

Playspaces - Educators, Parents and Toddlers

Chapter for book

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This chapter looks at the experience of toddlers and their families arriving at childcare. The children's arrivals were filmed and the observations analysed, using attachment theory as a guide. Children begin their childcare day by saying goodbye to parents and hello to staff and other children. This is an important opportunity for getting them off to a good start with secure relationships inside child care, which can help them become better connected, more confident in their learning and less likely to be isolated or show behaviour problems during the day. Current thinking in early childhood theory and practice (e.g., the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009) acknowledges the importance of forming secure relationships: however, there has been little attention to the opportunity to invest in them at this part of the day.

The content of the chapter is based on the Attachment Matters Project (Dolby, 2007; Dolby et al, 2008)¹ that has pioneered a method of working to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. The approach involves choosing a practical issue in early childhood education and care. Small-scale research is then conducted to understand the issue better. The findings are then used to develop a concrete procedure that educators and parents put into practice step by step. The discussion of each step with staff and parents is

¹ In this project clinicians and educators in an early childhood centre have worked together for ten years to develop new understandings of how teacher-child relationships and interactions can support children's learning and social competence with peers. The early childhood centre is called KU James Cahill Preschool, operated by KU Children's Services, a not-for-profit children's service in Australia.

recorded (filmed) and the process of working together is incorporated into what is produced. The result is a practical, well-tested procedure with a dedicated package of training resources that have come directly from practice with input from educators and families.

The approach is consistent with Whyte's emphasis (this volume) in pursuing new directions for research and practice in early childhood settings that "signals a shift away from top-down approaches with 'educational' outcomes or efforts to integrate infants and toddlers into 'preschool' programmes; towards a pedagogy of compassion, care and advocacy". Similarly, Tronick and Beeghly (2011) argue "that a more intense focus on the life of infants and parents *as it is lived* is warranted (p.116)" to emotionally support very young children at home. We would say the same intense focus on the life of infants and toddlers and educators *as it is lived* is warranted to emotionally support young children in child care.

This also highlights educators' own need for support. Child care staff work in a field that involves intense emotional relationships, but often do not have the same support or supervision as other professionals. Rather than supporting practitioners for the emotional task they face on the floor, organizations may develop ways of protecting staff from feeling too much (Menzies-Lyth, 1989). In his chapter (this volume), Peter Elfer argues that unless staff are given the support to process the painful as well as joyful aspects of close relationships with very young children, they will almost inevitably retreat into distant styles of interacting.

By filming the morning transition it is possible to get to see and feel the immediacy of what happens; we look for the support that children and educators need in the moment and the opportunities that follow when this support is given. The chapter now sets out the method, findings and discussion from the research, and then describes the transition procedure that emerged from it and the process of working with educators and parents to develop it.

The filmed observations

Fourteen families and their children were invited to participate in this aspect of the Attachment Matters Project. Separations were filmed as parents brought their children to child care at the start of the day and took them home in the afternoon. Eleven of the children were aged between two and three years and three children were older (4-5).

Filming (by RD) began as each child came through the gate and continued until the parents had left and the children were interacting with their peers. A researcher who did not know the families (BF) analysed the video-taped interactions, tracking how the children related to the adults (parent and educator) over the transition period.

The analysis was based on attachment theory. John Bowlby (1988) says that what makes children (and all of us) feel safe is a **relational anchor**. Children use their attachment figure as a “secure-base from which to explore” and as a “safe haven to return to” (Ainsworth et al, 1978). This attachment-exploration cycle opens up opportunities for learning (Ainsworth et al, 1978). It is considered to have great educational relevance, because the safer and more comfortable children feel to come in to their educators, the more effective learners they will be when they go out to explore (Cooper et al, 2009; Dolby, 2007). The feeling that the educator is gladly “being there”, to come back to, is what makes it possible for children to go out and learn.

The Circle of Security authors (Cooper et al, 2005) have drawn a map of this attachment-exploration cycle in the shape of a circle and make the children’s relationship needs explicit. We received permission from the Circle of Security authors to use a particular form of their map, the “OK-not-OK” Circle, as the key to tracking the children’s experiences in the filmed observations. The map is reproduced below.

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This OK-not-OK Circle is a simple version of the Circle of Security roadmap (Cooper et al, 2005). It succinctly summarizes the process of relationship support for children. The adult hands support both halves of the Circle: the words “exploring my world” on the top half refer to the secure base children need for play and learning; and “filling my cup” on the bottom half refer to the safe haven children need when they have had enough of exploring and come back in to reconnect. Inside the Circle is an orienting question: is the child “OK or Not OK?” as they come in and out to their attachment figure.

In this project, the researcher’s role (BF) was to use the OK-not OK Circle as a roadmap to describe what she saw. She noted when the child signaled for or made contact with either their parent or educator, noting the time on the clip. She recorded what she saw them do or say and made a guess about the child’s relationship need in that moment, whether it was on the top or bottom of the Circle. This procedure of “Seeing and Guessing” was devised by Glen Cooper (Cooper et al, 2005). The researcher (BF) used the “OK-not-OK” question to

describe how she perceived that the children were feeling in that moment and to guess whether the adult was “with” or “not with” them in their experience.

Making Bids for Connection.

The observations showed that as soon as the children came into the centre they immediately looked across at one of the educators. Each of the fourteen children made visual bids or signals to make contact with an educator within the first forty seconds of walking through the gate. They did this regardless of how they came in; for example some children walked in hand-in-hand with their parent; others ran ahead and other children clung on to their parent and were carried in.

The video analysis supported the idea that the children looked for a connection to an educator as their starting point to settle into their child care day. They needed to know that they were on a staff member’s radar and that they were available and ready to look after them. When the children looked across at an educator, the researcher guessed their relationship need to be “Fill my emotional cup”. Then the educator’s task is to welcome them in because the child is on the bottom of the Circle. The parents’ needs may be similar to the children’s: they might be wondering, “What have I got to do, how am I going to manage this situation?”

With this in mind, instead of focusing on how to engage the children, the first task becomes one of negotiation, where child, parent and educator come together and the child experiences that responsibility for their care shifts from the parent to the educator. The child needs to know that both adults have him/her in mind as they communicate in a relaxed way about the transition, and indicate that the educator is ready to look after him/her. The findings were discussed with Glen Cooper (2011) who, in response, wrote the “Two Row Boats” metaphor.

The Two Row-Boats Metaphor

Imagine two little row-boats coming up next to each other. And the child steps out of the parent's row-boat and into the teacher's.

The problem for the children is that there is that moment where they have a foot in each boat. And if the boats drift apart they get stuck. Or when the children come in and they are not quite sure whether they are in the school boat or the parent boat then they are stuck. The morning transition is a way to help them to make that step from one boat to the other.

What we want is for the children to know that the parent and the teacher are in charge and they are going to take care of this. The children can need what they need and feel what they feel and be OK. They don't have to act like they are OK when they're not, or feel more than they feel, or take charge themselves.

We would like the children to experience that there is a clear negotiation where the child goes from feeling secure with parent to secure with the teacher and it is pretty seamless.

Glen Cooper, 2011

Each child looked to an educator when they came through the gate at the centre. How did they know where to look in a large group environment at a very busy time of the day? Did they have an expectation that the educator would look back and be pleased to see them? Were the children acting from a sense of *felt* connection with the educator? In fact, staff at this centre were already implementing a structure called Playspaces (Dolby, 2007; Dolby et al, 2008) that was intended to make the children's morning reunion with staff very predictable. The inspiration for this structure came from observing 6-18 month olds in an infant's room at childcare².

² The infants were filmed at floor level to show what they saw. When the staff were moving around what the infants saw were passing feet and then the

The Playspace® structure

The Playspace® structure was developed, implemented and evaluated within the Attachment Matters Project (Dolby, 2007; Dolby et al, 2008; Swan & Dolby, 2003). At the time of filming the morning transition with the fourteen children, Playspaces had been in place at the centre for four years.

The Playspace structure creates an *external space* where the staff member is physically predictable for the children, and supports an *internal space* or way of thinking within which the educator can think about the children's ease of coming in and out to them.

The *external space* is created when the staff each sit down in individual "Playspaces" before the children arrive. They each bring an activity that they can share with the children. They sit at the children's level and do not move around. By sitting still they provide a predictable physical presence and are easy for the children to find.

The *internal space* is an internal calm or sense of stillness (within the educator) that allows staff to take in the children's feelings. They have room in their minds to make guesses as to the children's relationship needs and to observe their own internal responses to the children's comings and goings. This internal space provides a 'holding environment' for the children (Winnicott, 1971).

Playspaces are in operation for the first hour of the morning when the children arrive (outdoors in summer and indoors in winter); at the end of the day; and when the children are outdoors.

distance between themselves and the educators was pronounced. These infant observations came from the programme called Child Observation Seminars. RD is on the teaching program of the NSW Institute of Psychiatry, where for 12 years she has run the Observation seminars for child psychiatry trainees at a childcare centre, a unique collaboration between child psychiatry and early childhood. The trainees come to child care for one semester and sit at the children's level in the infants' and children's rooms one morning a week. RD films what they observe, and the observations are then reflected upon with the trainees and the early childhood educators.

Uniquely in this centre, the educators had a secure base themselves. The Attachment Matters Project employed a child and family worker (Eilish Hughes) to be on-site and each educator had release time (30 mins per week) to meet with her. This gave the educators time in the company of someone who was supportive of their understanding of what the children were doing and feeling and the feelings this evoked in them.

Filmed observations of their interactions with the children were used in the meetings. The educator and child and family worker could process the children's emotional communications while looking at the clips together. Processing involved making guesses as to the children's relationship needs and reflecting on the feelings the children's behaviour evoked in the educator. Just as the educators were the "hands" on the Circle of Security supporting the children, the child and family worker was the hands of support for the educator. We have found the image of 'the hands within the hands' of the Circle of Security (Cooper et al, 2009) extremely useful.



This tiered support assists staff in the process of self-reflection, which in turn enables them to meet the relational needs of the children. The tiered support also supports the staff to reflect with the parents about their child's relational needs.

The educators' experience of the Playspace structure

At the time of developing the transition procedure, the educators were interviewed to get their reflections on Playspaces. The first educator described how she felt when she first began to use the Playspace structure in her practice. At first it didn't feel right, as she explains.

"I found it very difficult when I first started doing it because I was always taught that to be there with the children, you have to be where the children are, which isn't the case. The children know where I am. They know if they need me I'm here, sometimes they might not come up to you but they will look at you or they smile at you and you smile back and that's telling them, 'I'm here if you need me'.

Another educator gave this picture of how Playspaces work as an external space where children know that the staff are available to them.

"Playspaces, it's how the children get to know you are available to them. It's surprising how soon the children get to know not only that you're physically available to them as they know the space that you're in but that they also get to know that you're available to them to notice them, to be with them and to spend time with them and to just be."

A third educator describes her experience of Playspaces as an internal space where she is open to the children's feelings.

"When I'm in my Playspace I look at the kid's faces, that's my first contact as soon as they walk in the door. I look at their face and their body language. How they are looking when they come in the door gives me a pretty good idea of how they are feeling inside. I'm always getting ready for noticing the children's feelings and I think that's what Playspaces are all about."

The same educator describes how this also becomes a reflective space where she can settle herself to be ready for the children,

“Playspaces enable me to be prepared for the children to come in, it’s where I get grounded so I feel grounded and ready to receive whatever comes. It helps me feel grounded because I can actually notice so much more just by sitting there and watching the children come in. The Playspace is like my little welcome mat when I come into work, so I just walk into the room and go ‘oh great, I’m here’ and I can just sit in this little spot and my day begins. It just calms me down and I forget what has happened in my house this morning! I can offer the children time and no pressure in my Playspace. I’m just allowing them the same thing that I have given myself by sitting in that spot”.

The intention behind Placespaces is to support educators to be physically predictable and emotionally available to children. It is also intended to give them a “sanctuary space” or refuge from outside distractions so that they can be in the moment with the children and notice how they come in and out to them and reflect on the children’s relationship needs. The quotes from the educators are in keeping with these Playspace objectives.

The process of working with educators and parents to develop the transition procedure.

The transition procedure was not intended to teach educators and parents new skills but rather give them a new perspective about the children’s experience at separation, based on relationships. The morning drop-off was broken down into steps. The suggestions and the reasoning behind each step were discussed with parents and educators. The information in each step was intended to highlight to the child that there was an adult available to support them during this time.

We worked with five families with toddlers and educators who knew the families well. RD and EH filmed each step of the transition procedure with each family and educator, and got their feedback on how each step helped them show the children that the educator was ready and available to care for them. Each of these steps is illustrated with comments from these parents and educators.

The transition procedure step-by-step

On their way to preschool (step 1), it was suggested to parents that they talk with their child (in their own words) about which staff member they would like to go in and see when they arrive. For example “Jody will be waiting for us at the sandpit, shall we go and say hi”. The intention was to reassure each child that an educator will be available to take care of him/her.

Educators were asked to prepare by reflecting on what relationship question the child may come in with. For example “Do you see me? Are you OK to look after me?” This was important because the filmed observations suggested that what mattered to the children in the first moment was the contact with the educator, ahead of any interest in the activity that they could join in.

This is a quote from one of the parents after we (RD or EH) filmed this step and sat down with the parent and educator and watched the clip together.

“On the way to preschool Ethan has always had this disconnect. When he’s with me, before we reach the gates of the preschool he’s interested in me and we just have a conversation all the way along the street, but then as we reach the preschool gate he’ll clam up and won’t even answer my questions. He’s just absorbing the surroundings trying to work out what is happening, he can be shy. Or sometimes he can be boisterous and wanting to take part in a particular activity. So the idea of actually going in to a teacher is good, to have that one path he follows. The “Row-Boat” metaphor exactly describes what is happening with Ethan”.

Once the children and the parents arrived (step 2), the suggestion was for parents to bring their child to an educator in their Playspace. Primary caregiving was not practised in this centre, although the children showed that they usually had a particular consistent carer that they come into each morning. We asked the educators for ideas of a welcome for the child that would also include the parent.

Their suggestions included:

“Hello Sophie, you’ve come in with your daddy”.

“Good morning Trisha you’ve brought your pillow and your mum”.

“Hello Max, you’ve brought parsley from mummy’s garden”.

Then the parent feels included, “It’s about both of us (not only my child)”.

Children can be very aware of whether the educator enjoys the encounter with their parent. A genuine greeting to the parent will go a long way toward reassuring the child.

This is a quote from the director of the centre after we filmed and watched with her and the child’s parent how she welcomed the family.

“I believe that everyone who comes through the gate would like to feel as though they have been seen or acknowledged. And the children are all going to have a different way of doing that. In the Playspace, over time you get to work out what is the best way to get that connection happening. How would you see that if you were not sitting down? You would just miss so much of the children’s reactions. Sometimes I can feel uncomfortable thinking I am not quite sure what to do with the children who don’t connect easily. But then I feel the least I can do is to welcome them in. I’ve learnt to appreciate that all the children have a need to be seen even though on the outside they might not show their feelings to you. They express their need for connection in a more indirect way.”

As the director said, some children do not connect easily and may express their need for connection in a more indirect way. They come with their own expectations about how available “big people” are. When an educator says, “I’m glad you are here” children’s responses will reflect their attachment history, initially expecting a response like the one they get from their mum and dad. Educators who are trained in Playspaces know how to give children a secure message about their availability; “I’m here and you are worth it” (Cassidy, 2006). They recognise that children will express their need for connection in different ways. Whichever way the children make contact, the staff understand that they

have learnt this pattern of connecting honestly from their interactions with their primary caregivers.

Therefore, a significant part of the training in using Playspaces helps educators become familiar with children's different internal working models of how close relationships work (Bowlby, 1988), and become more aware about their own attachment state of mind when responding to children's relationship needs.

This opportunity for reflection makes a difference in how the educators speak with the children when they first arrive. Their conversation is based on saying what they see the children do and guessing what they need in the way of relationship support (Cooper et al, 2005).

Sara comes into childcare holding on tight to her mum.

Educator to Sara: "You are holding on tight. I see you want to be close to mummy right now. You can both sit down here with me".

Sara sinks into her mum for a longer cuddle.

Educator to Sara: "I'm glad you're getting filled up with Mum's cuddle. You can keep that cuddle inside you when mummy leaves. I will stay here with you".

What to say when saying goodbye (step 3) covered the moment just before the parent was about to leave. The idea behind this step was that when parents say goodbye, children want to know that they are being handed to someone who can keep them safe. It will reassure children to hear this being negotiated, and their feelings being acknowledged. Here is an example of a negotiation.

Dad to Jack: "Jack I'm leaving now. Judy is here to look after you and keep you safe for me".

Dad to Judy: "Judy will you look after Jack today?"

Judy to Dad and Jack: "Yes Jack, I'm pleased I get to keep you safe and play with you till Daddy comes back. I'm always here when you need me".

Saying you'll keep a child safe may seem strange to the adult and abstract to the child, but in our experience children seem to respond to it in a way that shows they understand the meaning. What is important is how the adults convey the message, "we can keep you safe", rather than the words they use. Saying this out loud creates very clear expectations, and tells Jack that he is in the minds of two big people who care for him.

A parent can also acknowledge that their child is upset and can let them know that although saying goodbye is hard to do, they have support and they are not alone when they feel lonely.

Dad to Jack: "I know you feel sad to say good bye and you will miss me, I will be thinking about you today. Judy is here to look after you and keep you safe for me".

Dad to Judy: "Judy, will you look after Jack today?"

Judy to Dad and Jack: "Yes Jack I am always here when you need me, I'm pleased I'm here to keep you safe and play with you until Daddy comes back later".

Examples or suggested scripts were offered at the start because talking with children in this way does not come naturally. The examples enabled parents and educators to find their own words to make it their own. The following comments from educators and parents show how they experienced using this 'relational language' with each other at the morning separation. The comments are taken from a parent -teacher night when the transition procedure was shown and discussed within the parent community.

Educator: "I think at first it does sound funny to say that "Oh I'll look after you and keep you safe" but the more you say it the more comfortable you feel with it and you realize the difference that it makes for the child and how predictable it is for them. When they come in they know we're here for them and the parents. And you know too, that we're all here for you.

So if you are thinking that feels a bit strange over time it does feel more comfortable.”

Director of the centre: “I think it feels more strange for the adults but it doesn’t feel strange for the children. That’s where your mind shift may have to be around that.”

Parent: “The whole thing with the dialogue I found quite awkward at first saying “They’ll look after you and you’ll be safe”, but it was amazing the difference that it made. Seth went from someone who was quiet, often didn’t want to go and would be upset when I left and he changed to where gradually he became more and more comfortable and it’s gone now the past 6-8 months where I find myself going through the speech and he’s going ‘yeah whatever can I just play now’. It was absolutely invaluable to see him transform and to see the effect that it had.

This parent also noticed a big difference with the Playspaces.

Parent: The Playspaces I found amazing because of all the different ways that it works, seeing him come in and for a while Sally was that person that he particularly wanted to go to and ... I saw in some videos that the guys kindly showed me to see him talking and physically moving in between me and Sally. He’d start off and he’d be holding on to me, talking to Sally and doing a bit of play and as time went on and over the course of 3,4,5 minutes he gradually relaxed more and more and started making eye contact with Sally and you could see him, with the benefit of looking at the video, become more and more comfortable to where it was like, the metaphor I was given was coming in on a rowing boat going from one boat to another boat and there’s this transfer between the two and it’s absolutely accurate it really was quite amazing to see it work so smoothly. The contrast is the other place that we go to which is a perfectly good place but it’s the traditional thing of ‘Leave your child with us and if they cry don’t worry, they’re fine after you leave’. And you walk away with the

sound of your child crying and you have to think to yourself it is going to be fine.”

Another parent: “I must admit I had never, you kind of take it for granted that the child knows that the carers are there to look after them because why, why else, do you send the children here if it’s not for the other adults here to look after them, so you kinda think that the kids know that but until such time as you do verbalise it, it probably doesn’t sink in for them. (I think what was helpful) was almost like a combination of the two by having the Playspace and by naming the feeling as you leave as well.”

The final step in the transition procedure helped parents to become familiar with what happens after they leave (step 4). Because staff remain in their Playspace for the first hour of the day it is easy for the children to stay with them and to find them again when they venture out.

Director of the centre: “Playspaces have given us the opportunity to recognize that children have a greater capacity to learn about, and explore their world and relationships with each other, if they are able to form a secure connection with the educators who are responsible for their care. This is evident to us each day in our work with the children”.

The first hour of the day is dedicated to emotional exchange, rather than the staff directing and teaching the children in a formal programme. When the children are with them, the educators are intentional in their practice to link up the children. New parents are introduced to this arrangement through a “Parent Invitation” evening where the staff and some existing parents describe how the morning unfolds after parents leave. The director uses video clips to show parents the lens that the staff look through to see the children’s own play ideas and to indicate where they (the staff) can support the children to develop their play skills and give them a position in the group. They use the structure of Linking from Marte Meo (Aarts, 2008) to do this. For example, parents may see a

videoclip that shows a 9 month-old who is non-verbal, making an invitation to another child.

Elly points to a bright big ball she has discovered. As she points she vocalizes in emphasis and looks over to Sheena who is beside her. She is conveying clearly “Do you see what I’m looking at?” On the clip you see Elly’s educator turn to follow her pointing finger, “Elly you found *the ball*.” Elly looks pleased. She keeps pointing and looks at Sheena once more. Then you see the educator turn to Sheena and you hear her say, “Look Sheena, Elly is showing you *the ball*”. Sheena looks at the ball and smiles. Then you hear the educator say, “Elly, Sheena *likes* your ball”.

By being in the moment in their play, the educator helps the girls to successfully make contact. When she names what she sees Elly doing, she gives Elly words for her actions. Later when Elly can say “ball” she can make a more predictable social invitation to Sheena. When the educator names what she sees Elly doing she also gives her a position with her peers and helps Elly come to trust her own ideas more. When she lifts up Elly’s invitation to Sheena and Sheena’s response back to her, the educator makes it easier for the girls to come into each other’s play (Aarts, 2008),

The video clips allow the parents to “borrow” the educators’ eyes to see into the world of their children at child care. They enjoy seeing what their children *can* do, and where the educators are stepping in to assist. Because the information is concrete, it often suggests to them things that they can do at home the same as the educators are doing at child care. A natural partnership is forged.

Conclusion:

The Early Years Learning Framework highlights secure attachments as the first principle in Belonging, Being and Becoming. “Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships” are fundamental to educators’ practice and children’s learning” (2009). The challenge is how to put this into practice. The approach taken here suggests that an answer can be found by looking at the life of infants and toddlers and educators *as it is lived* in child care.

This chapter looked at the experience of arriving at childcare and then reported on a transition procedure that was designed so that parents and educators could reassure children that the connection that they were seeking from their educators was readily available. This procedure went step-by-step through everyday “lived” interactions to give children the experience of connection, to enable them to feel that there is a plan here for “how I can make contact with my teachers so I feel I belong”. It is a procedure that acknowledges the experiences of educators and respects and supports them to be open to the emotional demands and joys that are part of their day-to-day interactions with very young children. The structure of Playspaces is at the heart of this procedure. There is more work to be done to see the transition procedure formally implemented in an infants’ room and to see how educators can use Playspaces with younger children, namely with infants who are not yet mobile.

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