

# Using a Key Person approach

## Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

### *Aistear*

**Themes:** Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking

**Guidelines for good practice:** Learning and developing through interactions (pp.27-51)

### *Síolta* Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

5: Interactions, C5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5

Research Digests linked to the above  
**Standards**

This tip sheet looks at what a Key Person does. It outlines the benefits of using a Key Person approach and highlights some considerations to be taken into account when organising this approach.

All practitioners work with and get to know every child in their room. Key Persons, in addition to their usual everyday interactions with parents and families, get to know a small group of 'key' children very well. They act as a link between the setting and home - assessing, documenting and planning for these children's learning and development and sharing this information with parents and other relevant people, for example, a speech therapist or social worker.

## What is a Key Person approach?

A Key Person approach is used in many early childhood settings to help children to form secure attachments and build close relationships with a Key Person. Using this approach means each child is assigned a named person who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with the baby, toddler or young child and his/her family.

The Key Person approach supports children's overall learning and development. Children do better when they experience warm and responsive relationships. When they feel secure and happy and can trust the adults around them, they are more confident in exploring the world, trying out new experiences and learning new things. They become more independent when they know that they can rely on the adults for reassurance and comfort when they need it. When Key Persons in early childhood settings spend time caring for, playing with and talking to babies, toddlers or young children in the small group that is their special responsibility, this fosters the kind of nurturing relationships that help children to feel confident and competent.

## What does a Key Person do?

The Key Person supports the child's developing identity and responds sensitively to his/her communications, feelings and behaviour. He/she is aware of the child's and family's preferences and needs (for example, likes and dislikes in relation to food, sleep, comfort items, activities) and ensures that these are respected and promoted.

The role of a Key Person includes

- being a **familiar point of contact** for parents and families when the child starts in the setting and at daily arrival and departure times.
- getting to **know each child's** interests, preferences, temperament, ways of communicating (verbal and non-verbal), emotional and physical needs, and responding to these sensitively.
- being aware of the child's language, background and culture, and ensuring that these are **understood, respected and reflected** in the setting.
- being a **secure base** for the child from which he/she can explore and interact with others.
- observing, assessing and recording the child's learning and development, and helping to plan new experiences that build on interests and help him/her to **learn and develop in a holistic way**.
- sharing **important information** with parents, for example, when the baby, toddler or young child does or says something new or when he/she particularly enjoys something or makes a new friend.

- easing **transitions** for the child by helping to introduce new experiences and people, and helping the child to **cope with change**, for example, at the settling-in stage, when moving through activities during the day or spending time in a new room with the child to ease the transition to a new group or staff member.

## What are the benefits of the Key Person approach?

- **For the baby, toddler and young child:**  
*I always have someone special that I can go to when I am sad and need a cuddle, or when I discover something new and want to share it. I know what to expect, and feel secure and confident enough to explore my surroundings, try out new things, play, learn and have fun.*
- **For the parent:** *I know that my child's development is being nurtured and that he/she has someone to go to when I am not there. I know that I am listened to, and that I have a familiar person in the setting that I can talk to about my child.*
- **For the Key Person:** *I can get to know the children in my group and their families very well, and this helps me to be more effective in my work. I can watch how the children in my group grow and develop over the year, and can support this by planning suitable and enjoyable experiences for them so that they can progress in their learning and development. I know what is most likely to interest them, and how to comfort them when they are upset.*

## Organising a Key Person approach

The following points may be helpful when organising a Key Person approach in a setting.

- Within a setting, children often show a preference for one or other person and will go to this person when they are upset, unwell or tired. As far as possible, children's **preferences** should be respected when allocating a Key Person to them.
- It is important that the child forms a relationship with a second or **back-up person** and with other members of staff in addition to the Key Person.
- Organise staff rotas/holidays/transitions so that the baby, toddler or young child is **cared for consistently** by the same Key Person or by another familiar back-up person when this is not possible. Children should always have at least one familiar person on hand.
- Make sure those who look after the baby, toddler or young child try, as far as possible, to maintain the **same care-giving routines and approaches** so that the child knows what to expect.
- **Arrival and departure times** are crucial so ensure the Key Person makes use of these to chat to parents and to exchange information, share any concerns, and to help make the links between home and the setting.
- Sometimes a Key Person **moves rooms** with their group of children, making the transition easier for all involved.