

The First Five Years: Strengthening relationships in the preschool setting

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Fostering a relationships approach to early childhood teaching

The new curriculum framework, *The Practice of Relationships* from the NSW Office of Childcare, acknowledges the role that children's services may be able to play in fostering children's social and emotional development through a relationships approach to intervention. Evidence discussed in *Neurons to Neighbourhoods*, shows that high quality intervention which focuses on developing secure relationships between staff and children is linked to the prevention of delinquency for high risk children. Those children who are securely attached to the staff display more competent interaction with adults, more advanced peer play during child care years which is sustained well into the second grade (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).

The Benevolent Society together with KU Children's Services placed a psychologist in a Sydney, inner-city preschool where the children were a high needs group. Many of them experienced distressed relationships at home, coming from multi-problem families. At preschool the children's conduct and developmental problems were a concern for staff who also identified a need for parents to be supported in their daily lives and in their parenting role.

Whilst KU Children's services provided optimal infrastructure (such as above regulation staff ratios), the staff requested extra support to help them explore ways to build up stronger connections between themselves, the children and their families and to help the children become more settled and calm. The intervention ran for two terms in 2001 and 2002.

It was thought that the best way to approach this request was to support the staff to provide the children with secure emotional backup, using Bowlby's attachment framework (Bowlby, 1997, 1998). In order to do this, the intervention aimed to enhance the staff's emotional availability towards the children and their families. In this context, emotional availability refers to an individuals' capacity to be emotionally responsive and sensitive to another's needs and goals. It involves being accepting and tolerant of the wide spectrum of emotions, particularly distress. The concept of emotional availability is based in attachment theory and is considered vital in supporting

children to learn to self regulate their emotions (Bowlby, 1988; Easterbrooks & Biringen, 2000; Sroufe, 1979).

Empathy is at the heart of emotional availability but it is a challenge to be empathic when children have a poor emotional base and respond with disruptive behaviour. The children may react against the limits that are set rather than experience them as containing and the adults caring for them may quickly come to feel out of control. However, when staff are supported to reflect on these moments and put themselves in the children's place, they can offer a different kind of support, one based on understanding the children as vulnerable and "out of their depth" when thinking about their difficult behaviour. Once they can acknowledge the children's feelings, they can better support them to calm down in their presence. This leads to the children feeling safe and secure with the adult and to know that they can go to them for comfort. The relationship that is formed is a protective one which provides a solid foundation for the children learning emotional self-regulation.

The intervention was designed to give staff a chance to observe the children's emotional behaviour and support them to reflect on their observations from an attachment perspective, with the psychologist providing a secure base for the staff just as they acted as a secure base for the children.

In consultation with staff, the psychologist introduced a framework for "reflective observations" (Dolby et al, 2001) that could be fitted within the normal preschool day. These "reflective observations" gave the staff practice in observing the children's emotional communications and practice in reflective functioning by having a dialogue with the psychologist about what they saw and felt in these observations.

Creating an opportunity for staff to observe the children's emotional development and for the children to experience the staff as more physically available

Reflective observations were built into the free outdoor play periods to coincide with the times that the staff experienced the children as most unsettled. Staff were asked to choose a play area (such as the sand pit or swings) and stay within this same area, which they later came to call "zones". This enabled them to observe the children's emotional communications and to be more physically available to both the children and the families. Families and children knew where the staff member would be in the morning thus it was easier to approach them. It was a concrete way to highlight the staff's availability. The children could feel free to explore and play because they knew that they could return to the staff member at any time. The psychologist also maintained her own zone.

How did staff observe the children's emotional development and reflect on their own feelings?

Whilst in their "zone" staff were asked to observe:

- how each child approached and interacted with them
- how long it took for the child to approach them
- how often the child approached them
- how often (if at all) the child approached them when distressed, and
- how they returned to play.

The opportunity for staff to have a reflective dialogue about what they observed and what they felt themselves to be experiencing with the children

Whilst staying in one area and making these observations staff were encouraged to reflect on their own feelings and use them as a guide to understand how the children might be feeling in the interaction with them.

Staff were able to approach the psychologist at their own pace and talk about how they were feeling towards a child. For example, if they reported feeling out of control because of the way a child was behaving, they were helped to make the connection that the child was probably feeling like this too. Then both the child's vulnerable feelings and the staff's reaction could be acknowledged and discussed. This process helped staff to become more sensitive towards their own and the child's feelings. They were able to reframe the negative behaviour as the child being in distress rather than one who was naughty. For example, staff became more welcoming when a child approached them in an indifferent way or came in roughly. They understood that the child needed their support at these times and saw as their immediate goal to keep the child close and help him/her to calm down. It was observed that when the children felt accepted they were more likely to stay in close to the adult themselves. Then the staff felt more in control of the children and were able to set limits that the children could receive (Dolby et al, 2002).

The reflective conversations took place close in time to the interactions, but never in front of the children. A time was set aside to talk in another room. Over time these "on-the-spot" consultations began to change into one-to one supervision which the staff booked ahead for. This happened as staff developed a relationship of trust with the psychologist and began to use their feelings as a guide both to help them understand how the children might be feeling and to think about how to respond to them

This entire process strengthened the relationship and helped the child and staff member to negotiate the more difficult times together. It was stressed to staff that the repairing of a breakdown in the relationship between themselves and the children was the essence in building the secure relationship not the lack of breakdowns (Marvin et al, 2002). In this regard, as well as trying to build up a relationship with the children around positive times, special attention was paid to interactions when things went wrong. These negative times were highlighted as significant opportunities for relationship building.

Changes in the playground

With this structure, children began to cluster around teachers in play, reducing the amount of running around after children. It gave staff the opportunity to build on their relationship with each child so that they were better able to assist the children in negotiating relationships with their peers. If the closeness of the cluster became too much for a child to tolerate they could run to another teacher and spend a few minutes in another cluster rather than running around lost in the playground. This structure gave the children the control in determining the amount of intimacy they could tolerate.

If a child wanted a staff member to go with them to another zone, it gave them the opportunity to practice negotiation or working in partnership. The staff member could explain that they needed to stay where they were. They could also encourage the child to move off by letting them know that they would be there, in the same place, for the child to return to when he/she had finished exploring in other zones. Staff members were guided at their own pace towards developing the skills in reading the children's cues, especially when these involved problem behaviours.

Whilst using this approach, children and staff became calmer. The staff were able to have more 'enjoy with' moments with the children and were less caught up in feeling ineffective and helpless. Children appeared more settled and were able to spend longer periods playing rather than being distressed or disruptive.

The challenges of this approach

Staff initially found staying within one area uncomfortable as they had to sit with aroused feelings that were brought up in them, such as when the children did not choose to go to them or when they had many children with them. It also required them to place trust in the children and let them come to them rather than following them. A staff member was set up to float between areas in order to give staff and children extra support when they needed it.

Supporting parents in building relationships with their children

With the psychologist in her zone, parents were able to approach her on an informal basis at their own instigation. They sat with the psychologist and became observers together as the parents brought up issues relating to parenting and their child's behaviour. The child often chose to be part of this and had the experience of being talked about safely with the psychologist containing the parent. The parent had the experience of being able to stay at the child's level of experience and reflect on what they saw the child do or what they were worried about with the child. This became for model for staff and parents to talk together about the children's needs.

The importance of the relationship between early childhood staff and the children

As discussed in *Neurons to Neighbourhoods*, the critical aspect of quality child care is the relationship between the child and the staff member providing that care. By focussing on emotional availability, the aim was to facilitate an empathic shift whereby high needs and difficult-to-manage children could feel supported and protected. When staff respond empathically, children feel safe, experiencing that "this person understands how I'm feeling and knows what to do to help me feel better". These small moments of protection build together to help children believe that difficulties can be resolved and to feel sure of themselves and their caregiver in this process.

The intervention attempted to do this by creating the opportunity for staff to observe the children's emotional communication and have a reflective dialogue with the psychologist about what they saw and felt in these observations. In particular, they were able to reflect on their own feelings around difficult times with the children because the psychologist was present as a secure base for them. With this support they became less threatened by the children's negative behaviour and more able to make the empathic shift, whereby they could see the children as vulnerable and needing support to help with their emotional regulation. It also helped the staff to work together, to problem solve together to meet the children's needs.

Evaluation of the intervention has confirmed that from pre to post test the emotional and behavioural problems of the children reduced and the staff changed in how they perceived their relationship with the children. Themes of compliance/control (such as struggles over limit setting) reduced and themes of being protective (a reliable source of comfort to the child) increased. The children became more settled and the staff reported feeling more relaxed and as having more enjoyable times with the children.

The way to sustaining this high-quality, relationship-based care for young children is to continue to support the staff as they integrate this framework based on attachment theory and emotional availability.

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