



# The Key Person Approach

Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years



Barnardos



**We can never remind ourselves too often that a child, particularly a very young and almost totally dependent one, is the only person in the nursery who cannot understand why he is there. He can only explain it as abandonment, and unless he is helped in a positive and affectionate way, this will mean levels of anxiety greater than he can tolerate.**

*(Goldschmied & Jackson, 1994)*

The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years

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**Written by** Michele McDermott

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## Introduction

The care and education of young children in Ireland has changed in the last two decades, with many children spending more time in their early years being cared for by people other than their parents, whether this is by childminders, nannies or crèches. Shared group care, such as in crèches, is now quite common and this may be full day care, part time or sessional care.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1992, refers to a child's right to learn and develop. For children to reach their full potential it is essential that the environment they are in is warm and responsive, one where they feel secure and have formed a bond or attachment with the adults taking care of them.

One way of achieving this bond in an early years setting is by introducing a key person approach, where each child is assigned one person to be their primary carer, with this person also acting as the link between the service and the child's parents. The key person approach is primarily focused on the relationships and communication between educator, parents and children. Having a secure relationship with one person in shared care supports children's emotional wellbeing and enables them to become familiar with and confident in the setting.

In some countries such as the UK, the use of a key person approach has become mandatory as an understanding of the importance of individual special relationships in shared group care has come to the fore (Department for Education UK, 2014). While this approach is not mandatory in Ireland, both Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) refer to the importance of key relationships between educators and children and parents.

This booklet is for all those working in early years services that provide shared group care. It provides information on what the key person approach is, the benefits of this approach and what needs to be considered to ensure it works effectively. It will support both managers who are introducing the key person approach and the staff working in those services.

## What is The Key Person Approach?

The key person approach in early years is a method of care in which each child is assigned a particular educator who will act as their 'go to' person. This person will support the child and their family when they are first integrating into the setting and will continue to be the key person for routine care and for moments of emotional intimacy, building up a secure attachment with the child.

It is important for a child's wellbeing that they have a person with whom they feel connected. By having a specific knowledge and understanding of the child, the key person can show warmth and sensitivity in their communication with the child. They will become a secure base from which the child can explore the world and a safe haven to return to when they feel overwhelmed by the environment. When the child feels unwell, tired or fearful, or has questions, they will seek out their key person.

At a chemical level, it has been found that affectionate touch and other nurturing behaviours trigger the release of neurotransmitters in the brain. These have a direct, soothing effect, and also suppress the production of the stress hormone cortisol (Albers et al., 2008). This minimisation of stress can be supported by a constant, sensitive and reassuring key relationship.

While the key person will share the closest bond with the child, the child will also build a secondary relationship with another adult in the setting. This is important as the child needs to feel supported on the occasions that their key person is not available to them. It may not be possible for the key person to be there to greet the child and to say goodbye every single day, so it is important to have an approach in which a secondary or 'buddy' key person is available to the child during these transitions. This will be another adult who works in the room, with educators sharing responsibility for each other's key children when one is absent.





Multiple, indiscriminate care, however, where a child is cared for by whichever adult happens to be nearest at the time, is generally based on what is easiest for the group and the routine of the setting rather than on the needs of individual children. Fragmented or disrupted care is not beneficial to building a child's feelings of worth and value.

The key person is also the primary contact with a child's parents and will develop a warm, responsive and sensitive communication with the parent. This is a reciprocal relationship – the key person will get a full understanding from parent(s) about the child's likes and dislikes, family, comfort objects, words and routines and will, in turn, provide the parents with specific information about their child and details about their day, which they may not get when there are a number of different staff caring for the child. Message books passing on information cannot replace the detailed face-to-face information that can be passed on by a child's key person.

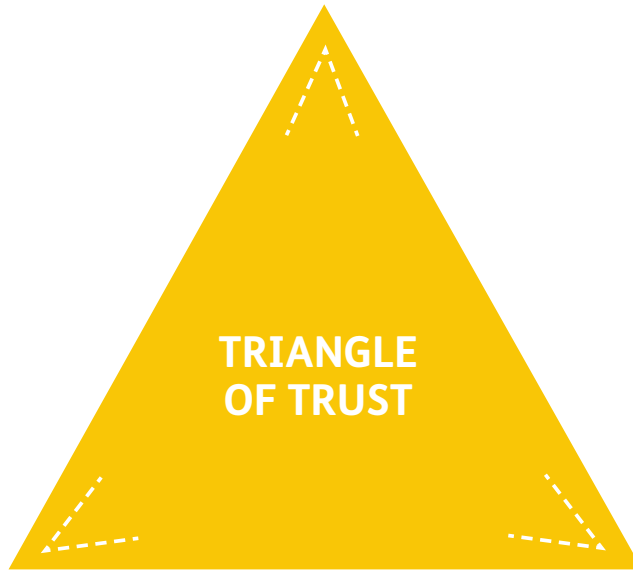
The key person approach is, in simple terms, a triangle of trust that an educator and parent build to support the child and their experiences in an early years setting. Each part of that triangle has even sides – no one participant is more or less important than the other (Elfer, 2007).

The attachment role that the key person in an early years setting plays does not usurp the parents' position in the child's affections. They are the attachment figure while the child is separated from the parent. Building a consultative relationship with parents is important to a child's wellbeing, learning and development as the parent is the foremost educator of the child. The quality of a child's learning and their development of resilience may depend on the quality of their relationships both with their key person and their primary carers (Dukes & Smith, 2009).

The principles of the key person approach can be linked to the Síolta Standards on Rights of the Child, Interactions, Play, Curriculum, Health and Welfare, Transitions, and Identity and Belonging, and all four of the Aistear themes of Well being, Exploring and Thinking, Communication, and Identity and Belonging.



**BABY/CHILD**



**PARENT**



**EDUCATOR**

## Secure Attachment and Relationships

Attachment refers to the critical bond that children develop with their parents or primary caregivers during the first years of life. From the moment babies are born, they seek security and love from responsive parents and caregivers. The key person approach is based on attachment theory and one of the main principles of attachment theory is that 'dependence leads to independence'. This means that the more that a baby or child experiences contingent responses, the more they will be armed with the skills to be independent. Contingent responses involve back-and-forth interactions where the quality, intensity and timing of the adult's signals clearly reflect the signals that the child has sent. For example, when a young toddler pulls on an adult's leg, the adult gets down to their level to respond to them immediately. Secure attachments are the foundation for strong relationships, which will support wellbeing and future mental health, and are the prototype for all later relationships.

The foundations of attachment theory were established by John Bowlby (1969), a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who believed that attachment was an evolutionary mechanism for survival. Mary Ainsworth (1979), an American psychologist, and Bowlby collaborated to establish a procedure for classifying the different styles of attachment in young children. Ainsworth identified three patterns of attachment: secure, ambivalent and avoidant. These attachment styles are said to be 'organised' in that each consists of a pattern of behaviours and responses that the child exhibits when under stress. A fourth pattern of 'disorganised' was later identified. Attachment styles do not only impact on the child's view of themselves, but also on how they view others. By understanding the different styles of attachment, educators can better understand and respond to the children in their care.

A summary of the main aspects of each attachment style is presented in Table 1 on the opposite page.



	Caregiver's responsiveness to child's cues and needs	Child's general wellbeing	Child's expectations
<b>Secure attachment</b>	Quick Consistent Sensitive Warm	Secure Explorative Happy	Child believes and trusts that needs will be met
<b>Avoidant attachment</b>	Emotionally distant Unengaged	Emotionally distant Will not explore	Child believes that needs probably won't be met
<b>Ambivalent attachment</b>	Inconsistent Sometimes sensitive, sometimes unengaged/ neglectful	Insecure Angry Anxious	Child cannot rely on needs being met
<b>Disorganised attachment</b>	Erratic Frightening Extreme	Depressed Very passive Unresponsive Angry	Child is very confused and does not know how to get needs met

*Table 1 Attachment styles*

The key person approach has been adopted in early years services as the understanding of the importance of attachment interactions has grown. These attachment interactions are integral to the development of self-regulation that children use to help them navigate the social and emotional world. Self-regulation is the ability to be able to control your actions and behaviour, which is important for both making and maintaining relationships and for emotional wellbeing. The key person helps a child to develop this through consistent, sensitive and thoughtful responses.



## Communicating the Key Person Approach with Parents

Parents will require information about the key person approach, including what it is, why it is in place, how it works, the benefits of this approach, and the role and responsibilities of the key person. Information about how a key person supports children in group settings will help to reassure parents and carers about leaving their child in the care of others. It will also help to allay a parent's fear that their child will form a stronger attachment to an early years educator than to them.

As parents are the primary educators of their child, it is very important for the child's social, emotional and cognitive development that there is regular communication between home and the early years service to ensure there is a link for learning. Clear information, properly communicated will also reinforce for parents that it is their emotional relationship with their child that is most significant.

Management and staff require training in the key person approach so that they can feel confident in explaining its necessity and its benefits to parents.

## How the Key Person Approach Works in Practice

In an early years setting, each large group of children within a room can be divided up between educators, with each adult being responsible for one small group of children.

Many services group children together who are the same age in a particular room, for example, infants, wobblers, toddlers and preschool. Children move from the baby room through others to the preschool room while they are attending that service. They have a key person for the duration of their time in each room and when they move to another room, they then form another relationship with another key person and so on. This is one of the most common ways of implementing the key person approach in Ireland. Some services provide a long transition into a new room with a small number of children moving at the same time. The key person will support the children to form relationships with the new key person. This is planned and purposeful with strategies in place that focus on reducing anxiety, to help a child to settle in.

Staff: child ratios need to be taken into account when considering the key person approach and its implementation. Building relationships with children and families requires appropriate ratios so that educators have the time to make real connections.

## The looping system

The looping system is another, more developed, method of the key person approach. In this method, an educator is assigned as key person to a small group of children when they enter the service and this educator moves through each room with the children as they grow and develop.

For example, a staff member begins in the baby room as a key person to a small group of babies. When these children grow older, the key person will move with them into the next room, leaving behind an adult who is a key person to the babies who are still in the room. As the staff: child ratio increases, there is the opportunity for new children to join this group. The foundation of the looping system is that the educator with whom the child has first built a relationship moves with them through the setting, bringing a consistency in attachments. The move into another room is the only transition that takes place for the child, rather than them having to form a relationship with a new key person at the same time. When the children leave the setting, the key person moves back to the baby room and becomes key person to a new group of babies.

Some services will provide this looping system until the age of three, when children move into a preschool group and have a new staff member to build a relationship with.

The looping system takes into account the research that has been carried out on attachment, which identifies the crucial requirement for emotional ties in shared group care. A system in which young children are able to build up long-term, consistent relationships with fewer adults is favourable to making new relationships with each room change. The looping system provides the necessary connection that is required for children to feel that they belong, which links with Síolta Standards on Interactions, Transitions and Identity and Belonging, and the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging.



Infant



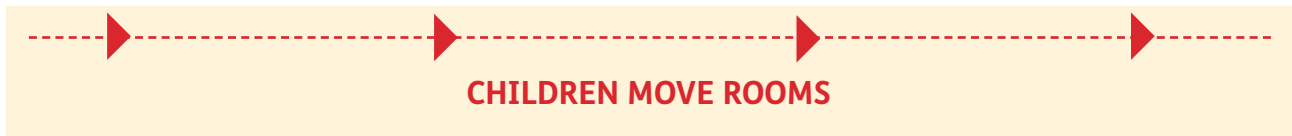
Young Toddler



Older Toddler



Preschool



## The Child and Key Person Relationship

Every child has their own temperament and some children may be easier to understand than others. A child's temperament can impact on how adults interact with them and it is important that educators keep this in mind. As a key person, you will get to know and understand each child's temperament and adjust your responses to match the needs of that child. Taking time to understand the child's temperament is conducive to building trust between you. It is also through this understanding that you can support a child who is anxious, angry or sad.

It is important also that you keep in mind the uniqueness of each child and family, recognising them as individuals with their own particular background and experiences. You can then respond to a child's specific requirements and interests. Keeping up to date with training/awareness on inclusion will support you with your key children and families.

Being aware of your own temperament will give you an insight into how you act under stress and how you might respond to a child's upset and distress. It can sometimes be a challenge to interpret what a child needs and how best to support them with their emotions. You will need to tap into your own emotions to respond appropriately to a child's behaviour that you may find challenging.

Your own experience of caregiving as a child may also impact on how you provide care. An awareness of your own values, attitudes and beliefs is important when working with and building relationships with a variety of families. For example, there are many child-rearing practices in society that may not fit with your own ideas. It is important for you to accept this variety but also to be confident about your professional practice and to recognise the difference between your own attitudes and beliefs and what may be real child protection concerns.



In order to truly understand your own responses to children's needs and behaviour, consider the following:

- What sort of temperament do you have?
- How does that impact on the interactions you have with children?
- How do you respond to the emotional needs of the children in your care?
- Do you find it easier to respond to a sad child than an anxious one?
- Does anger from a child elicit the same feeling from you?
- How do you use empathy to respond to children's expressions of behaviour?
- How will you adapt your interactions to respond to each of your key children's temperaments?



**The young children with whom we work, and who do not yet have language to express what they are experiencing, need to have these special relationships too, and deeply need to have them in a very immediate and concrete way.**

(Goldschmied & Jackson, 1994)

## Settling Children In - Supporting Transitions

The transition into the setting is a period of upheaval for children and parents and, as the key person, you can support them in this. Settling into group care is stressful and emotionally overwhelming for children. How successfully a child settles into a service and how well this period between setting and home is managed can impact negatively or positively on their wellbeing and will help to determine the emotional impact the setting has on the child (Ahnert & Lamb, 2003). This transition requires sensitive responses and preventative strategies to minimise the stress for children.

When a child is settling in, they will require an adult to be with them as they adjust to changes. It is understandable and normal for children to exhibit sad and fearful behaviour, and this may not abate for a while. If a child remains anxious and sad though, then it is important to consider why this may be. A busy environment where there are many things occurring simultaneously can be information overload for a child. Also, sharing the attention of adults, like sharing toys, can be hard for a young child. The opportunity to connect to one key person who they matter to and who matters to them will help tremendously. The empathy and responsiveness that you show at this time while the child becomes accustomed to shared group care is very helpful in settling the child (Síolta Standard 5 Interactions, Component 5.3).

Other transitions, such as moving between rooms and changing key persons, also require careful planning. The original key person may spend time with a child in their new room to help them settle in or a plan may be put in place, for example, for the new and old key persons to spend time together with the child when playing outdoors to ease the transition. It is important to consider if these transitions from room to room and person to person are beneficial for the child and whether they could be minimised or even avoided altogether.

David is 16 months old. He has been in the baby room since he was six months old. He has built up a secure relationship with Sinéad who has been his key person since he started. David is very attached to Sinéad and his parents have built up a trusting relationship with her. Sinéad is worried that David is going to find it hard to settle into the next room as he does not have strong relationships with any of the adults there. His parents have expressed a desire that he stay longer in the baby room.

Consider:

- How does this current situation meet attachment theory research?
- What sort of strategies could be put in place to ensure that David's needs are met and that his parents' concerns are addressed?

## Matching children with adults

Some services do not assign a key person to young babies for a few weeks, to wait to see if there is a natural bonding between particular adults and babies, which may seem like a sensible way to organise key pairings. This may not be the best way of matching a child, however, since the transition from home to shared care is a huge one, which requires sensitive communication between parent and key person from the start. Older children will also benefit from being matched with a staff member from the outset, to help both child and parents to become accustomed to the service and how it operates.

## Home visits

Some settings carry out home visits before a child starts in the setting to introduce the child and parent to you, their key person. This is an opportunity to begin the relationship building, with the child able to observe you in their own home surroundings and take time to 'warm up' to you. Following the home visit, you can consider the information you have collected about the child and the family, and use it to plan for settling the child in, an important part of your role.

You can acquire and source materials or equipment based on the child's interests that can be used to support them during the settling-in period. Familiar comfort materials that smell of home or familiar textures can be brought from home and you can ensure that the child has easy access to them (Síolta Standard 5 Interactions Components 5.1 and 5.6 and Aistear theme of Wellbeing).

Home visits may not be practical in instances where children are not accessing local services. Visits are also dependent on whether parents are comfortable in letting educators into their home. However, when the reason for a home visit is fully explained, it can help to build the communication between you and the parent as well as between you and the child. Where a home visit isn't possible, contact can be made by phone, email and text before the child starts at the setting. It is important to remember that a single home visit will not have a huge impact on your relationship with the child, however, as any new relationship takes time to build.

Aoife is 18 months old and will be joining Daffodils Crèche next month. Jean will be her key person and is visiting her at home. Jean speaks with Marie, Aoife's mum, as Aoife plays with a bucket and some wooden spoons on the floor. Jean talks with Marie about what food Aoife likes, her interests and the names of the people in her family. She takes notes of what Marie tells her. Aoife occasionally gets up to show Jean the spoons and say 'poon, poon'. Jean repeats 'Spoons, you're showing me your spoons.' When Aoife puts the spoon to her mouth, Jean describes what Aoife is doing. 'You're putting the spoon in your mouth. Mmmm, yum yum.' Aoife smiles and walks back to the bucket and brings that back to her. Holding it up to Jean she says 'num, num'.

Jean asks Marie the familiar terms and words Aoife uses and understands for sleeping, toileting, and other care routines. She also makes enquiries as to how Aoife likes to be comforted and what she is interested in. Marie asks Jean if she would like to see Aoife's bedroom, which may give her other hints of what Aoife likes.

Consider:

- How does Jean start to build relationships with Marie and Aoife at the meeting?
- What other potential opportunities are there to develop this relationship building while in Aoife's home? *Consider, for example, responding to Aoife's play by becoming a playmate for a while.*
- How can this relationship building be supported for Aoife before she integrates in the crèche? *Consider, for example, bringing along photographs or a video of the setting, staff and children (with permission) who will be in Aoife's room.*
- What else could Jean try to find out about Aoife at this visit? *Consider, for example, asking about foods and smells that Aoife may be used to – the smells in a setting are going to be different to those at home and food is going to taste differently so any familiar smells or foods may help Aoife's transition. Also ask about songs or rhymes that Aoife enjoys.*
- What other strategies would you use to support this transition?

## **Gradual transitions**

To further aid settling in, arrangements should be made for children to spend time with their parent in the setting before the parent begins to leave them for short periods of time. This process may take a while and should be led as much as possible by the child's needs during this huge transition. This can be extended incrementally so that a child can feel comfortable with their key person and also in the new environment. Making the transition into the setting slow and continuous in this way may need to be discussed with parents to ensure they comprehend how helpful a gradual transition is in supporting the child to settle in. Some children may need many visits before officially starting, to reduce their anxiety.

## **Comfort items**

Some team members may have concerns about familiar comfort items from home that children use to self soothe, such as a 'blankie' or soft toy, being used in the setting. They may worry about these items going missing causing sadness to the child or irritation to the parent. However, comfort items are a very important aspect of transitioning for a child who is settling in. A team discussion is required to consider what can be done to support the needs of children who require comforters and offer practical solutions for ensuring that items don't go missing but are available for a child when required.



## Bonding with Children

It is important to remember that young children are emotionally needy and that this is a very normal aspect of development (Lindon, 2012). Some services put strategies in place that help educators to build up an emotional connection with children. Sensitive responses to the cues that babies and non-verbal children make is vital in this relationship building. For older children this may take the form of one-to-one conversations based on the interests that the child has expressed. Both require fun, loving and warm interactions (Síolta Standard 5 Interactions).

Below are some suggestions as to how you can initiate bonding and start to build trust with a child.

- Ask families for photographs of important people in the child's life that you and the child can look at and discuss together.
- Greet the child by name each day with a smile and a few words of welcome.
- Touch, hold and speak to the child in a warm, attentive and leisurely manner.
- Give the child attention when they demand, signal or request it and when they pause in exploration/play. Interact with the child at their own preferred pace.
- Recognise and value what the child does by attending to and describing for them the activities that they are involved in.
- Provide time for the child to complete activities in an unhurried way. Ensure that they can complete activities.
- Take photos of the child involved in an activity that you can look at later together to start discussions.
- Give the child objects of interest from the service environment or outdoors, such as leaves, acorns, conkers, to begin conversations.
- Find out what books the child likes either from home or in the setting and read them during a one-to-one interaction.
- Support the child in their interactions with peers and other adults.
- Make only positive comments about the child and others around them.

Children will begin to show trust when they show pleasure in their interactions with you through smiling and when they initiate interactions.

Questions to ask of your service	Sometimes / Usually / Most of the time
Do the same team members greet the children each day?	
Does the same person settle in the same child each day?	
Does that person talk with that child's parent at greeting times and going home time?	
Does the team member spend one to one time with children they have responsibility for?	
Does my service ensure a shared understanding of a caregiving approach?	

Table 2 How are you meeting the individual needs of the child? (adapted from Lindon, 2012)

## A Child's Right to Choose

There is an onus on adults to match their practice to the needs of each child and to work to build up strong relationships with each child in the group they have been assigned. However, in some instances it may be that a child attaches to a person other than the key person that has been assigned to them. This preference should not be seen as a rejection but as a natural preference that the child has made and services should try to adjust and adapt.

Any preference that a child indicates must be respected as the right of the child to make choices about who they want to build a relationship with (Síolta Standard 1 Rights of the Child). Full discussion between the manager, both staff members and the parents needs to take place before any changes are made in relation to a child's key person.

If this situation happens often, with children choosing to attach to an educator other than the particular key person who has been assigned, then managers and team leaders need to reflect on the practices of this educator and how this may be impacting on a child who makes an emotional connection with another adult and not the individual they were matched with.



## Benefits of the Key Person Approach

The key person approach has many benefits for all of those involved – the child, their family and early years educators.

### For the child

Having a key person in an early years setting gives the child a secure base, enabling them to develop emotionally and socially. From this secure base the child can explore the environment, make friends and learn new things. One adult who provides a stable, secure environment who the child knows is their point of contact when required will impact positively on the child's self-belief, self-reliance and overall wellbeing.

When children are in large groups for extended periods of time it is important for them to have someone to be able to snuggle up to, or to chat with. Children's stress levels are reduced when they have someone that matters to them in shared group care. When stress levels are reduced they have the emotional space to be able to think about their exploration and learn from it.

An adult who remembers the conversation or activity that they shared with a child the day before is invaluable to the wellbeing of the child in that it confirms for the child that they have been listened to and are valued and supported. The reminder of a conversation or task also supports the child's cognitive development by providing opportunities to remember, review and build on that task if they choose to do so.

The key person approach is characterised by a relationship of trust so that the child can feel secure within a group experience. The key person is responsible for a small group of children which means that each child can feel that they matter in that environment to that particular adult. The adult's responsiveness to the child's developmental needs supports the child's feeling that they belong, which will enable them to express what they think and how they feel freely. Their feeling of identity and belonging will develop as they build this relationship with their key person.

Seeing their parents and key person communicating in a positive way will also support the child's feeling of belonging.

Ahmed, 22 months, has been attending Being and Belonging Crèche for the past three months. Jane, his key person, knows that Ahmed will take a nap quite happily but when he awakes, he cries and is disorientated. Jane discusses this with Ahmed's parents and they agree that Jane will follow the routine that Ahmed has at home after a nap. Jane will sit with Ahmed while he wakens fully, he will then sit in her lap and take a drink, which Jane will have ready, and then Jane will put on his shoes slowly and with care. She will wait until Ahmed is ready to re-engage with others, all the time talking to him in an unhurried way. All staff understand that Ahmed needs this time and after a while see how happily he will play when he has been emotionally supported in this way. Ahmed has learned that he can trust Jane to respond to his need to take time to 'get started' again. This reliance on Jane's consistent response provides him with security.

### **For the parent**

Parents may experience anxiety and concern when their child first enters shared care. An environment where staff come and go, either because of shifts or because of high staff turnover, can be a source of concern to the parent. It is important, therefore, that parents have one person that they and their child can connect to as this will give them greater confidence about the quality and commitment of the service. They will also feel safe in the knowledge that their child is secure and happy, that there is a person who understands their child's needs, that they are respected as the child's primary educator and they can share the learning and development that is taking place.

### **For the key person**

The key person approach provides you with the opportunity to get to know a child as an individual and on a deeper level, which leads to higher satisfaction and engagement. You can use your professional and personal qualities to build up a relationship that is genuine, knowing that your role is important to both the family and the child.



The benefit of knowing a smaller group of children on a deeper level means that you will be able to use observations in a meaningful way to support each child in their learning and development.

Amy, who is three and a half, joined the service three weeks ago. As her key person, Brian has been observing that, while she plays alone quite often, she watches others playing from afar, as if she wishes to play. His observations of Amy over the past week indicate that she does not appear to know how to initiate play with others. Brian talks to other team members to see what they have observed. He puts in place strategies to help Amy to be able to enter play with other children. He then observes her to see whether these have helped.

Strategies that Brian uses:

- He asks a group of children on Amy's behalf if she can join in the play – as a question not as a directive.
- He models for Amy how she can get into play by asking if he can play and commenting 'that looks fun'.
- He helps Amy to bring a toy to the game others are playing.
- He guides Amy to play beside the group.

In services where the key person approach has been implemented, it has been found that issues of challenging behaviour are reduced as educators have a clear understanding of their children and what makes them tick. When there is greater knowledge of a child's temperament, you will have a better understanding of how to respond. Being able to distinguish when a child needs to be alone or when they need comfort for a while is important. Sometimes, an educator following a child who is angry will increase the level of stress that the child is feeling and exhibiting. Understanding when it is appropriate to step in to talk with an angry child is based on an understanding of how emotions impact on behaviour and having empathy with that child.

Niamh is key person to Kasia and Cedric, both aged two. She knows that each child requires a different response when they are distressed. Cedric likes to be held when he is distressed whereas Kasia does not want this level of contact when she is upset and prefers it when Niamh just holds her hand.

When parents see that you value their opinions and preferences for their child, they are likely to share more information. You will also feel more confident about sharing information with parents, such as an observation you have made that might indicate a developmental delay.

## Support for Implementation of the Key Person Approach

Introducing a key person approach into an early years setting is inevitably a management decision, however it is essential that everyone working in the setting is on board and understands why they are doing this and the benefits it will have for them, the parents and the children. For the key person approach to be effective, all early years managers and educators involved should understand the importance of the approach as well as its challenges and rewards, which will require open discussion among the entire team. It is also essential that all educators are trained in the approach and have a clear understanding of its complexity and what is involved.

Management structures that fully support the key person approach are essential for it to be properly planned, implemented, maintained and continually reviewed (Síolta Standard 8 Planning and Evaluation). As a key person you should feel supported with any challenges you may face while caring for children and also with any concerns you may have about the level of care that a child receives outside the service. Regular support and supervision by the manager is essential, as outlined in the Child Care Regulations (DCYA, 2016).



As the key person approach is such an important aspect of good practice and requires time for discussion, it is also important that the whole approach and how it is working is addressed at team meetings as a regular agenda item.

A comprehensive policy and procedures that identify how the approach will be implemented and how certain situations may be addressed are also important. For example, when children move with one staff member to another room, how will this impact on the other children who are left behind with their own key person? Management must also look at the Transition Policy for settling children in a relaxed and unhurried manner.

As a manager thinking about introducing the key person approach in your service, consider:

- What training would team members need prior to the key person approach being introduced?
- What should be included in a Key Person Policy?
- How would the key person approach be communicated to parents?
- What supports would you need to provide to ensure all staff are able to consistently implement the approach?
- What supports will be in place for teams to be able to raise issues or concerns?
- What does your Settling-in Policy state about consistency of staff for this transition?

As an educator in a service where the key person approach is being implemented, consider:

- What do you understand about the key person approach? Do you agree that it is important?
- Are you aware of the benefits of the key person approach for children, parents and staff?
- How does your service implement a key person approach?
- Do you feel supported to raise any concerns or issues you may have?
- What is your role in settling in your key children?
- Are there particular times of the day, such as arriving and leaving, that you are with your key children?
- How do you support transitions into other rooms?



Q Moving the body  
Z Develop number  
under  
AA. Explor  
BB. Explor





## The Challenges of the Key Person Approach

While the benefits of the key person approach far outweigh the challenges it brings, it must be acknowledged that issues can arise.

As a key person, your connection with your key children is complex and management must pay attention to the emotional experience of educators carrying out this very important role (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007). The approach asks you to connect with young children on a deeper level than can be usual in shared group care, which can cause emotional tensions and conflicts. By acknowledging that the key person role can be emotionally demanding and by putting a comprehensive support system in place, management can ensure that the approach is effective. When you are given the opportunity to express any issues you may have around relationships in an open way and are supported through discussion as well as practical resources and supports, you will be encouraged to implement the approach and will appreciate the rewards that can be gleaned from it.

Differences might arise in beliefs about what is best for children when they enter shared care. For example, some educators may feel that it is not fair for children to become so attached to one member of staff and that they will feel bereft when the adult takes holidays or leaves the service. Similarly, some educators may believe that this attachment will be a problem for children when they have to leave the service. Early attachments are beneficial to children's emotional and social development in the longer term and this should be discussed as a team.

Another challenge that may arise for early years educators is that it can be daunting to feel totally responsible for a child's emotional wellbeing. By knowing a child well and building a meaningful relationship with them, however, communication problems can be reduced. Open communication is invaluable in helping children with their developing behaviour skills.

The key person approach advocates for the needs of the child, which may require rethinking the staffing routine. A routine that is too flexible may be inappropriate for supporting children. For example, too many staff working on a part-time basis can mean that children have a number of 'key persons'. Such inconsistency for children is not a true reflection of this approach as it does not put the child at the centre of decisions, so management needs to take great care when planning rosters.

Parents may also feel uncomfortable with the level of attention and care that one team member is providing for their child. As mentioned earlier, it is important that you understand the thinking behind the approach and are able to provide parents with accurate information they can reflect on. You can then encourage opportunities for parents to be able to discuss any concerns they might have.



**Children are enthusiastic to struggle to make meaning of adults' communication and they need to encounter adults who are equally enthusiastic to make meaning of their communication.**

(Elfer, Goldschmied & Selleck, 2011)

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

You may have concerns about how the key person approach will work in practice. The approach does require much thought and discussion about how it can be implemented in a way that is child-centred. The questions below are some of the most common.

### **We use the key worker system in our service rather than the key person approach. What is the difference?**

The key worker system was originally a term used in social and health care to refer to a coordinator of a care plan for an individual across a multi-disciplinary team and the focus was, therefore, on administrative tasks. A key person approach, while also having administrative responsibility of observations and record keeping for the child, focuses primarily on building and supporting interactions between educator, child and parents or other key adults in the child's life. It doesn't matter what term you use. As long as you are focusing on relationship building with a child and their family then you are using a key person approach.

### **Does the key person approach make children more clingy?**

Questions such as 'What if a child becomes very upset when I have to go to lunch?' or 'What if I am attending to a child and another of my key children becomes jealous?' may be asked. Interestingly, if situations such as these occur, it means that the child trusts you and is using you as a secure base. As a child develops an understanding that you are there for them to go to when they need, their sense of security grows and their 'clinginess' will abate. Empathic, consistent responses to the child's anxiety will support the child in adapting to shared care. It is also important that the child has a secondary key person. This person will be the 'stand in' for the child, which means that when you are away, another educator is able to support the child. It is crucial that all staff understand the importance of responding to the immediate needs of a child whose key person is not available with a sensitive response.



## **My colleague thinks that we should wait until we get to know the temperaments of the children before we match up each child with a key person. Is he right?**

The transition into group care from home is a huge one for a child and we know that a child's cortisol levels, which indicate stress, are generally higher when the child is in group care than when they are not. With this in mind, it is more appropriate to have a child matched before they begin to ensure that the transition is supported for both child and parent by a key person for consistent relationship building. The connection made with both parent and child before commencing can help reduce anxiety for them both.

## **What if many of the children choose one member of staff to be their key person?**

This is unlikely to happen too often. However, if it is happening regularly then it is important to investigate, identify and address the cause of this. It may be that not all staff members understand the role and they may need some support in carrying it out appropriately.

## **How can I be with a child all the time?**

It is not realistic to expect that a key person can be with a child all of the time: you may be on holiday or sick leave, the roster may be organised that you are absent when one of your key children is arriving at the setting or going home, or you may be responding to another child. Children generally do not have the exclusive, full-time attention of a parent and it won't happen in an early years service either. It is important for children to learn that people they love go away but they also come back (Elfer, 2007). There should be a system in place to maintain continuity of care, which ensures that a child is comfortable with another team member.

## **We have a key person approach but nappy changes and sleep time are carried out by the staff who are available at the time and depend on staff rotas, break times, lunch times. Is this ok?**

Early years settings should never choose their priorities based on what is easiest, quickest or most efficient for adults. Decisions on care should be based solely on what is in the best interests of the children. While routines in the service are important and it is essential that each educator gets adequate break times, with proper organisation it is realistic to expect that a child can rely on one adult, their key person, to attend to their intimate routines, for example, nappy changes, sleeping or waking. If this is not happening then managers need to look at what might be adapted in the routine to allow for the best interests of the child (Lindon, 2012).

## **If the children don't seem too worried about different people changing nappies, toilet training them or putting them to sleep, then is it ok?**

Children have different ways of expressing their needs. Some will be very vocal about wanting one person to put them down for a nap, while others may become very quiet and acquiesce to the routine that adults have put in place. Since young children may be unable to verbally express their emotions, it is a key responsibility of educators to be able to empathise with how they might be feeling. Children, like adults, have patterns and routines that help them to feel secure. Intimate moments such as nappy changing, sleeping and waking require a very familiar adult on a consistent basis.

## **How can I reassure a parent that my relationship with their child will not impact on theirs?**

A strong relationship between key person and child will not affect the connection that a child has with their parents. Your role is to be an attachment figure while the parent is away from the child. When the parent returns, you take a step back from the attachment role. Sometimes a child will not want to go home, and it may appear that the child is more attached to you than their parent. However, this behaviour is more likely to be because they want to share this space with their parent

or that they are upset at being separated from their parent in the first place. It is important to communicate this to the parent. When you know the child well, you will be able to identify what is happening for the child and, in partnership with the child's parent, put in place strategies to help at going home time.

**Is it not more beneficial for children to get used to being with different adults? They will have to do that when they move to primary school.**

When children are securely attached they feel secure about venturing off and interacting with others, knowing they have a base to come back to. Making connections with adults is important. However, too many different adults caring for them may result in a child feeling that they don't matter to anyone in particular. When a child moves to primary school they will have had at least four years of consistent, warm relationships that have developed their feelings of self-worth. The transition to school is a big one that requires thoughtful planning and children will need support from adults they feel secure with.

The key person approach will allow you to get to know each child in your care on an individual basis, understanding their interests and needs. This will lead to deeper connections and interactions between you and, subsequently, a more positive relationship. Quality relationships give children the security and confidence they need to explore their environment independently, learning and developing as they go.

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## **Barnardos**

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

**T:** 01 453 0355

**E:** [training@barnardos.ie](mailto:training@barnardos.ie) or  
[resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie)

**W:** [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)



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