

Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

A briefing paper to inform the Knowledge Makes Change Seminar Series

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Introduction

There is little doubt the terms such as 'neuroscience', 'wellbeing' and 'resilience' are sprinkled liberally throughout most recent and current early childhood development information. There is also much debate. For every argument presented, there is a counter-argument, often shouting just as loudly.

So, where do we start, how do we separate the facts from the fiction and how do we use this ever-expanding field of knowledge to support the children in our care?

We are all Animals *really*

If we go back to the beginning, when Charles Darwin first studied animals and published '*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*' in 1872, it was met with great controversy, and still is in some parts of the world. Fast forward to current times, and regardless of personal views, we know that we share some characteristics with other animals that inhabit this wonderful planet of ours.

We watch enchanted as baby lambs, kittens and puppies find their way. We marvel at dolphins, whales, and other sea creatures. We are enthralled at the delicacy of the tiniest lace-like wing and are surprised by the strength of the smallest of creatures. We gaze upwards in amazement at the birds of prey as they float around high above on the thermals.

Ultimately much animal behaviour is about survival. They learn how to hunt, stay safe and make friends with others who will help.... And they learn much of this through play. Think of the puppies and kittens, rolling around with their siblings, the new-born deer and lambs gambolling across the fields, and the dolphin playing 'tag' deep in the ocean. Eventually, these skills become the very skills these young animals need to survive.

We now know that many animals share similar brain architecture to our own. Most animals have some form of limbic system. Whilst it is often termed the 'Mammalian' brain, as it is more evolved in mammals, other animals have it too. Reptiles, such as crocodiles, for example have it, and will fight tooth and claw to protect their eggs.

In terms of the cortex, or neo-cortex, this is the highest evolutionary area, where thinking and learning happens. Originally believed to be only found in humans, but we now understand that many mammals, and indeed birds, for example, can be trained to undertake tasks, which would imply that they can learn too?

In addition, there is much debate regarding whether animals show emotion:

For example, several recent studies have shown a range of mammalian species appearing to mourn, or show grief, when a closely related animal dies. In an article in National Geographic, Traci Watson looked at some of the research regarding how several species of whales have been observed continuing to hold the dead bodies of a 'pod-mate' or close relatives:

The most likely explanation for the animals' refusal to let go of the corpses: grief. 'They are mourning,' says study co-author Melissa Reggente, a biologist at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Italy. 'They are in pain and stressed. They know something is wrong.' (Watson 2016)

Similarly, the article considered other species which are suspected to show emotion:

Scientists have found a growing number of species, from giraffes to chimps, that behave as if stricken with grief. Elephants, for example, return again and again to the body of a dead companion. (Watson 2016)

In the National Geographic article, Watson goes on to acknowledge the ongoing debate regarding brain development in animals:

Such findings add to the debate about whether animals feel emotion – and, if they do, how such emotions should influence human treatment of other creatures. (Watson 2016)

(Garvey 2018, p.27)

Regardless of the ongoing debates, one thing is certain, we can learn a great deal from observing animals. Just as we can learn a great deal from observing children.

Exploring Neuroscience

Neuroscience, in the way we use the word is actually a whole host of sciences. For example, we can use photography and imaging techniques to take photographs of new born babies' brains. We can use biology and chemistry to understand how blood and oxygen move around our brains and bodies, and we can use medicine and psychology to try and understand what happens when things go wrong.

Likewise, there are different branches of science that *also* use the term "neuroscience". Cognitive neuroscience, educational neuroscience, behavioural neuroscience, developmental neuroscience and computational neuroscience for example, and, this list is ever expanding as our knowledge grows.

The key here, in terms of early childhood and our understanding, is to accept that this is not a finite definition. It is ever evolving and ever changing; and to accept that we need to continue to be interested as the knowledge grows and develops:

A fundamental paradox exists and is unavoidable: development in the early years is both highly robust and highly vulnerable. Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger

scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.

(Shonkoff and Phillips 2000, p.5)

Brain Development & Stressors

Whether we use the term neuroscience or brain development, some things are fairly well established:

- There are different areas of the brain that do different things
- The brain is interconnected
- The brain and the body are connected and should be seen as a whole
- The brain processes information (and also stressors) in specific ways

Messages begin from one of the five senses. We see, hear, taste, smell, or touch something. Information is carried through the interconnected networks and nerves that run throughout the body. Those messages are then passed to the appropriate area of the brain to process.

Stressors are processed in the same way (think of when you touch something hot - the message goes from your hand to your brain) all without you having to 'think' about what is happening. And the process works in exactly the same way in all animals. This is where the commonly termed 'fight, flight or freeze mode' comes into play. When the brain senses a stress (danger) it must decide how to react. Is it possible to 'fight' out of the danger, is it possible to out-run the danger or, is it best to stay still and quiet and hope the danger passes?

When we observe children, we see all three of these modes coming to the fore. Sadly, due to some terrible circumstances, there will always be children who are constantly in fight, flight or freeze mode. In addition, there will be stressor points in the day (think drop-off/pick-up and lunchtimes, for example) when inadvertently children are tipped into one of the three modes. Furthermore, the stressors or dangers, can be real or imagined - think how you feel walking alone in a dark shadowy street or when you wake in the middle of the night sweating and shaking from a very real nightmare - the fear may well be imagined, but the body reacts as if the threat was very real.

Our reactions have evolved to keep us safe. Dr Suzanne Zeedyk uses the imagery of 'Sabre Tooth Tigers and Teddy Bears' - our brains are responding to the 'sabre tooth tiger' (whether real or imaginary). Our resilience is supported by our 'inner teddy bear' - how well we cope when things are difficult.

In addition, there are various types of stress - internal (being unwell or worrying for example) and external (being in a too hot or difficult environment for example). Stress can also be defined as short term (to meet a deadline for example) or long term (ongoing, acute stress that does not dissipate).

This ongoing, sometimes low-level stress appears to have the most damaging impact on our mental and physical health and is what Dr Jack Shonkoff and the team at Harvard Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University have termed 'toxic stress'.

Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

It is always difficult to know, or suspect, that children are experiencing difficulty in their lives, and as early years practitioners we follow the necessary procedures to try to ensure we keep children safe. Aside from that, there are things we can do that will have a huge impact, and again science can help us understand why these things have an impact.

If we take the work of Professor Francis McGlone, as an example, this research looks at the CT fibres that carry messages to the brain.

[Here is a neuroscientist] saying we need to touch, cuddle and hug children. Professor McGlone is a highly regarded academic and researcher and has written numerous publications. His work concentrates on touch, temperature, pain, itch and pleasure. Professor McGlone's research is mainly in the area of a class of peripheral nerves called c-fibres:

C-fibres [are] widely recognised as coding for pain and itch when the skin of the body is damaged, but another type of c-fibre has recently been found innervating the skin that does not signal negative skin based events (pain/itch) but the positive and rewarding sensations we experience when being gently touched. These c-fibres are called c-tactile afferents – CTs for short. CTs play a vital role in all manner of social interactions, from the nurture of a mother to her baby out to the reassuring touch to an elderly relative in a care home. (Professor F. McGlone, personal communication, 30 March 2017)

In conversation with Professor McGlone, he talked of how his research looks at the 'feeling aspect of touch' as opposed to 'the sensing aspects of touch', and how the evidence is uncontroversial: similar fibres respond specifically to the same feeling of a touch in many social animal species.

(Garvey 2018, p.177)

We can apply this directly to contemporary early childhood research, and the work of Dr Jools Page exploring the role of attachment, cuddles and intimate care;

[The Professional Love in Early Years Settings \(PLEYS\) research project](#) was set up to examine how those who work in early years settings can safely express the affectionate and caring behaviours which their role demands of them. The outcome was a set of Professional Development Materials which comprise the Attachment Toolkit. (Page, 2015)

'Professional Love' is a term we can use to consider the necessary, and vital affectionate nature of the work we undertake with children. The current Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point here (see also [Significantly Different Substantially the Same](#) briefing paper). The world may have changed, but children have not changed - and what children need has not changed. Things that are important to children, such as snuggling up reading a book, cuddles and hugs and the 1-1 times during nappy changing for example, become ever more important... and, the outdoors becomes indispensable:

I first turned my attention to the question of environment, and this, of course, included the furnishing... In considering an ample playground with space for a garden as an important part of this... I am not suggesting anything new.

(Montessori 1912, p.81)

If we refer back to the discussion around animals, we know they are happiest outdoors; this is predominately true for children, and has been known for some time. In early years, we try to ensure we provide outdoor opportunities for children too. However, as Kathryn Solly explains, it actually goes much further than that '[Margaret McMillan] was very aware of the adult's moral responsibility to provide the best outdoor experience.' (Solly 2014, p.5)

In essence, and it almost seems too simple, the message is very clear - children need adults. Children need adults who love, hug, snuggle, play, sing, laugh, get messy, act silly, laugh, and all of this outdoors as much as indoors. I will leave the final word of this section, to one of the oft-quoted words of wisdom, from one of the greatest child development heroes:

*In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults... **Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.** That's number one. First, last and always.*

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005)

Little Brains, Big Behaviours

It would be fair to say that anyone who works with small children will have witnessed some very big behaviours.

I use the word behaviours purposefully. I hope you will notice it has the letter 's' on the end. ... We tend to say 'children's behaviour' meaning all-encompassing, everything, rather than the more linguistically correct 'behaviours'. ... 'behaviours' encompasses our words, actions, deeds, manner and conduct – in all its possible permutations. Yet, oddly, the word 'behaviour' (minus the 's') has come to have a definite and definitive, negative undertone. When we say 'we want to talk about children's behaviour', we usually assume, usually correctly, that this is behaviour that is unacceptable or 'misaligned'. In other words, we use the word 'behaviour' as an all-encompassing term for any so-called 'negative' behaviour. (Garvey 2018, p.96)

In other words, it may be perhaps useful to adopt the word 'behaviours' which hopefully will help us to see a range of behaviours, and then in turn, why these might be happening, and what we can do to help.

If we link this back to the discussion from earlier, we can start to see how understanding brain development and how children respond to stresses (whether real or imaginary), we can start to understand why the behaviours feel so huge to children. Imagine how we feel as adults when things do not quite go the way we had planned or hoped - we might have more experience and knowledge - but I can guarantee we have all felt the need to scream and shout in frustration at times. Dr Daniel Siegel explains this as 'flipping your lid' and his research is equally applicable to children and adults.

What about the Grownups?

Human reactions to stress are very similar, whether they are small humans, or big humans, as the work of Dr Siegel and Dr Zedyk, amongst others, show. Whilst some of us may have more knowledge, experience and understanding, the brain responses to

stressors (real or imaginary), on the whole, revert to fight, flight, or freeze modes. Therefore, we can use the knowledge from science in our work with children, and indeed, adults.

All of the research and information explored here relates to humans... All of us as humans, regardless of age, may well need support at different points and with different situations. There is a very simple message here - if we want the best for children, then we have to look after the grownups.

So, if we are in the ECCE sector to make a difference, to improve children's life chances and impact on outcomes, all the research shows that it is the staff that make the most difference. It all comes back to:

- *relationships, personal development, training, staff support, (such as supervision), and the right environment = **quality outcomes for children and families.***

Which is exactly what we have examined throughout this book:

- *relationships, personal development, training, staff support, such as supervision and the right environment = **quality outcomes for practitioners and staff.***

And so, the message is simple – you can't have one without the other!

Poor relationships, inappropriate continuing professional development (CPD), poor training, poor staff support, and a poor environment will not support children or families or practitioners or staff or leaders or managers.

(Garvey 2017, p.242)

Equally, much of the discussion in this briefing paper applies similarly to how we can support parents/carers. In order to do this, we as practitioners and professionals must start with the premise that:

Parents want the best for their children and want to be involved in their children's learning. (Connor & Wheeler 2006, p.10)

Like all humans, parents react to stressors in their lives, and may, at time need additional support. Equally, part of our role as professionals is to share this knowledge and understanding with parents. Dr Suzanne Zeedyk's work is highly accessible and there are several PDF documents available for download through Connected Baby, as well as Suzanne's own website. In addition, the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative have produced a very easy to understand video looking at brain development, adversity, and resilience, which is also widely available and free to use and share.

The Role of Adults

The research surrounding early childhood is very clear, very conclusive, and far reaching - the role of the adult is crucial.

There remains strong evidence of the value and benefits of a play-based pedagogy in supporting all areas of learning for children throughout the Foundation years and even beyond. There is also strong evidence that a 'balanced' or 'hybrid' teaching approach, blending adult instruction with play-based, child-led, relational

approaches, and incorporating adult-scaffolded learning objectives, can effectively support all areas of learning.

(Pascal, Bertram and Rouse 2019, p.54)

In particular, when we are discussing the role of adults in supporting children when things are difficult:

About the time that infants begin to form specific attachments to adults, the presence of caregivers who are warm and responsive begins to buffer or prevent elevations in stress hormones, even in situations that elicit behavioural indicators of distress in the infant.

(Shonkoff & Phillips 2000, p.237)

The key thing to remember here is that over 400 years of early childhood development research and theory demonstrates that children are extremely resilient. Now, science is showing us how resilience is built. This of course links directly back to the discussions around attachment and the importance of touch, cuddles and professional love in early childhood. Children need adults who are 'present', adults who listen, join in, guide, support, play and so on, and importantly, adults who know when to step back.

Going Forward?

For those of us who work in early childhood, there is one very simple message - look after you! As the saying goes, you cannot pour from an empty cup. There are many ways we can look after our own wellbeing, The New Economics Foundation research 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' is a good place to start and will feel familiar and comforting to those of us in the early childhood field. In addition, there are several easily available 'wheels' that offer simple tools to look at balance and wellbeing in our lives.

Similarly, mindfulness techniques such as meditation are also readily available, and are proving to be incredibly useful. Once perhaps seen as a little 'airy-fairy', research is now showing that for some people, mindfulness changes how the brain looks and operates, reduces blood pressure, and can lessen the need for medicinal intervention in conditions such as chronic fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome and anxiety and depression for example.

As well as looking after ourselves, we need to look after our teams. One way we can do this is through a 'Positive Performance Management Model' (Garvey, 2017), that covers all areas of staff development. In addition, we can use our knowledge of early childhood, to support our work with adults:

If we saw staff as 'unique individuals', working in 'enabling environments', supported and challenged by 'positive relationships', there would be less need for the more difficult, negative model of performance management.

(Garvey 2017, p.32)

Or maybe even the use of supportive methods that could be termed a 'learning journey' for grownups?

Final thoughts

Neuroscience is an ever-expanding field of sciences, that continue to amaze us. Keeping up with the science is important, but bear in mind that it is OK to question and be curious about what you read, hear or see. One thing seems to be certain - we need connections, relationships and interactions, to help us feel safe. Feeling safe helps brains

to be in a position to learn, develop and thrive... this is as much true for adults as it is for children. Together, let's put emotional wellbeing at the heart of early years practice - by looking after ourselves, each other and of course, the children - and creating an environment in which everyone can flourish.

Further Resources

ACEs Too High

A wealth of information regarding the research into adversity in childhood.

<https://acestoohigh.com/>

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

A wealth of information around brain development, toxic stress and resilience. Including the video 'Brains Journey to Resilience.'

- <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/>
- <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/brains-journey-to-resilience>

Connected Baby & Dr Suzanne Zeedyk

Both websites offer a wealth of information around connection, attachment, brain development, early childhood, resilience and so on:

<https://connectedbaby.net/>

<https://www.suzannezeedyk.com/>

Dr Daniel Siegel – Hand Model of the brain

Information on brain development, mindfulness and parenting. From Dr Siegel, who is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and the founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at University College Los Angeles.

- Dr Daniel Siegel presenting a Hand Model of the Brain
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>
- Article about the Hand Model of the Brain
<https://www.psychalive.org/minding-the-brain-by-daniel-siegel-m-d-2/>

[Emotional Well-being - 'what works' for young children and their families](#) (KMC Seminar with Professor Iram Siraj)

[NSPCC - Supporting children and young people's mental health](#)

NSPCC have collated some resources to help staff support the children and young people and families they know and work with through this challenging time. This is a comprehensive collection, with resources for [people who work with children](#), [resources for parents and carers](#) and [resources for children and young people](#).

[Nurturing Healthy Minds Together](#) – a report published by NCB exploring the published literature and policy developments around prioritising and supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young children

The **Open University** (OU) has a new free Level 1 introductory course which focuses on the mental health and wellbeing of babies and young children (aged 0–8 years), its importance and how to support it.

[Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing](#)

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[Significantly Different and Substantially the Same](#) (KMC Seminar Jan Dubiel)

The World Health Organisation has provided [Tips for healthy parenting](#) with [free posters](#) to download including [Learning through play](#); [Keep calm and manage stress](#); [Talking about Covid-19](#); [Keeping it positive](#)

Local Services

[Psychology and Well-being service](#) help and support for children, young people and parents in Jersey during Covid-19

[The Mental Health Network](#) on the Jersey Government website - The Mental Health Network provides information, advice and support for people in Jersey on all aspects of mental health. It is the definitive online network for all of Jersey's mental health services, giving you the right help, in the right place, at the right time.

Monthly KMC Newsletter:

If you do not currently receive the monthly KMC Newsletter and would like to, you can sign up to it by emailing kate@jcct.org.je (Jersey Child Care Trust) and requesting to be put on the mailing list.

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Chartered Institute for Professional Development (CIPD)

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work>

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Harvard Center on the Developing Child

A research and development platform, that supports scientific research that can inform the testing, implementation, and refinement of strategies designed to achieve significantly better life outcomes for children.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/>

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