

## Early Years Teachers and Practitioners Working in a Time of Lockdown:

### Accounts from the frontline

Peter Elfer



I love this picture by van Gogh<sup>1</sup> of a little girl running into the arms of the man. The depth of feeling and the enabling power of emotional attachments is obvious. Running across the vegetable patch matters not a jot to any of them. It is a domestic scene but represents aspects of so many nursery interactions. Emotion, feeling, professional love (I am thinking of the work of Jools Page here) and safety matter so much in early childhood pedagogy. How on earth are early years professionals managing in a time of such anxiety, social distancing and lockdown?

In this short piece, I wanted to offer a few reflections. They draw on conversations with leaders, early years teachers and practitioners. The conversations speak of

the extraordinary complexity of managing continued work with children and families during the Covid pandemic and the emotional impact of that work.

#### ***The extraordinary complexity of managing provision in this time of lockdown***

After years of austerity, re-tendering of services and fraught negotiation over 'free' hours funding, many services hardly went into lockdown in a secure and certain position. On top of this, the almost overnight organisation of provision for the children of key workers and those children who are vulnerable has been an extraordinarily complex logistical task for nursery leaders.

Fast practical organisation has had to be managed holding in balance multiple kinds of judgements and decisions. Which children need to attend and where will they attend, their original setting or a new hub location? Which staff can be involved in that work and which staff must not be involved for the protection of their own and their families' health?

I was so struck by the accounts of such skilful and sensitive balancing of practical logistics with emotional considerations. A three-year-old with complex needs and difficult home circumstances had made huge progress in the last year with a deep attachment to his key person. What is a Head to do when the key person is desperate to be on the 'hub' staff rota but there are vulnerable adults in the key person's own family? The Head's decision to prioritise the health of her own staff member is obvious but how painful and upsetting. It is clear that these kinds of decisions are not exceptional but being made daily in the light of changing Government guidance (and sometimes, it is a less than guiding light!).

#### ***Babies and young children making sense of it all and teachers and practitioners holding them in mind***

If all this is difficult enough for adults, how are babies and young children making sense of it? Stories of anger, confusion and frustration are commonplace. Anxiety about missing loved adults at nursery, changed

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<sup>1</sup> We have reproduced this picture from the website of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Arts with grateful thanks and under its Open Access provisions

physical surroundings, anger and grief over the 'disappearance' of friends, and the loss of the containing effect of routines.

Practitioners have reminded me of children's resilience and for those practitioners unable to work, that they are reassured knowing children they had been closely working with are safe with trusted colleagues and loving families. Staff having to work from home are going to extraordinary lengths to keep in touch with children and families who are more vulnerable but not attending, sometimes knocking on 'virtual' doors that are not readily opened.

There is a limit of course to what even the most dedicated professional can do. The early years workforce sometimes seem more prone to anxiety and guilt than others! Not being able to meet the needs of children and families in the way that so many services had been doing so reliably and consistently is hard. More than one key person told me that they could hardly bear this and sometimes pretended to themselves that they would not be missed by children who they knew were deeply attached to them. But they were insightful enough to know that this was a self-protective pretence.

Froebel made the beautiful observation that adults are

*...the sun which draws him out; and when he establishes other relationships within and beyond himself, these are the climatic conditions, the broad sky, under which he grows up* (Froebel, 1830, cited in Lilley, 1967:78).

We now know of course that whilst 'adults in general' matter, 'the sun that draws out the child' is really those adults, at home and at nursery, who know the child deeply and can hold them in mind, working to understand and respond to their feelings and ideas. It is the very essence of the Key Person approach. 'Holding' (one of Donald Winnicott's famous ideas) is so valuable because it embraces both physical holding and mental holding. Everyone knows how much being held and touched matters for babies and small children. But we also know how much it matters to feel remembered and thought about when we are not together.



So in conclusion, I take my hat off to those leaders, nursery teachers and early years practitioners continuing to 'hold' babies, young children and their families in mind, whether they are doing it with physical presence or at a social distance.

Thank you for all your thought, work, love and risk taking to keep society's young children and their families in your professional minds.

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