



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet

Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being

England

Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being

Supporting children's emotional well-being is central to caring for and educating young children and babies. At times it can be challenging for practitioners and parents alike to understand how best to support children when they are upset or anxious. It is vital that children's emotional needs are effectively met from an early age by sensitive, knowledgeable, caring adults so they can learn to self-regulate and develop emotional resilience to help them cope with everyday life in the future.

Well-being is an awareness of your emotions and being able to express these in a safe and age-appropriate way. It underpins good mental health. For young children, feeling secure and at ease will enable them to cultivate the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework says, "strong warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others."

Children may display feelings of sadness, distress and frustration in many different ways such as:

- Crying
- Shouting
- Throwing items
- Deliberately breaking items
- Hitting out
- Biting
- Becoming withdrawn and quiet
- Not engaging with activities or others
- Have difficulty with separation from parents or key adults in their lives
- Start having toileting accidents when previously fully toilet trained
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty eating, or overeating
- Regressing with their speech or having a sudden speech difficulty.

It is important to remember that some, if not all, of these behaviours could also be associated with a child experiencing abuse or other changes and transitions in their life, so it is vital to talk to a child to discover the reasons behind these actions. If your staff have any concerns or have noticed a significant change in a child's behaviour they must liaise with the designated safeguarding lead immediately. Positive relationships with parents will also help practitioners discover what the child is trying to communicate using their behaviour.

Brain fact

“Did you know that the ‘reptilian part’ of the brain controls instinctive functions such as breathing and blinking? It is also responsible for the basic survival in responses to threat - or ‘fright’ (frozen in fear); ‘flight’ (running away) and ‘fight’ (responding aggressively) - which occurs when a human feels threatened, unsafe or insecure.

“Children need to feel safe and secure and adults can facilitate this by considering the possible threats for each child and minimising these threats as far as possible.”

Social and Emotional Aspects of Development, National Strategies 2008, p.16

There are many different factors that can adversely affect children’s emotional well-being including:

- Events in their home life e.g. parents separating, separation of stepfamilies, birth of a new baby, death of a family member or pet, moving home, moving bedrooms etc
- Poor housing, living in poverty etc
- Lack of warmth, attachment and affection from their primary carer
- Abuse
- Parental drug or alcohol misuse
- Frightening events and traumatic situations in their own lives or on the news.

Observation is crucial in noting patterns or changes of behaviour to address any concerns as early as possible. Keeping Children Safe in Education states that staff must be aware of the impact that adverse experiences such as the ones listed above, can have on a “child’s mental health, behaviour and education.” (Keeping Children Safe in Education)

Top tips for supporting children’s well-being

“Babies and young children experience well-being and contentment when their physical and emotional needs are met and their feelings are accepted” (Birth to 5 Matters). The relationship with the key person, which is statutory throughout the EYFS, is the basis for a child’s well-being within their setting.

Building a secure relationship between the child, family and their key worker is a ‘triangle of trust.’ This is characterised by sharing information about a child’s likes and dislikes, intimate care preferences and how they might feel about being away from home. As the relationship develops it will be helpful as the parents or carers will also volunteer information about any changes at home which could impact a child’s well-being.

Here are some ways a practitioner can develop a key relationship with their designated children and how this crucial attachment can be supported by leaders:

- Tune in to the emotions of the child and what they are trying to communicate to you. Being empathetic to children's needs shows them their feelings are important to you and you understand what it's like 'to be in their shoes.' By responding sensitively to their needs, labelling and validating their emotions, practitioners are co-regulating
- When dealing with an upset or distressed child seek to label their emotion, validate it and then create a plan to help resolve the underlying cause
- Appropriate reassuring hugs and cuddles are really important – ensure staff know what is appropriate through policies, guidelines and training
- Children's friendships are very important for their well-being. Provide support for those children who find making friendships challenging
- Provide comfortable, cosy areas for children to relax
- Display resources and picture books reflecting a range of emotions and use emotion boards, spoons or stones to support children to share how they are feeling. As adults, we should be role modelling that it is normal to be sad or frustrated sometimes, but we should always talk about how we feel
- Praise children's efforts as well as achievements to help raise self-esteem.

How settings can support a practitioner in their key person relationship

It is vital that practitioners receive support for their role as a baby or young child's key person can have "specific and potentially heavy demands" (Birth to 5 Matters). Professional support can be offered in a variety of ways which will ensure that the key person is able to develop a reciprocal and emotional bond with the children or babies.

- Consider creating regular opportunities, or prioritising time, for informal conversations with staff about the latest development or funny things their child has said or done. 'Sharing the joy' can help strengthen the bond
- Supervision sessions with a more experienced member of staff can support the practitioner to discuss challenges and work through possible solutions
- Comprehensive and ongoing professional learning opportunities are critical to develop staff skills
- Practitioners should have knowledge and understanding of child development, attachment theory, pedagogy of effective practice and strategies to identify and support children with special educational needs or disabilities
- Create time for the key person to meet with external professionals working with a child. This will extend a practitioner's skills and knowledge on how to support the child and is a forum to share ideas and strategies.

Friendship bench

Some settings successfully use a friendship bench for the children. They can use this area if they need a cuddle or want someone to play with. However, planning and preparation is advisable to introduce the concept to children so they know when and how to use it, for example –

- If your friend is sitting on the bench, they may need some kind words or a toy to play with
- If you are new to the setting
- If you want to make new friends
- If your friends aren't here today
- If you want to play something different than what your friends are playing
- If you're having a problem with your friends and you just can't solve it right now and need to take a break
- If you want to be a buddy/friend to someone.

Have staff monitor this area to ensure children are supported quickly if they need it. Having a bench indoors and outdoors enables this approach to be consistent.

A People Place by William J. Crocker

If this is not the place where my tears are understood, then where do I go to cry?

If this is not a place where my spirits can take wing, where do I go to fly?

If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where do I go to seek?

If this is not a place where my feelings can be heard, where do I go to speak?

If this is not a place where you'll accept me as I am, where can I go to be?

If this is not a place where I can try to learn to grow, where can I just be me?

Further resources, support and references

- NSPCC support if children are worried about terrorism: <http://bit.ly/35FMiZn>
- A useful link for if children are worried about the news: <https://bbc.in/2OqGYmU>
- Birth to 5 Matters: <https://bit.ly/3vHaZ6j>
- NDNA online training course: Promoting Positive Behaviour: <https://bit.ly/38gMCo2>
- NDNA factsheet: Traumatic situations: Support you can provide: <https://bit.ly/3EqcH1T>
- NDNA factsheet: Safeguarding Children and Child Protection: <https://bit.ly/36OdZ8l>
- Keeping Children Safe in Education, Department for Education:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2>
- Social and Emotional Aspects of Development: Guidance for practitioners working in the Early Years Foundation Stage, The National Strategies Early Years (2008):
https://foundationyears.org.uk/files/2011/10/SEAD_Guidance_For_Practitioners.pdf
- Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage, Department for Education
<https://bit.ly/47MgfXG>

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

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