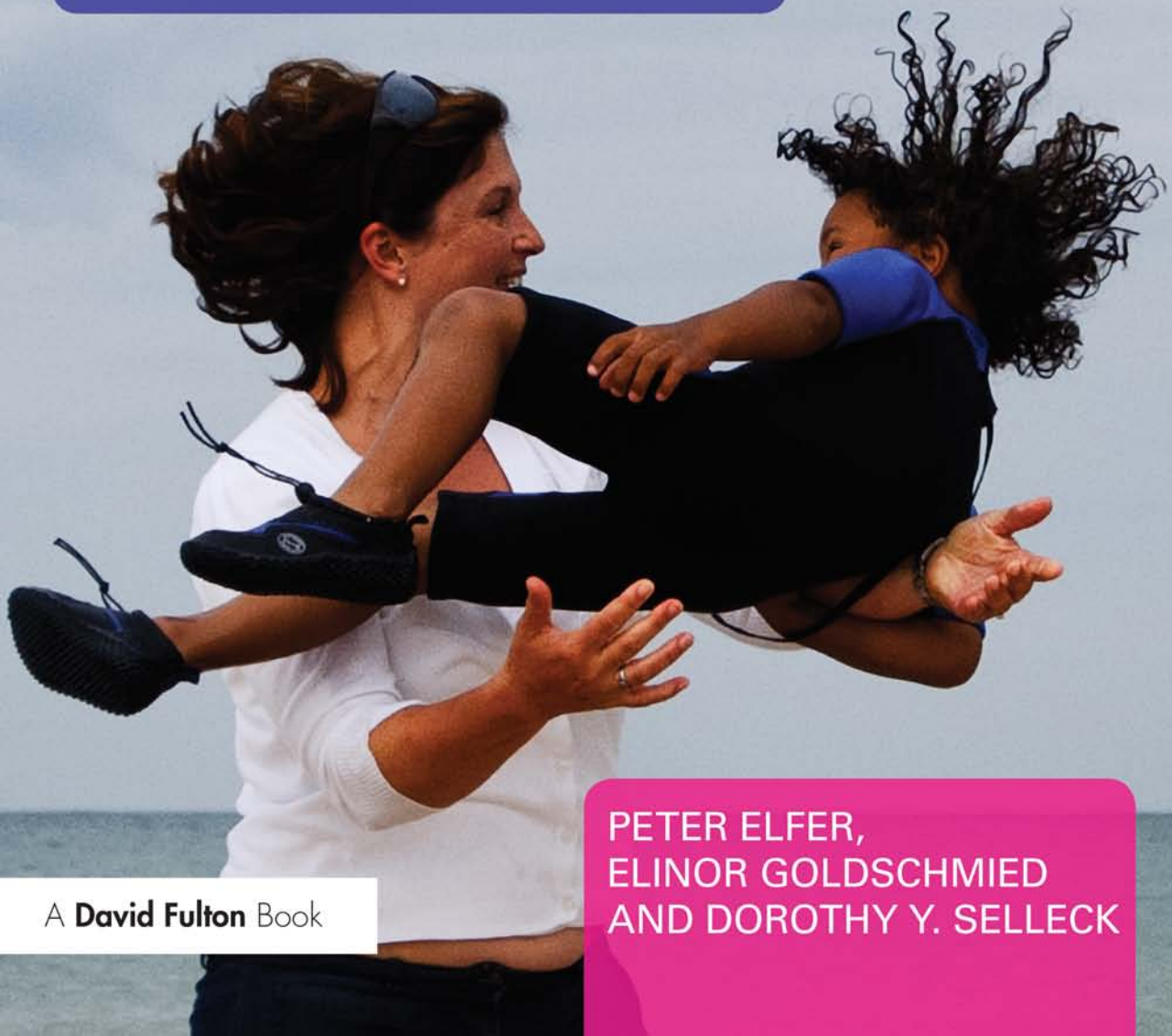
SECOND EDITION

KEY PERSONS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Building relationships for quality provision in early years settings and primary schools

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS **KEY PERSONS IN THE NURSERY**



PETER ELFER,
ELINOR GOLDSCHMIED
AND DOROTHY Y. SELLECK

A **David Fulton** Book

Key Persons in the Early Years

Key Persons in the Early Years aims to explain what a Key Person is, the theory behind the approach and the practicalities of implementation. Practical in its approach and containing case studies as examples of reflective practice, this second edition details the role of the Key Person across all ages in the early years. This new edition has been fully updated in line with the Early Years Foundation Stage and features a new chapter on the Key Persons approach with 3- to 5-year-olds.

The book offers guidance on:

- making the Key Persons approach work in your setting, with realistic strategies;
- the benefits of this approach for children's well-being, for their learning and to ensure equal chances for all children;
- potential challenges and problems and how to overcome them, drawing on accounts from practitioners of their journey in implementing this approach.

This book will be an essential text for practitioners and students who wish to fully understand the Key Persons role and how it can benefit children, parents and their setting.

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Second edition

Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied and Dorothy Y. Selleck

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Contents

List of figures and tables *viii*
Preface *x*
Acknowledgements *xii*

1 Parenting and working, children and settings: achieving life balances 1
Public policy and private choices 1
What counts in quality? 3
The early years setting: a home from home? 6
The early years setting: not a substitute home but a place to be different 9
Relationship is key: the theory 11
Relationship is key: children speaking 16
Sunil's story *16*
Angelina's story *17*
Graham's story *17*
Mario's story *20*
How do we respond to these different voices and what they may be seeking to tell us? 22

2 What is the Key Persons approach? 23
The benefits of a Key Persons approach 23
For babies and young children *23*
For parents *23*
For the Key Person *23*
For the early years setting *24*
Why 'Key Person' and not 'key worker'? 24
The Key Persons approach for babies and young children 24
The Key Persons approach for parents 34
The Key Persons approach for the Key Person 38
The Key Persons approach for the early years setting or school 39

3 A strategy for implementation: an approach, not a system 40
Aspect 1: Values, principles, research evidence and … time! 41
Aspect 2: Building an approach, rather than a system 42
Aspect 3: Practical realities 45
Introducing the Key Persons approach in different kinds of setting 45
The Key Persons approach: documenting the role 52
Home visits and establishing a partnership 54
Building a key group 56
Observing, noticing and not noticing 58
Sharing and not sharing information 59
Aspect 4: Who is the 'Key Person' for the Key Person? Mentoring and professional supervision 61
The challenge of emotionally close relationships with children 61
The challenge of physically close relationships with children 62
The challenge of close relationships with parents and other family members 64
Mentoring and supervision: the practice and some examples 67
Why 'My door is always open' may not be enough 72

4 The Key Persons approach for 3- to 5-year-olds 74
Introduction 74
Defining some of the terms we use 75
Why do we need a Key Persons approach with 3- to 5-year-olds as well as with babies and under-3s? 79
Well-being 80
A focus on the final year of the EYFS: extending a Key Persons approach into primary schools and reception classes 90
Learning and development 97
How can the Key Persons approach work with large numbers? 100
What are the implications for practice? 102
The importance of detailed observations 102
The importance of authentic conversational exchanges between adults and children 102
The challenge to build a strong partnership with home 104
Equality 107
Allocating children and their families to a Key Person 111
Guidelines for managers for implementing a Key Persons approach 112
The Key Persons approach in practice 114
Strategies for getting started and organised in primary schools and pre-schools 114

5 The Key Person journey: its benefits and challenges 118
Theme A: Establishing the Key Persons approach 119
Example 1: From key worker system to Key Persons approach – creating foundations 119
Example 2: Establishing the Key Persons approach in a reception class 121
Example 3: Developing the Key Persons approach in Rupert's Day Nursery 123
Example 4: Developing the Key Persons approach in Sandilands Primary School 127
Example 5: Developing the Key Persons approach in Crumpsall Primary School 130
Example 6: Implementing the Key Kersons approach 134
Example 7: An account of the the Key Persons approach in practice 135
Theme B: The importance of continuity of a Key Person through the early years setting and into Key Stage 1 136
Example 8: Managing transitions 136
Example 9: A parent's perspective on the stresses of transitions without Key Person support 137
Theme C: The impact of the Key Persons approach 138
Example 10: Noticing the effect of loss of security when a child attends another nursery during the holiday period 138
Example 11: The impact of being attached to a child; remembering and cherishing attachments with key children who have moved on; finding a way to 'let go' at the end of the relationship for Key Persons and children 139
Example 12: The impact of the Key Persons approach for a 3-year-old and his mother 139
Example 13: The impact of the Key Person's role on an anxious child 140
Example 14: The dilemmas and challenges in relation to the loss of a child 141
Example 15: The impact of the Key Person in supporting attachments at home 142
Theme D: Maintaining the Key Persons approach when it is established 143
Example 16: Building, maintaining and developing the Key Persons approach in two children's centres 143
Example 17: Working together as a group: one aspect of the Key Person's journey in early years settings; an example of reflective practitioners thinking about a child together 146
Example 18: The Key Persons approach with 3 to 5s – a practitioner's perspective – issues, difficulties and possibilities 149

References 156
Index 162

Figures and tables

Figures

1.1	Some reactions to Sunil's story	18
1.2	Some reactions to Graham's story	20
1.3	Some reactions to Mario's story	22
2.1	Key group time in a quiet space in the school library	32
2.2	The Key Person with her group at lunchtime at the start of the year	33
2.3	Talking about feelings in a Key Person group	33
2.4	Time to talk to key children individually	34
2.5	The 'mother', child and Key Person create and maintain a triangle of trust and communication between each other	36
2.6	A child being settled into the early years setting	37
2.7	A child and her Key Person enjoying play together in the outside learning area	37
3.1	Implementing the Key Persons approach	40
3.2	Statement of commitment	42
3.3	Example of the discussion notes from a development team meeting	49
3.4	Notes from a development team meeting as staff work on refining their Key Persons approach, strengthening practice and solving problems	51
3.5	Important aspects of a Key Person's relationship	53
3.6	A Key Person in the nursery sharing a book with a child	55
3.7	The Key Person settles the child to sleep	60
3.8	Once the child is settled and sleeping, the Key Person leaves his favourite storybook close by for when he awakes	60
3.9	Example of nursery guidelines on physical touch and holding	63
3.10	A nursery Key Person having support and supervision	66
4.1	The three overlapping spheres that indicate the Key Persons approach should be extended to a wider age group	80
4.2	Playing games with his father, learning to win and lose	82
4.3	Adam's drawing of a fish	86
4.4	Adam's writing	87
4.5	Working alongside adults, building blocks for 'professional intimacy'	89

4.6 A relationship with a family *and* their child: a triangle of trust and attachments in the classroom 90
4.7 Key group time at Eastwood Children's Centre, Roehampton 99
4.8 Joshua's drawing, age 6.2, sledging very fast 106

Tables

4.1 'Personal' and 'professional' perspectives on the Key Persons approach 76
5.1 Grouping of children 123
5.2 Grouping of children 127
5.3 Grouping of children 130
5.4 Process of the project 133

Preface

Children begin their lives with us in the safe places of laps, homes and early childhood centres, and in the places we walk, talk and travel as families and communities. However loved and cherished children may be, childhood includes times and events that may be difficult or painful for children. Ordinary childhoods and ordinary growing up, alongside the magical, loving, enchanting times, also are times of difficult emotions, sadness, fear, anxiety, perhaps occasionally even terror, loss and bereavement.

Toddlers who are 'up' and wide eyed and whirring like aeroplanes above an adult's shoulders, and 'down' to terrible crashes on soft sofas, are rehearsing triumphs and treacheries. This 'playing up' and 'playing it out' is the stuff of growing up. Powerful thinkers, lovers and learners begin in families, and often go on to early years centres to live and learn these things too.

We think that what babies and young children experience in the beginning makes a difference, in families but also in early years centres. Adults at home help children manage the emotional roller coaster that life can be. Parents do this for their children as part of the day to day job of parenting, even if some of the time the incessant demands of children growing up can threaten to overwhelm most parents. The paradox of parenting is that it is so ordinary and so special at the same time.

In *Key Persons in the Early Years* we argue that the youngest children also need special kinds of relationships to set them up right when they are cared for away from their parents. Children from different families have very different experiences (for example playing in private gardens, travelling the hills and dales in the family van, watching videos, being carried through markets or sitting on the end of the supermarket trolley).

One or two practitioners in the setting, whilst never taking over from parents, need to connect with what parents would ordinarily do. That is, they need to be special for each child; help them manage throughout the day, think about them, get to know them well, and sometimes worry about them too, so as to help them to make a strong link between home and setting. We have called the two people that carry that role for a child, the child's *Key Persons*. The strategy that makes it all happen is the *Key Persons approach*.

Peter Elfer, Elinor Goldschmied and Dorothy Y. Selleck

Postcript for this second edition

Elinor died in 2009 and we are sad that she has not been able to contribute to this second edition of the book. We remain in active contact with many of the practitioners, trainers, academics and friends of hers, here in the UK as well as in Italy. We share a sense of gratitude for her huge legacy of the sense of how much it mattered to babies and young children to have someone in their early years setting for whom they are special. Elinor used to speak of the child 'being camped out, as it were, in the adult's mind'. Part of this legacy was also Elinor's commitment, without ever compromising the principle of 'professional' attachments, to continually explore and learn about how such attachments can work in the most respectful and effective way for all involved. We hope you the reader will join us in continuing that journey of research, exploration and understanding.

Peter Elfer and Dorothy Y. Selleck

Acknowledgements

The inspiration for the Key Persons approach came from the international work of Elinor Goldschmied, a trainer and consultant on good practice in nurseries.

Our evolving understanding over the years of the three authors thinking together about the subtleties of the interactions between parents, children and staff in early years settings and schools would never have got off the starting blocks if many early years managers and staff had not been so open to us spending time in their settings observing what went on.

We want to pay tribute to the professional openness and generosity of many parents and practitioners, friends and colleagues, who often seemed to be speaking to us very much from the heart. But it is the babies and young children who, when we found ways to listen carefully enough, taught us most about what matters in nurseries, often long before they could talk.

CHAPTER

1

Parenting and working, children and settings
Achieving life balances

Public policy and private choices

> Are work and family life compatible? All too often parents find it impossible to balance employment and care commitments. Reconciling work and family life is important to individuals and societies. Parents who wish to care for their children by giving up work should have their choice respected. Often, however, this 'choice' is constrained, because parents see no way of giving their children the care and education they need at the same time as working in today's demanding labour market. Yet children whose parents are not in paid work are likely to be poor, while mothers who have interrupted their careers to care for their children are at higher risk of poverty when they are older. The ability to generate income in a fulfilling job and the desire to provide the best for one's children, giving them the care and nurturing they need, do not have to be mutually exclusive.
>
> (OECD, 2005)

The practicalities for parents of finding a job and an early years place for the children where the hours fit together, never mind the journeys, is not at all straightforward. If parents also have children of school age, the logistics are worse. Then there are holidays, late starts on days following holidays and INSET days. Covering for when children are unwell can barely be thought about.

But achieving a balance of family life and work, connecting the worlds of home and the early years setting is much more than the fitting of work round setting hours or setting round working hours, as difficult as that is. There are emotional transactions to be negotiated: balancing personal needs and children's needs, time at home and earning an income for the family, being a 'good' employee but also being a 'good' parent. Although parents are very different from one another and have different approaches to bringing up their children, almost all parents want the very best for their child. Compromises are always necessary in life, but for most parents their children matter more than anything else. Striking these balances has to be done in a

society that seems to be continually changing its policies and attitudes to earning and parenting. Public policy has certainly come a long way in the last 60 years.

While recent governments have wanted to encourage both women and men to work outside the home, this has certainly not always been the approach. At the close of World War II, the Ministry of Health could not have been more explicit:

> in the interests of the health and development of the child … the right policy to pursue would be positively to discourage mothers of children under two from going out to work.
>
> (Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, 1945: 1)

Since 1945, the demand for greater fairness between women and men, equality of opportunity, changing family needs and the growth of the economy have combined to gradually enable a change of message from Government about how our youngest children are cared for.

In the years since 1945, the attitudes of government towards child care, evident in the circular quoted above with its message that women with children under the age of 2 should not work, have changed completely. Governments since 1994 have achieved a lot:

> The authors of this paper are not alone in applauding the government's achievements. Tremendous progress has been made in children's services in England since the first OECD review took place in December 1999. Most noteworthy are the significant increase in investment, the expansion of (local) Sure Start schemes and new moves towards children's centres and extended schools.
>
> (private communication from John Bennett, author of the OECD report on early years, 2004, quoted in Pugh and Sylva 2005: 22)

An aspect of this 'tremendous progress' has been the increasing attention successive governments have given to the Key Person role and its importance. In the guidance issued with the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health, 1991), the importance to children's well-being of consistent individual attention from a practitioner who knew that child well was emphasised. That value of each child having his own Key Person was a guiding principle of the *Birth to Three Matters* framework issued by the Government in 2002 (DfES, 2002). Another big step forward was made with the introduction of *The Early Years Foundation Stage* in September 2008, when the Key Persons role was made a duty ('you must') rather than just a recommendation ('it would be a good idea if…') (DfES, 2007).

Yet even back in 2005, Gillian Pugh and Kathy Sylva did not wear rose-tinted spectacles. They described a number of serious challenges still to be faced to develop a genuinely child-centred, integrated, accessible service working closely in partnership with parents. Further, as we write, the news is dominated by the imposition of spending cuts by the Coalition Government and the intention to move away from the aim of universal provision for all children and back to targeted provision for children and families considered to be most in need. The Early Years Foundation

Stage is being reviewed by Dame Claire Tickell and it is likely that we will see some considerable changes to it.

So public policy and the legislation, duties and guidance that accompany it, impacts directly on the private choices parents make because it influences the very supply of early years places, their cost and their quality in general and very specific ways. We know from professional experience, research evidence and from having children and grandchildren of our own, just how much it matters what each early years setting is like. We know too how much difference it makes to know that there is someone in the early years setting who has special responsibility for each child and for helping that child build a special bond of belonging.

As well as public policy, public attitudes impact on private choices too. The roles women and men, mothers and fathers take at home and at work, as portrayed on the television and film, in newspapers and magazines, also shape the life balances that families strike. At one time it was seen as irresponsible if a father did not work outside the home but irresponsible if a mother did. An opposite but equally powerful theme suggested women were bored or boring if they did not work outside the home. Many mothers seemed to feel blamed and shamed whatever they did.

For many parents, particularly mothers, there still seems to be quite a deep anxiety about whether the care of children outside the family home, however good it is, can be good enough. Yet the main conclusion of researchers is that good quality services are not harmful and may bring many benefits (Melhuish, 2004; Belsky *et al.,* 2007; NICHD, 1997). At home, they allow both parents to work and have a better standard of living. And children may end up with the best of both worlds, the love and uniqueness of private family life but also the advantage of being part of a public community of adults and other children in the early years setting.

Alongside changes in public policy, more flexibility and less blame in cultural attitudes about the roles men and women actually take has seemed to free up the private choices that can be made about how child rearing, earning a living and running a home can be shared.

How 'free' such choices feel to those who make them and how well they work out in practice depends on many factors and not least levels of wages parents receive and levels of charges for early years places they have to pay. The flexibility of working hours and the hours of the early years setting are key factors too. Alongside these essential practicalities, we believe there are two other critical factors that determine the impact of early years care and education on the daily lives of children, parents, and practitioners: first, the quality of the early years setting; and second, how the two worlds of home and setting are enabled to join up. We believe the key to both these factors converges in the idea of the Key Persons approach. The remainder of Chapter 1 is devoted to saying why.

What counts in quality?

'Quality' is a slippery idea. It is easy to slip it into writing and conversation ('quality education', 'quality setting', 'quality standards'), as if everybody would understand exactly what quality means in practice (and agree that this is what they wanted or valued for children). The quality of a car will be judged differently by different drivers

according to what they most want (size, style, reliability, economy, top speed). To describe something as a 'quality car' says very little about its strengths or weaknesses. Similarly with a 'quality early years setting', different parents will give different priorities to different aspects of the setting (location, training of staff, programme of activities, approach of the manager, facilities and equipment).

When asked what they think is most important, most parents and practitioners list practical things first – safety, hygiene, quality of the food and sufficient staff. However, they also say that whilst these are essential, they are not enough. What matters most once the practicalities are in place are the staff, what they do and how they interact with the children.

This strong consensus amongst the people in daily contact with the children is supported by research:

> Why do infants, indeed all people, so strongly seek states of interpersonal connectedness, and why does failure to achieve connectedness wreak such damage on their mental and physical health?
>
> (Tronick, 2005: 293)

Penelope Leach emphasises the same central point although she expressed it in terms of how much relationships, another word for 'interpersonal connectedness', matter:

> Children's relationships with the people who take care of them are an important – probably the most important – aspect of the overall quality of child care. Research studies have identified a range of caregiver qualities that make good relationships with young children more likely, including sensitivity, empathy, and attunement. Being cared for by adults whose work is informed by these qualities and attitudes can help babies and young children to feel confident in themselves and encourage them to communicate and talk, think and have ideas, discover and learn.
>
> (Leach, 2009: 193)

To this extent, researchers and writers, practitioners and parents seem to broadly agree about what counts in judging quality. However, when Leach speaks of 'adults', how many adults can this be? How can a team of practitioners work as individuals as well as a team offering each child consistent attention as well as enabling the child to benefit from contact with all the people in a team? And what does Leach mean by 'sensitivity' and 'attunement'?

Consistency partly means that the majority of staff working in a setting 'this month' are still there working together 'next month' and the month after and so on. It refers to staff turnover and the importance of this being low. However, it also refers to a more detailed consistency during each day with regard to how many different people hold and care for each child. If a baby has five nappy changes in a day, for example, and a different person carries out each one, is that sufficiently 'consistent'? If six different people give a toddler her lunch, one washing face and hands, another sitting her in her chair, a third spooning in first course and a fourth pudding with a

fifth also taking a turn with the spoon and a sixth wiping her face and hands and getting her down at the end, is that sufficiently consistent?

These questions of who does what with each child in each setting, the number of different people and the details of how they interact, are very practical questions that lie at the heart of big questions about quality. But they raise an even bigger question about what kinds of places early years settings should ideally be.

Most people, watching the interaction between a baby and parent figure, are moved by the intensity of their mutual love affair. Whilst the baby's adoration, delight and playfulness can seem to quickly collapse into sadness or even despair, there is no escaping the intense passion and importance of these interactions. This is how babies are!

But why? Is this intense interaction, like any other love affair, purely for its own sake, unique and irreplaceable, a wonderful part of the human condition? Or does it also have a purpose? Is this interaction, in the form it takes, present for a reason? Does it matter for the child's healthy development? Is there even a place for the word 'love' in discussions about professional practice?

It's called love … actually!

> 'Care' is the word that is most often used in early childhood settings to describe the role of practitioners who are not 'teachers' in the traditional sense of the word … We are continually reminded that care and education are inseparable … For me, in policy terms, the role of 'carer' has always been cast as a 'cinderella' role to that of teacher/educator. Many practitioners choose a career in nursery nursing because of their desire to form close relationships. A well informed practitioner (with a Masters degree in ECE) recently told me, 'Our babies are so happy and content, they have a lovely time, I love them all so much!' …
>
> Drawing on Noddings' work on the intellectual aspect of caring in relation to ethics of care and education, I want to push the boundaries of 'care' and 'love' further, specifically in relation to babies and children under three. I want to suggest that the work of early childhood professionals involves not only 'care' and 'education' but 'love, care and education'. If this is the case then could it be that for some mothers when they recognise reciprocity at first hand they are able to identify the intellectual experience as an attachment that is fundamentally in tune with their own wants and needs for their child rather than a feeling that is threatening to the mother–child relationship?
>
> (Page, 2008: 181–7)

In relation to early years settings, we can ask these questions in another way. We know that monomarty (infants being cared for by one mother figure) is not a precondition for healthy human development. However, do settings need to be places where *some* features of the parental relationship are provided for each child? These features might include coming to know the child very well, showing the child spontaneity, immediacy and delight in interactions, the ability to be involved in an intense relationship without being overwhelmed by it.

In no way is this to suggest the relationships professional practitioners make with children can be the same as home relationships, but it is to ask whether some aspects of the parental relationship need to be replicated in early years settings.

Are settings for babies and young children best understood as an extension of home, where children meet a wider range of adults and children but are still mainly cared for by a small number of people, in relationships that replicate some aspects of home relationships? Our answer to this question is *yes.* For us, the meaning and implementation of the Key Persons approach is about the organisation and detail of professional relationships to support this model.

As we describe on pp. 9–22, others have argued differently. The uniqueness of home relationships and their importance to healthy development are understood and acknowledged. However, their argument is that there is no need to attempt to reproduce any of the attributes of home relationships when children are away from home. They see early years settings as providing an opportunity for children, from the earliest age, to experience and participate in a network of relationships, with other babies and children as well as adults, that is much broader and more open than within a family. In such a model of the early years setting, the Key Persons approach may well then be seen as unduly restrictive.

The early years setting: a home from home?

Is the job of a practitioner, in a 'good quality' setting, to be rather like a loving parent? Practitioners sometimes speak as if the role is like that of a parent although they are often careful to say it is not the same as a parent. Carol and Mehta, experienced practitioners working in private settings, speak first:

> It's like you are sort of their second mum as such because you're like their parent during the day because you do everything with them that their parent would do with them on a Saturday or a Sunday or any other day that they don't come in so it's like you've sort of really got that back stage role it is sort of similar I suppose … it's a nice feeling of second mum, it's not oh God I'm being his mum again today, it's a nice feeling, it's like sometimes when it's during the week you're sort of on the parents' level in a way, well I suppose that sounds wrong. It's just you see as much of them as their parents do. If they're here from Monday to Friday you see as much of the children as their parents see of them. So I suppose that probably sounds weird but … (Carol, toddler room leader)
>
> (Elfer, 2008)

> You do feel like Mum, especially with baby babies because they're so dependent on you, they're very dependent. They need feeding and they just need attention all the time. They need their nappies done and it's pretty much you do feel like their mum sort of. You don't go to the extreme where we try and take over as their mum but it's just that feeling. I know what it's like to be a mum and it's only after having my son how I can actually put it on the other foot now. Whereas before I never had a baby of my own at home 24 hours a day, it's a little