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## Introduction

*Being a Key Person in an Early Years Setting* addresses a child's need for warm, responsive relationships with their carers in an early years setting and explains how the role of a key person can be developed to provide the best possible opportunities to promote a child's emotional well-being and learning.

Babies and very young children need to feel secure when they are cared for outside of the home and family. They need to feel loved, safe, nurtured, listened to, understood and encouraged in order to grow as a human being in confidence and self-esteem. This is the bedrock of emotional well-being, which enables all other aspects of development to flourish including physical development, communication and language, the ability to make sense of the world, to think creatively and abstractly, to have social awareness and to behave appropriately and considerately towards others. None of these aspects of development will meet the full extent of the child's innate potential without emotional well-being, and this rests upon the sure foundation of secure relationships.

In an early years setting, each child is assigned a key person to be the main person responsible for his or her well-being. Through forming a close, trusting relationship, the child is assured of warmth and responsiveness from his or her carer. Sometimes this person is referred to as a key worker; however, this book will use the term *key person* as described by Elfer et al<sup>1</sup>, as this title better

reflects the human capacity for relating to others, for reciprocity, for kindness and sometimes vulnerability, along with the human need for support. A member of staff employed to care for a child is, first and foremost, a *person* whose job it is to relate to children, parents and colleagues, not simply a paid employee whose purpose is to carry out a set of defined tasks and performance objectives.

It is a requirement of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)<sup>2</sup> that settings ensure there is a key person for every child, and the role is detailed in the Statutory Framework. For children with special educational needs or disabilities, this person carries an extra responsibility under the Special Education Needs and Disability Code of Practice<sup>3</sup> to ensure the child's needs are identified and met, and that the setting carries out their part in relation to applying appropriate SEN support when necessary.

### **What does it mean to be *key*?**

The word *key* carries an interesting set of meanings. Primarily it is used as an *adjective* – a word used to describe something. In this context, we can consider a range of adjectives that have a similar meaning to *key*:

significant	important	priority	valued
valuable	crucial	top-of-the-list	special
fundamental	foremost	essential	

The word *key* is also a *noun* – a word used to describe an object. In this context, we can consider the word *key* as a noun meaning ‘an object that unlocks or opens’. A little boy held up a plastic key he had been given at school. “*This is the key to unlocking my potential!*” he announced. Someone caring for a child holds a key, not just to unlocking their learning and achievement potential, but a key to opening the heart to trust, a key to opening doors to experience or perhaps a key to unlocking joy, wonder, curiosity and gladness to be alive.

*Key* is also a musical term – music being pitched in a certain key so that players and singers can remain in tune. Each of us has our own key, not simply for singing, but for our whole being as we resonate within the world. When others tune into our key, we feel we are in harmony with that person.

Finally, the word *key* is sometimes used as a *verb* – a doing word. In this context, what could *key* mean? Usually it means to fit, like a key in a lock, or to adhere, as when a painter keys a surface with sandpaper to help it hold the paint more effectively. In this way, a carer must fit their own practice to the needs of the child, to their interests or their feelings, their abilities, and a close fit enables the relationship to thrive.

So to summarise, we can say that a key person is a significant, important, priority, valued, valuable, crucial, top-of-the-list, special, fundamental, foremost and essential person in a child's experience within an early years setting. A key person holds the key to unlocking a child's potential, happiness and learning. A key person tunes in to the child's being so that the two harmonise their shared understanding of one another. A key person adjusts their approach to fit with the child's needs; they bond, and so an attachment relationship is formed.

### **The aim of this book**

The aim of this book is to raise practitioners' awareness of the significance and value they have as a *key person* in a child's life, so they may carry out their roles with sensitive and compassionate effectiveness.

The book is built around some important theoretical perspectives:

**Attachment theory** as described by Bowlby<sup>4</sup>.

**Transition theory** as described by Bronfenbrenner<sup>5</sup>.

**Relational pedagogy of the Pre-school Learning Alliance** as described by Mathivet<sup>6</sup>.

**Sustained shared thinking** as described by Sylva et al<sup>7</sup>.

