**Key Person**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states that every child in a group setting must be assigned a key person.

**What is the key person approach?**

The key person approach is a way of working in childcare settings in which the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling close attachments between individual children and individual nursery staff. A key person helps the child to feel familiar with the setting and to feel confident and safe within it, when children feel happy and secure they are confident to explore and try out new things. Research has identified that close attachments allow this to happen. The key person approach ensures that parents have the opportunity to build a personal relationship with ‘someone’ rather than all working within the early years setting. Attachment to a key person is a necessary process in young children’s development. All children need to form an attachment to one skilled adult who regards them as special.

**Managing the key person approach**

The key person is the staff member who is there to greet the child in the morning, to provide comfort to them if they are upset, to play and enjoy time with them and be the one, whenever possible to offer intimate bodily care. This staff member will also have other children for whom she is a key person and part of the skill of the job is being available for all children, although she cannot do everything for everybody all of the time. What is certain is that children who are enabled to feel safe and secure will be much more able to be themselves and try out new ideas in the various relationships and experiences on offer in the nursery. This key person will have planned with the family when the child will start at nursery, how they will work together to introduce the child and settle them in; how they will combine efforts to make sure that life at the nursery and life at home dovetails together. One way of making the role of the key person explicit is to write a job description, which sets out the key responsibilities, identifying what is the responsibility of the key person and what activities remain responsibilities of the staff team as a whole.

**The benefits to the key person approach**

The key person approach has clear benefits to the setting as it is known to lead to better-satisfied and engaged staff, improved care and learning for the children, and parents and carers who will have a more trusting confidence in the qualities and devotion of professional staff.

The benefits to very young children are that the approach can provide them with a deeply satisfying and enriching experience of nursery life that complements their home life, as a close emotional relationship with a key person in the setting does not undermine children’s ties with their own parents. As babies move towards crawling, toddling and walking they are also able to seek out the adults they need. The availability of one main adult that they can count on is very important to them. Babies and young children become independent by being able to depend upon adults for reassurance and comfort.

**Basic responsibilities of the key person role**

- Provide a secure base for your key children by supporting their interests and explorations away from you. By smiling and nodding as they explore and by drawing their attention to interesting things around them.
- Providing a secure base for key children by being physically and emotionally available to them to come back to, by sitting at their level and close to them.
- Comforting distressed children by acknowledging their feelings and offering reassurances and explanations.
- Settling new children into the setting.
- Eating with your key group.
- Holding your key children on your lap to bottle-feed maintaining eye contact and talking to your children.
- Changing and toileting your key children, using familiar handling and words.
- Dressing and washing your key children, understanding and being sensitive to their age and stage of development.
- Reflect on the emotional aspects of key working with your manager and colleagues.
Establishing effective practice

To ensure effective practice, rotas, where possible should be based around when the key person is available for each child. Some babies and children are in the nursery from eight in the morning until six at night; very few staff work shifts this long and the key person will take holidays or is off sick. It is at these times that a back up key person is so important. Even so, the periods when the main person is away should be kept to a minimum or the role starts to become meaningless.

This is not suggesting that the key person is with their children every minute of the nursery day, parents cannot manage this. And, if they did how would a child begin to learn that separations at times maybe a little painful, although they do allow the possibility of forming new relationships with the security that the key person does return.

Overcoming challenges to using the key person approach

To overcome challenges to using the key person approach it is important to explain the key person role to parents so to reassure them, as they may be concerned that their children will become more attached to members of staff than to them. Having a back up key person identified to cover times when the key person is not available. Also, providing training on the key person approach to new staff as part of their induction programme. Help children to become familiar with their new key person when moving rooms or groups by providing settling in periods to aid with transition. Although try to keep changes of key person to a minimum as children who are cared for by several different adults spend all their time trying to become attached which uses up their energy and can hamper their development. Ensure parents are kept informed of any changes and plan time for the key person to discuss their children with parents so that they have a good understanding of the children in their key group.

The key person approach is intense can be demanding and requires a big commitment which needs to be understood planned for and supported by the settings management, policies and procedures. One of the main benefits to being a key person is that you matter and make a difference to a child and their family. Day care can only be as good for the child as the people who do the caring, children need stable and consistent care and a good quality setting provides care that is responsive, sensitive and stable.

References


For further information please contact your Improvement Officer. If you are not certain who this is please call 01922 686534.