'Settling In': Exploring the complexities of observing and responding to young children's communications of distress as they start day care

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Settling In: Exploring the complexities of observing and responding to young children’s communications of distress as they start day care*

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ABSTRACT
This paper uses material from two psychoanalytic observations of children in day care to illustrate ways in which young children communicate their feelings on separating from their parents. It discusses how early years practitioners respond to children’s distress as they form a Key Person relationship. Points are raised about how difficult it can be for practitioners to respond to children in the early days of them getting used to the new environment, especially in the absence of a robust, reflective work culture. The child’s Key Person may avoid understanding children’s distress and even misinterpret the child’s communication. The paper presents detailed observations of a young girl, who in the absence of an available and receptive adult, finds ways to distance herself from or to cut off from missing her mother and longing to go home. Her defensive, or self-protective response, arguably leads to more difficulty for her Key Person, to notice, understand and respond sensitively to her expressions of distress. The paper argues for better, supportive, reflective systems for early years practitioners working in day care, in order to improve the emotional experience for them and for the children.

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Introduction
This observational article aims to bring to life some of the complexities surrounding communications of and adult responses to young children’s distress as they settle into day care by asking two key questions.

- How might young children communicate their distress on settling?
- What are some of the challenges for the Key Person when faced with noticing, psychologically receiving, and responding sensitively to a young child’s distress on settling?

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*This article further develops some of the themes in an essay of the author’s which won the Louise Emanuel Essay prize, 2019; and was published in 2019 in the Journal of Education Psychotherapy.
The Key Person

The Key Person is a named early years practitioner allocated to an individual child and their family as they enrol into the child-care system. This has been a mandatory requirement in the UK since 2008 (DCSF). The Key Person approach (Elfer et al., 2012) puts the relationship between this practitioner and child at the centre of good early years practice but this relationship is complex and (like any good relationship) needs a nurturing environment in which it can thrive.

Previous research suggests (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Elfer, 2012; Hopkins, 1988) that as well the need for a Key Person, there is also a need for robust systems to help the Key Person critically reflect on the ‘emotional demands’ (Elfer, 2012, p. 131) of their role and the challenges they may face supporting a child and their parents to settle into a new attachment relationship. I argue that the emotional demands on the Key Person are at their highest during a period referred to by the early years education sector as settling.

Settling

In my experience, settling is used by the sector to describe as well as to normalise and generalise feelings of distress (often communicated by crying) which young children experience when separating from their parents. This so-called settling behaviour is expected from most children and there seems to be an implicit understanding that the unsettled behaviour will last a number of weeks until the settled behaviour (represented by playing and communicating freely both with the adults and other children in the setting) becomes the norm.

Parents, inexperienced in this, may initially show an ordinary responsive concern for their child’s communication of distress and look to the early years setting for guidance on how to manage the separation difficulties. Understandably, early years professionals are perceived as experts by experience. Many of these early years settings manage a collective response to the way the distress is managed by using ‘settling policies’, advice leaflets and individual conversations with parents or carers.

It has been my personal experience that the use of a word such as ‘settling’ to generalise about the behaviour, its meaning, and its management, seems to act like a stop sign to open dialogue and thinking with parents and it obstructs taking a more reflective stance where the unique meaning behind the distress of an individual child can be considered together. One way of interpreting this is as a sector-wide, unconscious, institutional defense against the uncomfortable feelings aroused in everyone. This defensive system protects the Key Person (and the parents) from feelings stirred up in them in the face of such powerful and primitive emotions. The distress is painful and therefore unconsciously avoided.

The problem with these defensive responses is that, while they might protect the adult, they do not benefit the child. These unconscious defensive processes
obstruct a more contingent and containing response, as they enable an escape from straightforwardly being in touch with the child’s feelings, leaving him or her alone with their undigested emotions.

**Defensive systems – individual and institutional**

The idea of the worker and an institution employing defensive strategies (many of them unconscious) in order to manage the emotional difficulties of a job has already been referred to in previous studies (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Menzies Lyth, 1988a). I refer to these further below, from the institutional perspective. The individual defensive system in healthy mental development can be helpful in times of stress, grief or shock, for example. Temporarily, the reality and pain of a painful response can be defended, for example by repression. Children (and adults) frequently rid themselves of strong anxiety, for example, through the unconscious process of projection (Klein, 1959). From babyhood, the projection of unwanted feelings into other people around us, brings temporary relief from what might feel overwhelming. Problems arise when projections are not noticed and understood as defenses against anxiety. Thinking about and attempting to understand the child’s behaviour as a communication of distress, is key in order that less socially acceptable behaviour does not become repeatedly relied upon and thus more entrenched.

Institutionally defensive systems are discussed in an action research project aimed at improving the quality of care in day nurseries, commissioned by the then Department for Health and Social Security (cited in Bain & Barnett, 1986). The findings of the action research demonstrate how everyone, rather than an individual looking after ‘key’ children, actually protected the worker from getting too involved in the emotional aspects of caring but was not helpful to the children. These findings mirrored the seminal work of Isabel Menzies Lyth about nursing care in hospitals in the 1970s. Both studies recommended that someone specific, a keyworker, be assigned to individual children (or patients), while recognising the emotional challenges for the worker tasked with taking seriously and responding to the child or the patient’s feelings.

Hopkins (1988), in response to these recommendations, led an intensive six-month training project aiming to ‘facilitate the development of intimacy’ between practitioners and children in day care. She observed how adults busied themselves with what they perceived to be their work task and spent more time preparing things for, or cleaning up after the children, rather than actually being present and emotionally available. This activity, Hopkins argues, is another example of an unconscious defense employed by the worker to protect herself against the anxiety of getting too involved with the children and their relational needs.

Encouragingly, Hopkins found that these and other unconscious avoidant defenses could be somewhat mitigated through work discussion and training sessions she offered. These sessions encouraged practitioners to reflect on
the likely reasons behind individual children’s behaviour. This project provided evidence that more intimate relationships could develop in day care settings, where the individual attachment needs of the children could be better understood and responded to, if staff were provided with the opportunity to talk and think together as a team about the emotional complexities of their caring role with young children away from their home and family.

More recently, Peter Elfer and Katy Dearnley, a senior child psychotherapist (2007), undertook a CPD action research project aiming to provide a model of training which could offer, as Juliet Hopkins had (1988), an opportunity for members of staff to talk and think together as a team. Participants had the opportunity to reflect and think openly about the difficulties they encountered in their work developing emotionally close relationships with the children, families and colleagues in their early-years’ settings.

Currently, the Key Person approach is a UK government requirement for early years’ professionals working with children aged 0–5, in any setting. These settings include school nurseries, reception classes, pre-schools, playgroups and units for two-year-olds attached to schools where many children are spending as much as 10 hours a day, 5 days a week. An effective Key Person approach which offers emotional containment for both the children and the workers is relationally complex. This article aims to bring to life the key person-key child relationship and supports the argument that there is a pressing need for reflective practice opportunities for the workers in a nurturing work environment, in order that the workers can then better receive (take in and contain) the emotional state of the children in their care.1

Being received

The process of receiving communications of primitive (infantile, non-verbal) distress can be highly challenging and understandably overwhelming for parents and practitioners alike. Receiving a child’s distress means allowing the pain to be expressed, thought about and digested before the child is able to take back something more emotionally manageable. In a busy, early-years setting this can be a noisy, messy and draining process. Bion calls this process containment (1962). Over time containment enables the child to internalise the experience of being cared and feeling understood, and over time he or she is able to go on to notice, express and manage his or her own feelings in identification with the thoughtful, containing adult. This, according to Bion is one key to a mentally healthy life. Often, in early years education literature something similar, but referring only to the child is called ‘self-regulation’.

Are you receiving me?

I am interested in how the complex emotional process of settling children is experienced by early years practitioners as well as the degree to which there
is a working culture which acknowledges and discusses feelings or whether they are unconsciously defended against, and therefore not received.

I would like to hypothesise that if a misattuned call and response pattern becomes the default setting at a time when the boy or girl toddler is most vulnerable (having separated from their parent, attachment figure), then the toddler might find other ways to protect/defend themselves from becoming overwhelmed. My interest lies in whether the young child’s defensive strategies (which might well be understood as ‘disruptive’ behaviour) are noticed by the Key Person, or whether the ‘disruption’ escalates, persecuting the workers, who become less inclined to think of disruption as a sign of distress.

I turn now to extracts from my observations of two different two-year-olds, Luca and Ava. Luca has just started in the early years’ centre and is in the early stages of establishing an attachment relationship with his Key Person. Ava has been at her nursery for eight weeks. Luca is described as ‘settling’ as he communicates his distress whereas Ava is described as having ‘settled.’

Luca is only in his second week of ‘settling’. Like many of the other children, he does not speak English at home. Luca and Kelly, his Key Person have just come in from playing outside. The children staying for lunch and the afternoon (including Luca), are led straight to the lunch table. Kelly has pulled a curtain across to divide the space between the children staying for lunch and those waiting to be collected by their parents or carers.

Luca

Luca, a blonde-haired boy, is standing up from his chair and table and crying out. His nose is running, and his eyes are wet with tears. ‘Maa, Maa’, he cries. His tone sounds pleading- as if he does not understand the situation. His tone goes down on the second ‘Maa’. It is as if he is actually talking to his mother. He is looking towards the door. His lunch is on the table, an open packet of potato crisps and a small sandwich in a box. He is a big, ruddy-faced healthy looking boy and looks older than his two years. ‘Luca, Shush,’ Kelly says loudly. She is sitting on the chair next to him, leaning towards him. As she says his name Luca looks at her. Her face is flushed; she looks hot. ‘Luca, sit down and eat. Eat your crisps,’ she says, in what sounds like a firm voice. Luca sits down on his chair momentarily and then he stands up again, takes a crisp from the packet and bites it in half. ‘Maa, Maa.’ he cries out again, his mouth half full of the crisp. ‘Shush now, that’s enough,’ says Kelly. She glances up at me explaining, ‘He is still settling.’ A few moments later she says, ‘I can’t stand it, I hate it, I just want ‘em to stop.’

After a short time as we watch Luca together, she adds, ‘I never cry, and I know that is not a good thing because it just comes out later on’. I agree that it is hard to see children upset like this, and I then ask her how she thinks Luca might be feeling in this moment. She looks at him before saying, ‘He’s alright, he’s got me and he’s fine when he can go off and play with the cars’.
How does the Key Person respond?

Kelly responds to Luca each time he cries out for his mother. There is a clear balance of communicative turn taking. He says something, she responds. He does something, she responds. But her responses are out of tune to his communication which brings to mind an unhappy game of jack-in-the-Box. Jack pops up but is immediately pushed down only to pop up again and to be pushed back down; so, it goes on. I feel uncomfortable. I am reminded of Beebe’s (2006) findings of mistimed interactions where she identifies, by micro-analysis of video footage face-on of mothers and their babies, that both were ‘co constructing’ the negativity they felt (p. 160), each making their next move in response to the one that went before.

The absence of reaction from the other adults was noticeable as were my feelings of discomfort. The adults seemed busy and quite cut-off from Luca’s distress. Their task focus, as an avoidant social defense against the painful reality of taking in the needs of the child or patient, was described by both Bain and Barnett (1986) and Menzies Lyth (1988a, 1988b). Menzies Lyth described the nurses’ apparently impersonal interactions with patients in hospitals. She describes how the staff rota and the task-focus (on such activities as changing sheets and checking patient charts) served to protect staff from feeling too emotionally connected to the patients and feelings of loss when the child patients and their families, to whom the nurses had become close, were discharged and left the ward. Routine tasks also detached the nurses from anxiety about seriously ill patients.

The early years setting’s ‘settling’ culture could also be understood as a social or an institutional defense. If the children are generally expected to be distressed during this period then the adults are defended against becoming too emotionally stirred, as in the observation of Kelly with Luca. The institutionally defensive position means that the staff are not in touch with the reality of the distress as they get on with the practical tasks such as taking children to wash hands, organising lunch boxes and supervising them eating. This leaves Luca emotionally alone despite his Key Person’s close physical proximity.

As the observer of the interaction between Kelly and Luca, I was the recipient of unconsciously projected feelings. Both Kelly’s discomfort and Luca’s distress are important points to consider. I was left to think about the feelings and the impact of my presence on the interaction. I wonder how Luca and Kelly responded to my gaze. The observer is not invisible and while trying hard to be a benign figure, one cannot assume one is always experienced as friendly. The similarity of my own personal experiences when I was a little child taken to the nursery by my Mother, as well as my personal experiences of being a mother leaving my own small child at the nursery are also factors in my own response. The significance of understanding feelings such as discomfort as counter transference is important. Freud first introduced and discussed
countertransference in 1905. Considering the countertransference is crucial in trying to think about which feelings belong to whom. In the observation of Luca and Kelly, my own associations to personal experiences are my personal countertransference in Freud’s original sense – my personal association to Luca with someone he does not yet know, in the nursery. The second meaning of the countertransference, which is now more commonly considered, is that I might feel something which has been projected into me from Luca or from Kelly, which might give me some insight into what they are feeling. Copley (Copley & Forryan, 1997) describes the countertransference as the mirror of feelings evoked in the worker but actually belonging to the client. Being attuned to notice and to reflect on the detail of these feelings and reactions in myself (in this case with the support of a Work Discussion seminar group) is invaluable. The thoughtful discussion provides a space to think about the countertransference; my feelings of discomfort, which might be in identification with Luca’s distress and longing for his mother, seem to be similar to Kelly’s as she points out, frankly, that she cannot cry, but she is well aware that it will cause her distress when ‘it just comes out later on’.

Kelly pulls the curtain across and neither she nor Luca will see the children waiting to be reunited with their parents. Yet, consciously, she finds it difficult to acknowledge Luca’s distress. She tries hard to shut it out, ignoring his cries and instructing him to put food in his mouth. Perhaps she wants either to distract him or to stop him crying out. Protecting Luca from the painful view of the other children’s reunion with their parents seems to have evoked something in Kelly herself, so-out of sight, out of mind perhaps. It seems likely that Luca is aware of parents arriving, and he cries out for his mother. Kelly tells him he is ok, he has her, but she is not the one who he needs. He wants his mother. Kelly’s comment seems to gloss over the complexities for Luca in establishing a new attachment relationship in a new and unfamiliar language. It is painful for Kelly as well. She seems to be out of tune, and possibly struggling with the feelings of misunderstanding and rejection that she is not the one who he wants. She is physically but not very psychically present. It is quite understandable, and quite possible, that Luca’s distress is just too painful for Kelly to think about and she becomes emotionally unavailable as self-defense. This would mean there is a defense mechanism within an institutionally defensive system, which, sadly, at that moment, leaves Luca emotionally alone. When looked at in this way, it is unsurprising that Luca then rejects Kelly’s responses. He has not felt contained, his distress is not received for the first or the second time. He seems to give up and gets down from the table to play with the cars.

Kelly’s words suggest she might be trying to shut out Luca’s cries, but her face is flushed, perhaps a sign that Luca’s feelings penetrated and left her feeling uncomfortable. She sounds irritated as she tells him, ‘That’s enough’; Perhaps he is getting under her skin but, she seems to resist the reality of
Luca’s distressed longing as if his upset touches on her own past experiences and reactivates something very painful. This interpretation makes some sense in relation to her next comment when I ask about how Luca is feeling. She is able to reflect a little on his upset and she describes her response, ‘I can’t stand it I hate it … I just want ‘em to stop’. It seems to be that Luca’s cries echo deeply inside and might easily overwhelm her. I wonder if my presence in this moment provides Kelly with some brief containment and a space to notice how she feels, just as the Work Discussion seminar group provides me with an opportunity to reflect on emotions stirred up in myself. Kelly remains reflective as she says that she knows that not crying is not helpful, ‘It just comes out later on’.

Elfer and Dearnley (2007, p. 271), hypothesised that early years settings could offer more emotionally containing responses to the children if the workers had the opportunity and space to think together about the emotional complexities of their job. Their action research project offered a continuing professional development (CPD) Work Discussion group using a psychoanalytic framework for its facilitation. In these groups, participants had the opportunity to talk and think openly about their work and its difficulties, developing emotionally close relationships with each other, the children and their families. The project concluded that reflective practice was most certainly essential if interactions in the nurseries were to become more emotionally sensitive even though the participants found it challenging to replicate the working model afterwards in their own organisations.

To return to Luca, he cries out for who he wants – his mother. He knows where she will appear (he looks towards the door) and this gives us some idea of his ability to hold her and the good and comforting feeling she represents in his mind. In this moment, however, as he points in the direction where he hopes she might appear, he seems to run out of energy. His internal battery has run down, and he cannot hold himself together. Emotionally, he seems in a disintegrated state.

I use the term internal battery to describe an idea originating from Melanie Klein, whose object relations theory introduced the importance of the child’s earliest experiences with caregivers as a crucial role to later healthy mental development. Klein (1952) conceptualises the internalisation little by little of good experiences with a good mother. She refers to the internal mother who has responsively and lovingly thought about and cared for the child as the taking in of the ‘good internal object’, the mother in the mind, who provides security. This responsiveness acts like an emotional battery keeping one going when the external mother is not present. Luca’s battery has run down quickly in this moment and he has not yet taken in enough sense of the care and nurture of Kelly or the other adults in the institution where he finds himself.

If Luca is involved in repeated interactions like this, I wonder what he will internalise about what happens when he expresses his distress to his Key
Person and how this might affect whether he does so or not in the future. The famous Robertson films show footage of children in brief separation in hospitals (1971). These films help us to see how, after an initial period of protest, children often withdraw from seeking comfort, seeming to cut off from the mental pain in the absence of a contingent adult response. We know from the brief conversation with Kelly that Luca’s distress is understood to have gone and that he will ‘be fine’ when he plays with the cars. But, if interactions such as this are commonplace for him, I wonder whether his car play can offer anything other than a distraction and a way of ignoring the feeling of longing for his mother.

Anna

I observed Ava, aged 2 years and 2 months, weekly in her Nursery for a year. I knew from an initial meeting with her mother, Joy, and having met her Key Person, that Ava was perceived to ‘struggle to settle’ and she cried a lot on separating from her mother. I quote a short extract from my first meeting.

Joy describes an unexpected and complicated pregnancy with Ava, a difficult, premature birth, and a difficult first year with a hospitalisation. Mother says, ‘Ava cried until I went back to work and she was a nightmare when she first started at the nursery because she clung to me and cried for weeks. In the end I stopped taking her and sent my Dad instead.’

I wonder about Ava who was known to cry all the time and think in simple terms she might have continued to express herself in this way to try to make herself understood. We have the story here from Joy’s point of view, that Ava was a nightmare when she started at nursery and that Joy had to physically detach herself from the clinging at the daily moment of separation. If we take careful note of Joy’s words, she describes Ava herself as a nightmare. I wonder how that might have felt for Ava. Her distress was responded to by Joy’s avoidance of the nightmare-Ava altogether. She sends her father instead. In the next observation extract, Ava’s Key Person (Sobia) and Ava are together. Ava has been at the nursery for just over two months. She is having her nappy changed and the two of them are talking about her family and about her day.

‘You were a good girl when Mummy dropped you off today weren’t you Ava; you didn’t cry, you did really well’. Ava looks at Sobia for a moment, her mouth turns down slightly but then she nods putting three fingers of her right hand into her mouth.

Being a good girl, according to Sobia, seems to mean not being visibly upset when Mummy or Grandfather leave. The implicit message is that not crying means being good. Again, this could be seen as an unconscious defensive position adopted by both mother and the early years workers to make the transition easier for them. Ava goes along with it. She nods in agreement as Sobia tells her she was a good girl, but the pause and slight wobble of her mouth, before she
nods, gives a clue to her uncertainty. This conversation during the nappy change also offers her a quiet opportunity to recall her mother even though the conversation is very much about being a good girl because she didn’t cry. As the possibility of tears arise, her mouth turns down, she inserts her fingers, to stop herself from crying using the fingers to soothe herself.

The following vignettes describe how, over time, Ava adapts to the routines and expectations of the nursery which do seem to offer her a degree of emotional containment. However, we also see that when the adult’s focus is elsewhere, Ava’s distress still seems to leak out as if she has a ‘leaky’ form of container in her mind. Waddell writes, ‘… too much emotional absence is felt as an insecure or leaky form of containment’ (2002, p. 47). I wonder about the experience of her mother and her Key Person seeming unable to contain and bear her distress, at the beginning of her postnatal life; perhaps it was too painful to bear. If this was leaky containment, I want to consider what evidence we can observe of it in Ava as she works out how to be in this nursery.

Ava is with a group in the small area where the coats hang; the children have been instructed to put on their coats so they can play outside.

Ava moves into the cloakroom an enclosed space with a rug on the floor and coats and bags hanging on pegs on three sides. Each peg has a picture of one of the children with her or his name written on a label. Ava goes to her peg and reaches down her coat, which she places open on the floor with the hood between her legs. She bends forwards, tries to push her arms in the sleeves and to flip the coat over her head. It doesn’t work. She starts again. The same thing happens, she cannot get her arm in the sleeve and the coat slips off her shoulders and onto the floor. The third time Sobia manages to hold the coat steady and Ava gets her arm in. She looks round at Sobia who says, ‘You put your coat on by yourself. Well done Ava,’ giving her a thumbs up. Ava grins at her oddly with an open mouth, tipping her head back and sticking her chin out. Sobia turns away to help another child. Ava turns to me. ‘My … . Mummy coming later,’ she says quietly, her voice a bit gravelly, as if she has a cold; her skin looks inflamed with eczema. I nod and feel sorry for her. She takes the bottom of the zip in each hand and asks me for help. I bend down and connect the zip at the bottom, she does the rest. She looks at me blankly. I smile at her.

Standing, Ava is taller than me as I am crouching down. She climbs up putting one foot on either side of a gap in one of the benches and holds onto a coat peg with each hand. She looks at me and repeats quietly, ‘Mummy coming later.’ One of her feet then slips or drops off the bench and she hangs onto the pegs. She seems to be holding on precariously and I wonder if she has shocked herself; she turns and grins at me, the same grin she gave to Sobia. She takes hold of each peg again and does the same thing with her feet, balancing on the bench. She seems taller than me and then drops again, hanging on with one hand and grinning, sticking her tongue out slightly. I do not like the game and am glad when the children are called to sit on the step to wait to go outside.

Ava seems to need to repeat this same feeling of precariousness in the cloakroom. In fact, she does it in almost all my visits. While observing it, I feel I am on
the receiving end of powerful projections of vulnerability. I want to catch her, to stop her from falling. I did not know whether this sequence happened all the time or only on the days when I was there. I felt relieved when she was called to sit on the steps.

Transition times in the nursery can be challenging for young children and are often times when the longing for a parent surfaces. Familiar structure and continuity are disrupted in transition and adult attention focuses on things which need to be done for each member of the group. In this example, it is getting coats and hats on. Ava first turns to flipping her coat over her head with arms in, something the children have been taught. She receives due praise for her efforts, but Sobia’s attention moves on; she is busy with others. I feel that Ava wants to hold Sobia’s attention for a moment longer with her grin.

Ava then turns to me and quietly mentions her mummy, perhaps reminded of her by the coat. She is clearly suffering physically with her runny nose and itchy skin. Ava asks me to help and I wonder if she really wanted to feel wrapped up in her mother’s arms. I note her blank stare and it is painful to see how little and vulnerable she is. I want to smile at her.

When we discuss the feeling of precariousness in the cloakroom sequence, in my Young Child Observation seminar, we note that I am the one feeling anxious. The repetition of this behaviour on each of my visits suggests something stuck inside Ava, which she projects into me. I wonder whether she felt the need to repeat the sequence again and again, working something through. Freud (1920) recognised a compulsive repetition in his grandson’s play with a cotton reel. He discarded and then retrieved it when his mother was not there, as if working through feelings about his mother’s absence and return. Freud further suggested this was repeated in an effort to feel in control of what he had no control over in reality. In Ava’s case sticking out of her chin and her funny grin and the wobbly climbing and hanging seemed to have a slightly manic quality. It was as if, as I witnessed over time, she used excitement in order not to feel anxious, leaving me with that feeling. Later in the observation

Ava lays the baby doll down on one of the cloakroom benches where she is here to changing its nappy. She tries extremely hard but undoing the baby clothes is difficult. She pulls at the fabric and I wonder whether she will ask me to help. Another child comes and to stand next to her watching her struggle. She looks up at him and suddenly throws the baby on the floor laughing loudly and artificially. She then notices Sobia sitting on a small rug, sharing a book with another child sitting on her lap, and clambers awkwardly over the bench to get to Sobia. Ava stumbles as she stands in front of Sobia. ‘My turn,’ she says loudly. ‘You need to wait for your turn, Ava,’ replies Sobia sounding firm but patient ….

There is some urgency about Ava’s need for Sobia, getting away from her struggle to be a mother to the baby. I think she did not quite feel up to the task; success in undoing the clothes proved difficult. Again, she became
rather manic and threw the baby away along with her own little girl feeling of not really being up to the task; she is not really a mother. The boy watching seemed to represent watching herself failing. Perhaps she felt ashamed or embarrassed. Then, stumbling towards Sobia, she wobbles – her little girl vulnerability means she wants Sobia immediately; but she has to wait her turn, the reality of group care.

A few months later I notice Ava often plays by herself and, when I am observing, she only really interacts with Sobia when caregiving is required or times of transition. On the occasion I describe below, she is at a table where there are travel brochures and toy telephones. I observe her for some moments as she gathers shiny leaflets in her arms. She drops some. She concentrates and retrieves each one. Standing on her tiptoes, she places the gathered leaflets on the top shelf, before noticing my presence.

Ava looks over to me and says ‘Mummy, Daddy’ and then something I cannot hear. She sticks her tongue out and blows a raspberry at me. I feel a little shocked as if she is telling me to go away. I look at her trying to keep my face neutral as she grins falsely. I hold her gaze. She drags a chair and holds close a large hardback atlas, sitting down opposite me; there is very little space between us. She opens the atlas resting the top on my knees and ‘reading’ words in a very loud voice as she notices random things like animals and trees. She is flipping through very quickly and suddenly snaps the book shut saying loudly, ‘The End!’ I fear the book will hit me in the face. She stands, takes the book back to a table and comes straight back with it, repeating her story reading sequence twice more.

Ava is playing in a way that seems to be carefully sorting everything into its right place, another play pattern which I observed her repeat, as a way to gather herself up emotionally. In these moments, she seems to identify herself with a more grown-up, capable Mummy figure, distancing herself from her, needy little girl self. She pushes herself to her physical limits stretching up to the highest shelf holding the slippery leaflets. They could all slip through her hands and arms at any moment and I, observing, worry that they will. I feel very anxious and almost overwhelmed by an urge to help her. Then I feel shocked as she blows a raspberry at me, as if I now represent the anxious little girl. The grown-up story reading follows. This too has a somewhat manic quality. The oversized book and the over loud voice seemed to bolster a sense of a managing, bigger, capable Ava, not someone who feels small or distressed. I feel I am experiencing what Rustin (2006) writes about the potentially therapeutic value of having an observer, but it is complex. In my role as observer, I had the luxury of being gloriously uninterrupted in my task of watching, unhindered by the needs of other children, unencumbered by the usual responsibilities of being a Key Person and thus able to observe, listen and receive her unconscious communications. But, with this freedom comes the responsibility of not influencing with my words, thoughts or actions at the moment. Perhaps in this ‘big book’ reading sequence she was fed up of my benign
presence and wanted or perhaps needed to elicit a response in order to feel safe as she wrestled with such a huge and heavy object. She might have understandably expected a gentle and predictable reminder from Sobia to ‘be careful’ and when it did not come, perhaps felt some degree of anxiety in my presence.

**Concluding thoughts**

The observational extracts of Luca and Ava were chosen to think about young children’s distress which is evident in early years centres everywhere. The UK early years education guidance (DFE, 2020) repeatedly states the need for individual children to be cared for by an identified Key Person and that this member of staff should ‘help children to feel emotionally safe’ (p,28). In psychoanalytic terms, containment, the unconscious emotional process understood to be vital for healthy social and emotional development.

This paper focuses first on Luca’s distressed, anxious communications as he is just beginning to make a new and trusting relationship with his Key Person. I have also considered that the unconscious institutional defenses might contribute to Key Workers’ struggles to attune to children like Luca’s response to separation as they first come to nursery. The Early Years sector’s frequent use of the term ‘settling’, again seems to be an institutional defense against knowing about individual small children’s personal distress. Individual and institutional defenses are relied upon by the adults in order that the group care of children in the early days of separation from their mother, father and home can be managed. In turn, it seems that many children quickly mobilise their own defenses as well.

Observations of Ava, as she grapples with the transition into day care, hint at signs of distress. I suggest that the institutional focus on positivity and being ‘good’ although initially apparently containing, actually seems to distance Ava from feeling her distress and vulnerability. As she became increasingly determined to be ‘big’ and ‘good’ her anxious feeling became less easy for the Key Person to notice and so, although she made use of the observer, she became more distanced from having her anxiety contained by a receptive member of staff. I, as observer, in turn, made use of the weekly supportive young child observation seminar group and I had regular opportunities to discuss my complex countertransference at length. This containing system helped me, for the most part, to offer a benign presence. While I did not know how Ava behaved when I was not there (most of the time), I did feel that she made much use of me during each hour of observation and I thought about her a lot.

Unfortunately, human resources are undoubtedly stretched in most Early Years settings. The UK guideline is that the Key Person be responsible for *three or more children* and, in addition, they are kept busy with many other tasks, including planning and reorganising the educational environment and
resources within it, as well as maintaining children’s records. It is possible that tidying up might offer the worker some much needed mental relief from the emotional toil of the job of being exposed to the feelings of so many children.

The securely attached child is likely to be able to cope with distress on separating from his mother or father, and to be able, over time, to build new attachments with his Key Person at day care; he will have the internal resources to find ways to manage the less-attuned moments. What is more complicated, and more worrying is the research (Wright et al., 2018) into insecurely attached children who have not been accustomed to predictably empathic responses from their parents and suggests there is an association between this and the development of ‘callous emotional traits’.

It seems fair to suggest that for all young children, (but especially for those young children whose parents have difficulty in responding consistently and sensitively to their children’s distress or anxiety), the capacity of the Key Person to be empathic, receptive and containing (to the parents and the children) is crucial. Further understanding and more research into what might complicate this process is urgently needed.

### High quality care

Revised Department for Education Early Years guidance (2020) which is due to become statutory in September 2021, cites ‘high-quality care’ as one of the features of effective practice and stresses that ‘the child’s experience must always be central to the thinking of every practitioner’ (p. 5). In order to keep the child’s unique experience of settling central to thinking, I suggest the Key Person needs to be working within an effective settling system which supports Key Workers to remain flexible and curious about a child’s feelings and individual settling experience.

Effective settling systems need to provide the Key Person with as much space as possible for open dialogue about the emotional work of supporting young children’s healthy mental development. A system which specifically supports staff to pay close attention to the detail of children’s behaviour and gives staff a chance to think deeply about what this behaviour might mean, as well as how they feel about it, is key. My overwhelming experience is that Early Years practitioners are highly skilled at knowing their children well; but the long hours of this work, with very little ‘non-contact time’ means that it is logistically very challenging. Peter Elfer and colleagues are working hard to evaluate the effectiveness of providing reflective Work Discussion groups for Early Years workers. Julian Grenier, a leading figure in Early Years provision, was commissioned by the Department for Education to revise the Early Years Guidance. He cites Elfer’s work and, in particular, Work Discussion Groups as a recommended approach (Grenier, 2020).
From my own point of view and in my professional role, promoting and encouraging positive adult–child interaction, there is a direct correlation between my own capacity to tune into, and respond thoughtfully to individual practitioners, and the greater likelihood that they will tune in and respond to the children, containing rather than avoiding, communications of distress. My experience as an observer has helped me better understand just how difficult this is in practice, but, as I work to promote an emotionally connected approach, where feelings can be discussed openly, my aim is to encourage early years workers to remain curious about their own feelings and those of the children. A child in distress is not a failure in care. Failing to notice, and to respond to a distressed child, is.

**Note**

1. All names and identifying features of the children and nurseries have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

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