

5 things to know about...

The Key Person approach



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1 Attachment and continuity

An emotional attachment between the young child and the key person is central to high quality early education and care. This special relationship is sometimes referred to as 'professional love'. It helps the child feel secure and nurtures a solid foundation from which they can go off and explore, gaining independence.

When 'matching' a child with a key person it is important to be flexible. Sometimes a child may develop an affinity to a particular adult, and be more drawn to them than to their key person. Supportive teamwork can prevent this from being a problem.

Continuity is central, offering the child consistent and familiar care. It is useful to have a second person as a back-up in case the key person is not available.

2 Partnership with parents

A close partnership between the parent/carer, the key person and the child is integral. It is often referred to as the 'triangle of trust'.

Trust builds gradually, so the key person needs to prioritise time for this to happen. Parents often seek out their child's key person at drop-off and pick-up times. The parent and key person can share information and expertise about the child's needs, care and interest.

These daily interactions support strong parent-practitioner communication. This enables a greater mutual understanding of the child.

3 Individualised care and learning

The key person tailors activities and interactions to meet the child's needs and interests. They plan activities and interactions that will support the child's development. Flexibility is essential, as this will be different for every child.

The key person uses their knowledge of the child to inform their planning. Activities and experiences are then appropriate to their development and temperament.

4 Emotionally demanding

The transition from home to an early years settings can be emotionally intense. A child may feel worried, anxious or upset. Some will express this overtly, others won't. Whatever the case, practitioners need to become attuned to them. Acknowledging what is going on for the child is crucial to the role.

The key person needs to help the child process their emotions. This supports the child's general wellbeing. Distracting a child from their feelings will not help them make any sense of what they are experiencing.

This is an emotionally complex process for the key person, and something for which they need support.

5 Reflective practice

Close relationships with young children can evoke the key person's own early relationships and attachments. This can be difficult to bear and navigate. A reflective space where careful attention can be given this is vital.

Development Matters (2021) says that work discussions are integral to the key person approach: 'Offer supervision or work discuss sessions to staff. Staff will need to talk about the strong feelings that children may express'.

Further reading:

Goldschmied, E and Jackson, S (1994) *People Under Three: Young Children in Day Care*

[How can the key person approach support children's social and emotional learning in the early years?](#) Dr Peter Elfer in conversation with Dr Julian Grenier (2011)

[EEF blog: Unlocking the role of a Key Person in Early Years – Part 1](#)

[EEF blog: Unlocking the role of a Key Person in Early Years –Part 2](#)

