Helping vulnerable children to learn

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Educational psychotherapy was developed by Irene Caspari, principal psychologist at the Tavistock Clinic, London. During the 1950s she pioneered a technique which combined psychological insight with teaching in order to address the emotional blocks which can impair learning. The principles she developed in courses on the psychological aspects of learning inform the Foundation’s work in promoting teachers’ awareness of the emotional factors which underlie learning.

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Editors: Lee Marsden & Jenny Dover
The title of our first article – *Are You Receiving Me?* – draws attention to a thematic thread running through this journal. The myriad ways in which children may convey their feeling states and adult responses to these communications are the basic stuff of educational psychotherapy. Much of the thinking on which the work is based and its application in varying settings is demonstrated in this collection of articles.

As an observer in a day care nursery, Debbie Brace describes ways in which children try to communicate their distress. Both the institution and individual workers have ways of defending against the pain this arouses, leaving some children emotionally alone. An idea conveyed to some children is that being “good” means avoiding showing difficult feelings. Using Bion’s concept of containment, among other psychoanalytic theories, Debbie Brace considers how even the silent responses of a thoughtful onlooker, using a reflective stance, may help a particular child to feel less alone. This sensitively written, prize-winning paper (Louise Emanuel Essay Prize, 2019) makes a strong case for all nursery workers to be given opportunities to reflect on and process ‘the emotional complexities of the job’.

Similarly, the Caspari Foundation has always sought to raise psychodynamic awareness and a reflective stance among teachers and other workers in education. Luke Palmer explains how the Caspari model for story groups in schools develops the staff’s thinking and their broader practice, through working with pupils in a therapeutic group. Like Debbie Brace, he wants adults to listen properly and to understand that difficult behaviour is often a defence against difficult feelings. He gives examples of being alongside children, following their lead and valuing their individual creativity in ways that are different from being a directive, task-oriented teacher. In the terms of his evocative title, we need to work at *Getting It*.

These first two articles describe children in group settings. Sharpening our skills in both ‘getting it’ and thinking how to respond is possibly best achieved in supervised work with individual children. In *Observing and Interpreting*, Jenny Dover emphasises the value of close attention to the details of what we see, hear and feel. *Being in the room with the child* is the second part of her title and her many examples of receptive therapeutic exchanges portray the sometimes intense and powerful feelings at play in the therapy room. Like the previous writers, and again with reference to Bion, she believes that if we are well held in our working environments, we are better placed to receive the possibly unbearable feelings some children struggle to manage, often defensively.

Another way of developing skills in both observing and reflecting on what we have seen, heard and felt, is through observation of a mother and baby. Louise Mullier’s account, *Early Experience in the Family: A template for learning*, demonstrates clearly Bion’s theories concerning early containment and the development of thinking. There are other links with the first article; Louise
Muller wonders if the role of a reflective observer is experienced as a containing presence for both mother and baby. She also refers to her own feelings of discomfort when, apparently unable to tolerate her baby's distress, the mother attempts to jolly her into being ‘a happy baby’. More positively, there are several descriptions of mother’s sensitive reading of the baby which suggest that she is generally ‘getting it’ and the article ends with interesting speculations about the baby’s future learning.

The final article, by Julia Haslam, also concerns a mother and child. In this case, mother’s own poor support network and the earlier separation of mother and child have contributed to a general lack of containment, his delayed emotional and cognitive development and his dangerous, defensive behaviour. The therapist is aware that ideally the circumstances require a multi-disciplinary team. This is not available so she bravely undertakes parent-child work, modelling for mother various ways of connecting more meaningfully with this very chaotic child and strengthening their relationship. The therapist’s own containment is supported by her supervisor, her growing theoretical understanding, and her use of her own feelings in interacting with the child.

While the recurrence of Bion’s thinking in these articles has been highlighted, all the writers make reference to a range of theorists. In his review of Nurturing Children by Graham Music, Jim Rose refers to a style of writing that makes complex theory accessible. He says that Music shows ways of applying theory to children’s presenting behaviour and makes clear that being understood and held in mind are at the heart of emotional well-being. One of the chapters that Jim Rose highlights concerns the need for the systems around the child to take a reflective stance and for the therapist to see uncertainty and curiosity as a necessary part of the work. Learning from the experience of difficult times is also mentioned.

Similarly, in reviewing Playing With Ideas, An Independent Practitioner's Introduction to Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy by Deirdre Dowling, Lucy Alexander finds the most interesting part of the book a section looking at ‘hard times’ for the workers in the therapeutic process. These are potentially times for learning, accepting doubt as part of the process. The therapist’s role in providing an emotionally holding environment and the interplay of children’s internal and external worlds are also key to Dowling’s thinking. The book points to the many different settings that could benefit from a child psychotherapy approach.

This idea of a wider application of psychoanalytic practice and thinking brings us to Psychoanalysis and Other Matters, Where Are We Now? edited by Judith Edwards. Mia Beaumont’s review explains that this book links psychoanalytic concepts with a range of subjects including mathematics, sculpture and anthropology. Like the articles in this journal, it emphasises the importance of looking closely at what we see, hear and feel. The review points to several chapters likely to be of interest to educational psychotherapists and draws particular attention to the final chapter, about the importance of observation in all psychoanalytic work and the learning to be gained from the process of mother and baby observation.

Lee Marsden and Jenny Dover

Are You Receiving Me?
A discussion about the complexities of responding to young children’s distress in day care

Debbie Brace

Abstract

How do young children communicate distress in day care and how is this distress noticed and received by the adults looking after them? This observational study uses a psychoanalytic approach to explore these questions. The children featured are observed to communicate distress on separating from their parents as they establish a new relationship with a secondary attachment figure (their Key Person). Questions are asked about how challenging it is for the Key Person to respond to these primitive distress communications while establishing this attachment relationship and how, in the absence of a robust and reflective work culture, the Key Person and the child will likely avoid the pain of this distress and unconsciously employ defensive strategies to do so.

This study adds to the argument for better supportive and reflective systems to be put in place for the adults working with young children in early years settings in order to improve the emotional experience for all.

Key Words: distress, early years, key person, young children, day care, responding.

Introduction

This study aims to bring to life some of the complexities surrounding communications of and adult responses to young children’s distress in day care. The topic will be discussed using observational material in an attempt to explore the following questions:

- How might young children communicate their distress in early years settings?
- 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?
Previous interest and experience

My job and my interest is in supporting, encouraging and inspiring the developing communicative relationship between adults and young children. The majority of my work focuses specifically on adult-child interaction and the potential positive or negative impact that daily interactions with significant adults have on a child’s developing language.

As a qualified teacher, I am commissioned to work alongside a speech and language therapist and run an early language project for the early years education department of a culturally diverse London borough with significant economic and social deprivation. This project supports a wide range of early years settings for young children aged between 0-5, made up of school nurseries, reception classes, pre schools, playgroups, two year old units attached to schools and private day nurseries. The project evolved from the nationally funded Every Child a Talker programme (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008) which aimed to address the fact that a national average of 50% of children were starting school with delayed communication skills.

One of the project’s key principles focuses on the role of the early years practitioner, the aim being to develop more meaningful and positive interactions at the right language level between the practitioners and the children in their care. We use the term planted adult to describe interactions between adults and a child where the practitioner is available and attuned to an individual child's language level and focus of interest. If the practitioners can make the most of opportunities to follow the child’s lead in this way then communication skills are usually progressed.

Through my studies and with the support of my seminar group, I have had the opportunity to think more broadly about what constitutes a positive interaction and focus in more detail on communication between practitioner and child during a moment of distress. I have become increasingly aware that, whilst I felt confident in how the project supported the practitioner-child interactions during small group time and play/learning activity, both they and I seemed to be avoiding focusing on children’s communications of distress.

My training using a psychoanalytic and observational approach has increased my awareness of the importance of considering both conscious and unconscious processes at play for adults and children in any interaction and has supported me to become more observant of the ways in which children communicate distress and how and if they seek comfort from their practitioner whilst away from their parents. My studies have also further developed my understanding of the importance of sensitive and responsive care giving by significant adults and how early experiences and interactions with these adults impact on the mental development of the child.

All names and identifying details have been changed for reasons of confidentiality but I acknowledge that the observations in this paper represent only a snapshot of what I was privileged to observe. I remain grateful to the settings who allowed me to learn from them in this way as this has been integral in developing the theories around distress which are specific to this paper, but which I believe have a wide application.

Settling

Leaving parents and starting life at an early years setting is a daunting task for any child. Attachment relationships are not a focus of this paper but are an important factor in why a child might feel more or less stressed during this process and need emotional support to manage this transition during a period often referred to as settling.

In my experience, settling is a term used by the early years sector to describe as well as normalise feelings of distress (often communicated by crying) that young children experience when leaving 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 behavioural norm.

Parents, inexperienced in this scenario, may initially show an ordinary responsive concern for their child’s communication of distress and look to the setting for guidance on how they manage the difficulty of the separation. Understandably, the setting is perceived as the expert having experienced this distress scenario repeatedly with many different children. Powerful in this moment, the setting’s collective response via settling policies, advice handouts and individual conversation play a crucial lead role in how the distress will be responded to.

It has been my experience that the use of an actual word to generalise behaviour at this time seems to act like a stop sign to open dialogue and thought, obstructing a more reflective stance being adopted where the meaning behind distress communication can be considered from an individual child’s perspective.

One way of thinking about this is as a sector wide institutional defence adopted unconsciously to defend against and protect the Key Person (and the parents) from feelings of anxiety stirred up in them when confronted by such powerful and primitive emotions. The distress is painful to face, therefore it is unconsciously avoided. The problem with defensive responses is that, whilst they protect the adults, they do not benefit the children. Because the unconscious defensive process obstructs a more...
contingent response, it gets in the way of feelings being straight forwardly felt and leaves the child alone with their emotions.

Institutionally defensive systems were discussed in an action research project commissioned by the then Department for Health and Social Security, (Bains and Barnett, 1986) aiming to improve the quality of care in day nurseries. They recommended training to raise awareness of the psychological needs of very young children as they promoted the idea of allocating a specific adult to a specific child (the Key Person approach) as one way of increasing emotional sensitivity in day nurseries. Importantly they also recognised the emotional challenges for the practitioner when tasked with noticing and responding to specific children’s feelings.

Bion (1962) calls the two way process of psychologically responding to and digesting another person’s feelings, containment. This helps us to think of something needing to be held to keep it from spilling out everywhere. When a child’s difficult feelings begin to overflow, repeated containing responses – in which a trusted adult makes an effort to understand and think about what a child might be feeling – are hugely comforting and known to have a significant impact on mental health. Decades of research concur that without enough repeated experiences of emotional containment within a trusting relationship, a child’s emotional development and their ability to self-regulate in the future is under threat (Gerhardt, 2004). A recent longitudinal general population study of young children (Wright et al., 2018) has established an association between early empathic maternal responses to distress and lower levels of ‘callous-unemotional traits’. (Frick, 2009)

The way in which infants and young children are responded to, particularly when distressed, matters because they are communicating from such an emotionally primitive position. Their sense of who they are develops in relation to the interactions with significant people and experiences surrounding them. Unmanageable and unprocessed feelings of distress are communicated by infants and young children behaviourally in often forceful, uncivilised and somatic ways. These communications need to be received.

Are you receiving me?

I would like to hypothesise that if a mis-attuned call and response pattern becomes the default setting adopted at a time when the child could be seen to be at their most vulnerable (having separated from their attachment figure), then the child might find other ways to protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety. The question is, will these alternative strategies (which might well be expressed through ‘disruptive’ behaviour) be noticed by the Key Person or will they become less obvious and therefore more difficult to interpret as distress?

In order to evidence my thinking around this topic I will present observations of two different two year olds; Fabian and Anna. Fabian has just started at his setting and so is in the early stages of establishing attachment relationship with his Key Person. Anna has been at her nursery for eight weeks. Fabian is described as settling as he communicates his distress whereas Anna is described as having settled.

We turn first to Fabian. New to the setting, like many of the other children, he does not speak English at home and is in his second week of settling. We join Fabian and his Key Person (Tracey) as he comes in from playing outside. The children staying for lunch and the afternoon session (including Fabian) are led straight to the lunch table. Tracey has pulled a curtain across to divide the space between the children staying for lunch and those going to be collected by their parents or carers.

**Fabian**

A blonde haired boy, Fabian, is standing up from his chair and table and crying out. His nose is running and his eyes are wet with tears, ‘Maa maaa.’ His tone sounds pleading – like he doesn’t understand the situation as his tone goes down on the second ‘maaa’. It is as if he is actually talking to her. He is looking towards the door. His lunch is on the table. An open packet of crisps and a small sandwich in a box. He is a big boy and looks older than his two years, ruddy faced and healthy. ‘Fabian, shush,’ Tracey says loudly. She is sitting on the chair next to him and leaning towards him. As she says his name Fabian looks at her. Her face is flushed and she looks hot. ‘Fabian, sit down and eat. Eat your crisps,’ she says in what sounds like a firm voice. Fabian sits down on his chair momentarily and then stands up again, takes a crisp from the packet and bites it in half. ‘Maa maaa,’ he says, his mouth half full of crisp. ‘Shush now, that’s enough,’ says Tracey. She glances up at me telling me 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 of us watching Fabian 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 then ask her how she thinks Fabian 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?

Tracey responds to Fabian each time he cries out for his mother. There is a clear balance of communicative turns. He says something, she responds. He does something, she responds but her responses are so out of tune with his communication that it reminds me of an unhappy game of jack in the box. The jack pops up but is immediately pushed down again only to pop up again and be pushed back down and so it goes on. It makes me feel incredibly uncomfortable to watch. I am reminded of Beebe’s (2006) findings about mistimed interactions where she identified, by micro analysing video footage, that both parties were ‘co-constructing’ the negativity felt (p.160). Each makes their next move in response to the one that went before.

The lack of reaction from the other adults is notable as are my feelings of discomfort. The adults seem busy and quite cut off from noticing Fabian’s distress. This task focus as an avoidant defence mechanism against the painful reality of the needs of the child or patient is known as a social defence and was brought to light in the 1980’s research by Bain and Barnett as well as in the seminal work of Menzies-Lyth (1988, 1988b), (1970). She commented on seemingly impersonal interactions with patients and hospitals and noticed how the staff rota and task focus behaviour (e.g. changing sheets, checking charts) protected staff from feeling too emotionally connected to the job; for instance, from feelings of loss as children and families they had become close to moved on.

The early years setting’s settling culture could be understood as a similar institutional defence. Children are generally expected to be distressed during this period and this expectation protects the adults from getting too emotionally stirred up by Fabian’s needs as an individual in this moment. This institutionally defensive position means that the staff are able to block out the reality of the distress and get on with the job in hand – which in this case is taking children to wash hands, organising lunch boxes and supervising them at lunch. The problem for Fabian is that this leaves him emotionally alone despite his Key Person’s close proximity.

As an observer of this interaction I am the recipient of collective projected feelings of discomfort and they are important for me to reflect upon. What is the impact of my presence on the interaction? How do Fabian and Tracey receive my gaze? The observer is not invisible and though trying hard to be a benign figure, one cannot assume being received as one. The similarity of my personal experiences of being a child left at nursery by a mother as well as my personal experiences of being a mother leaving a child at nursery must be thought about as making up part of the uncomfortable feeling.

Understanding these uncomfortable feelings as a counter transference, an important psychoanalytic tool first discussed in 1905 by Freud, is crucial as I try to think about what feelings belong to whom. How might what I observe and am feeling about what I observe be influenced by my own past experiences and what might I be feeling on behalf of Fabian or Tracey? Copley (1997) describes the counter transference as the mirror of feelings evoked in the worker but actually belonging to the client. Being attuned to notice the detail of these feelings and reactions in myself and reflect on them with the support of my seminar group, gives me valuable information. Perhaps my feelings of discomfort are indicative of unconscious feelings in the nursery being defended against with denial.

Tracey pulls a curtain to hide the truth of this divided experience. She finds it difficult to acknowledge Fabian’s distress at being (as far as he is concerned) in the wrong half. She tries hard to shut it out and ignores his pleas, instructing him to put food in his mouth. Does she think that eating will distract from feeling or that quite simply having food in the mouth will stop the noise? I wonder if keeping the pain of the children’s reunion with their parents shut out of view with the curtain helps Tracey to shut out the difficult feeling being evoked in her. Out of sight, out of mind. Unfortunately the children can still hear what is happening. Certainly Fabian seems to know exactly which side of the curtain he would prefer to be on and does not appear to be deceived by not being able to see. Tracey tells him he is ok and he has ‘got her’ but his communication clearly tells us that she is not what he needs.

Fabian has got her but he doesn’t want her, he wants his mother. Tracey’s comment that he has ‘got her’ seems to gloss over the complexities involved in establishing a new secondary attachment relationship with a child. Can Fabian or a child like him transfer his trust to his Key Person if the responses he is given are so out of tune with his needs? She is physically but not psychologically present. It is quite possible and certainly understandable that Fabian’s vulnerability is just too painful for Tracey to think about and this makes her emotionally unavailable. This feels like a defence mechanism within a defensive system and although this is understandable and protective for the adults, it leaves the child emotionally alone. When looked at like this, it is unsurprising that Fabian then rejects her responses. His distress call is not received, it is a faulty line so he calls again and continues to stand up and cry out until, getting nowhere, he seems to give up and gets down from the table to play with the cars.

How is this faulty line experienced by Tracey? Her words tell us she seems to be trying to shut out hearing Fabian’s distress call but her face is flushed. This could be an indication that his feelings are penetrating through to her and making her feel uncomfortable. She sounds irritated as she tells him ‘that’s enough’. He is getting under her skin but it is as if she is not actually seeing and hearing the reality of Fabian’s distress in the present moment. Perhaps his distress is interacting with her own past experiences and reactivates some painful and unprocessed feelings in her. This interpretation makes some sense in relation to Tracey’s next comment when, in response to my question, she...
is able to reflect a little on Fabian’s upset and wonder about her response to this saying she ‘can’t stand it when people cry’ and ‘just wants em to stop’. As she says this she sounds as if someone else’s crying might easily overwhelm her.

I wonder if my presence in this moment provides Tracey some brief containment and a space for her to think about emotions stirred up in her just as my seminar group provides an opportunity to reflect on emotions stirred up in myself. She continues in this reflective position as she says that she knows that ‘not crying’ is unhelpful because it ‘just comes out later on’.

A collaboration between Elfer and Dearley (2007), hypothesised that settings could offer more emotionally containing responses to the children if they had the opportunity and space to reflect on and process the emotional complexities of the job. Their CPD action research project used a psychoanalytic framework for thinking and aimed to facilitate an ‘emotionally containing process.’ (p. 271) Participants had the opportunity to talk and think openly about the difficulties they encountered in their work developing emotionally close relationships with the staff, children and families in their settings. The project concluded that reflective practice was most certainly necessary if interactions in the nurseries were to become more emotionally sensitive although the participants found it challenging to replicate the working model back in their settings.

How does Fabian communicate his distress?

Fabian cries out for who he wants; his mother. He knows where she is expected to 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 though, as he reaches towards where he hopes she might appear, his internal battery has run down and he is unable to hold himself together. Emotionally he seems in a disintegrated state.

I use the term internal battery to describe an idea originating from Melanie Klein’s object relations theory which introduced the importance of a child’s earliest experiences with their care givers as having a crucial role to play in later mental development. Klein (1952) called this ‘good internal object’ a feeling of security one carries inside as a result of having been thought about and cared for responsively and sensitively by someone significant. This responsiveness has acted like an emotional battery and keeps one going during times of stress. Fabian’s battery has run down in this moment and we see there is no one he can easily turn to to recharge.

If Fabian is on the receiving end of repeated interactions like this one I wonder what he will learn about the acceptance of distressed feelings and how this might affect how he communicates with his Key Person in the future. The famous Robertson films showing footage of children in brief separation in hospitals (1971) help us to see how after an initial period of protest, children often withdraw from seeking comfort seeming to cut off from difficult feelings in the absence of a contingent adult response. We know from the brief conversation with Tracey that Fabian’s distress is felt to disappear and ‘be fine’ when he plays with the cars but, if interactions such as this one are common place for him, I wonder if his car play can offer anything other than a distraction and way of ignoring his painful feelings.

Anna

Next we turn to Anna; a child aged 2y and 2m and observed weekly in her early years setting over a one year period. I know from an initial meeting with Anna’s mum (Joy) as well as from a meeting with her Key Person, that Anna was perceived to ‘struggle to settle’ and expressed her difficult feelings on separating from Joy by crying. To illustrate this I will now present a short extract from my first meeting.

Joy describes a difficult and unexpected pregnancy, a difficult and premature birth including hospitalisation and a difficult first year where Anna ‘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 dropping her off and and sent my Dad (Anna’s Grandfather) instead.’

I wonder about Anna being perceived 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. Presumably whatever the response given, perhaps it didn’t feel quite a fit because she felt the need to keep on crying. We have the story here from Joy’s point of view that Anna was ‘a nightmare’ when she started at nursery and that she had to physically detach herself from Anna as she clung to her daily at moments of separation. If we take careful note of Joy’s words here she describes not the distressing and difficult situation as the nightmare but Anna herself as the nightmare. I wonder how it felt for Anna to be given this role in the drama. Her communication of distress is responded to by Joy avoiding the nightmare altogether. She sends someone else (her father) to bear it.

In the next extract we meet Anna’s Key Person, (Raj). Anna is 2y and 2m old and has been at the setting for just over two months. Anna is having her nappy changed and

Anna looks at Raj for a moment,
her mouth turns down slightly but then she nods putting three fingers of her right hand into her mouth.

For Anna, being a good girl at this setting means not showing you have difficult feelings when leaving mummy. The implicit message is that distress is something to be avoided or kept out of sight. Again, this could be seen as an unconscious defensive position adopted by both mother and the setting to make the transition easier for them. Anna has no choice but to go along with this collusion. She nods in agreement as Raj tells her she was a ‘good girl’ but the pause and slight wobble before she nods give us some clue about her uncertainty in agreeing with this dichotomy. This conversation during nappy change offers her a quiet opportunity to recall her mother but the conversation and thinking together is very much about being a good girl because she didn’t cry. We see some of her feelings leak out in this moment as her mouth turns downwards and she inserts her fingers. Does she do this to stop herself from crying? Perhaps she needs to soothe herself and at the same time stuff her true feelings back down as she learns they are not welcome.

The next series of vignettes go some way to show how, over time, Anna adapted to the routines and behavioural expectations of the nursery which do seem to offer her a degree of emotional containment. However, we will also see that when the adult’s focus is elsewhere, her distress seems to leak out. I find the idea of a ‘leaky’ form of containment helpful as I think about Anna managing her feelings. Waddell (2002) writes that ‘too much emotional absence is felt as an insecure or leaky form of containment’ (p. 47). I wonder if the experience of her mother and her Key Person seeming unable to receive and bear her distress at the beginning (because it was too painful to bear and therefore needed to be defended against) was experienced as leaky containment and if so, what evidence we can observe of this in Anna as she works out how to be in this nursery.

We join her now during a group transition where, inside the small cloakroom area, she has been given a group instruction to get her coat on so she can play outside.

Who will catch me?

Anna moves into the cloakroom to find her peg and coat. The cloakroom is an enclosed space. A rug is on the floor of the cloakroom area and pegs hanging with coats and bags run around three bunched sides. The children have their name and photo of themselves on their peg and Anna goes over to her peg and reaches down her coat. She lays her coat open on the floor with the hood between her legs. She then bends forwards, tries to push her arms in the sleeves and flips the coat over her head. It doesn’t work.

She starts again. The same thing happens where she can’t get her arm in the sleeve and the coat slips off her shoulders and onto the floor. She tries a third time and this time Raj manages to hold the coat steady so that she CAN get her arm in. She looks round at Raj who says ‘you put your coat on by yourself- well done Anna’ and gives her a thumbs up. Anna grins at her with an open mouth, tipping her head back and sticking her chin out. Raj turns away to help another child. Anna turns to look at me, ‘My ...mummy coming later’, she says quietly. Her voice is a little bit gravelly, like she might have a cold and 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 zip the bottom for her and she does the rest. She looks at me blankly. I smile at her.

Standing, Anna is taller than me (I am crouched 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 and repeats quietly whilst looking at me ‘mummy coming later’. She then kind of slips/drops off the bench with one foot and hangs onto the pegs. I think she seems precarious and wonder if that has given her a shock but she turns and grins at me the same gurnish grin she used with Raj then takes hold of each peg again and does the same thing with her feet, balancing on the bench. Taller than me, she then drops again, hanging on with one hand and grins, sticking her tongue out slightly. I don’t like the game and am glad when the children are called to sit down on the step to wait to go outside.

Anna’s need to act out this same precarious sequence on entering the cloakroom again and again was notable. She repeated the sequence in almost all of my visits. During the sequence I felt I was on the receiving end of powerful projections of her vulnerability as I constantly felt like I wanted to catch her, reach out to her or stop her from falling. I wondered if she only played out this sequence when I was there to hold her with my gaze and felt relief when the routine (sitting on the steps to wait) was called upon to take over holding Anna.

Transition times in the early years setting can be challenging for young children and are often observed to be times when a child’s need for their parent surfaces. Familiar structure and continuity is disrupted during group transitions when adult attention focuses on the task, as in this example of getting coats and hats on. We notice Anna first turns to an institutionally expected and accepted behaviour to help her to manage. She flips her coat over her head, something the children have been taught how to do at the nursery. She receives due praise for her efforts but Raj’s attention is fleeting as she is busy with the task. I felt Anna was trying to hold on to Raj’s attention for a moment longer with her somewhat clownish grin.

Anna moves into the cloakroom to find her peg and coat. The cloakroom is an enclosed space. A rug is on the floor of the cloakroom area and pegs hanging with coats and bags run around three bunched sides. The children have their name and photo of themselves on their peg and Anna goes over to her peg and reaches down her coat. She lays her coat open on the floor with the hood between her legs. She then bends forwards, tries to push her arms in the sleeves and flips the coat over her head. It doesn’t work.

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Anna turns instead to me and quietly mentions her mummy. Is this a snapshot of the vulnerability hiding behind the grinning mask? A vulnerability which could also be seen to be communicated via her runny nose and scratchy looking skin. Anna asks for help with her coat. I wonder how she experiences me and this coat enveloping her at a time when perhaps she felt a need to be enveloped by her mother’s arms. I accept her blank stare but find it hard to bear her littleness and vulnerability in this moment. I smile at her. Am I colluding with the nursery’s implicit policy promoting positive emotion?

The precarious cloakroom sequence follows and, with the help of my seminar discussion group, I think about the transference of feelings at play in this interaction. Anna unconsciously struggles with feelings around being little and missing mummy through her risky and precarious play and I receive this communication by noticing and thinking about how it evokes a heart in my mouth kind of feeling. I feel extremely on edge as I watch her. I wonder if I am feeling edgy on behalf of Anna and in this way am receiving her projected feelings as a counter transference.

As I mentioned, she repeats the precarious sequence at each of my visits indicating that something perhaps feels stuck inside her. Her need to repeat certain play sequences again and again suggests she is working something through. Freud (1920) recognised this compulsion for repeating patterns of play as significant. He observed his grandson discarding and retrieving a cotton reel and made links between this play sequence and his processing feelings around his mother’s absence and presence. He proposed that a child in play might repeat a sequence as a deliberate distortion of reality in order to feel more emotionally in control of a situation over which in reality they had no control. Freud calls this feeling mastery.

We also see how Anna begins to try out an over the top, jokey way of being. Her sticking out tongue and gurnish grins have a slightly manic quality. Over time I observe this trait establish itself more adhesively into her personality and understand this as another way she learns to deflect from her anxious feelings. We join her now as she concentrates hard to un-pop the poppers on a baby doll’s clothes.

Anna lays the baby down on one of the thin benches in the cloakroom. She has taken the baby here to change its nappy. She looks to be trying really hard but is having some difficulty to un-pop the poppers. She pulls hard at the fabric and I wonder if she will ask me to help. Another child comes over and stands next to her watching her struggle. She looks up at him and suddenly throws the baby on the floor laughing in what sounds to be a loud fake laugh. She then notices Raj sharing a book with another child. She clammers awkwardly over the bench away from the boy and discarded baby to get to where Raj is sitting on a small rug. She stumbles on her way and stands in front of Raj who has another girl sitting on her lap. ‘My turn,’ says Anna loudly. ‘You need to wait for your turn Anna,’ replies Raj.

There seems to be some urgency about Anna’s need to get to Raj and away from the struggle she has encountered as she tried to mother the baby. I wonder if her feelings of not quite being able to do the task she wanted to do had evoked a feeling of helplessness in her which the little boy, by standing next to her, seemed to bring to her consciousness. Perhaps she felt ashamed of her feelings and discarded them along with the baby on the floor, hiding behind a loud fake laugh.

She stumbles towards Raj. Her wobble could be interpreted as another way that her vulnerability leaks out in this setting. She asks loudly for her turn but the reality of group care is that you have to wait your turn for attention. Anna complies with this request seeming this time to use the behavioural expectations of the institution (being a good girl and waiting her turn) rather like a second skin. Bick (1968) proposed this idea to help explain observed behaviour which looks on the surface like it holds one together and has a supportive and emotionally containing function but in reality it is a defence and only serves to cut the self off from anxious feeling.

A few months later I notice Anna is often playing by herself and, in my observations, only really interacts with Raj during caregiving routines or times of transition. Today, she is at a table where there are travel brochures and telephones. I observe her for some moments as she gathers shiny travel leaflets up in her arms. She drops some because they are slippery. Concentrating, she retrieves each one she has dropped before gathering them all up again in her arms. Standing on her tiptoes, she places the gathered leaflets on a topmost shelf. She then notices my presence.

Anna looks over to me and says ‘mummy, daddy,’ and then something I can’t hear. She sticks her tongue out and blows a raspberry whilst looking at me. I feel a little shocked like she is telling me to go away. I look at her and am aware of trying to keep my face neutral. She grins at me – a false type of grin. I stay with her gaze. She drags a chair and a large hard back atlas very close to me and sits down opposite me so that there is very little space between us. She opens it resting the top of the book on my knees and reads out 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 thought it was going to hit me in the face. She stood, taking the book back to a table but then came straight back with it and repeated this story reading sequence twice more.

Alone at first and unaware of my presence, Anna is playing in a way that seems to be carefully sorting everything into its right place. Putting things back. This was another
play pattern that I observed to be repeated again and again. I wonder if by sorting things into the right place and gathering things up, she was finding a way to gather herself up emotionally. She seems in these moments to identify with a more grown up mummy part of herself. I can do it, I am the mummy. This almost precociously capable play seems to have the effect of distancing herself from her more vulnerable and messy self. She pushes herself to her physical limits by stretching up to the highest shelf with the slippery leaflets. They could all slip through her arms at any moment and as I observe her I worry that they will. The possibility of this happening is so likely, it makes me feel very anxious and almost overwhelmed with a feeling of wanting to help her.

Her greeting to me as she looks up is received as shocking. Was I meant to be shocked? Was she shocked to see me there? Was she blowing a raspberry to the anxious part of herself? The grown up story reading that followed felt to have a precocious and somewhat manic quality to it. An oversized book for such a little girl to manipulate, an over loud voice as she sat so close to me. She seemed to be bolstering herself by managing tasks that were almost out of her reach, a defensive way of being which again could be seen to be working to cut herself off from feelings of distress.

We can see here what Rustin (2006) means about the potentially therapeutic value of having an observer as, once Anna notices me, it feels like she is testing my capacity to contain her by repeating the book reading sequence. Will I be able to receive her fierce projections and tolerate the messy little Anna she is trying hard to disown?

Concluding thoughts

By presenting observational extracts of Fabian and Anna my aim has been to take a look at distress interactions which I believe could be typical in early years settings up and down the country. Statutory early years education guidance (DCSF, 2007, 2012) states the need for individual children to be cared for by an identified Key Person who should acknowledge and reassure anxious feelings shared by the child. In psychoanalytic terms this is known as containment, an unconscious emotional process understood to be vital for healthy social and emotional development.

This paper focused first on Fabian's communications of distress at a time when he is forming a new and trusting relationship with his Key Person. Agreeing with research which pre dates this paper (Bain and Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Elfer and Dearnley, 2007) I have discussed the existence of institutional defences (some of them unconscious) which go some way to explain why his Key Person was observed to struggle to attune to his distress at this difficult time. I have argued that the word settling generalises this distress scenario but avoids thinking about the individual child's distress experience. This and other defensive responses whilst protecting staff from becoming overwhelmed with the task of caring for young children during this emotionally stressful time, means leaving the child with the task of managing their distress in other ways.

Observations of Anna show what happens as a young child grapples with this unmanageable task and I have explored the idea that observable patterns in Anna's behaviour hint at her distress. Her reliance on the institutional expectations of the nursery coupled with the nursery's focus on positive emotion and being a good girl at first were felt to have an emotionally containing function, but actually seem to distance Anna from feeling and expressing her more negative and vulnerable feelings. I have wondered if this way of being has been exacerbated by a defensive response from both her mother and the nursery during her settling period.

If these examples are typical of early years settings, what will be the long term impact on the children? Anna turned repeatedly to the observer and made use of her as an emotionally available adult who could bear her projections. The observer in turn made use of the seminar group to discuss complex counter transference feeling but we don't know how Anna behaved outside of this containing framework and what would have happened had she not been the recipient of the observer's presence.

The secure child is likely to be able to cope with distress felt on separating from his parent and build a new secondary attachment relationship with his Key Person at day care, by finding enough good to manage the less attuned moments. What becomes more complicated is when interactions at home have been less empathetic during moments of distress, which have been found to have an association with the development of 'callous emotional traits' (Wright et al, 2018). It seems fair to suggest that for all young children, but especially for those with less emotionally connected interactions at home, the capacity of the Key Person to receive and sympathetically respond to distress is crucial. Further understanding and more research into what might complicate this process is consequently very important.

It is clear we need to build on research that has gone before and leave as much space as possible for open dialogue about the task of supporting young children's healthy mental development. Statutory early years guidance on its own is not enough. There is a clear need for more formal thinking spaces and more opportunities for practitioners – whose own past experiences may make them more susceptible to enacting institutional defences and keeping their distance from distress – to talk about and reflect on the emotional complexities of their work. Peter Elfer and colleagues are working hard to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of such reflective work discussion groups, noting that ‘the challenge is to combine the intense subjectivity of the method with an evaluation that is rigorous and objective.’ (2018, p.892)

From my point of view and within my role promoting and encouraging positive adult-child interaction, the more I tune into and thoughtfully respond to difficulties that individual
practitioners might be facing as they develop intimate relationships with the children and families in their care, the more likely they are to tune in and respond to the children, receiving rather than avoiding, their communications of distress. My experience as an observer has helped me better understand just how difficult this is in practice but by working with managers to promote and create a containing work culture, where I am open to discussing and reflecting on difficult feelings, I hope to truly promote and encourage positive interactions. After all, a child in distress is not a failure in care but failing to allow a child to express themselves is.

References


