Case study: Developing the key person approach

One theme that practitioners have found essential to keep in mind in thinking about the key person approach is the importance of allowing time for it to develop. Here, a nursery manager describes the way her staff implemented the key person approach in their nursery, persevering to overcome obstacles and finding huge benefits.

Two- to three-year 'apples' room

As the manager, I along with the supervisor of the two- to three-year-olds would like to share with you some of the changes that have been implemented and the effects that this has had on the children, the staff, the parents and the overall running of the 'apples' room.

Within the nursery we worked to a key worker system which probably the majority of childcare practitioners today still work to. Each child had a key worker who carried out observations on them.

That key worker would plan for their children's individual needs and develop them socially, emotionally, intellectually, culturally and physically.

The key workers knew their children, and the children's abilities, and we as key workers could take the appropriate steps to help our children move forward and develop skills further, however during a visit from the under-threes training and quality advisor we discussed ways of taking the key worker role one step further for the development of both the nursery staff and the children. We felt we could build on the relationships between child and key worker and at the same time help our children become more confident.

We implemented a new system where the key worker became the key person. The key person is responsible for their children. They greet their children, feed their children, change their children's nappies, and in turn bond with their children.
Within the two- to three-year age group the staff were apprehensive about this new idea and some staff said it would not work, but all the staff were willing to try and use the techniques to the best of their abilities.

To start, things were slower as all staff had to find a routine that worked best for them as individuals and also as a group within the room. We, however, persevered with the new system and we feel this has had amazing effects on the running of the room and the nursery as a whole.

Within the two- to three-year room, the staff were concerned that the system may fail in the absence of individual key people, due to their key children being without their main supporter. At this time sickness and absence levels within the nursery were quite high and we as a team did not want this to affect the children's learning and development.

We therefore implemented a 'buddy' system where, in the absence of a key person, their buddy would step in as a familiar support rather like a 'deputy' key person. However, since the key person approach has been in place, the sickness and absence levels have improved considerably. On speaking to individual staff members regarding sickness and absence, the majority of staff had the same impression, that staff simply did not want their key children to lack their support and therefore endeavoured to be there for them each day. This has been apparent in the strong relationships that have been developed between key children and key people.

The relationships that have been created are amazing, not only between child and adult but also between the staff team as a whole. The staff morale has been boosted due to everyone experiencing these changes together and the need to work closely, to ensure the day-to-day running was as smooth and consistent as possible.

To keep momentum going, within the two- to three-year room we have also implemented a system of praise where all staff have the opportunity to write positive comments about their colleagues' practice for all to see. This technique has also proved very effective and staff are genuinely keen to get into work and put 100 per cent effort into their work, as they are being recognised for this.

The pace of development has also improved. An example of this is a young child who was toilet training and progressing at a steady rate. The child had various staff members who would encourage him to use the toilet facilities and the child would be praised effectively. When the key person approach
came into play, the child had the benefit of knowing he had the support of
the person he had the strongest bond with, as well as her praise and
couragement. As a result the child has more confidence in his own
abilities and now uses the bathroom facilities expertly.

Due to the staff knowing their children's likes and having a broader
understanding of their needs, we find it easier to plan for our children taking
into consideration what they may hope to achieve from the activities. We, as
key people, have observed our children in various areas of the nursery and
have recorded when the children have lacked involvement and well-being.
We have looked at the two- to three-year room through the children's eyes
and have changed the room to benefit the children, and involve them more.

We feel that considerable changes have been made within the two- to
three-year room, all of which have had fantastic results on the morale within
the room, and the well-being of the children...

Throughout the changes, we have been fortunate enough to have the
support of our parents. They have been enthusiastic about the new
developments, and spoke positively about the changes that have occurred.
The parents have also expressed that they feel they gain more information
and support regarding their children's progress within the room. They too
have built up strong relationships with the key person, and this is all
beneficial to their child(ren).

We as a team would recommend that other childcare settings take on board
these changes and how they have worked for us. Although at first we
doubted the success, we are thrilled to have gained so much from it, and
have been delighted at the progress both we and the children have made.

Nursery manager and two- to three-years supervisor