

Secure Attachment & The Key Person In Daycare.
A Basic Guide To Attachment Theory (video 3 of 4)
By Richard Bowlby

In 1958 my father wrote this booklet, "Can I Leave My Baby?" Mothers sometimes asked, "Then can we never leave our small children?" I don't believe that anyone has ever suggested they should not. It's an excellent plan to accustom babies and small children to being cared for now and then by someone else. Father, for instance, or granny, or some other relation or neighbor. These are all people he'd expect to be secondary attachment figures. A bit further on he continues, "Leaving a small child whilst you go out to work needs much more care. If your own mother is living nearby, or a dependable neighbor can be a daily guardian; it may work out all right, but it needs regularity, and it must be the same woman or person who cares for him."

Nowadays a key person can play a very similar role. A bit further on he cautions, "Nannies are valuable people, provided they're good ones and provided they stay. It's the chopping and changing of people in charge of a young child which upsets him, and if a mother hands over her baby completely to a nanny, she should realize that in her child's eyes Nanny will be the real mother figure and not Mummy. But for a child to be looked after entirely by a loving nanny and then for her to leave when he's two or three, or even four or five, can be almost as tragic as the loss of a mother." That's what happened to my father; his mother didn't spend much time with him, about an hour each afternoon, and the rest of the time he was with his nanny, who lived with the family, and she became his primary attachment figure. But then his nanny left when he was four and he suffered the tragic loss of his primary attachment figure.

On the government's website about the Early Years Foundation Stage there's an extract from an article by Julian Grenier, who's head of a nursery school and children's center, where he writes about developing positive relations with children, and he describes the key person approach. Taking this approach means that the child experiences an adult who's tuned in, who can develop a special and personal history with the child. But then he adds a note of caution. In impersonal nurseries, anyone and everyone changes nappies at a time which is convenient to the organization. Children may be processed across the nappy changing table like tins of beans traveling along the checkout at a supermarket. You can get this article from the dcsf website.

It takes babies and toddlers several weeks of frequent and regular meetings to develop a new secondary attachment, for an unfamiliar practitioner to become a familiar key person. One way for a baby to develop a secondary attachment to a new practitioner is for the primary attachment figure to stay with them whilst they become friends. Then as the secondary attachment starts to become established the baby can usually manage a few minutes' separation from their primary attachment figure without distress, and then most will be able to manage longer and longer periods of separation and start to take some comfort from their key person. But even if they're

with a key person their separation anxiety increases with time and most can only manage half-days until they've become securely attached to the key person. And some will need extra soothing before bedtime and comforting at night.

A baby can only become securely attached if the key person is sensitive to the baby's needs and shows affection and bonds to the baby. This is a big commitment because the attachment gets broken if either of them leaves. Providing continuity of care is a real problem if there's high staff turnover, if there's short-term cover provided by agency staff, or if students need a few weeks' work experience. The distress of having broken attachments can put babies off making new attachments, which can lead to long-term social and emotional problems. To provide continuity of care, it helps if babies and toddlers are attached to more than one key person in a day care setting, but just because a baby has made an attachment to one key person, it doesn't mean that they can suddenly make another attachment to a new practitioner. It takes time for a baby to become attached.

Now if attachment has evolved to make babies and toddlers feel safe with attachment figures and to be afraid of separation, of strangers, and of unfamiliar places, then how do they cope with being separated, if they are cared for by strangers in unfamiliar day care settings? Babies and toddlers in impersonal day care cannot develop a secure attachment and will experience separation anxiety plus stranger anxiety if they're cared for by a practitioner who's not an attachment figure, and even more anxiety if they're not familiar with the day care setting. Julian Grenier writes, "Some children will respond to this type of impersonal care by appearing to be good in nurseries and settled. They know what to do in order to get at least a little bit of positive attention, but they're often rather passive and institutionalized. There's something lifeless about them, a lack of aliveness and quickness in their body language. Some other children respond to this type of care by seeming to be unreasonably difficult, demanding, or aggressive. They literally fight for attention."

I'm extremely concerned about the effects of impersonal day care, a form of emotional neglect. Most parents don't realize there's a problem, because the worrying behavior disappears when they collect the baby, and it only reappears next day after they've left.

Some babies and toddlers who've recently started the sort of impersonal day care described by Julian Grenier, who have not become securely attached to a key person, will show their distress by crying and searching for their attachment figure, but others appear to be good in nurseries and seem content to be left with an unfamiliar carer.

Why do babies and toddlers behave so differently? All babies and toddlers will find impersonal day care very stressful because they haven't got access to an attachment figure. But the way they behave will depend on their age and emotional development, their temperament and previous experience, and the security of their primary attachment. When babies and toddlers feel afraid but can't reach an attachment figure, sooner or later their normal strategies for coping with stress become overwhelmed and their psychological defensive strategies take over. These defenses can be seen in the characteristic behavior of the toddlers, and insecurely attached toddlers are usually

the first to show the behavior, especially if they're disorganized. Some will become hyperactive and aggressive and fight for attention, but others avoid seeking attention and become more withdrawn than usual and could be seen as good babies. They're often overcompliant and put on a false happiness and seem too self-reliant for their age. They're less interested in creative play and have learned to soothe themselves by sucking and walking or by clutching a familiar object, and some are indiscriminately affectionate towards strangers. At any time that stress levels become extreme, babies and toddlers can dissociate, which means they shut down and become disconnected from their feelings and detached from people. They become passive and their eyes appear vacant and they don't cry or protest when picked up by a stranger. There's a common misunderstanding that these are happy babies, because they could be held by anyone, and the babies who cry and don't dissociate, but fight for attention, are just being difficult. Neither of these are the lively and engaging behaviors of babies and toddlers with a secure attachment to a key person. These are psychological defensive strategies that mask real feelings and indicate an overwhelming degree of distress or even trauma.