

# HOW A CHILD'S EXPERIENCE IN NURSERY HELPS PREVENT HEART ATTACKS IN ADULTHOOD



**Hazel Sneddon is the Nursery Manager of Big Bird Nursery. In this article, Hazel explains why she believes all early years staff in the country should be trained in the biology of relationships – and why her nursery focuses on children's emotional needs rather than managing their behaviour.**

I am proud to be the manager of Big Bird Nursery, a pre-school and out of school service operating in Larkhall, South Lanarkshire.

One of the things that makes me especially proud is that we have ensured all our staff are trained in attachment. We understand we have the responsibility to do our very best to eliminate the stress and anxiety children bring with them to our setting. Children of all ages experience stress as they move from a home to an educational environment. As adults, we are charged with reducing that stress, paying attention to it and helping children let go of it. That's what our attachment training has taught us.

Our approach is informed by the research showing that children who experience stressful and unpredictable childhoods are more likely to experience poor mental health and develop long term health problems as they move into adulthood. It is that insight that has given rise to the term 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs).

Our staff team now recognises that ACEs are common, and that they are linked to cancer, heart disease, mental illness and being a victim of violence. We appreciate that ACEs are commonly intergenerational, continuing within the same families. We now regard ourselves, as early years practitioners, as having a very important role in addressing ACEs. We believe it is time for all educational practice to

follow the research and that all of us have to work together to break this vicious cycle in our society.

As early years practitioners, we need to recognise how important we are to these little people. To them, we are an extension of their family, not paid staff.

Have you ever seen a baby look into the eyes of their carer, and observed how their sense of bonding and security seems to be acknowledged? That is a display of attachment. Attachment-led care acknowledges this basic human need. Those of us who work in early learning and education establishments need to foster that sense of security for every child of any age.



**Hazel Sneddon, Nursery Manager**

Let me give one example of what attachment-led practice looks like for us. Ever seen a person walk down a noisy street, with the baby facing outwards in a buggy? Our culture believes that we are doing something admirable – allowing our children to see the world. But babies easily end up feeling disconnected from their carer, because they can't hear or see them. At Big Bird, we teach our parents and carers that this disconnection is not contributing to a baby's strong sense of emotional security. We try to help our parents see the anxiety babies feel in wondering 'Where's Mum?'

So at Big Bird, we now ensure we have prams that face the person pushing them. This is one way we promote attachment-led practice with our staff, and it gives us a practical way to show our parents how secure attachment contributes to healthy brain development. We talk about it in one-to-one conversations and in parent/carer evenings.

We've also changed the way we talk about behaviour. We no longer talk about 'bad behaviour'. We know behaviour is a signal of a child's emotional needs. We focus on responding in ways that help them feel secure, strengthen self-regulation and become resilient. We know you can never boost a child's well-being by making them feel worse about themselves. If a child's behaviour is 'bad', we need to be asking ourselves what's happened for them. The work we put into building genuine relationships, with children and families, helps us do that. Our parents often comment they feel happy knowing their children love their key practitioner like a family member.

Preventing ACEs is possible. Early intervention is crucial. Supporting the attachment process is fundamental to the success and wellbeing of our children. At Big Bird Nursery, we are delighted to be part of the ACEs Movement emerging across Scotland. We will keep shouting.

