Meeting needs now

In early childhood services our job is to respond to the emotional needs of babies and children as best we can. But how do we know we are meeting a child’s attachment needs?

While children can survive with a minimum amount of warm connection with adults, it reduces the likelihood of a happy, satisfying and rewarding adulthood. Research shows that responding now, and being present and lovingly connected to all the children in our care is the most powerful thing we can do for their futures (Barker, n.d.; Spence, 2005).

BABY-BLISS HORMONES

Babies’ and children’s bodies respond instantly to close physical contact, and affectionate eye contact with adults while feeding, resting, holding, massaging, talking or playing. This releases various ‘feel good’ hormones like oxytocin (the baby-bliss hormone) and serotonin (Grille, 2003; National Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shellenbarger, 2009). These hormones are not only crucial for bonding and attachment between a child and parent/carer (Barker, n.d.), but are essential for the development of the child’s optimum health and wellbeing, both physically and emotionally (Shellenbarger, 2009). These hormones become ‘set’ during early childhood and directly impact the child’s future adult life.

When regular closeness to a caregiver is absent, infants and children suffer from chronic elevated stress hormones like cortisol, resulting in less favourable emotional, behavioural and intellectual abilities for the rest of their lives. Additionally, the amygdala (the part of the brain that stores emotional memory) is fully mature at birth. Sensations and emotions such as fear, joy, abandonment, love and terror are all remembered from birth onwards and stay with us for life, colouring the way we relate to each other as adults (Grille, 2003).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

For me, when I am with a child I try to be fully conscious of that moment – placing my complete attention with the child, and not thinking about other things or what else I need or want to do. I observe the child’s behaviour – intuiting their intentions and experimenting with my interactions to meet their needs as much as possible. I cannot be present with every child at every moment and I do not always get it ‘right’ – but I actively look for such moments every day. I value, reflect on and remember these moments.

Affirming the child’s uniqueness through looks, words and actions, I revel in their learning and joy. When I hold these values and attitudes, my time with the children can be mutually nourishing. When I am in this place of loving connection, I collaborate with the child as to how much ‘attachment’ they need to have with me. The child and I discover, in partnership, how to be together and for how long. Maybe I need to gently encourage a certain child to explore the environment more independently, or sit with another child on my knee until he is ready to move and play. This will emerge through our heartfelt connectedness.

‘The greatest gift in these discoveries is the knowledge that every loving moment we share with our children, from the very beginning, will stay with them for life.’ (Grille, 2003)

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References