment. If they are surrounded by adults who handle their emotions well, they are more likely to develop these skills for themselves.

It is important, then, for practitioners to demonstrate how to handle emotions positively. Good ways of doing this include negotiating problems with colleagues, apologising for unreasonable reactions and using self-calming strategies.

Of course, every interaction will not be exemplary – practitioners are human! The important thing is that staff *intentionally* engage in healthy interactions.

4 Building responsive relationships: responding to the child's needs.

Every child needs to feel understood and responded to. Practitioners need to tune into the child's needs so that they can validate them and offer a fitting response.

Though *responding to the child's needs* is a daily occurrence in the early years, it is not straightforward. At one and the same time, the practitioner needs to show empathy to the child yet have some distance from them. If they are too close to the child's distress, they may get caught up in it and be unable to offer support. It is a delicate balance.

Finding this balance is something that practitioners can support each other with. A colleague's sensitive observations can be helpful here.

5 Self-care and support: taking care of one's wellbeing is essential for self-regulation

Managers have a significant role to play in ensuring their staff are well looked after at work. Professional development that focuses on emotional regulation and coping with stressful situations is essential.

Practitioners, too, have a responsibility to look after themselves. Often caregivers are so dedicated to looking after others that they neglect themselves. *Self-care* is a buzz word of this era, so there is not a shortage of ideas out there about how to do this. It's about finding what suits the individual.

Again, talking these things through with colleagues can be invaluable.

Further reading:

Elfer, P. ed. (2024) [*Talking with feeling in the Early Years: 'Work Discussion' as a Model of Supporting Professional Reflection and Wellbeing.*](#)

O'Sullivan, J. and Manners, L. (2022) [*Think Feel Do: A Wellbeing Handbook for Early Years Staff.*](#)

