

Settling children, crying children?

There is no doubt about it, settling takes time for many children. For others it would appear it takes no time at all. If we are to hold children's wellbeing at the forefront of our minds and consider their individuality and personality as most important we really must notice and tune in to what matters to children.

When starting something new we may all experience nervousness or anxiety or fear or butterflies in our stomach. It is completely understandable that there may be many anxious feelings that a young child experiences internally when things in their world change. I can only imagine what these might be for a baby, toddler or child who as yet might have no language or does not have the right words of emotion to verbalise what they feel. Perhaps they might think:

- Why am I moving?
- Why am I leaving?
- What have I done?
- Why is my special person leaving me?
- Why am I leaving where I feel safe?

Research tells us that fear and anxiety can lead to chemicals in the brain reacting and causing flight, flight or freeze. This might present in young children as running, crying, escaping, clinging, silence, staring, hitting out and shaking.

Attachment and relationship is key

When children are born we know they need to feel safe and secure. Having their needs met through food, cuddles, touch, sleep, play, bathing, communicating, changing and nurture helps them grow and develop healthily. Forming a bond with a main carer, parent or significant adult who can meet their needs enables this to happen. It is important to respect this first bond with their parent or main carer and understand that it can not be severed suddenly or pulled apart. This could be quite traumatic and would show a lack of empathy and understanding for the child.

The Key Person approach is such a vital part of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) because it originates from an understanding of attachment needs and the bond of child with their main carer. It provides a person to meet the needs of the child, and of the need to understand healthy attachment and brain development in young children.

Tears and crying

I often think about how a baby's cry can have us on high alert because we are tuned in to respond because a need must be met. We know that many adults are tuned in to babies' cries and that many parents can tell whether a certain cry

means a need for food, drink, nappy or other basic need. When I hear young children cry during new beginnings and settling in, I have that same instinct. I want to help to meet that child's needs to provide them with a positive, healthy and safe start.

10 ways to provide a safe start

1. Ensuring children's wellbeing is protected and respected during the whole process
2. Protecting from any additional or unnecessary upset by being sensitive to needs
3. Enabling healthy emotional development for all children
4. Supporting emotional literacy during these times
5. Providing a safe space for nurture and safety
6. Helping the team and children to learn about and develop resilience
7. Tuning into children's emotions and permitting them to feel these strong emotions
8. Listening to young children and how they communicate verbally and non-verbally
9. Responding developmentally appropriately to meet every child's needs
10. Giving children the language of emotion by describing and exploring what they feel

I read a thought provoking quote on social media "Crying is an irritant and people respond to it as an irritant, wanting to make it go away. Our goal should not be to stop crying, but to understand what the cry means and decide whether or not to intervene. Allowing a child to cry requires more knowledge, time, and energy than just picking up a child and patting her."(Magda Gerber)

It is well worth us checking and trying to understand what a child's crying means in order to support settling in fully for those children who are sad or tearful. We may not see tears but it is important to be aware of children's emotions and wellbeing at this uncertain time of change and adjustment.

Wellbeing

Ferre Laevers' theory states that a child whose wellbeing is high will have secure mental health and can then access meaningful, deep learning that is purposeful and involving. In providing a safe start, and considering wellbeing, here are 10 things to look out for:

1. Children who happily leave their main carer over time
2. Children who feel secure and safe in their play
3. Home-provision links that support transition and separation, including links made prior to the child starting and settling
4. A child-centred settling approach that meets the individual child's needs
5. Parents and main carers who feel confident to leave their children and

- who are supported in the separation
6. Children who are supported and understood in their emotions as they express them
 7. Children who are acknowledged and who have their needs met if or when they cry
 8. Children who are listened to when they express sadness or any emotion
 9. Children who are listened to if they want to go home or see their main carer
 10. Children who have a named and present Key Person who supports them and meets their individual needs

In many experiences, it is possible that the child will only have been with the main carer or parent before meeting their Key Person. It is likely that the child has only known comfort and attachment to this main carer and a few limited other adults prior to settling. It could also be possible that the child has been away from the main carer and is wholly used to separating by going to another provision or setting since birth or baby / toddler age. The child may be used to separating and making a new attachment. This could mean either that the child will come into your setting easily and happily and confidently or it could mean that the child has another change and separation to work out and this will require support. We know that every child is UNIQUE and therefore every settling in time should be unique too, to support their needs.

Key Person approach

We can not just assume the needs of every child when settling into somewhere new. The Key Person is a vital personal relationship to bridge this gap and be that special person who supports the child. We know that young brains developing in the first three to five years of life have so many connections and pathways created through early experience, both positive and negative. Patterns and responses are programmed in the brain in the early years. Learning the child's story will help us to ensure settling is as helpful and supportive as it can be. With wellbeing in mind we can try putting the child's needs first as far as possible.

Reflecting on our practice

These 8 reflective questions might help:

1. How can we get to know this child's story in the best way?
2. How can we help the child to build a relationship with the Key Person?
3. How can we help the main carer to support the child and help us?
4. What do we need to know about the child's story so far?
5. How can we equip ourselves to meet the child's interests?
6. How can we put provocations and resources in the setting that the child will recognise or be drawn to because they are comforting or homely?
7. How do we help children to love coming to the setting and be happy to separate through the resourced learning environment?

8. How does understanding the child's needs help us to inform others and prepare the environment?

As I reflect on my experiences, I know that the more we know about each child, the more we can support and help them in settling. The more we know and understand, the more we can help. It is as simple as that. So let us try to find out as much as we can to support each child and help them settle safely, confidently and happily.

Useful links

- The keyperson in small reception classes and small nursery settings (National Strategies)
- Developing a key person approach by Siren films
- Attachment theory and the key person approach on Early Years Forum

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