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Promoting and restoring sound mental health in infants and young children: the role of Early Childhood Education and Care.

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From Playspace® Learning Professional Development Programme

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Many years ago, Berry Brazelton said *“The heart of a child care centre is the relationships inside it”*. For much of my working life, I have had the good fortune to learn about these relationships from the ground-up. Playspace® Learning is a professional development program for educators, that has arisen from twenty years of studying emotions and care in pedagogic relationships.

**History of our work:** In 2000 a senior education support manager in KU Children’s Services invited my colleague Belinda Friezer and myself to support the educators in a children’s service where the children – aged 2 to 5 - came from very distressed family relationships. The educators were burning out. The rate of staff retention had got down to a fortnight.

Belinda is a psychologist and art therapist who was then working within a team that offered the Selma Fraiberg – Alicia Lieberman model of parent-infant psychotherapy. She became the Infant Mental Health worker at the service. I’m a psychologist. In

2000 I had recently completed an observation project that gave me the privilege of spending two years sitting in two early childhood services and observing the interactions between infants, children and educators.

From this position, I was struck that what was visible to the children was often out of sight for the adults. The children were mindful of their educators' comings and goings, and through their own pattern of comings and goings they were expressing their learning and emotional regulation needs. What would it be like if educators could sit still and become still inside, so that they could take in what was happening from the children's point of view... while making themselves more accessible? I brought this perspective on stillness into the project. My position was clinical consultant.

### **The intervention**

**The Playspace:** The educators said that the most stressful part of their day was the morning arrivals: The children would arrive in a dysregulated state and it was difficult to make contact with them and their families. We introduced **a space** for the educators where they could better receive the children and the parents and their often dysregulated behaviour and feelings. This space became known as the Playspace. The Playspace is defined by stillness.

At the start of the day the educators sit on chairs at the children's level ready waiting for the children and families to arrive. Each chooses where to sit still and this becomes their Playspace. They make it their home with materials they would like to share with the children. Sitting in their Playspace makes the educators easy to find. Being still on the inside gives them more room to be sensitively receptive. Seeing their colleagues being still helps also them remain still and present to what the children and families are bringing.

In this arrangement, Belinda sat in her own Playspace four mornings a week. The educators were invited to contact her as needed, according to what was taking place with the children and how they were feeling. They experienced her accessibility at first hand. Belinda was offering the educators what they in turn could give to the children and families.

**Reflexive Practice:** Educators filmed some of their Playspace interactions and shared them with the team and with us in monthly staff meetings. We brought to these meetings our capacity for being still with the educators, so they could do the same with the children. We call this experiential learning Reflexive Practice. Reflexive Practice, using video mentoring, gives educators the chance: (1) to focus together on what they are seeing and (2) to listen to each other and to how they feel about the relationships they have with the children they care for.

**Evaluation:** One year later, we found that the children had shifted positively in their capacity; they became more emotionally regulated. The educators had shifted in their state of mind, from concerns about control to an emphasis on being a reliable source of comfort for the children. Staff retention grew from two weeks to ten years: no one left during the one-year project – in fact it was ten years before anyone left.

We became interested in how we could make this model of Infant Mental Health consultation sustainable, so educators could keep it going themselves without having the Infant Mental Health worker on site. We now offer this through Playspace® Learning, whose purpose is to build a secure-base culture within a service. We focus not just on how individual educators can become more sensitive and available to individual children – which of course is very important – but also on how the educators can support each other as a community within which they can be emotionally available.

**What has remained the same:** We have kept the Playspace and Reflexive Practice components. While a Playspace gives educators a protected space to be with children, Reflexive Practice gives educators a protected space to think together about children and to be attentive to the emotional experience in their work.

**What has changed:**

1. **We embed the Playspace in relational routines.** This is because day-to-day routines are core events in children's services. They generate the shared experiences that help children feel they belong. So, in Playspace® Learning we focus on this big part of the day, the transitions. Playspace® Learning is rooted in the minutiae of how educators greet infants and young children and families and receive their feelings. Educators learn and practice relational routines for welcoming children and families into relationship at the start and end of the day. A working party, consisting of educators, parents and ourselves tried out, filmed and reviewed the footage of each step to create these routines.

The transitions involve a series of jobs that work like stepping-stones for educator, parent and child. The educator leads the parent and child across these stepping-stones. The jobs serve to structure the interactions between them so that the child experiences their educator and their parent keeping them in mind and staying close. In the morning transition, the educators are looking for the children to get filled up by the contact they have with their parent, and to land with themselves.

The Negotiated Goodbye transition is followed by another relational transition that takes place immediately after parents leave. The 'Launch to Explore' transition gives children emotional back-up to enter play with peers. There is also a mini-transition between educators that can take place at any time during the day. This transition builds predictability and community.

**2. We introduce educators to relational language.** Relational language is where educators use their words to describe what is happening in the relationship and to speak to children's feelings. Educators learn a relational dialogue to lead parents and children through the transitions.

At the halfway mark into their Playspace Learning, educators recruit one family with whom to practice the transition routines. After four weeks or so of practising being still and implementing the transition routines, they film themselves and bring their footage back to the group for review in Reflexive Practice.

We find that Reflexive Practice gives educators a deeper understanding of care (as in education and care). They watch each other's footage and listen to how they each feel about their relationship with the children. Instead of feeling overwhelmed and held hostage to their feelings, through Reflexive Practice they learn to become curious about listening to their own feelings as a pathway into understanding the children's emotional worlds. Watching each other's videos, they see where there are opportunities to stay close to children when they are upset and they discuss together what words they might use to speak to the children's relationship needs. Through these discussions their confidence develops to use more relational language.

We see how the educators back each other up in these Reflexive Practice sessions. No longer avoiding the children's feelings or trying to 'fix' problems before they understand them, they plan together for what the children need. Here is an example of one educator backing another up: I observed this happening in the room. The educator Naomi was in her Playspace® and was comforting Steffi who was very upset because her dad had just left. Her loud cries bothered some of the other parents and children who were arriving. When Ryan and his mum came in to do their goodbye with Gianna, Ryan's mum asked Ryan to go and cheer Steffi up.

Gianna said to Ryan: *“Ryan, your mum is thinking about Steffi. Steffi’s upset because she is missing her dad. But look, Naomi is holding her and will stay with her till she feels better”.*

Ryan and his mum relaxed. They didn’t have to worry about Steffi. They were reminded that in this community the educators work together to stay with the children’s feelings and keep them safe. When educators back each other up like this they create an atmosphere of emotional connection. Parents and children love this about them.

**The Baby Playspace Project:** Between 2017-2019, Eilish Hughes, Dr Vickie Meade and myself introduced Playspace® Learning into a babies’ room. There was an emphasis on physical as well as emotional holding because of the close connection between these for babies. This project was a collaboration with Dr Jools Page, at the University of Brighton, who explores the role of professional love in early childhood education and care. Our Reflexive Practice and ‘Work Discussion’ of Dr Peter Elfer, from the University of Roehampton, each give educators space to sit together, to listen to each other and to sit with the painful as well as the joyful feelings that are evoked as they form close relationships with infants and young children.

In the Baby Playspace project, we have noticed that educators are using more relational language in their interactions with infants and toddlers. We see this as the outcome of Playspace Learning, the program that we developed to support educators to keep Playspaces going themselves. The babies room sounds different as the educators become confident to speak to the children’s feelings and relationship needs.

In the long-term relational language can play a big part in how services build a “Curriculum of Feelings”, whereby children experience day-to-day being in an

environment where feelings come up and are responded to in a relaxed manner; and where they hear educators 'using their words' to help the children make sense of their feelings.

**Where to next?** Dr Elfer, Dr Page and myself are using the three models of practice, Playspaces, Professional Love and Work Discussion to (1) raise the status of emotion and care in early childhood pedagogy and to (2) raise the status of educators. To **promote and restore sound mental health in infants and young children**, we must invest in our educators and the professionalism of their work. We must lend them support as they hold the feelings of a very distressed child, care for each other in this process of staying with, and build a secure base culture within which children can thrive.

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