



## **The importance of connections**

The development of this resource has been a collaborative effort between PACEY Cymru and early years childhood influencer, Alice Sharp.

The early experiences babies and children have with their care givers provides the foundation to their learning and development. If these experiences are unsettling for the child, then this could have an impact on future experiences. Positive attachments and connections from the outset support the child with developing resilience, well-being, and a sense of being loved and belonging.

## **Why are positive attachments and connections important in early years?**

Babies are born into the world with a need for others to care, love and nurture them. They are born with a connection to their primary care givers, in particular their mother, however, they are also ready to make further connections with their wider community. As an extension of the family, we, as the enabling adult, also help babies brain development through interactions we provide that strengthen the connections.

Babies and young children tune in and learn to read their carers body language and that certain movements or gestures mean certain things; for example, they may learn that a smile means they're likely to be spoken or sung to, or an adult stretching their arms out means they'll be picked up and cuddled, fed, or something good will usually happen. Through positive interactions they learn that this is usually a safe place, and as a result connections are built very quickly.

Babies and young children will also notice if interactions are negative or if there is a change to the patterns and tone of voice, or actions. This may confuse the child and could result in them being less likely to respond well, as they may no longer consider it to be a safe space. They may become less certain of how to react, and if this continues then the child is likely to become more unsettled and fretful. They may even build coping strategies to protect themselves to manage such experiences.

Positive connections or the lack of these, in a baby or young child's life will impact on their resilience and well-being, which can last through their childhood and into adulthood.

## **What are our legal duties in relation to making positive connections?**

Children have a right to be cared for and for their safety to be a priority as stated in Articles 2, 6 and 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Babies need to feel a sense of belonging, to feel cared for and loved, so they can take this confidence into their childhood. They need to see themselves and their community reflected in the setting.

- The four purposes of [Curriculum for Wales](#) recognises that the child's well-being is paramount in order for them to live, learn and thrive. As the enabling adults we aspire to children in our care becoming *'healthy confident individuals who, form positive relationships based upon trust and mutual respect, to be ready to lead fulfilling lives as a valued member of society.'*
- Standard 8.5 and 8.6 of the [National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare](#) state the duty set on childcare providers in terms of the importance of the settling-in process, the role we play in this and that *'babies and very young children are able to develop an attachment to a consistent carer or small number of regular carers'*.
- [Care Inspectorate Wales, Childcare, Play and Open Access Inspection and Ratings Provider Guidance](#) states under the Well-being theme that *'children need to feel safe, happy and valued within their childcare setting.'* They emphasise the importance of children *'feeling settled and being able to cope with separation from their parents; form positive emotional attachments, feel secure, happy, comfortable and relaxed and that they have bonds of affection with practitioners who know them well and give consistent care.'*

## Theory and background

Attachment, and the importance of having a strong connection between care givers and babies was the British psychiatrists, John Bowlby's concept, which was first introduced in the 1950s. His research is still held in high regard today. Experts have built on Bowlby's findings or have provided different perspectives to his findings over the years.

One of these is the *'Sabre tooth tiger and teddy bear'* theory from [Suzanne Zeedyk](#), Research Scientist and Infant Specialist, University of Dundee, Scotland.

This theory uses the term 'Sabre tooth tigers' to highlight and recognise the fear and anxiety that babies feel. The reference to 'teddy bears' highlights the importance of comfort to help babies deal with their fear and anxiety. This comfort, at a time where they experience fear, provides the starting point for babies to develop the ability to stay calm and self-regulate. This will also help manage the effect this has on their emotional development.

Children will develop their coping strategies in the environments that they're exposed to. Our role is to help the children in our care, to respond positively to their emotions



and provide comfort, care, play opportunities and a safe space which supports brain development that will help them cope with the world and environment that they live in.

If a baby is regularly exposed to stressful situations, then they are likely to develop a brain that is more used to reacting to stress than calm. This can have an impact on their holistic development. It can affect their learning and ability to focus on their play experiences, as they'll be on guard for that moment the 'Sabre tooth tiger' appears. It could mean that they may not truly relax and engage fully in their play or wholly explore their curiosity.

### **Role of the adult**

Every person, including babies and young children, need to feel a connection with someone, it is an innate need. Babies and young children rely on the adult to provide and nurture this attachment.

When supporting babies and young children it is important the adult providing care:

- shows a genuine interest in the child
- has knowledge of the child's background and family life
- creates an emotionally safe environment, by modelling good communications, showing empathy, kindness and compassion which will help the child feel calmer
- has a full understanding of the child's needs, including any additional learning needs and responds sensitively to the child's verbal and non-verbal communication. Offering an accessible and inclusive environment is paramount to the well-being of the child
- makes time and allows children to be unhurried in their play, which creates a sense of calm. Managing transitions throughout the day retains that sense of calm
- models joy, laughter and happiness with the children showing children you enjoy being with them and building trust. This encourages a sense of feeling connected, secure and safe
- encourages children to express themselves. Recognising and validating the child's feelings to help them find ways to express and begin to regulate their emotions and actively listening to the children's voices and the choices they make, helps children understand that they are valued and heard
- is aware of the various transitions throughout the day, how these affect each child and supports them to manage uncertainty and change. Routines help a child to learn what comes next and should help with remaining in a calm state

- provides reassurance, encouragement, celebrating achievements and successes which helps build the child's self-esteem, self-confidence and supports their sense of well-being
- supports children to gauge and manage risks.

Babies and children need others to help them learn to co-regulate their feelings and emotions which helps build their soothing and self-soothing strategies. Co-regulation is a building block to self-regulation, where the adult plays a lead, in minimising the emotional distress that may appear as fight, flight, or freeze.

### **The importance of play and modelling to support connections**

Play is a fundamental part of children's development it is the way a baby or a young child learns. Children may play alone, alongside each other, or together.

Much like the innate need to feel a connection, children have an innate need to play which supports their learning. The [curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#) states that: '*children find ways to explore a range of emotions and learn about the world they inhabit with others*'. As the enabling adults we play a crucial role in guiding children to understand their own emotions and those of others. We can do this through modelling, communicating and offering play opportunities to explore these further.

Suzanne Zeedyk, believes that the adult's role is to provide that reassurance and build the strong internal 'teddy bear, resilience and comfort when in difficult situations. This will create the resilient emotional system that comfort provides.

Here are some things to consider in terms of your practice in supporting the connections of babies and young children.

1. Provide calm and predictable situations.
2. Think about the level of noise in your setting. A constant noise can be detrimental to the building of the brain. Filtering noise can be challenging for a baby or young child.
3. Consider the environment and the accessibility to resources. Provide opportunities to be curious and to explore their feelings and emotions.
4. Do young children have access to adults who model good connections and attachments and resources that support this?
5. Do the children come to you independently? Will they ask or gesture for a cuddle/cwtsh if they need that affection, love, and connection? Do you give that cuddle/cwtsh at that time, or do they have to wait and ask again?



6. Are children encouraged to talk to you confidently and do you show genuine eye to eye contact and interest.
7. Do you stop what you're doing to actively listen to them?

### **What can I do to help strengthen the connection with the children in my care?**

Take a moment to reflect on how you support children with their first moments at your setting. Think about the walk up to your door and on entering your setting. Does it support a feeling of well-being and security? What about the noise in the environment during their first visit. How about your tone of voice? Will the child prefer the more upbeat and enthusiastic tone, or do they prefer a gentle *hello*?

Children will need to experience a smooth transition when a parent/carer hands over the care to an enabling adult. Think about how you support the children in your care and their families through these transitions.

Show them love and let them know they're valued. Make them feel safe. Make that disconnect a pleasant experience from the outset. This provides the child with the 'teddy bear' coping mechanism.

Most importantly *to provide the child with consistent care and respect* and remember to nurture the ethos of the 'teddy bear' and protect the child from the fear of the 'Sabre tooth tiger.'

### **Enhancing practice**

Alice Sharp has shared some thoughts and inspiration to reflect on our role in relation to supporting children with connections, take a moment to watch the clips and reflect on your practice.

1. [Being, becoming and belonging](#)
2. [Connecting, my family and community](#)
3. [Connections through love](#)
4. [Disconnect to reconnect](#)
5. [The first moment each](#)

### [Transcript - connections](#)

### **Reflect**

Having watched the clips consider the following. Are there any ideas that you will take forward to enhance your practice? Consider the following;

- How will I know if the children feel a connection with me/staff?



- How do I know that the children are in a calm, comfortable state of well-being? How will I know whether the environment is offering the provocations for children to make connections with each other?
- How do I support children with their first moments at our setting? Think about their first impressions and experiences not just the wider settling in period.
- How do I support children to leave their parents/carers and help them connect with me? How do I make them feel safe each visit?

### **Further reading**

[Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#)

[National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare](#)

[Professional learning: foundation learning support for practitioners in schools and settings](#)

[Connected baby](#)

[Suzanne-Zeedyk](#)

[CEY smart-PACEY](#)

[Inspiring Environments- PACEY](#)