

THE KEY PERSON APPROACH

A secure base for young children

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Young children grow and thrive from a **secure base** of **consistent, loving relationships**. To enable children to reach their full potential, it is essential that they feel safe when away from home and can form secure attachments with the adults taking care of them. **The Key Person Approach** is characterised by a relationship of trust so that the child can feel safe within a group experience.

Why attachment matters

Attachments are the emotional bonds that young children develop with parents and other adults and are central to the child's **overall well-being**. Children have a fundamental need to be safe in the relationship they have with parents or educators.

Dispositions like resilience, independence and emotional strength will emerge when a child's physical and psychological well-being is supported by an adult. When children feel safe, they are more inclined to make their voice heard, express their ideas and try things out. Attachment influences a child's immediate **all-round development** and future relationships.



Reflecting on the implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it could be argued that the provision of a key person should be afforded to children as a matter of right.



The Key Person Approach

A practical approach to creating a secure bond or attachment in the early childhood setting is by implementing a Key Person Approach.

The term 'key person' was created in 1994 by Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson (People Under Three: Young Children in Day Care). Here, they introduced the notion of an educator 'to whom the child can relate in a special way'. Attachment between the young child and the educator is at the core of this approach.

A Key Person is a named member of staff with responsibilities for a small group of children who helps those children in the group feel safe and cared for meeting emotional needs and supporting the child's well-being.

The ‘key person’ will work with, and care for, specific children and liaise with their parents, forming a three-way relationship between child and educator, and educator and parent. Many settings identify a ‘key person’ who can provide continuity of care for each baby and young child and lessen anxiety around separation from their parents (Nutbrown and Page, 2008).

The principles of the Key Person Approach can be linked to the **Síolta Standards** on Rights of the Child, Interactions, Play, Curriculum, Health and Welfare, Transitions, and Identity and Belonging, and **all four of the Aistear learning themes**.

What does the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide say about the Key Person Approach?

‘Key Persons, in addition to their usual everyday interactions with parents and families, get to know a small group of ‘key’ children very well.

They act as a link between the setting and home – assessing, documenting and planning for these children’s learning and development and sharing this information with parents and other relevant people, for example, a speech therapist or social worker’.



What does the Key Person do?

In the early childhood setting, each large group of children within a room can be divided up between Educators, with each adult being responsible for one small group of children. **The role of a Key Educator includes:**

- being a **familiar point of contact** for parents and families when the child starts in the setting and at daily arrival and departure times.
- **getting to know** each child’s interests, preferences, temperament, ways of communicating (verbal and non-verbal), emotional and physical needs, and responding to these sensitively.
- **being aware of** the child’s language, background and culture, and ensuring that these are understood, respected and reflected in the setting.
- being a **secure base** for the child from which he/she can explore and interact with others.
- **observing, assessing and recording** the child’s learning and development, and helping to plan new experiences that build on interests and help him/her to learn and develop in a holistic way.
- **supporting personal needs**, helping with issues like nappy changing, toileting and dressing.
- **sharing important information with parents**, for example, when the baby, toddler or young child does or says something new or when he/she particularly enjoys something or makes a new friend.
- **easing transitions** for the child by helping to introduce new experiences and people, and helping the child to cope with change, for example, at the settling-in stage, when moving through activities during the day or spending time in a new room with the child to ease the transition to a new group or staff member.

The Key Person Approach has many benefits for all involved – the child, the family and the Educator.

The child:

Having a Key Person in an early childhood setting gives the child a secure base, enabling them to develop emotionally and socially.

From this secure base the child can explore the environment, make friends and learn new things. One adult who provides a stable, secure environment who the child knows is their point of contact when required will impact positively on the child's self-belief, self-reliance and overall wellbeing.

The parent:

An environment where staff come and go, either because of shifts or because of high staff turnover, can be a source of concern to the parent. It is important, therefore, that parents have one person that they and their child can connect to as this will give them greater confidence about the quality and commitment of the service.

The Educator:

Working with children in this way allows the Educator to better 'tune into' children's play and their conversations to really get to know the children in the group well. This is essential in delivering a curriculum programme that emerges with the child's interests and stage of development. Children feel settled and happy and are more confident to explore and as a result become more capable learners.

Policy Matters

Adopting the Key Person Approach in an early childhood setting is not an isolated action.

Consideration needs to be given to the inclusion of this approach in policies, procedures and supports. A Key Person Policy, as well as policies on learning and development, need to address the role of the key person.

This includes policy issues relating to physical contact and intimacy between practitioners and children – where closeness is encouraged and everyone understands that this is part of professional, responsive provision.

Clarity around attachment and relationships between practitioners and children means that parents are involved in and assured that their children's all-round needs are attended to on an individual level.



For more information on the Key Person Approach see:

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide Tip Sheet:
Using a Key Person Approach

The Key Person Approach: Barnardos



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Refs:

Elfer P, Goldschmied E, Selleck D. (2012). Key Persons in the Early Years (2nd edition) Routledge.

Nutbrown, C and Page, J. Sage. (2008). Working with Babies and Children Under Three. Sage.