

Professional love

To cuddle or not to cuddle? Professional love has become a hot topic in early years. Here's our lowdown on the debate.

How much love and affection should practitioners show to children in your setting?

What's too little? And what's too much? It's a difficult area of practice – and a very interesting one.

The term 'professional love' was developed by University of Sheffield academic Dr Jools Page.

With a research team, she carried out a five-month survey of practitioners in England last year which revealed that the majority felt showing affection to children in their care was important.

However, they were sometimes concerned about whether other people viewed their actions as appropriate.

The team also worked with NDNA member Fennies, a group of nurseries in London and Surrey, as project collaborator.

Dr Page explained: "In recent years, a small but growing number of early years practitioners have been convicted of child abuse, and the continued media exposure of abusive clergy and then of various 'celebrity' entertainers has led to a climate of wariness and even suspicion of adults' professional relationships with very young children.

"A difficulty for those who work in early years settings is how to express the affectionate and caring behaviours which the role demands of them, and

"That key person relationship is more important than any resources in a nursery."

which very young children need in their development of healthy attachments."

Dr Page felt the whole area of 'professional love' had been relatively unexamined in the daily practice of early years settings, obscured by a climate of wariness.

The survey, which was completed by 793 early years professionals, including nursery staff, childminders and teaching assistants, found 95% felt that showing affection to the children in their care was important but 10% said they were worried about false accusations and how others view the appropriateness of their actions.

Opinion was mixed on whether respondents felt comfortable being alone around the children in their care, with one in five saying they avoid doing so.

Respondents gave a wide range of definitions of 'professional love', including broad terms like 'care' and 'kindness' or being 'available' and paying 'attention' to the children.

Some disagreed when relating professional love to parental love, with some saying it should be parental in nature - 'loving a child as if it's your own' or 'acting like a mother' – with others saying it wasn't the same as the bond you'd have with your own child.

A total of 10% of practitioners reported concerns over parents feeling threatened, jealous or uncomfortable about early years staff developing a relationship with their children, though this was more common among childminders.

In response to a child

saying 'I love you', nearly half said they would say 'I love you' back.

Others said they would give limited reciprocation by saying something like 'I like you' (20%), say 'that's nice' or 'lovely' (15%) or use diversionary phrasing such as 'I love spending time with you too' (2%).

The findings of the project led to the development of professional development materials in the form of an Attachment Toolkit including case studies, narratives and videos, which is being trialled and evaluated by Fennies.



NDNA GUIDANCE

NDNA's example policies on Intimate Care and Safe Care and Practice offer practical suggestions for good practice.

These include:

- Giving cuddles when sought by children needing comfort and in view of others where possible.
- Discouraging over-tickling, over-boisterous play or inappropriate language such as asking a child to tell them they love them. This should be reported if observed.
- Ensuring staff are aware of whistleblowing procedures and for random checks to take place throughout the day by managers to ensure safe practices.
- Ensuring staff have an up-to-date understanding of safeguarding/child protection and know how to protect children from harm, including identifying signs and symptoms of abuse.
- Intimate care such as nappy changing and toileting, or changing wet clothes, to be carried out one-to-one by a child's key person wherever possible, staying visible to other practitioners but maintaining a child's privacy, for example, leaving the door ajar.
- All staff undertaking intimate care should have suitable, enhanced DBS checks.

The Attachment Toolkit is not intended to be a list of 'do's and don'ts', rather it provides an opportunity for settings to reflect on their practice and develop policies and procedures to support appropriate loving practices - which are healthy for children's growth, development and learning, and put the rights of children at the centre.

Dr Page said: "Providing opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect upon each other's viewpoints is likely to bring about a more thoughtful understanding and crucially a shift in their thinking. The Attachment Toolkit is intended 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."

John Warren, Director of Childcare at Fennies, added: "We got involved in the research because of our vision to create the right start for under-fives. During the settling-in period children need a great deal of what can only be described as care and attention – or, as Dr Page would call it, professional love.

"Creating the right start for children and families is imperative, but it is also important for the parents to know where we are coming from as professional practitioners and to understand that we are not trying to take over from them as the child's main care giver."

As with all areas of practice, NDNA advocates the need for policies in place to establish good practice, and for all staff to be familiar with the policies and have opportunities to talk about them and review them. NDNA also offers training on attachment.

NDNA Early Years Adviser, Hazel Davies, who leads training on attachment for key persons, said: "Recent research into brain development has led to a greater understanding of how the brain works and how a child's earliest experiences can affect brain development and influence the person they will become.

"Practitioners can support healthy brain development by building secure attachments with babies and toddlers and providing a safe, stimulating environment that helps them to make sense of the world around them.

"Nurseries should have a key person policy – this can include the setting's approach to cuddling and cover the benefits to children of physical touch and attachment.

"They should also have guidance on intimate care – nappy changing and toileting – as part of a wider safeguarding policy. Staff need clear induction supervision and training to know what is appropriate within the area of professional love.

Hazel continued: "That key person relationship is more important than any resources in a nursery. Things to think about include, do children and babies choose their own key person according to their initial preferences and attachments?

"Is there a buddy system in place so that if the main key person is absent the baby or toddler has a second person that they have made an attachment with? What could you do to improve this?"

Settings should remember, too, that key persons also have needs – breaks away from the children, a chance to talk about difficulties or concerns and access to mentoring and coaching to aid their professional development.

For more information on professional love including the practitioners' toolkit, go to professionallove.group.shef.ac.uk