

The Key Person approach at Cowgate Under Fives Centre



The Key Person skillfully observes children in their play, their relationships and in the day-to-day activities, in order to inform future opportunities and experiences that best meet the needs and the interests of children. The key person system also enables informed and sensitive communication with the child, family and other agencies, in line with the key components embedded within the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach.

Pre-Birth to Three (2010)



Elinor Goldschmied was instrumental in creating the key person role we know today. A pioneer of early childhood care and education, her work has continued to have a profound influence on theory and practice to the present day. While all Elinor's work was innovative, perhaps the three ideas of greatest consequence have been the treasure basket, heuristic play and the key person approach.

In the aftermath of WW2 Elinor was invited to work in the orphanages that had been set up by Mussolini during the war. It was in these settings that she advocated small group work, which is where the seeds of the Key Person role were sown. At this time Elinor took responsibility for a group of evacuated children who were considered 'unbilletable' due to their unruly behavior, this experience provided the foundation for much of her later work on the management and organisation of nurseries, both in Britain and Italy.

The conception of the key person approach emerged from Elinor's focus on the development of building a genuine personal relationship with individual children and their parents.

Senior Early Years Officer Lian Higgins, shared with me that her role "is to inspire trust". Lian feels her knowledge deepens through her interactions with parents, and asks parents to help her understand their child, while sharing her observations and thoughts with them. Lian's experience has taught her that parents very much value the feeling that a practitioner really knows their child. In this way Lian is exploring not what to do but what kind of person to be (Cunliffe, 2009).

This model of practice leads us to identify the strengths and knowledge a family bring and to enable their participation in our service, this and harmonious relationships are key to achieving a co-ordinated model of collaboration.

Lian's thoughtful practice is guided by Froebel who revealed that "man's nature and purpose require that he should not live alone but develop in a social context" (Lilley, 1967). This philosophy underpins thoughts about relationships, particularly in a Day Care Setting, many of our parents have similar feelings as I discovered when I undertook some research of the key person approach (Karen Thomson, Senior Early Years Officer, 2011).

'Overall, for me, relationships are the key and the foundation for everything else that follows in life.'

M. Brown, Cowgate parent



The following extracts are taken from research carried out at Cowgate under fives with staff, parents and children, enquiring about their perceptions of the key person role.

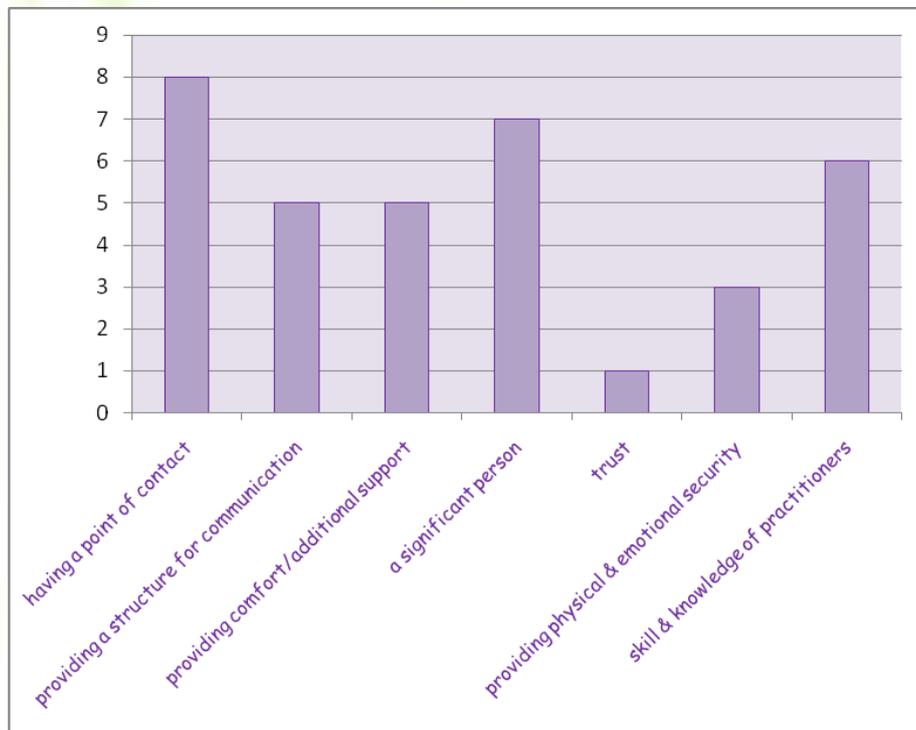


Figure 1; parent's experience of Key Person Approach

Our parent's evaluation can be seen in figure 1. Almost all parents commented on how valuable the Key Person Approach was at the start of their journey at Cowgate, particularly with young babies. However, most felt that it became less important as the children got older and moved through the centre. Parents spoke of seeking out those who they felt their child had a close connection to (Thomson, 2011).

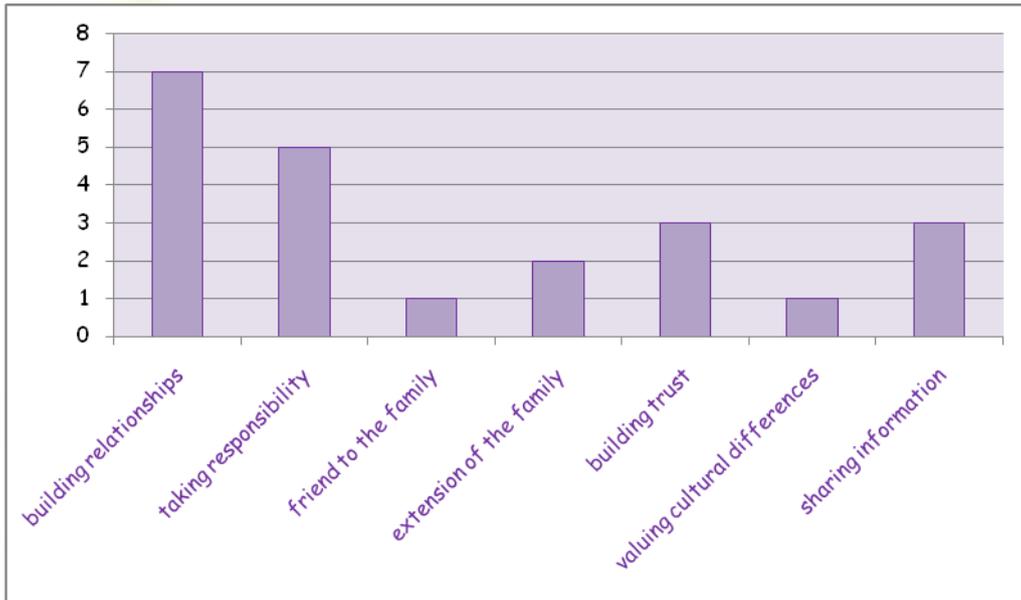


Figure 2; staff evaluation of Key Person Approach

Figure 2 reveals that most staff mentioned the importance of building relationships and working with the family. They viewed relationships to be the most significant factor.

Practitioners also commented on babies' need for love and affection, and the joy of sharing a family's experience (Thomson, 2011).



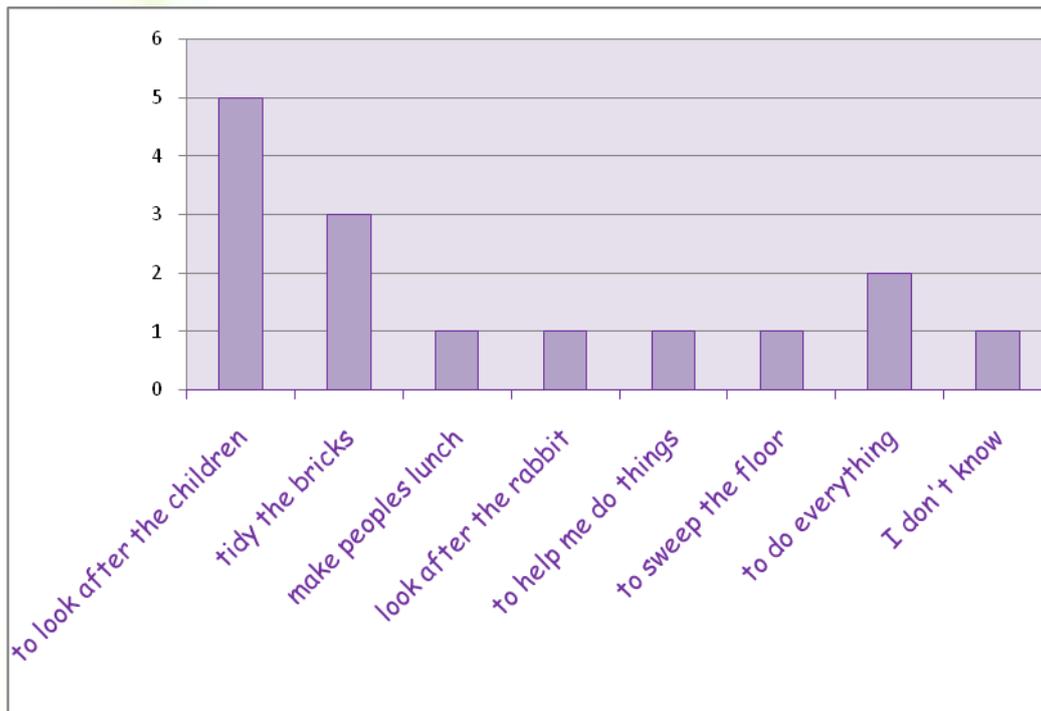


Figure 3; what did our children think a Key Person's role was

Figure 3; the majority of the children knew that the Key Persons role was to care for them, they also had an understanding of the role throughout the day. Our children seem to be describing the role of 'home maker' here (Thomson, 2011).

The fundamental principles of educational instruction and teaching should be passive and protective not directive and interfering.

Froebel in Jarvis 1891

The roles and responsibilities of a key person

Each Early Years Practitioner has responsibility for a small group of children so that they can pay particular attention to the emotional and physical well-being of those children. The key person approach is also about facilitating other relationships too. In our Cowgate community we recognise the advantages for babies and young children of having close and affectionate relationships with one or two adults who are responsive and emotionally available to them.



I would suggest that taking time to form relationships with children and families is key to understanding them and we need to find new ways of understanding the world in which we live.

McNair, 2016



- ❖ The key person has an important role to play in guiding and supporting the family through the settling phase, gathering relevant information about the child and their family. This happens when the family visit the centre and the key person visits home. During this time the key person will learn little facts about the child, such as who is in their family, what they like to do, how they like to be held. The key person will continue to update the team of any changes for the child or family over time i.e. dietary, medical requirements, changes in family circumstance etc.

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

Goldschmied E & Jackson S, people under three (second edition)

- ❖ Introduce the new family to our community and build positive relationships; while never taking over from parents, but connect with what parents would ordinarily do for their child. Being special for children, helping them manage throughout the day will help children to make a strong link between home and nursery'.

Children's and adult cultures are intricately interwoven in different ways across space and over time'.

Corsaro, 2009

- ❖ To establish respectful working relationships with staff, and families and to work collaboratively within multi-disciplinary teams.

Integrated services are socially dynamic spaces, practitioners should be constantly questioning their thoughts, practices and relationships.

Davis, 2011





- ❖ The key person shares life's wonders and celebrates the children's achievements with them. Then sensitively records personalised observations of the child to Learning Journals looking for and planning opportunities to extend children's interests and knowledge.

It is therefore just as important that those who have charge of children should watch how they accommodate themselves to their environment and notice the cause and sequence of habits they acquire.

Lilley, 1967

- ❖ Prepare for and host Parent Consultations with families; the key person in a day care setting plays an integral role in supporting families, these relationships can hold many benefits for the whole family. Parents might also like to meet at other times throughout the year and may require our support and reassurance.

Liebschner (1992) spoke of the interconnectedness of home reflected in the nursery.

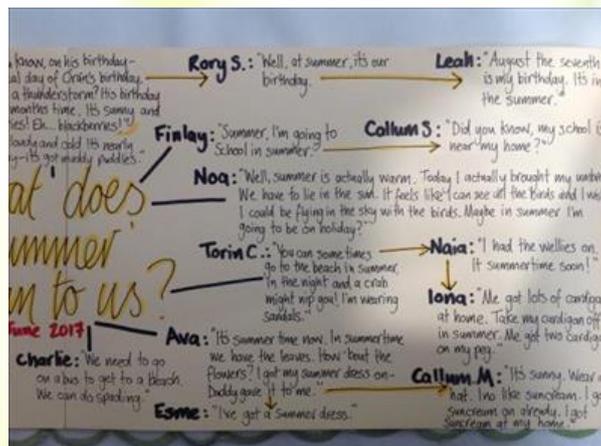
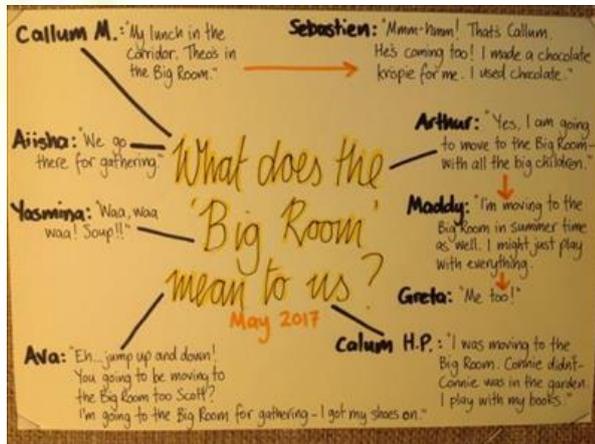
- ❖ Responsively organise and facilitate outings for our children, and to support outdoor learning at Forest School and Stickland.

He climbs into caves and crevices, clambers up trees and hills, searches heights and depths, and roams through fields and forests.

Froebel, Education of Man, in Lilley, 1967



- ❖ The key person sensitively supports the family during times of transition i.e. a new baby in the family, moving room, moving house or transitioning to school etc.



McNair's doctoral thesis on young children's transitions concluded that the practitioners at Cowgate approached transition procedures dialogically – in practice this meant less rigidly, enabling them to listen and respond to children, their parents and each other.

McNair, 2016

- ❖ To provide a hygienically clean, welcoming, caring and educational environment, and to contribute to the maintenance of resources.

Children seem to value places in nursery that are adult-free where their play can be spontaneous and absorbed, viewing the early years centre as 'their world'. Then a landscape of play and discovery becomes embedded in their daily lives as they construct their own identity away from adults.

Derr, 2001: Dudek, 2005



- ❖ The key person should aspire to be involved in the life of the centre; with Eco, Fairtrade, outdoor learning, and supporting extra-curricular events.



- ❖ Taking responsibility for your fitness to practice; keep SSSC registration up to date, take responsibility for your CPD, child protection training, and any changes in legislation and policy pertaining to your role.

The Code for Social Service Workers sets out clear standards that you are expected to meet. It is your responsibility to meet these standards and you should use the Code to reflect on your practice and identify how you can continually improve.

Scottish Social Services Council

- ❖ Develop an awareness of ASfL and your input to that. Additional support may be long term or short for a variety of reasons.
- ❖ Social inclusion - Information Governance – Equality and Diversity; demonstrating commitment to advocating an equitable environment, promoting social inclusion and equality, while having an awareness of diversity concerns.

....if we are in tune with parents, children and staff then there is a synergy and creative energy from which we all benefit....

Pugh & Duffy, 2006

- ❖ Refer any difficulties or concerns to your manager in line with council policy and procedures.



- ❖ Continually and organically develop a community responsibility to our children and families.

"I very much feel that we have a community responsibility to our children. I have always felt that I should make an effort to know all our children, and try to connect with all of our parents in some way, regardless of whether they are in my room or not."

Lian Higgins, Senior Early Years Officer



At Cowgate key people trust children as autonomous social actors creating their own environment and social relationships, it is they who are the experts in their own lives. We value what they have to say through words and expressions, and support them in driving change within the setting and in our practice.

Our approach is rooted in a commitment to the human rights of children and young people. We create spaces for children and young people to come together to discuss ways of developing and improving the services and activities that are provided for them, and support the work of adults who can make changes happen. Investing in Children

Key people recognise children's nomadic way of life in the centre offering a fluid space where even the youngest have the autonomy to choose where they want to spend their day, and who with. Acknowledging that the very youngest babies are people with thoughts, feelings and rights; people who have huge capabilities (Alderson 2001), (James and James 2012), (Qvortrup 2005).



We must give our children self-reliance and initiative, adaptability and efficiency for life.

*We want to send out individuals able to think, to cope with a situation, to be resourceful,
to be good social beings.*

Lileen Hardy, 1913

This policy is not an exhaustive 'list' of what to do as a key person, more of an exploration of how to be. The role is broad, and our world is not black and white, but complex and dynamic. We know from our experience that one size does not fit all, as such our practice is distinctive and unique, as are the children and families we work with.

The last words of this policy are summed up beautifully by one of our parents.

*"....and thank you (a thousand thousand times over) for continuing to make
Cowgate the wonderful/real/children's-paced/children's-sized/interesting/witty/warm
place it is".*

Message posted on Learning Journals to a practitioner from a parent 2017



Cowgate Under Fives Centre
Key Person Policy



