

coping strategies

Cath Hunter looks at ways to support children's emotional wellbeing throughout the nursery day...

find out more

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For both children and staff the nursery day is full of surprises as the routine progresses, activities occur and children's emotional reactions to them are expressed – sometimes in quite challenging and unpredictable ways. The emotional cues that children show can be used as a way of understanding, predicting and managing these times. The following examples illustrate three instances of problematic behaviour that I've encountered, and the ways in which staff were able to respond positively.



She had been living in the Caribbean with her Grandma for the past year while her parents came to England to find work, and she had only recently rejoined them. We discussed these experiences and identified the themes of loss in her life, i.e. loss of Grandma, loss of a familiar home, etc. The impact of this trauma had resulted in her feeling unsafe and terrified. Trauma usually generates a fight or flight response as stress hormones are activated, which explained her urgent attempts to leave the nursery. She had developed self-soothing as a way of managing this distress, but now needed help from an adult to reduce it.

We discussed the need for something familiar linked to Grandma to help her, and I suggested music. I encouraged Sam to explore this with her parents and to discuss the impact of this loss, to help them understand her behaviour. I suggested she attune to, and meet the emotional intensity of, what Kanika was feeling by using a calming tone and a facial expression that models this and validates how Kanika is feeling by affirming it, e.g. "I can see you're really scared that mummy's leaving now." This would help her feel less alone and overwhelmed, and more contained. When children are distressed they discharge feelings rather than processing them through thought, and they need adults to name their feelings for them so they feel connected to and understood. As she was not yet developmentally capable of finding the words to express how she felt, she needed help from a caring adult to provide her with the words.

Kanika's Grandma sent CDs over and Sam plays them when she arrives, much to her delight. She has been dancing and showing the other children who are happy to join in. Sam now feels more confident in her responses if Kanika gets distressed and is encouraging her to draw pictures which her



Start of the day

The beginning of the day can be loud and chaotic as parents and children attempt to manage their emotional responses to being separated. Some children who have experienced erratic parenting may have no sense of parental permanence, and therefore when the parent leaves may worry that they have been left forever. When a loved person isn't there and a child is too young to understand why, it can be extremely painful – in these circumstances the same parts of the brain are activated as when children are feeling physical pain, so their feelings of loss should be addressed with empathy and support.

Kanika – aged three

Kanika had been at nursery for four weeks and is extremely distressed on arrival, screaming, crying and clinging to her parents. After they leave she stands at the door, gazing out, sucking her thumb and twiddling her hair. She tries to escape at any opportunity and becomes agitated again when her attempts are thwarted. Her key worker, Sam, and I explored Kanika's background and previous experience as a way of understanding her anxiety.



parents send to Grandma, along with talking about her more. Prior to meeting with Sam, they'd thought it best not to mention her. Kanika appears to be happier and more settled now.

Carpet time

During the course of the day there are many opportunities for the differences in norms of behaviour between nursery and home to become apparent. At carpet time children are expected to manage sitting still, concentrating and engaging with the adult. For some this behavioural expectation is overwhelming and problems can be compounded by their inability to articulate what exactly they are finding difficult. This can be frustrating for staff and children alike.

Zak – aged four

Kate, a nursery teacher came to see me regarding Zak, who struggled with carpet time. He would roll around, poke the other children and was disruptive. She found this challenging and was concerned as the other children had started to copy Zak's behaviour. I suggested she make him a mat to sit on out of coloured card and introduce it as a 'special mat to help him at carpet time'. I recommended that she demonstrated how to sit on it, explaining to him how it could help him to sit still as all parts of his body needed to stay on the mat. I also suggested she ask Zak to choose the mat's colour, so he was able to take ownership of it.

Just before carpet time Kate encourages Zak to get his mat from his tray, and she chooses a place for him to put it. This enables her to observe him sitting in different places to see if this makes a difference. After carpet time he's asked to return it to his tray, encouraging his sense of responsibility.

Kate and I explored Zak's background and previous experiences, which provided us with a picture of his life. He's from a large chaotic



family and had never been to nursery before. This enabled us to make some sense of his behaviour and identify ways to help him manage the more structured nursery routine.

Kate was concerned that other children might want a mat, so I recommended that she discuss Zak's mat with the other children and explain that he has it to help him, and they could help him remember to use it, which they did. Zak responded very well to the use of his mat and proudly returns it to his tray after carpet time. Kate feels much happier about carpet time and has noticed that Zak's concentration has improved and that he has calmed down generally.

The end of the day

The end of the nursery day can be as chaotic and loud as the start, but problems can be compounded by everyone being tired. As young children don't have the language to say how they're feeling, this can be a challenging time as they wait with anticipation to be collected. For some children, the structure of the nursery day may be the only experience of routine they have and its consistency will help them feel safe. The unpredictability of life outside the nursery may evoke mixed emotions of excitement and anxiety as they're unsure what awaits them.

Joe – aged 3

Joe became very anxious and upset as soon as the coats were put on at home time. He became tearful and kept saying he needed the toilet, even though he'd just been. His key worker, Gail, explained to me that his parents had recently separated and were fighting over him, and who would have custody during the week. His dad had moved out of the family home and was renting a flat nearby. He spent some nights with mum and others with dad, and was understandably very unsettled by this.

I encouraged Gail to talk to his parents separately about this and to discuss the distress this uncertainty was causing Joe. They were both loving parents who had been

Successful support

Promote emotional wellbeing in your setting...

- 1 Become the voice for the child** – identify and express the feeling behind the behaviour you see. This helps the child link that feeling with their behaviour and enables them to understand the feeling.
- 2 Be consistent** – this enables the children to feel safe and secure during their time with you; let them know about any changes in advance.
- 3 Support each other** – work together to develop and maintain a strong team.
- 4 Acknowledge your successes and achievements** – no matter how small, you can't always measure the impact of your work immediately.
- 5 Look after yourself** – working with children can be emotionally exhausting. The golden rule is to look after yourself first so you are able to look after others.

sidetracked into their own battles with each other. I proposed that at the start of each week she asked for the weekly overview so she knew where he was staying each night. I suggested that Gail asked both parents for a passport size photo of themselves and his bedroom at each of their homes. I recommended that she make Joe a chart each week and attach the relevant photos for each day. She could then show Joe the photo of which parent would be collecting him and the bedroom he would be sleeping in so he knew exactly what was happening. This would also enable her to refer to this during the day so his anxiety could be reduced.

This sense of predictability enabled Joe to relax and look forward to seeing each parent, and helped his concept of time as he could see from his chart when he was next seeing the other parent. It also helped Gail with some of the other children in the nursery whose parents had separated, as it encouraged her to explore different ways of supporting them.

Home front

The impact of family background and external circumstances in children's lives is paramount to shaping who they are and how they respond to every event in their day. For nursery practitioners to be able to explore the impact of this is crucial in gaining a deeper understanding of the children they work with and developing a greater ability to meet their needs.