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Attachment Theory and the Key Person Approach

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Introduction

It is widely agreed among psychoanalysts that a bond between an infant and an adult who is special to them is central to a child's well-being. This is known as Attachment Theory. The concept was explored in depth by John Bowlby in his '*Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis*' from the 1940s to the 1970s, in which he claimed that an early attachment to the mother was vital for a child's emotional stability. This was expanded by Mary Ainsworth and her observations of toddlers left in an unfamiliar room with a stranger, known as the '*Strange Situation*' study. Faults in both studies have been highlighted and unravelled by subsequent psychoanalysts, and Attachment Theory has been buffeted by changing social expectations. In spite of this, Bowlby's research is recognised as the foundation for our understanding of the centrality of making secure attachments in infancy. More recently, Elinor Goldschmied and others have pioneered the *Key Person Approach*, which advocates the forming of special relationships between adults and children in the nursery setting. As the rising numbers of working parents continue to demand good quality childcare, the Key Person Approach is designed to bring the building of individual relationships into group care.

A Closer Look at Attachment Theory

John Bowlby described attachment as '*the bond which ties*' (Svanberg, p.6). He saw it as the basis of our evolutionary survival. Babies are completely dependent on the attentions of a close adult, usually the mother, for all their needs. Bowlby understood that infants had to make a clear attachment in order to ensure this protection. Other researchers have observed that there is a psychological, as well as a physical need to form early attachments: '*Attachment is central to our very survival, and what we are beginning to realise is that it is also central to our wellbeing*' (Svanberg, p.6).

The Phases of Attachment

Attachment is a process rather than something that happens overnight. There are three clear phases of attachment: Pre-attachment, Attachment in the Making, and Clear Cut Attachment. These describe the majority of relationships between infant and main carer and generally lead to a securely attached child.

Pre-attachment refers to the first few weeks of life, when a newborn baby shows no definite preference for a particular person, but instinctively begins to hold their carer close by crying, gripping with their hands and making firm eye contact.

Attachment in the Making is the phase from six weeks to six months, during which a baby smiles, imitates, tells the difference between familiar and unfamiliar faces and shows a preference for their main carer. In turn, the main carer, usually the mother, often responds instinctively and with sensitivity to signals from her baby. Svanberg explains that this is known as *'mind-mindedness or mindfulness...the ability to put yourself into the baby's head and work out what he is thinking'* (p.7).

Clear Cut Attachment is displayed from six months onwards. Now the baby shows distress when their main carer leaves the room and experiences what is known as 'separation anxiety' when left with another adult. Another feature of this phase is that the baby begins to learn that an object or a person continues to exist even if they cannot see them. This is Piaget's theory of *'object permanence'* (1896-1980). Equally, it is believed that it is important to the baby to know that they are kept in mind by their carer. Lindon explains that *'their emotional security depends upon feeling that they are held in mind by an important person in their life'* (p.90).

There is a fourth phase of attachment that spans the pre-school years. During this period, a child begins to understand that their main carer has needs of their own. A relationship based on negotiation is established and the child can settle into longer patterns of separation from their carer.

The 'Strange Situation' Study

This research by Ainsworth centred on the observations of a number of 12 to 18 month old toddlers placed in what was called the *'strange situation'*. This involved a mother and child entering an unfamiliar room together; a stranger comes in; the mother leaves; after a short time the mother returns. The toddler's reactions were recorded at each stage of the situation. Ainsworth found that there were three main types of responses: secure attachment referred to those toddlers who were distressed when their mothers left the room, but were happy to see her when she returned; insecure/avoidant attachment was displayed by children who showed little reaction on the departure or return of their mother: and ambivalent attachment toddlers showed distress when the

mother left, but continued to be upset when she returned. The children in these categories showed obvious strategies to deal with the separation from their mother. Ainsworth created a fourth category, disorganised attachment, for those toddlers who did not demonstrate a consistent coping mechanism. She linked her research to her observations of mothers at home with their babies, concluding that the development of attachment was greatly influenced by the responses of the main carer to the child.

The Benefits of a Secure Attachment

Bowlby believed that patterns of making relationships are formed in the very early stages of a child's life, through their very first relationship with their main attachment figure. *'The primary attachment, the first relationship, will make a sort of blueprint or internal model in the brain for...relationships in the future'* (Siren Film 1, p.8). It is therefore vital that children experience positive and loving early attachments, from which they can grow in confidence and independence: *'Securely attached children have positive self-beliefs. They understand themselves through the reactions and responses of those close to them. Positive messages from their attachment figures help to build self-esteem and trust'* (Siren Film 1, p.19). As children learn to understand themselves through their relationships, so they begin to develop empathy which is a key characteristic of a responsible and caring individual. Elfer explains that *'empathy is no more than the ability to understand the feelings of another person....the roots of that are in having your own feelings understood and that only happens through attachment relationships'* (Siren Film 2, p.20).

Criticisms of Attachment Theory Research

The main accusation aimed at both Bowlby's and Ainsworth's studies are that they are based on a narrow section of society and focus only on the mother as the main care giver. Western society has changed dramatically since these studies were carried out, and some argue that they are outdated. As Goldberg writes *'an increasing number of children are reared in households with one parent, two partners of the same gender, multigenerational families, or households that include a non-familiar resident'* (p.97). Our society is now built from many cultures, each having their own traditions and familial organisation. What is clear from all studies of attachment is that it is not who is doing the caring, but the *'amount, quality and consistency of care'* that is important (Goldberg, p.106).

A Closer Look at the Key Person Approach

The Key Person Approach is described as *'a way of working in nurseries in which the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling and supporting close attachments between individual children and individual nursery staff'* (Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck, p.18). Care by large, ever changing

groups of adults, rather than by someone especially present for a child, has been called '*multiple indiscriminate care*' (Bain and Barnett in E, G, S, p.13). The Key Person approach recognises that an infant is distressed by differences and comforted by the familiar. A Key Worker, whose task is generally administrative and organisational, is not the same as a Key Person, who's role embodies '*an emotional relationship as well as an organisational strategy*' (E, G, S, p.19).

The Key Person's Role

As a Key Person, a nursery practitioner will be responsible for a small group of children. In a professional way, the Key Person needs to demonstrate three characteristics: availability, sensitivity and warmth (Siren Film 2).

Settling in

Before a child is due to start at the early years setting, the Key Person meets with the child and their parent, either at home or in the nursery, to plan a suitable settling in programme. They learn little facts about the child, such as who is in their family, what they like to do, how they like to be held. It is the Key Person who greets the child at the start of a session, and supports the parent and the child as they say goodbye. By sensitively handling this moment, which is naturally distressing for the securely attached child and parent '*the Key Person can help to make the parting a dignified and carefully thought out time, even if it is quite a brief affair*' (E, G, S, p.24). The practitioner is also present at the reunion between parent and child at the end of the session so that they can talk about the child's day and provide a link between the setting and home.

Building an Attachment

The Key Person meets any physical needs, such as changing nappies, feeding or cuddling at nap time, and in this way they begin to build a secure attachment with the young child. Lindon emphasises the importance of physical contact when comforting and playing with a child: '*Touch is a powerful non-verbal message, reassuring children that they are liked and welcome*' (p.93). The practitioner reminds the child that they are 'kept in mind' by their parents and siblings by talking about these significant people and what they did with them yesterday, or will do later. The Key Person shares life's wonders and celebrates achievements as the child develops in confidence and independence. They need to be aware that they are the secure base from which the child can explore the setting, other children and other adults. Elfer explains that '*the role is not about limiting the child's activities with other children and other adults. The key person approach is about facilitating other relationships through allowing a close relationship*' (Siren Film 2, p.24).

Relationships with Parents

The Key Person must also consider the needs of the parent. They may require reassurance that the benefits of a special relationship with a Key Person in the nursery will not replace attachments at home. Pound points out that *'attachment is not a fixed quantity in children's lives. More at nursery does not mean less at home'* (p.45). The practitioner must recognise boundaries, remaining professional while expressing warmth and understanding. Any problems between the adults must be resolved without disruption to the child's attachments (Lindon). Goldschmeid advises the early years practitioner to think of *'the importance of a triangle of relationships between the child, the parents and the key person'* (E, G, S p.19).

Nursery Organisation

Implementing a Key Person Approach in an early years setting is not just a case of devising an organisational strategy: *'It needs to be motivated and driven by a spirit of advocacy for the rights of children to be listened to, even before they can speak'* (E, G, S, p.31). Every setting is unique and there is no single, right way to introduce this approach. However, plans need to be in place to cover for sickness, holiday, meetings or a job change. In these unavoidable situations, children's attachments are necessarily disrupted, but the change needs to be kept to a minimum by having a back up key person. As Elfer explains, *'It is much better that they have that experience of attachment even if they have to lose it at some later time than not to have any attachment experience at all'* (E, G, S, p.23).

The Key Person's role needs to be recognised within the setting as being rewarding but intellectually and emotionally demanding. Time needs to be given to each member of staff to talk about concerns and to share experiences; *'Managers have a vital role, not just in their ingenuity for creating time for talking, but in creating a climate of attitudes that sees talking about heartfelt worries or concerns as a positive part of the developing professional life of the nursery'* (E, G, S, p.33). Working as a team becomes even more important as the Key Person Approach is introduced.

Conclusion

The current understanding of early attachment relationships has evolved a great deal from Bowlby and Ainsworth's original theories, but the general principle remains the same. Infants and children need to form secure attachments with a few adults who are special to them. Using this to inform their practice, with some guidance from the Key Person Approach, early years settings can build positive and rewarding attachments with the children in their care.

References

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After doing her PGCE, Juliet taught in a Nursery and Reception class at a school in South London. She then moved to East Sussex, teaching Reception and Year 1. Since then she has juggled three children with work as a freelance writer, as well as a short stint part time in a nursery. She currently writes for the FSF and her first children's picture book was published in March 2011.



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