

Professional Love in Early Years Settings (PLEYS)

‘Attachment Toolkit’

Booklet 2



The **‘Attachment Toolkit’** is a set of Professional Development Materials with an evaluation form which have been developed from the findings of a University of Sheffield funded research project in collaboration with Fennies nurseries, which examined practitioners’ views of *‘Professional Love’* in Early Years Settings. The Attachment Toolkit comes with an evaluation form (and link to the AT website online evaluation) to enable ongoing monitoring of usage and feedback on the contents and is comprised of:

- Two e-booklets: *Booklet 1) Introduction*, *Booklet 2) ‘Attachment in Practice’*
- Two models of reflective practice in the form of:
 - A *‘Cycle of Reflection’* tool,
 - A *Thinking about ‘Professional Love’* tool

These tools are accompanied by case study material – narratives and short 2-3 min video clips of adult: child interaction at key times of the day, including during the settling in process

- A *Reflective Practice* pro-forma for use in early years settings

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ATTACHMENT IN PRACTICE

Booklet 2



The '**Attachment Toolkit**' is a set of Professional Development Materials which have been developed from the findings of a research project which examined practitioners' views of '*Professional Love*' in Early Years Settings. This second booklet **Attachment in Practice** is intended to support individuals and early years settings to reflect on the Actions, Communication and Language around attachment, intimacy and love contained within complex and 'messy' human relationships which determine the policies, practices and ethos of the setting.

The PLEYS project was led by Dr Jools Page and was funded by the University of Sheffield Innovation, Impact and Knowledge Exchange (IIKE) as Constructions of Intimacy in Early Childhood Education and Care: practitioners' experiences

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Introduction

The *'Attachment Toolkit'* is a set of Professional Development Materials which have been developed as an outcome of the Professional Love in Early Years Settings (PLEYS) project. They are intended to assist practitioners to reflect on their own attachment experiences with young children and families. This second booklet *'Attachment in Practice'* summarises the findings of the project and then briefly draws attention to Attachment Theory before moving on to discuss how this theory fits with the everyday experiences for children, families and practitioners in early years settings in the twenty first century. It is the *context* of these experiences which are central to determining the appropriateness of early years attachment practice in relation to love, intimacy and care, and which are emphasised in the *'Cycle of Reflection'* and the *'Thinking about Professional Love'* tools which are integral to this *'Attachment Toolkit'*.

Summary of PLEYS Project Findings

Through this project it was possible to establish the research ideas around *'Professional Love'* in work with young children and to generate a debate around the issues. The range and depth of data generated from the PLEYS project supported Jools Page's¹ professional assumptions about love and intimacy in early years settings. Practitioners were asked to respond to a range of questions around their beliefs and experiences related to attachment and *'Professional Love'* more broadly. The survey data based on **793** questionnaire responses revealed:

- ❖ An overwhelming majority of practitioners have a very positive, confident attitude towards the role of *'Professional Love'* as part of their practice in early-years settings. **Most** practitioners explained that they are **comfortable** in enacting professionally loving practices such as **hugging** and using **sensitive touch** to build security and attachment. For example, **95%** feel that **showing affection to the children in their care** is an important part of early years

¹ Page, J. (2014). Developing "professional love" in early childhood settings, In L Harrison and J Sumsion (Eds) (2014). *Lived Spaces of Infant-Toddler Education and Care - Exploring Diverse Perspectives on Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*. (pp.119-130). International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development Series. Springer Publishing.

practice. **89%** feel that they have a good knowledge of non-statutory safeguarding guidance or advice relevant to their post.

- ❖ Despite the positive attitude towards the role of '*Professional Love*' in early years, practitioners did express some worries about aspects of their work. For example participants may be confident and positive about their practices but they may still worry about how attachment affects their work with **10%** of practitioners reporting that they worry about false accusations and how others view the appropriateness of their actions. While participants were very positive about the appropriateness and value of their professionally loving actions, opinion was again mixed on whether or not they would feel comfortable being alone with children. Around **1 in 5 practitioners claimed that they avoid doing so.**

- ❖ Practitioners were asked to describe what they understood by the term '*Professional Love*' in their own words. There were many and varied views and definitions from the sector. The research team were overwhelmed with the time taken by participants to explain their feelings in such depth. Some definitions were quite broad, often using words such as "**care**" and "**kindness**", or being "**available**" and paying "**attention**" to the children.

- ❖ There was some disagreement among practitioners when relating '*Professional Love*' to parental love:
 - ◆ Some specifically stated that '*Professional Love*' **should be parental in nature** (e.g. "Loving a child as if it's your own" or "act like a mother")
 - ◆ Others felt that '*Professional Love*' **should not be parental in nature** (e.g. "not the same as the bond for your own child" or "professional love is not parental or family love")
 - ◆ ***The role of the practitioners' own feelings was an integral part of 'Professional Love' for some respondents.*** The majority of these thoughts centred around feelings of genuine affection and fondness towards the children (e.g. "I am fond of the children I care for" or "You

have stronger feelings for the children in your care than with other children who are not”).

- ◆ **Other practitioners focused on how the child should feel in a professionally loving environment:** for example “safe”, “settled” or “secure”; “loved”, “appreciated” or “valued”.

- ❖ **The importance of establishing some form of attachment with the children** was a very common feature when practitioners defined ‘Professional Love’ (e.g. “growing strong attachments to the children in my care” or “it is inevitable that you will form a bond with the children you work with and that they will form a bond with you”)

- ❖ **The role of physical contact such as hugging, kissing** was present in a number of definitions often with some demarcation between acceptable and non-acceptable actions. A small number of practitioners went further to describe that **displays of affection in general must be initiated by the child.**

- ❖ There is a very strong relationship between participants’ beliefs about their own practices and what they believe parents would want for their children – this seems to be a central motivation for practitioners.

- ❖ Just over half of the respondents to the survey (**56%**) stated that they **were not concerned** about parents’ attitudes towards ‘Professional Love’ practices. Where this was justified, this was usually because:

- ◆ Practitioners feel that they are acting in line with *what parents want* for their children (22%)

or

- ◆ Practitioners feel that parents understand there are clear policies or boundaries in place (3%)

- ❖ There were numerous reasons *for* concern including the following:

- ◆ 10% of practitioners reported concern over **parents’ feeling threatened, jealous or uncomfortable** about early-years staff

developing a relationship with their children. **This was more common for childminders (13%) than those working in other early years settings (8%)**

- ◆ 5% of responding practitioners described their concerns in terms of **lack of education/knowledge on behalf of the parents**, i.e. they don't recognise or understand children's love and attachment needs and therefore question or misinterpret practitioners' activities
- ◆ 10% percent of participants reported that 'communication' or 'good relationships' with the parents are central to allaying any concerns they may have.
- ❖ Less frequent features (less than 5% of participants):
 - ◆ Some describe how **practitioners are vulnerable** and are concerned about parents inferring that practice may be inappropriate or even making more specific accusations
 - ◆ Several participants made specific mention of the effect of stories about inappropriate practices in the media, and how as practitioners they may be approached for reassurance or even viewed with heightened suspicion following such events.
 - ◆ Several practitioners made specific mention of their experiences of parents raising concerns about men working with their children.
 - ◆ In stark contrast, a small number of practitioners responded *quite specifically* that they didn't know what the parents felt and that they would be interested to find out more.
- ❖ In response to a child saying 'I love you' **nearly half** of all practitioners claimed that they **would respond** to a child by saying "**I love you**" (47%).
- ❖ Further responses typically fell into one of six categories:
 1. Limited reciprocation, "I like you" or similar (20%)
 2. Non-reciprocal acknowledgement; praising or thankful "that's nice" or "lovely!" (15%)
 3. Diversion phrasing involving love (2%) e.g. "I love spending time with you too!"

4. Explaining or exploring other relationships, loves “Who else do you love?” (2%)
 5. Non verbal response only e.g. smile or hug (1%)
 6. Saying that they are part of a collective loving setting (2%) “You are loved”, “I love all the children in this nursery”
- ❖ More experienced practitioners (and correspondingly, older practitioners) tended to have even **stronger positive views** about the role of ‘*Professional Love*’ in early years practice than those who were less experienced (or younger). Further analyses of responses across groups of practitioners revealed the following patterns:
- ◆ A slightly higher proportion of practitioners that work with **under 2s** tend to feel that parents **approve** of them kissing their child than those working with older children
 - ◆ A slightly higher proportion of practitioners that work with **under 2s** tend to think that practitioners **should kiss** children in their care

In relation to men, the survey revealed some concerns about men working closely with children. Some of these concerns were based on issues reported about parents’ views and other responses related to the views of male practitioners.

- ❖ In line with the complete sample, almost all of the male practitioners report a generally positive attitude towards professional love practices in early years. Four of the male practitioners did feel however that parents viewed them differently to female staff, one participant providing a particularly emotive statement:

“What really bothers me is that those parents who argue that there are not sufficient men in early years settings, primary school settings, and child care, are also the first to accuse men of inappropriate behaviour towards (their) children. And only then these parents wonder why so many men shy away from working with children. Only then society comes to the conclusion that men are insensitive towards children and ignoring/neglecting/avoiding their duty of care towards children. As a male working with children I simply cannot win, and regardless of what I do I know it is only a matter of time before I get accused”.

❖ Other survey responses stated:

“I think surveys like this are interesting, as it makes Educators think about their practice. I think it's sad that we are still asking about men in Early years. I've always worked with men in early years, some have been amazing, and some haven't, just like female Educators I've worked with. Most families I've worked with have really welcomed having male educators”

“I think it is sad that practitioners are viewed with caution at times when they show affection and warmth, due to a handful of highly publicised cases. I think men are discouraged from entering early years professions as there is a negative belief that they 'must be paedophiles if they want to work with children'. Many children would benefit from male influence in their lives in early years settings as they don't have male role models at home. Hopefully this research will make positive changes to early years practice and views”

“I think it will be very difficult for male workers to be free of stereotypical gender views?”

“I have male members of staff and I have received a few queries from parents who are not wholly comfortable with them, however I consider this to be fuelled by media hype and have on every occasion been able to reassure parents and gain their support”

“I work alongside my husband and I know he has more concerns than me. Partly because he is a male and I think also because he doesn't hold the qualifications I do and the confidence that comes with that”

“I have had parents express concerns about male members of staff, requesting that their children are only ever changed by female practitioners”

“There can be a suspicion re: males in early years settings, despite their giving another layer of learning & experience to EY. But, I have also experienced the opposite where a parent has been furious and complained when their upset child wasn't given the extent of physical comfort, closeness and kisses that the parent thought appropriate. A no touch policy could be considered abuse / neglect of a child's needs, so most professionals risk careers and give a cuddle”

“I am totally in support of encouraging more males to enter early years but know that they face suspicion and mistrust from some parents and colleagues. It is one of the reasons why I discouraged my own son from pursuing a Childminder role as I wanted him to work in a group setting to avoid false allegations”

“Many children would benefit from male influence in their lives in early years settings as they don't have male role models at home. Hopefully this research will make positive changes to early years practice and views”

The survey results were used to inform individual and focus group interviews which were carried out with both male and female practitioners. When asked why they had responded to the project. Examples included:

“I think that this is one of several areas in Early Years care and education where there is a mismatch between discourse / policy and good practice. This is a medium through which to voice my views”

“We have always felt strongly at my setting that it was more damaging to deny young children affection such as cuddles (I have worked at my setting for over 10 years and this has always been our view) but I was aware that many other settings do not think this way. I read the first paper on Professional Love as part of my degree studies last year which I felt validated my setting’s views even more but also increased my concern that there are settings out there that still have ‘no cuddling’ policies. This just seems inhumane to me if you are working with young children, especially with all the research becoming available on the importance of affection in healthy brain development etc”

“I’m a Childminder working with children from birth to six and forming close bonds with them is a big part of my role as their carer. Building relationships with children, especially babies, is very important for their social and emotional development and over all sense of belonging and well-being. I was intrigued by the term ‘professional love’ as I think it’s a perfect description of what Childminders, who often care for small number of children in their own home, do naturally as part of their job”

In seeking to understand a bit more about the responses to the survey, one example in particular summed up what other participants also said:

“As both a student on a foundation degree course and also a ‘professional’ in the early year’s sector, I am extremely passionate about the emotional well-being of our youngest children. My current role, professionally is ‘Welfare and Safeguarding Officer’ for a Local Authority. This involves advising early year’s settings and childminders of their responsibilities under the welfare and safeguarding requirements laid out within the EYFS, and also to deliver awareness raising training for the safeguarding of children to all early year’s practitioners. The responses I gave throughout the survey represented my views about the challenges of striking the balance between building close relationships with children and protecting ourselves from allegations. I strongly believe though, that as early year’s practitioners, we need to feel confident about the attention we give to children and be able to explain the reasons behind it. I look at older children in secondary schools and ask myself whether some of the unwanted behaviours being displayed are due to a lack of emotional affection given to them as younger children? I remember looking for childcare for my own child and the one thing, 14 years ago, which made me choose the place I did for my child, was the childminder saying to me “you may not get a pretty picture every day, but if your child is upset, I

will cuddle him and no matter what, I will love him like he was my own". I really believe children need to feel loved, valued, cared about and as though they are special to us, through our responses and actions towards them".

Finally, practitioners were asked about the type of professional training they felt was most needed to support them to develop and maintain appropriate attachment relationships with children and families in their early years settings. Example responses included:

"All EY practitioners need to have a full understanding about attachments, and about what safeguarding means in everyday terms (and of course how to protect themselves). So a few basic 'myth busters' may be useful..."

"I think some self-delivered training workshop (so practitioners do together) of personal skills around confidence, assertiveness, professionalism, together with case studies and scenarios to work through – and then a few more to support building own setting based guidelines/policies for practice. As then each setting would be able to take ownership of their guidance".

"I think all settings should have an attachment policy which should place importance on allowing staff to show professional love to children appropriately".

"I think it's necessary to educate all practitioners in the importance of early attachments so that they understand what they can do to help promote good attachments, between themselves and the child and to support the parent and child attachment as well. Guidance should set out exactly what the boundaries of appropriate attachments are, encourage practitioners to have good written systems including specific policies signed by the parents and also advise how practitioners can safeguard themselves against allegations"

The main findings derived from the individual and focus group interview data together with the survey results suggested practitioners want to feel more confident about their professional decisions in relation to love, care and intimacy. To do this participants told us that they wanted an overview of Attachment Theory. Thereafter, practitioners told us they wanted examples of how to apply their understanding of this theory to their everyday intimate relationships with babies and young children.

The 'Attachment Toolkit' has been developed to help build practitioners confidence about how to determine the appropriateness of 'Professional Love' in the context

of their attachment relationships with babies and young children in their own early years settings starting first with a reminder about the place of Attachment Theory. These professional development materials have been intentionally written to complement the safeguarding policies and procedures of any early years setting which are designed to protect children from abuse or harm in all its forms.

The Place of Attachment Theory² in 21st Century Early Years Practice

In the late 1950's John Bowlby, developed the idea that the mother-child relationship was crucial to the child's ability to make what he identified as a 'secure attachment'. Bowlby believed that the child flourished best when he or she was with the mother and that when this mother-child relationship was interrupted the child would suffer. Bowlby's ideas were heavily criticised by other researchers who claimed, amongst other things, that his methods used to determine these ideas were flawed. Others suggested that as long as the relationship was stable and reliable then the child was able to form multiple attachment relationships with one or two special people and this did not *have* to be only with the mother. Instead it was proposed that the best relationships were provided by whosoever was most capable of meeting the individual emotional needs of the child³. It was claimed⁴ that consistency, reliability and predictability are of more importance to the child's emotional security than whether or not this attachment is provided by the mother. If this is the case then it follows that when babies and children attend early years settings they need to know that the adult who is going to temporarily 'replace' their parent is going to be able to 'mind' about them until their parent returns⁵.

For an increased understanding of Attachment Theory, practitioners are encouraged to read more widely about the work of Bowlby - see for example, Howes and Spieker (2008), Page (2015).

² Page, J. (2015). The Legacy of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory In T. David, K. Goouch and S. Powell. (Eds). *Routledge International handbook of philosophies and theories of early childhood education and care*. London: Routledge.

³ Rutter, M (1972) *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*, Middlesex, Penguin Books Ltd

⁴Howes, C., and Spieker, S. (2008). Attachment relationships in the context of multiple caregivers. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment theory, research and clinical applications* (2nd Edn.). (pp. 317-332) London : Guilford Press

⁵Page, J. (2015) Love, Love, Love. *Nursery World Special Edition Let's begin: The care and education of children from birth to three years*, *Nursery World* 29th June – 12 July 2015.

<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/opinion/1152266/love-love-love>

The time and emotional effort it takes to settle a young child into an early years setting is grossly under estimated⁶. Yet, sensitive and thoughtful caregiving routines by an emotionally available adult can make all the difference to the experience for the child.

When children are separated from their parents they need to be able to trust that the parent will return. Most early years settings have a settling-in policy that takes account of this fact, with procedures in place to allow children to gradually develop a secure relationship with their key person. The settling-in is a critical period for the child, the parent and also for the practitioner in their role as the child's key person, as this triangle of trust takes time to develop. The role of the key person⁷ is to 'tune into' the individual needs of the child and to work in harmony with the parent to form a close and secure attachment bond with the child. In their key person role a practitioner might emulate what a parent does at home, for example stroking a child's hair or speaking in hushed tones to soothe the child's distress, which, as the relationship deepens, becomes a form of professionally loving practice.

The main tenants of Bowlby's Attachment Theory⁸, in spite of its controversy, are central to the role of the key person and the key person approach⁹ as an expectation of current early years policy and practice. Attachment Theory helps to explain why young children thrive most when they are in the company of adults who are genuinely interested in them and who are able to form strong, attuned, attachment relationships with them¹⁰. Undisputed is the fact that love and affection are natural and normal aspects of human relationships and are fundamental to the healthy growth of young children. It is therefore the consistency, predictability and reliability of these relationships with the key adult in an early years setting which will provide children with the secure attachment

⁶ Page, J., and Elfer, P. (2013). The emotional complexity of attachment interactions in nursery, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Online 5 February 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.766032>

⁷ Department for Education (2014). *Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: DfE

⁸ Bowlby, J. (1953) *Child care and the Growth of Love* Middlesex: Penguin

⁹ Elfer, P, Goldschmied, E and Selleck, D (2012) *Key persons in the early years: building relationships for quality provision in early years settings and primary schools* (2nd Edn). London: Routledge

¹⁰David, T., Gooch, K., Powell, S. and Abbott, L. (2003) *Birth to Three Matters: A Review of the Literature*. London: DfES

relationship which is so essential for their growth and learning. This is how one practitioner summed this point up:

“Our centre's practice is Rights Based Learning and our staff are highly trained in Attachment Theory.....we strongly believe it is a fundamental human need to be loved and cherished. Professional Love is being aware that affection is as important to the child's development as food and drink”

Furthermore, adults who have experienced loving, stable relationships and, as a consequence, have developed emotional resilience are much more likely to be equipped to deal with complex and emotionally challenging relationships with others. Therefore, if early years practitioners are both emotionally resilient *and* intellectually capable of understanding themselves in relation to the behaviour of others, they are more likely to be able to cope professionally with the everyday emotional demands of working with babies, young children and their families¹¹ and for ‘Professional Love’ to be realised.

What is Professional Love?

As presented in the survey summary there are many instances when aspects of love, intimacy and care are overlapping and because they cannot be compartmentalised it can be difficult to distinguish these concepts from one another within professional early years practices. Yet, when looking more closely at individuals who use a lens of ‘Professional Love’ some practitioners seem to be self-aware and able to recognise the crucial importance of being able to shift their thinking beyond their own needs and instead to become completely absorbed in thinking about and acting with the needs of the other person in mind, in a completely non-judgmental way; this is called being able to ‘de-centre’. When practitioners are able to ‘de-centre’ and to see the world from the view of ‘the other’ then they are less likely to become ‘too attached’ because they will be thinking *about* and responding *to* the needs of ‘the other’ as opposed to thinking only about their own needs which will lessen the likelihood of any misunderstanding. When this dialogue and reflection is encouraged it can lead to

¹¹ Page, J. (2014). Developing "professional love" in early childhood settings, In L Harrison and J Sumsion (Eds). *Lived Spaces of Infant-Toddler Education and Care - Exploring Diverse Perspectives on Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*. (pp.119-130) International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development Series. Springer Publishing.

the creation of policies and implementation of practice which can protect and safeguard young children as the following examples from the research demonstrate.

“I define professional love as being entirely present for the children in your care. Giving them your complete attention and energy and wanting the best for them emotionally”.

“Professional love is about adults’ sensitivity towards the very young children in their care and “reading” what is needed to make a child feel loved at any moment in time. What is appropriate will vary between children, between different practitioners even towards the same child and even between moments in time (where a cuddle may be needed one day it may not the next). It is this sensitivity which is the difference between an adequate practitioner and an outstanding one. ”

“[This research] has helped me reflect on policies I do not have in place, but maybe I should!”

“After 34 years in early years I believe it is almost impossible to do my job well without a strong attachment to the children in my care. As human beings I believe we flourish in an environment where we matter to those around us. It is this notion of “mattering” that defines my idea of professional love”.

“Professional love is based on mutual respect (carer and infant), on bonding and a sense of belonging but NOT overstepping and thinking you know better than a parent”

Practitioners who have mastered the emotional resilience and intellectual capacity to ‘de-centre’ are uniquely positioned to recognise this as the first step to building secure, loving and appropriate relationships with children which are consistent, predictable, reliable and authentic and most importantly are accepted and reciprocated by the children and also by their parents and families. As practitioners get to know children in the context of their home and family, as well as within the setting, the depth of their connection with the child, sometimes called ‘tuning in’, gradually develops within a triangle of relational trust. It is the depth of feeling, investment of time, energy and emotion together with the longevity of these relationships which is what manifests itself in this context as love. For example:

“Having a loving attachment with the children, including kissing, cuddles and appropriate touch. Understanding that you are not their mother and will not replace them. But act like a mother in the absence of their primary caregiver”.

“Love that is not harmful to the child as in it should be kind, unconditional, truthful, and loving.....Like the love for your own child it just happens over time with bonding.”

“A relationship developed over time that develops into a genuine 'I really GET you'”

‘Professional Love’ provides practitioners with the language to appropriately describe the close, loving intimate and affectionate bond which, over time, is inevitably developed with the children in their care in the context of reciprocity (meaning with mutual agreement) and shared understanding. Here are just two examples from many similar comments we received:

“Early years professionals should be taught in how to act with professional love and that this is an important part of their work. All those no touch etc policies are greatly contra productive in the first instance for the children and secondly for the professionals”

“This is a timely research at a time when child abuse is so much in the news. There have been cases of horrible instances of abuse but overall childcare is a caring profession. Providers can become less warm towards children because of fear of allegations. We need strong policies understood by both providers and parents. For childminders this is particularly needed as we work on our own”

We know that babies and young children are spending many hours a day in early years settings in the company of professionals who are doing their best to provide them with suitable attachment relationships as a requirement within the Early Years Foundation Stage. Defining love in professional roles is problematic because there is no skill set that can be applied, taught or measured. Nevertheless, to deny the existence of love, particularly when research has already confirmed that love matters¹² is unhelpful. As this project has demonstrated it is the debate and theorisation of love and care which is important. Providing opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect upon each other’s viewpoint is likely to bring about a more thoughtful understanding and crucially a shift in their thinking. The overwhelming response to the call to participate in the PLEYS project has confirmed this point.

¹² Gerhardt, S. (2004) *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain*. London: Routledge.

“It is a GREAT relief to all of us in our Children's Centres that this research is being carried out. It is also a bit sad that it is needed! We do hear at training sessions that there is anxiety amongst some practitioners from other settings in case they are wrongly accused of hurting a child. There are also mis-messages given by some trainers and inspectors about touching or having a child too close”

“This is an important subject and I hope that your survey will provoke lots of professional discussion”

“...It has made me, as a manager, reflect on my relationship with children, parents and made me more understanding towards my staff and their attachments”

Working with the ‘Attachment Toolkit’: ‘Thinking about Professional Love’

The ‘Attachment Toolkit’ includes three worked case studies: ‘*Constructions of Love*’, ‘*Constructions of Intimacy*’ and ‘*Constructions of Care*’ derived from real practice examples of everyday relationships which were naturally observed in Fennies Nurseries. As these case studies show, it is only when practitioners come to understand themselves and their actions in relation to others that this ‘*Professional Love*’ is then realised as an *intellectual, loving, caring* encounter and can become appropriately embedded in their practice as depicted in the ‘*Thinking about Professional Love*’ diagram below.

The model represents the triangular relationship which, over time, is developed between the parent, child and the practitioner. Without doubt, practitioners need support from senior colleagues in their work with children and families and this is *even more* crucial when thinking about emotionally invested relationships. Therefore, as the data revealed, practitioners need continued support from those in senior roles, together with a suitable space and time to discuss their thoughts, feelings and self-reflections.

“Regular staff supervision should take place.....Students and less experienced staff must be well supported to understand and practice within the nursery policy guidelines”.

Professional Love builds on the ‘ethic of care’, which according to the research literature¹³ is when there is a *compulsion* on behalf of one person to care for the other. When reciprocity exists, and as the relationship deepens, then the compulsion to care, together with the capacity to de-centre and emotionally invest in the relationship, can be defined as ‘*Professional Love*’¹⁴:

“I have encountered parents who are concerned their child will become too attached to me [as a Childminder]. It's important not to upset parents or make them feel that they have to compete for their child's love with professionals but that we can all love children”.

“I can understand that parents relationships with their children and views on others relationships with their child can vary greatly. I think as a good key person you need to be able to read the parent and adapt your practice to allow for the parents’ wishes and views. I know some parents feel insecure or even jealous if you have a good bond with their child. It is crucial then to work with the parent to ensure they feel you are no threat to them”.

It is the shared understanding that adults can bring to the experience for the child, which can, over time lead to a strong, secure attachment. It is when this mutual agreement *does not* exist, or if the practitioner becomes *over* involved, that the capacity for tension and unease, which may lead to either emotional burn out or an enforced distance, undermines the relationship and the child may feel rejected and unloved. When this happens there is the potential for the parent to feel threatened and for the relationship to break down.

“Parents' can experience feelings of jealousy when they see the professional love between a practitioner and their child. This is where your communication with parents is so important; to be open about those feelings and clear that your intention is never to replace or better parents”.

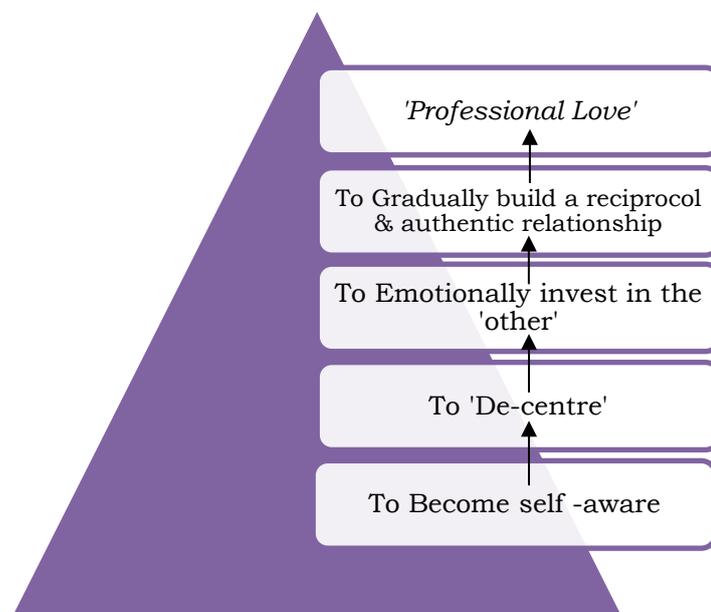
It is not possible to become emotionally invested with every child, parent and colleague because it is too overwhelming and exhausting. The key person approach therefore fits well with Attachment Theory¹⁵, because it reinforces the importance of forming close attachment relationships with *one or two* special people.

¹³ Noddings, N. (2003) *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, (2nd Edn) Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

¹⁴ Page, J. 2011. Do Mothers want professional carers to love their babies? *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 9, (3), pp310-323

¹⁵ Bowlby, J, (1965) *Child care and the Growth of Love* (2nd edition) Middlesex: Penguin

- The first step in this process of '*Thinking about Professional Love*' is for practitioners to become more **self-aware** by *stepping outside of their own personal frame of reference* so that they are **available** to reflect upon the consequences of their actions and interactions with others
- Step two is to **de-centre**; to be compelled to act for the good of the other person. In doing so the practitioner needs to shift their thinking beyond their own needs, and become completely absorbed in thinking about and acting with the needs of the other person in mind, in a completely non-judgmental way
- Step three is when practitioners are able to **emotionally invest** something of themselves in the relationship-rather than to distance themselves from the child and/or parent
- Step four is for practitioners to build a **gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationship** with children and parents. It is this reciprocal relationship which determines the level of acceptance and trust between the child and the practitioner but also between the practitioner and the parent
- When practitioners have built **enduring mutual** relationships with children who they have formed a close, affectionate bond developed over many hours, days, weeks, months or even years of the child's attendance at their early years setting, then it is likely that they will have come to love them. This triangular model of thinking about love in the early years is intended to offer practitioners a process to have in mind which complements a parent's love for their child rather than undermine it; hence step 5 is to recognise the existence of '*Professional Love*'.



Working with the 'Attachment Toolkit': 'The Cycle of Reflection'

The 'Cycle of Reflection' illustrated below is the tool which has been developed within the 'Attachment Toolkit' to assist practitioners to reflect on the *minutiae* of their everyday experiences with children and to consider the consequences of what they see or hear in relation to love, care and intimacy. Worked examples are presented in narrative form along with a set of reflective questions (explained in more depth below). There is also a short video clip which accompanies each of the case studies ('Constructions of Love', 'Constructions of Intimacy' and 'Constructions of Care') to assist practitioners to view the examples for themselves.

Reflective questions however, can only make sense when thought about in the **context** of the experience that individuals have either seen, heard or been part of, as demonstrated in the three worked examples of constructions of love, intimacy and care.

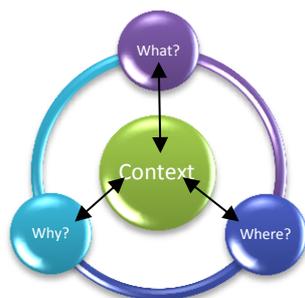
- In an early years setting the role of the practitioner is to understand the difference between professional and personal relationships to be able to provide children with safe and appropriate boundaries
- This involves the policy and practice of the individual child within the context of his/her family, community and early years setting

- Building professional reciprocal relationships takes time. It is only through regular and consistent communication practices, informed by a '*Cycle of Reflection*', that safe, professional and loving boundaries can be maintained

The '*Cycle of Reflection*' can aid practitioners to engage in a regular critical dialogue with others about these experiences before deciding on whether these experiences are appropriate or not. The reflective questions posed within the case studies are:

- ◆ **What** was the experience?
- ◆ **Where** did it take place?
- ◆ **Why** was your attention drawn to this experience?
- ◆ **What** was your immediate response?

The purpose of these case studies is to assist practitioners to reflect on the appropriateness of these examples within the concept of '*Professional Love*'. Practitioners are encouraged to use the '*Cycle of Reflection*' alongside the '*Thinking about Professional Love*' tool to increase their confidence about experiences of love, care and intimacy with children in their own settings before deciding on the implications for their own setting policies, procedures and practice which includes safeguarding.



Working with the 'Attachment Toolkit': in tandem with – Safeguarding Policy

The 'Attachment Toolkit' is intended to be used alongside safeguarding policies designed to protect children from harm. These attachment tools have been developed to support individuals and early years settings to reflect on the Actions, Communication and Language contained within complex and 'messy' human attachment relationships which determine the policies, practices and ethos of the setting as summed up by this practitioner:

“My approach to safeguarding is based on collegiality and ownership. We need to agree what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in terms of adult interactions with children. This includes use of language, development of relationships, touch, response to children’s behaviour and adult initiated interactions. I do not believe it is possible to be prescriptive in defining a list of ‘Dos’ and ‘Don’ts’ but we can reach a consensus on what we deem to be ‘healthy’ interactions and what we would view as ‘unhealthy’, suspicious or somehow meeting the emotional needs of the adult as opposed to comforting a child. Such discussions must be based on the principles that –

- ◆ *Children need love*
- ◆ *Children and adults must be protected / safeguarded, the former from abuse, the latter from unfounded suspicion and allegations.*
- ◆ *It is not possible to work or flourish in an environment of paranoia.*
- ◆ *Love involves trust*
- ◆ *All abuse and inappropriate behaviour must be acted on.*

All our activities must be conducted in open environments – physically and relationally, with mutual support and accountability. There needs to be a culture where professional challenge and discussion are embedded in practice.”

Professional Love in Early Years Settings (PLEYS)

‘Attachment Toolkit’

ATTACHMENT IN PRACTICE

Booklet 2

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