

The role of childcare professionals in supporting mental health and wellbeing in young people: a literature review

Ione Inness

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The importance of early years and the role of the childcare professional supporting children's health

"At present, 1 in ten children and young people suffer from mental health problems. Evidence of symptoms are demonstrated through depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders.

Positive mental health enables children to develop their resilience and grow into well-rounded adults. Recent research suggests that children are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than 30 years ago" (Mind, 2015).

The first years of life are critical for a child's social and emotional development (Ashdown and Bernard, 2012). Babies are vulnerable and totally dependent on others for their survival. From the beginning babies are only aware of their immediate needs (if they are wet, hungry, in need of attention etc). One of the first social emotions that babies display is when their caregiver leaves the room - the baby's cry can act as a signal that they are unhappy and needing help. Thus by the end of their first year babies are primed to develop crucial ties to their parents or other significant adults (Jones et al, 2015). Usually, but not always it is their mother they learn to trust because consistency and loving care teaches a baby about the importance of developing a deep emotional bond with another.

Attachment

This period of a child's development is called attachment. John Bowlby (1907 – 1990 cited in Berant, 2013) was a psychoanalyst who believed mental health and behavioural problems could be recognised in early childhood. Bowlby's revolutionary attachment theory proposed that children enter the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this helps them to survive. Furthermore, Bowlby believed that attachment behaviours are innate and can be activated by conditions that seem to threaten the achievement of proximity, such as separation, insecurity and fear (Berant, 111: 2013).

It is this natural instinct in babies that propels them to seek safety and comfort from their primary caregivers when they perceive an imminent threat or discomfort. The term

attachment also describes the availability of the caregiver towards the child. In practice this means how the caregiver responds to the baby's needs for physical and emotional closeness. A strong attachment between baby and caregiver helps develop a deep internal blueprint of positive relationships. Additionally, these characteristics help shape a child's sense of self, gives them their first introduction to their own autonomy and helps regulate their emotions (Blair and Cybele Raver, 2014).

Self-regulation

One of the most important responsibilities which parents undertake when their baby is born is teaching their offspring how to regulate their thoughts, emotions and behavior. Theorists believe that children who reach adolescence without developing this ability are more likely to do badly in school, demonstrate aggressive behavior, abuse substances, engage in high-risk sexual behavior and as a result of any or all of these generally experience negative life events (Houghton et al, 201, Canada Education, 2015). Sadly, parents who have difficulties in this area themselves can therefore struggle to pass these skills down. However, some experts suggest that most if not all major problems that affect individuals of all ages in our society, including a number of health problems and mental issues, can be traced in some way to an inability to appropriately control aspects of the self (Reading et al, 2008, Blair and Cybele Raver, 2014).

Nowadays, self-regulation is closely aligned with self-control and in some areas the two overlap – both are used to achieve the same goal. However, the difference lies in when a challenge arises between our current state and our desired state, and we become motivated to change our mental and emotional behaviour. The concept of *self-control* describes the conscious effort to change behaviour and thus reduce the challenge, while *self-regulation* comprises this as well as more instinctive processes—and both are important in human development.

Nursery setting example

“Ben and Harry are playing together happily building dens in the nursery garden. They work together to build Harry's den first, using seat cushions from the bench in their playground and the underneath of the bench as a tunnel lining the ground with the seat cushions. As they construct Harry's den an argument breaks out between them about the materials they're using for Harry's den that results in Ben pushing over Harry's den and walking off leaving Harry standing next to his broken den in tears. An older child in the nursery comforts Harry and a nursery worker who has been observing their play talks to both of them. A few minutes later they smile at each other and both return to playing in Harry's den”.

The concept of self-regulation in this example is demonstrated by the boys calming down and shifting from their strong emotions to calm emotions which allows them to play together again. The ability of both of the boys to transform their unruly behaviour and compose themselves is an important tool. Self-regulation can benefit a child

through their entire life from test preparation, interviews, sporting events, homework completion, and musical performance to simply calming themselves for restful sleep. Self-soothing is an ability that is an essential part of emotional regulation: the ability to shift from powerful emotions to calm emotion in order to prevent all-consuming anxiety (Blair and Cybele-Raver, 2014).

Since the 1990s researchers have reported that self-regulation can be a limited resource. Houghton, (2011) likens the process of self-regulation to a muscle that gets tired, as a result a conscious act of self-control causes diminished performance in an immediately subsequent test of self-control. Thus, just as exercise facilitates stronger muscle mass, regular use of self-control improves willpower strength. Additionally, there is further positive news that in the same way that athletes can end the race with a last bit of energy with a final push, people with dwindling energy reserves of self-control can gather their last resources to meet a further demand before requiring time for renewal.

As a very positive side benefit, building self-regulation can lead to improvements in unrelated areas, such as studying. Fortunately, not all tasks need effortful self-control. Unconscious self-regulation is the control of thought, emotion or behaviour without mindful, purposeful intent. It's possible to convert self-control from conscious to automatic, and to carry out the automatic response rapidly, even under stress (Blair and Cybele-Raver, 2014).

In practice, in a nursery or early years setting it's possible to see a child self-regulate in everyday situations through watching them approach a task they find challenging. If the child is able to stay calm and focused the better he is able to integrate the wealth of information coming from his different senses and assimilate it, and then sequence his thoughts and actions. For a caregiver to support the child's actions they would help the child approach the task with encouragement and support. Perhaps in some cases it would be beneficial for the caregiver to show the child how to undertake the task (scaffold) and then allow the child time and space to carry it out themselves. However, experts state that there is a fine line between self-regulation and compliance. This is due to the fact that unlike compliance based on punishment, self-regulation nurtures the ability to cope with greater and greater challenges because it involves arousal states, emotions, behaviour, and – as the child grows older – thinking skills (Houghton et al, 2011).

Houghton et al (2011) state that the growth of self-regulation is consistently linked with successful learning, including pre-reading skills, early mathematics and problem solving. Therefore, a caregiver can introduce strategies that seek to improve learning by increasing self-regulation. Experts like Blair and Cybele-Raver (2014) claim that children who can exhibit self-control and have a good command of their self-regulatory function have on average an impact of seven additional months' progress within school and later learning. Additionally, studies also suggest that improving the self-regulation skills of children in the early years is likely to have a positive impact on wider outcomes such as behaviour and persistence (Jones et al, 2015).

Some research indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can begin nursery or reception with weaker self-regulation skills than their peers. As a result, embedding self-regulation strategies into early years teaching is likely to be particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Houghton et al, 2011). More evaluation is required to find a particular type of curriculum which improves self-regulation in children. However, in spite of this, studies that have been carried out which are likely to offer better results have looked at older age groups which suggests that explicit instructions should be provided with many scaffolding opportunities in which, children can practice their new skills. For instance, an early years practitioner might introduce an activity in which the children need to follow instructions for a building activity but they will be asked at the end of it about teamwork, collaboration and a review of how the group interacted with one another (Jones et al, 2015).

Children's self-regulation skills have the potential to also reflect their ability to manage their own behaviour or learning. In the early years, their efforts to improve self-regulation often lead to improved levels of self-control and reduced impulsivity (Harris, 2015). Specific activities like role play, taking turns and working as a team typically include supporting children in articulating their plans and learning strategies and reviewing what they have done.

A caregiver is able to introduce a number of approaches like stories or characters to help children remember different learning strategies to extend their self-regulation technique. However, it is often easier to observe children's current self-regulation capabilities when they are playing or interacting with a peer. Self-regulation strategies can belong to PHSE as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Child development and how this affects later learning

Different kinds of childhood trauma and the repeated stress of abuse have tangible effects on a child's early development (Burke-Harris, 2014). Specifically, ill treatment affects brain maturation, which unfolds across a lifetime. Exposure to continued adversity particularly affects the prefrontal cortex, which is the area of the brain critical for learning. This means that repeated stress for baby's brains and their bodies changes their developing hormonal systems, how their brains function and even their developing immune system. Evidently, early adversity dramatically affects babies and future wellbeing (Jones et al, 2015).

In the early years of life, positive attachments with a specific caregiver result in the infant being able to explore its immediate surroundings with their caregiver nearby, measuring potential risk and accepting unfamiliar adults. If a risk appears that a baby perceives as hazardous they return to their "secure base", the caregiver. However, babies who don't return to their caregiver or seek comfort from a stranger are termed insecurely attached (Eisenstadt, 2014). As a result of this babies can be affected mentally and physically. If babies receive confusing messages of love or inconsistent

care they tend to mature differently from strongly attached babies. An insecure attachment can lead to emotional difficulties and forming positive relationships (Berant, 2013).

It is widely acknowledged that an insecure attachment to a specific caregiver can affect constructive learning associated with a lack of consistent care during formative years (Reading et al, 2008). However, it is also recognised that no one person can provide everything that a growing child needs, and that they are able to form close attachments with several people. Therefore, the emotional bonds that children cultivate in their early years with their parents and other caregivers are crucial to their healthy development. A child with a secure attachment can rely on their parents or caregivers for safety and a base from which to explore and learn about the world (DCSF, 2008).

The role of the key person

Within a nursery, a key person is the specific person who provides consistent care and emotional support to individual children. This type of support will change as children get older, but even older children are still in need of close relationships with particular adult/s who focus upon a child's individual needs and have a marked interest in the child and their family (Reading, 2008, NICE, 2012). In practice a key worker makes a child feel secure through ensuring the child feels safe within its physical and emotional environment. One way to exercise this in early years settings is to provide the child with a space for their sleep mat, or a peg for their coat, which helps them feel they have their own space.

Another way for key workers to help children feel they belong is through introducing them to the routines which exist in the nursery and the rituals which are associated with starting and finishing the day. It is important that the key worker helps children to recognise and articulate their feelings. For instance, the key worker can help children learn strategies to calm down. This can be undertaken for example through simple relaxation techniques such as meditation and mindfulness practice (Reading et al, 2008).

Adult role models and empathy

One of the most important aspects of teaching young children is for them to have good role models in adults. They need adults to set a good example and provide opportunities for interaction with others so that they can develop clear positive ideas about themselves and others. However, it is fundamental that before we can ask young children to empathise with others, early years practitioners need to understand children's feelings and be able to see things from their point of view (Blair and Cybele-Raver, 2014).

In doing so we have to understand three basic and important things which are:

1. Children's feelings are important to us

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2. Others have feelings too and
 3. Others may think and feel differently from us (Mathers et al, 2014).

Practitioners can advance children's empathy through developing strong relationships with their parents, practitioner's availability towards children and their parents throughout the day and becoming tuned in to their needs and feelings. Key workers can demonstrate their role by actively listening and modelling behaviours the child will pick up on. Additionally, encouraging children to listen to one another and notice how the other is feeling whilst providing opportunities for children to develop the skills of empathy and modelling those skills themselves will enable children to form ideas of positive relationships (Houghton et al, 2015).

The role of early years practitioners

Early years practitioners are in a unique position which enables them to provide advice and assistance to parents and children at emotionally charged points for example weaning, toilet training or tantrums (EYFS, 2008). In settings practitioners who possess high levels of self-awareness and empathy can be attentive and respond reflectively rather than impulsively. As a result, the relationships they come to establish with the children and the learning opportunities they provide will help children to develop the personal, social and emotional skills they need, as well as feelings of belonging and emotional well-being. Making friends and getting on with others helps children to feel positive about themselves and others (EYFS, 2008).

In early years settings adults are the ones who create the type of climate in the setting which influence the personal, social and emotional development of the children in their care. Each child has a unique life experience which is personal to them and shapes the way that they grow and develop, both physically and mentally. Therefore, how a child responds to a certain situation will be unique.

There is a potential that their behaviours can appear inappropriate and have the propensity to prompt an adults' negative response and result in labelling children as badly behaved or obstinate. However, a true understanding of how each child is unique and how they learn and develop gives early years practitioners the time to support and build upon a child's personal, social and emotional development; teaching them to accrue skills such as how to solve arguments/challenging situations (Hillman and Williams, 2015). When helping children learn social and emotional skills it is particularly important for practitioners to be "tuned in" to and show empathy for each other.

Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE)

The Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) component of the EYFS which targets young babies includes encouraging young babies to respond to, or mimic, adults. For young children it is important to ensure that all staff have detailed information about the home-language experiences of all children and for practitioners to be positive about differences and support children's acceptance of difference (EYFS, 2008). It is important

to note that attitudes towards difference are learned from examples the children witness either from within their home environment or adults they see on a regular basis.

Practitioners can also support children's PHSE skills by helping children to begin to negotiate with one another using language (EYFS, 2008). For example, if they want to join in with a game or if another child has a toy that they want to play with, the practitioner could talk about what they could say through modelling the correct language for them. The same applies for games which include turn taking and the rules which signpost the play (Hillman and Williams, 2015). A strong enabling environment supports and promotes active learning and development for all children. It is a place where all children feel safe, cared for and relaxed because they are in the continuous care of adults who know them well and are 'tuned in' to respond to their needs and interests. It involves both the physical environment – the space in which children learn and develop, and the emotional environment – the atmosphere and ethos created by all who are part of the setting.

The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and how it supports children's mental health

In 1994-2004 The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE Project) was carried out by the Department of Education (Hillman and Williams, 2015) to examine effects of preschool programs on cognitive and social development in 3-5 year old children. The EPPE project demonstrated the beneficial effects of high quality provision for children's social and behavioral development. Specifically, the study found that the duration of attendance in months was more important especially if the start was before the child turned 3. The younger age was associated with better intellectual development. The EPPE project illustrated that children from low socio-economic environments were more at risk of poorer outcomes including education, employment, health and wellbeing.

However, in settings that viewed educational and social development as interrelated and equal in importance, children were likely to make all-round better progress. In response to the EPPE project findings and the Childcare Act 2006, the UK government introduced The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008. The EYFS ethos was based on the methodology that children who learn through play become better learners (EYFS, 2008).

Free play and exploration are, historically, the means by which children learn to solve their own problems, take control in their lives and become proficient learners. Therefore, in terms of supporting children's mental health, early years professionals play a hugely significant role. Mooney et al (2015) describes building on partnerships between health and early years professionals while engaging both parents and practitioners. Mooney's study emphasis increased awareness of mental health issues in the public sector not only helps local resourcing but nationally as well.

Developing social and emotional skills

Experts within the early childhood field have disagreed in the past over the best ways to teach young children social and emotional skills. Many have argued that teacher-led lessons are not the best way to impart social and emotional skills and that instead children can foster their social and emotional development in carefully tailored, caring environments with individual adults who respond in particular ways. Early childhood educators have often advocated that games and stories are useful methods to teach children about social and emotional competence (Harris, 2015).

Early PHSE has had a huge impact on later wellbeing, learning, achievement and economic circumstances. This is why the Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities with their partners in settings to help improve all children's wellbeing and reduce inequalities (DfE, 2015). As a result, practitioners are able to support children's PHSE through working effectively with parents and building on existing positive relationships between children and their parents.

The loving ways parents exhibit their care for their children can be utilised by practitioners, such as hugging, comforting, talking, playing, being proud of every achievement and celebrating it within the setting. These positive reactions are the foundations of successful personal, social and emotional development. Gerhardt (2004) states that babies are all competent learners from birth but commonly it is our parents who give their children the confidence to keep learning and stretching the boundaries of our understanding.

Parents are usually very interested in their children's progress as they join groups of other babies or young children in an early years setting. However, practitioners work very hard to ensure that children are happy in their learning and development and it helps children if parents are genuine partners with practitioners.

Promoting health and wellbeing

Promoting physical activity and good diet sends positive messages to children about taking care of your own body. Fitness and eating habits are closely aligned to weight and how we view ourselves. National rates of obesity continue to rise which have significant long-term implications (Mooney et al, 2015). The personal, social and emotional component of the EYFS continues to endorse children's resilience and support their physical and mental health.

"Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the support that enables them to fulfill their potential. Children develop quickly in the early years and a child's experiences between birth and age five have a major impact on their future life chances. A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right. Good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up." (DfE, 2014).

Therefore, the role of the childcare professional is crucial to young children's wellbeing. The caregiver needs to be healthy to be a positive role model. Reciprocity is important, in this case, looking after oneself will help ensure that the child in your care will be helped to understand the importance of keeping healthy.

The evidence shows that when a setting's focus is high quality and promotes social and emotional development it furthers academic success (Mooney et al, 2007). The Perry Pre-school study is indicative of this. The study examined how a sample of high-risk group of 3 and 4 year olds were randomly selected into two groups – one high quality pre-school setting and the other not. The study found that those who had experienced high quality settings were more likely to be successful in all areas of life (educational achievement, be in receipt of higher earnings and maintain healthy relationships) than the group who had not attended a high quality setting (Jones et al, 2015).

High quality settings can alleviate some of the initial disadvantages children face when born into adverse family environments. The success of these settings does not rest on improving a child's IQ but furthering their non-cognitive skills. These crucial skills help strengthen social and emotional development which ultimately support future success. This highlights the importance of the environment and early intervention (Jones et al, 2015).

In practice this means building on children's externalised behavior; motivation, persistence, self-esteem and sociability which all contribute towards determining social and economic success. Academic ability cannot be determined through IQ alone. A child's cognitive ability – their capacity to use judgment and reasoning when faced with a task is intermixed with non-cognitive characteristics like self-discipline that are a better determinant for predicting future educational attainment (Heckman, 2012).

The future of mental health

According to the Mental Health Foundation (2015) children who suffer from health problems associated with poor behaviour and low achievement at school are those who have poorer outcomes in later life. Evidence indicates that difficulties that arise in early life continue to shape adolescence. In response to recent figures published by MIND (2015) and other mental health charities, the UK government placed good physical and mental health high on its 2015 agenda. In 2011 - 2015 the Government pledged £400 million to help prioritise mental health services, including delivering improved therapeutic services to children and young people (Gov, 2015). By doing this they hope to raise the profile of mental health as a health issue and provide more effective help to those in need. Critics state that the money proposed has been invested too late, and some could be better invested in making a difference in formative years (The King's Fund, 2015, Mental Health, 2015).

By the time all children begin school they vary in cognitive skills, communication and social development. Therefore, if their early experiences have been negative then the Government's pledge to support their wellbeing could be interpreted as an empty promise which will fail to address the root cause of some mental health issues.

Heckman (2012) points out that the years between 0-5 are critical for shaping productivity when the brain rapidly develops cognition and the skills necessary for success in school, career and life. The Perry Pre-school study in 1962 reinforced the idea that the early years in a child's life are crucial for health and wellbeing. The outcome of the study indicates that the role of the caregiver/teacher is paramount for a child's success.

A professional childcare provider who recognises the difference between typical behaviour versus atypical behaviour can help regulate a child's temperament. Consistency and kindness from a professional caregiver can help prevent negative experiences from causing lasting harm.

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