

Relationships, reciprocity and reflective practice in challenging times

Dr Leah O'Toole, Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University



In our book *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Early Childhood Settings and Primary Schools*, Noirin Hayes and I reflect upon the key lessons we have drawn from our work and observations in early childhood theory, research and practice over the years. We identify commonalities

across a range of approaches, including the importance of warm, caring relationships, the need for approaches based on agency, reciprocity and respect, and the value of reflective practice. As I, like many of you, try to negotiate the 'new (ab)normal' in this coronavirus-dominated reality, balancing competing demands of virtual work as an educator while taking care of a young family, and as I try to imagine a post-COVID world, I find myself reflecting again on relationships, reciprocity and reflective practice.

While different theoretical and curricular perspectives may suggest alternative practical strategies for

ECEC, it may be that it is not the strategies in themselves that are effective, but rather the relationships underlying them. Many theories, like attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), humanist/student-centred theories (Rogers, 1995), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), explicitly name the power of relationships to support children's learning and development. In reality, relationships are complex, messy and multi-faceted, involving not just educator and child alone, but embedded within the contexts, cultures and times in which they develop.

'Social-distancing' provides a disconcerting illustration of this; our traditional ways of engaging with children – face-to-face, within encircling embraces, through shared play, through gentle touch – have in many cases been wiped out overnight. While as adults we find virtual ways to connect with our friends, for many children the shut-down meant complete and sudden loss of contact with peers. Early childhood educators provide a significant 'secondary attachment' (Bowlby, 2007) for children and for some, the abrupt closure of ECEC settings may even represent the loss of their only safe spaces. It is not over-dramatisation to say that this is traumatic, for children and for adults; and yet the solution to this trauma may lie in these very relationships. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard (2020), responsive relationships help buffer us against the potentially toxic effects of ongoing stress like that caused by the pandemic. Building such relationships in ECEC settings does not happen of its own accord and maintaining them in these challenging times will not happen without focused effort. Across society and within our sector specifically, we have



Dylan Gorman - Age 3 - Drawing a picture of playing at the beach, looking forward to brighter days

seen heroic efforts to maintain our human connections; grandparents mastering video-chat to see their grandchildren while they 'cocoon', communities playing balcony-bingo, and creative efforts by early childhood educators to keep in touch and support children and families.

One of my wonderful students on the BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning in Maynooth University asked me this week, "How can we support



Luke Quinn (Age 7) Playing during Lockdown

positive transitions back to early childhood education when all this is over?" Perhaps the answer is "who knows?!", considering the unprecedented nature of what is happening, and the lack of clarity about the future, but I suspect that the key lies in the life-defining, life-changing power of nurturing relationships. Recognising the trauma caused by COVID-19 and prioritising relational, safe spaces for children will be far more important than misguided attempts to 'catch up' on lost learning. This will be particularly important for children like my little boy who have had their ECCE year suddenly cut short, only to return to their early education in 'big school'. The fat tears rolling down his 5-year-old cheeks as he realised that he would not be returning to the preschool he loves are not something I'll soon forget. There is extensive research evidence that preschool-primary school transition can be stressful at the best of times (O'Kane, 2016) and this is not the best of times.

The most effective relationships are reciprocal. Listening to children and the needs they express through behaviours, moods, sleeping and eating patterns, etc will be crucial to supporting them while the crisis persists and in the transition back, requiring strong reflective practice. These are extraordinary times, and we won't always get it right. Like many educators from early years to third level, I was eager to provide plenty of 'content'

to support students' learning online, only to discover that the support they actually needed was (unsurprisingly) relational, and piles of content just caused stress and distress. We need to be truly open to hearing the needs of those we work with and for, and to reflecting on and changing our practice where necessary.

In thinking about the new beginnings for ECEC that could come from the pandemic, as we emerge from the devastation there could be a unique opportunity for positive change. I am not the first commentator to note that we cannot, or should not, go 'back to normal' when all this ends. Things that seemed impossible a few short months ago, like early childhood educators' pay being directly state-funded, are now happening. A new sense of social solidarity has emerged, and COVID-19 has left us under no lingering delusions that what happens to others somehow does not impact us. This pandemic has offered a clear illustration of ties that bind us together as humans - that we are all dependent on each other. Early childhood educators have a profound, crucial impact on children, and realising this can be daunting. However, right now they need you more than ever, and a focus on relationships, reciprocity and reflective practice may be the key to getting it right: as Bronfenbrenner, famously put it, "In short, somebody has to be crazy about that kid" (2005, p. 262).