

What About The Children?

Patrons: Sir Michael Morpurgo, Rebecca Abrams, Sir John Timpson, Dame Sarah Storey, Professor Mark Tomlinson

'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society'

Registered Address: Feldon House, Chapel Lane, Newbold on Stour, CV37 8TY.
Email: enquiries@whataboutthechildren.org.uk or research@whataboutthechildren.org.uk



RESEARCH SUMMARY

'What is it that we still don't get?' – Relational pedagogy and why relationships and connections matter in early childhood.

Cliffe, J and Solvason, C. (2023). *Power and Education*. Volume 15, Issue 3.

The focus of this discussion paper, targeted at Early Years (EY) professionals, concerns the power of relationships and their importance within the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). It picks up the above challenging question asked to EY practitioners by Suzanne Zeedyk at a UK EY Leadership event in 2017. In the Cliffe and Solvason article, the discourse is framed in the context of the recent pandemic and its impact on children's relational worlds caused by lockdown and subsequent social isolation. In ECEC settings, each child has a designated member of staff, or Key Person, who helps them feel safe and cared for. This paper identifies implications for the way that the Key Person role and relationship is viewed and implemented in EY settings.

Using the theoretical lens of attachment and a relational pedagogical perspective, the writers explore the significance of early relationships between Early Years Educators (EYEs) and the children in their care. Key areas of early learning and development are considered, including physical and emotional health and its connection with long-term mental health and wellbeing. In relation to everyday practice in the early years, the writers argue that, despite the established theoretical understanding of the importance of early attachment relationships based on the work of Bowlby, for example, educational discourse and policy have not clearly focused on the significance of positive relationships in the EY. This is in spite "positive relationships" being one of the key themes within the EYFS statutory framework (DfE Great Britain 2023).

The paper is written in three parts.

Part One provides a complex and almost existential view on relationships in the EY and uses perspectives of attachment and bonding which should be central to EY practice and understanding. The writers move beyond this basic application of attachment in the Key Person relationship with the individual child in their care to less commonly considered philosophical points about the nature of relationships in families, communities and beyond. Overall, the discussion is framed by a perception that humans are "born to connect". However, Cliffe and Solvason argue that this innate and dynamic interaction between the child and their world is marginalised in current ECEC contexts.

The writers use a genetic inheritance perspective based on research which suggests there is an innate desire for connection in the human biological make-up, based on babies' relationship-seeking behaviours from birth, building on traditional attachment theory and suggesting there is a high level of agency in children's early communication behaviour demonstrating a high degree of social capacity for 'connection' beyond just seeking food or safety. The discussion moves beyond the view of attachments as being purely to address basic emotional needs; it considers the value of community in providing a sense of belonging which underpins key aspects of mental health. The writers explore the value of supporting children's development in the context of their social worlds and wider relationships, not only with people, but in a deeper spiritual context related to the human condition which is based on a desire or drive for relationship in its widest sense. The paper challenges Maslow's ideas of 'individualist' Western views on human need as missing essential relational elements of spirituality, the soul, and inheritance and companionship or attachment beyond human boundaries, for example with the natural world.

Part Two brings the discussion back to the social context for ECEC pedagogy and practice, drawing on evidence in wider society using a broad range of research and data that relates to children's lived experiences of poor mental health and wellbeing. The writers acknowledge the recognition in society, and in the education system of trends in the UK concerning an increase in children's poor subjective wellbeing, as tracked by the annual Good Childhood Report (2020), for example. However, they suggest that the concept of wellbeing concerning the youngest children in our society is overall not well understood. They note that, as the Early Years is the place where children are developing aspects of self-regulation, identity, and social relationships, ECEC is well-placed to have a systematic focus on relationships and social connections in policy, pedagogy, and practice.

The writers provide a critique of the ECEC system and explore how, regardless of the mandatory Key Person role being intentionally designed to support daily attachment-based interactions, Early Years Educators are given little clear guidance on how this aspect of their role is achieved in practice. Instead, they suggest that there has been a narrowing focus within the key person role on children's attainment, measurement of outcomes, and accountability. This is contrasted with the work of those practitioners and thinkers in the field who are trying to re-establish an imperative of relational pedagogical approaches. To this end, they explore the tensions in the area between that of professional love, care, and education and a reductionist perspective on academic competencies.

Part Three explores *relational* pedagogy in more detail, suggesting it should be central to practice in the EY to use more exploratory approaches to teaching and learning. They discuss how the development of a child's curiosity to encourage deeper connections with the environment encourages children to become less egocentric by viewing themselves as part of the wider ecosystem. They argue

that connectedness with the wider environment can help to address the above aspects of anxiety and low well-being, thus bringing about an improvement in children's mental health. The writers draw on cultures and communities where this view of 'the self' in relation to the natural world is already embedded, for example, in aboriginal cultures. They suggest that it is the ethical responsibility of all involved in children's earliest learning experiences, including parents and educators, to support children to engage with the wider world in a relational way as a sustainability imperative.

Finally, conclusions are drawn in response to the central question posed in the paper concerning the way in which ECEC currently has an unrealised potential to play a pivotal role in supporting children to become secure in their own identity as social beings in relationship with others and the world around them.

Julie Kent