

Key workers:  
Getting to  
know children  
and families

## Parents, Early Years and Learning: Practice example

In early years settings, a key worker system – where a practitioner is allocated a small number of children – is accepted as standard good practice.

It enables a close, secure adult–child relationship, which is critical for early development. Some settings now use the term *key person* in order to emphasise the emotional nature of this relationship.\* Organising in this way also means that one practitioner has primary responsibility for gathering in-depth knowledge of the child, based on observation. They might also be responsible for records of achievement, although this task is sometimes shared.

Many centres are extending the role of the key worker further, to include establishing a relationship with, and getting to know something about, a child’s family and background.

This knowledge enables more meaningful conversations with both child and parent, which will help to enhance learning. Children also benefit from seeing their parent and key worker in a friendly, open relationship.

At **Thomas Coram Children’s Centre, Camden**, all new families are invited to a meeting (in small groups) with their key worker and to visit the centre in action. Key workers in the baby room have 3 children; in toddlers, 4; and in kindergarten, 10. All children also receive a home visit, where essential information is gathered about eating, sleeping, language development, comfort routines and people who are special to the child. Families can share their feelings about their child coming to nursery and they are asked if there is anything they would like staff to know about the family.

All children have a settling-in period (one week for over 3s, two for younger children) where parents may be needed to stay with their child. The whole induction process is seen as a time for staff and families to get to know each other.



As a child moves through the different age groups, key workers set up new introductory meetings for parents. Each year, one worker from each age group – babies, toddlers and kindergarten – moves so that at least one familiar face from the team remains with the child and its family.

“Knowing families well means less assumptions are made. We’ve found that you often think a parent must know about the importance of play and interaction with their child when, in fact, they may need support to realise this.”

Parents know the key worker is their first point of contact, but also that they are welcome to approach any member of staff. Parents are able to build relationships with a range of practitioners.

\*Elfer, P and others (2003) *Key Persons in the Nursery*. David Fulton Publishers.

*We find that knowing parents well makes it easier to encourage them into workshops and other events.*

At the **Pen Green Centre for Under Fives, Northamptonshire**, key workers have always been called family workers to emphasise the importance of working with children and their families. Each family worker has up to ten children in their group, and a base in an area of the nursery where they display their current interests and gather at group times.

Family workers also hold family group meetings for the children and their families in their group so as to come together, get to know each other and celebrate the children's learning. Family workers gather as much information as possible about the children. Children at the centre sometimes have complicated arrangements, during the week, where they are looked after by different family members. Family workers have found that by asking the families to detail where their child is cared for during the week on a regular basis, they can be much more in tune with each child.

**Seacroft Children's Centre, Leeds** has two additional staff members employed for the support of five children with severe disabilities. After a period of time building staff confidence, the children and support staff have been integrated into mainstream key worker groups. Each group now has two key workers. The key workers are paired to act as significant second carers to cover for changing shift patterns, absence and holidays. The pair of key workers cover up to 10 children in any one session if they have a child with profound disability; and up to 12 children if they do not. This means there is always someone that has in-depth knowledge of the families to receive the children and to liaise with parents.

The children with disabilities and their families are part of the mainstream group in the fullest sense. They work and play with their able-bodied friends. The therapists who visit the centre work with the disabled children in the setting. Other children and staff have picked up on the type of work they are doing and have taken on some of that work – such as intensive interaction, developing eye contact and eye tracking.

Parents and children are greeted warmly each day and all members of staff feel able to support parents in their child's development.

At **Konstam Children's Centre, Camden**, building positive, friendly relationships with parents is seen as an integral part of the key worker role. Working hard on building the initial relationship makes it easier later on, if difficult issues need to be discussed with families. However, it is acknowledged that practitioners don't always find communication with parents easy and so they are given support through regular management supervision. Key workers are encouraged to express opinions openly and are helped to work through feelings when there are difficulties – which can help to develop confidence.

Hana's first language is Somali. She was very quiet in nursery. Her key worker had suggested that her mother spend some time in the setting with her, to help build her confidence. Her mother seemed reluctant, saying she really didn't have time because of her other children. However, she welcomed an additional home visit, where the key worker was able to meet Hana's father and older siblings. She learned that the family were under additional pressure, as one of the older children had special needs which required a lot of extra care. She listened to the parents' account of their own upbringing in Somalia, as well as chatting to them about Hana in nursery. Hana thoroughly enjoyed the visit! Establishing a relationship took time – but over the year, to the delight of Hana, her father was encouraged to come out on two local trips. Her brother was also able to come into nursery occasionally to read with her and chat to her key worker in the morning. Getting to know a little more about the family helped staff to understand the pressures they were facing, opened up more dialogue and benefited the child.

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