

NurseryWorld

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Don't go!

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Don't just wait for children to get over their distress when a parent leaves them at nursery, says Penny Tassoni - help them to form new attachments to a key worker and other children

The way in which children adjust to new settings varies enormously. Some children appear to glide effortlessly into their new environment, while others, especially younger children, show signs of great anxiety when the time comes for their parents to leave. To help support children during the settling-in period, early years practitioners need to understand the importance of attachments in young children's lives.

What is an attachment?

The term 'attachment' is used by psychologists to describe an emotional tie or relationship that a child has to another person. The need for babies and children to form attachments appears to be instinctive, with early ties forming the template for children's later relationships.

The process of forming an attachment begins shortly after birth. Babies show preferences for human faces and voices by around six weeks. By three months, most babies show recognition and pleasure when they see their principal carers while still accepting unfamiliar faces. This changes at seven or eight months, when babies have formed specific attachments and will actively protest by crying or turning away if a stranger approaches them.

Is anxiety instinctive?

The fear of strangers marks the start of a period in which babies and toddlers show great anxiety when their parents or carers leave. Research suggests that strong separation anxiety peaks at around 18 months, before tailing off at around three years. Many psychologists believe that this fear of strangers is instinctive and was originally intended by nature to prevent babies and young children from wandering off into potential danger. It is interesting to note that it begins at around the time most babies are learning to become mobile.

Stages and signs

The early signs of separation anxiety are hard to miss, as the child protests by crying and often showing anger. Child psychologist John Bowlby noted that there was, however, a pattern to separation anxiety and that if left, children would eventually quieten and enter a 'despair' or withdrawal stage. Adults can sometimes interpret this as an acceptance, but in reality it means that the child is quite distressed. Finally, in rare situations when parents or carers do not return for weeks or months, the child literally breaks off the attachment. Bowlby referred to this stage as 'detachment'.

Possible consequences

Some parents and even practitioners have viewed separation anxiety as almost a 'rite of passage' and have accepted it as part of the settling in process - making remarks such as, 'He always kicks up a fuss, but after a bit, he quiets down.' This is not a wise stance to take. Children who repeatedly show separation anxiety tend to take longer to settle in and are often the ones who find it hard to return after a short break or absence. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that their early experiences of 'unsuccessful' separation creates long-lasting problems - they cling when entering the reception class and find it hard to settle in to secondary school.

Settling in without tears

The key to avoiding separation anxiety is to ensure that a child has developed an attachment in the nursery before the parent leaves the child alone. This is the basis of the key worker system, whereby one person within the setting is meant to take on particular responsibility for the child. Problems tend to occur when the attachment is not strong enough and the child does not feel confident in the care of their key worker. Settling in without tears, therefore, requires that parents are gradually able to 'distance' themselves to allow the key worker to form an attachment, while the key worker needs to be active in gaining the child's trust.

Puppets, books and 'special' treasures are useful tools in helping children to enjoy being with a new-found friend. To help children build a relationship with their key worker, it is advisable that they make several short visits to the setting, with the purpose being to 'wean' the child away from the parent. Encouraging parents simply to play with their child during initial visits is not always a good idea, because there is a danger that the child learns to associate the setting with having a good time in the company of their parent rather than having a good time with their key worker.

Has it worked?

It is useful to test the strength of the attachment with the key worker before children are finally left by asking the parents to pop out of the room or move slightly away from their child. A child who immediately shows signs of distress is unlikely to cope with their parent's prolonged absence, while a child who is quickly reassured and carries on playing with the key worker is more likely to be ready.

During the first few sessions away from their parents, children will rely heavily on their key worker. It is therefore not a good idea for them to attend if their key worker is not on duty in the early days, but as most children quickly go on to form further attachments to other members of staff and children, this becomes less of an issue. NW

Student links

This article links to elements P2.2 and C5.1 of the NVQ 3 in Early Years Childcare and Education.

Evidence collector: Design an information leaflet for parents explaining the importance of the settling in process. Give them suggestions as to ways in which they may be able to 'distance' themselves from their child while the key worker is trying to form a relationship.

Bowlby's early work on attachment

John Bowlby is widely credited with recognising the importance of early attachments in emotional

development. In the 1940s he researched links between juvenile delinquency and the quality of a child's early attachments. His findings stated that babies need to form one main attachment and where this did not happen or the attachment was broken, the child would be at risk of irreversible psychological damage. Bowlby's work was influential, particularly in hospitals, where it was the practice to prevent children from seeing their parents during a stay. His work was later criticised for over- emphasising the role of the mother, as other research suggests babies can make strong attachments to other people, including fathers.

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