



Nursery attachments and the Key Person role

A Froebel Trust early childhood
research highlight by Dr Peter Elfer



Froebelian principles

This research highlight looks at the Froebelian roots of attachments in group settings and the Key Person role. It makes links between research & practice in Froebelian education today. Throughout this highlight the term 'nursery' is used to mean group settings such as nurseries and kindergartens.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood. **The principles** of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern early childhood education.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

A Froebelian approach to education reflects the wholeness of Froebel's ideas and brings together all the principles of his work. This research highlight makes particular connection to three of the principles:

- **Unity and connectedness**
 - Autonomous learners
 - The value of childhood in its own right
- **Relationships matter**
 - Creativity and the power of symbols
 - The central importance of play
 - Engaging with nature
- **Knowledgeable and nurturing educators**

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Why do human beings so want to feel connected to others?

It is in our close relationships that we feel **understood and learn best.** ¹ Froebel saw this in his observations of relationships between adults and children nearly 200 years ago:

“To the child the sight of the grown-ups around him... is 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) ²

Froebel’s description of connection is a beautifully poetic way of showing how important it is to young children, to all of us, to feel loved, understood and responded to. As in many other things, he had a deep understanding of what the research was to discover some 150 years later, starting with the development of ‘Attachment Theory’ by John Bowlby, as described by [Anne O’Connor \(2017\).](#) ³



Why are emotional attachments so important in group settings such as nurseries and kindergartens?

Attachment describes a baby's or young child's strong emotional connection to an adult caregiver.

At one time, there was much anxiety about babies and young children attending nursery whilst parents and carers worked, for fear that family attachments could be undermined.

We now know this is a far too simplistic way to view nurseries. The wellbeing of children depends on good experiences at home as well as in settings, and **home and nursery connecting well.** ⁴ Good experiences are ones where the baby or young child feels deeply known, **understood and responded to.** ⁵

From the outset, even before birth, babies are looking to form attachments with consistent adults who **will respond to them.** ⁶



How do attachments develop in nursery and kindergarten?



Attachments with adults in the family and educators in nurseries are the same in principle, but very different in practice.

Family attachments to a new baby often happen at first sight. Early childhood

educators, building a relationship with a new baby or child starting nursery, need time. These attachments are different too because they happen within professional boundaries. [Jools Page](#) ⁷ has described these relationships as 'Professional Love'.

The emphasis given to attachment relationships compared to other emotional connections in nursery **varies in different countries and settings.** ⁸ In England and Wales, the educator mainly responsible for helping babies and children feel attached and thought about is

the Key Person. There is strong support for the **Key Person role from educators.** ⁹

Close connections with friends and in groups are important in nursery too and an important part of the Key Person role is enabling these.



What is needed for the Key Person approach to develop in practice?

Three things are essential:

- Educators need a clear understanding of what an attachment relationship in group settings such as nursery and kindergarten means. **The Key Person role is a relationship role, not a co-ordination or record keeping role.**¹⁰
- There needs to be a supportive professional environment. Powell and Gooch's work showed how much providing loving care mattered to educators in baby rooms but that they did not always feel supported in this, or even that it was **valued by those in authority.**¹¹
- Babies and children are not likely to make attachments if educators do not stay long in the setting. Educators in the private and voluntary sector in England (the great majority of provision) are often **in a position of 'high financial insecurity'.**¹² In these circumstances, educators may soon become exhausted and seek alternative work.



What do nursery attachments mean for home-nursery connections?

Many parents and carers will be delighted that their child has a close relationship with one or two key people at nursery, although they will know all the staff.

However, some parents or carers may feel anxious or resentful that they are going to be replaced in their child's love by someone at nursery.

Robyn Dolby and colleagues, working in Australia, have focused on these home-nursery connections. They use the image of two rowing-boats coming together to represent this. The educator sits still in their rowing-boat ready to welcome families and children. **Parents and carers row their boat up close to the educator's boat, and both adults hold their boats steady, so the child can take that step from one boat to another securely.**¹³

Illustration: "Two Rowing Boats"
Image by Sophie Hopmeier



How do early childhood educators manage the demands of making these attachments with so many different children and families?

The close emotional relationships we make with family and friends are usually one of the greatest joys in life. However, they can also be demanding, needing time and care to maintain and sometimes to resolve difficulties. This is just as true, and even more important, when thinking about close emotional relationships in early childhood settings, where professional boundaries and accountability matter.

Educators need, and are entitled to, regular opportunities for professional reflection together, and with a senior member of staff, where they can talk thoughtfully and in depth about the emotional connections they are making with children and families. The Froebel Trust has funded the evaluation of one effective model of professional reflection called 'Work Discussion'.¹⁴

Opportunities like 'Work Discussion' can be a regular feature of educators' working lives. They are important to their wellbeing. However, it is much more than this. Close emotional attachments, with ever-changing children and families are only possible when we **understand how demanding such attachments can be.**¹³

In that way, the joys and satisfactions of attachments, 'being the sun for children', can be better recognised and valued. Every educator will also experience, from time to time, difficulties and struggles that will occur in some relationships with children and families. Alongside the joys, these too are an inevitable part of the work.

Early childhood educators who understand the challenges can be supportive of each other and then be better enabled to work more effectively.¹⁵



Reflecting on attachments in group settings such as nurseries and kindergartens and the Key Person Approach

Does the description of the Key Person Approach in this research highlight fit with the practice in your own setting?

Taking account of all the pressures educators manage, are there aspects of your practice that you feel could be developed to offer the babies and children you work with a better experience of feeling understood and responded to?

Has the research described in this highlight changed or developed your thoughts about educators' emotional attachments with the babies and children with whom they work?

What space do you have for re-charging and thinking together about your day-to-day work, all the emotion and feeling you bring to it, and the emotions you may be left with at the end of the day?

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