

Should childcare staff 'love' the youngsters in their care?

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Anonymous survey explored how early years workers felt about 'loving' the children in their care While the majority of practitioners believe showing affection to the children in their care is important, concerns exist about how others view the appropriateness of their actions

A toolkit for early years practitioners has been created by researchers at the University of Sheffield after a study examined whether they should 'love' the children in their care.

Dr Jools Page, from the University's School of Education, explored how a rise in media coverage surrounding sex abuse scandals has had an impact on childcare providers by asking early years professionals for their views on 'professional love' in an anonymous online survey.

To carry out the research Dr Page and the research team spent five months from February to July 2015 talking to early years professionals across England and worked intensively with early years practitioners at Fennies, a privately owned group of nurseries based in south London and Surrey, who were the project collaborators.

"In recent years, a small but growing number of early years practitioners have been convicted of child abuse, and the continued media exposure of abusive clergy and then of various 'celebrity' entertainers has led to a climate of wariness and even suspicion of adults' professional relationships with very young children," said Dr Page.

"A difficulty for those who work in early years settings is how to express the affectionate and caring behaviours which the role demands of them in their loco parentis, and which very young children need in their development of healthy attachments."

Dr Page has developed the term 'professional love' to try to understand these intimacies, which she says have been relatively unexamined in the daily practice of early years settings, obscured by a climate of wariness.

The survey, which was completed by 793 early years professionals, including nursery staff, childminders and teaching assistants, found:

95 per cent felt that showing affection to the children in their care was an important part of early years practice. However, 10 per cent said they were worried about false accusations and how others view the appropriateness of their actions. Opinion was mixed on whether respondents felt comfortable being alone around the children in their care, with one in five saying they avoid doing so.

Respondents gave a wide range of definitions of 'professional love', including broad terms like 'care' and 'kindness' or being 'available' and paying 'attention' to the children.

Some disagreed when relating professional love to parental love, with some saying it should be parental in nature—'loving a child as if it's your own' or 'acting like a mother'—with others saying it wasn't the same as the bond you'd have with your own child.

The role of physical contact like kissing and hugging was present in some definitions, with some comment about acceptable and unacceptable actions, while a small number went further to describe that displays of affection in general must be initiated by the child.

Just over half of the respondents (56 per cent) said they were not concerned about parents' attitudes to professional love, with 22 per cent saying they feel they are acting in line with what parents want for their children and three per cent feeling that parents understand there are clear boundaries or policies in place.

However, 10 per cent of practitioners reported concerns over parents feeling threatened, jealous or uncomfortable about early years staff developing a relationship with their children. This was more common (13 per cent) for childminders than those working in other early years settings (8 per cent).

In response to a child saying 'I love you', nearly half (47 per cent) said they would say 'I love you' back.

Others said they would give limited reciprocation by saying something like 'I like you' (20 per cent), say 'that's nice' or 'lovely' (15 per cent) or use diversionary phrasing such as 'I love spending time with you too' (2 per cent). Two per cent said they would explain or explore other relationships by asking questions like 'who else do you love?', a further two per cent said they would respond by saying 'you are all loved' and one per cent said they would give a non-verbal response like a smile or hug.

"The project findings were used to co-produce a set of professional development materials in the form of an 'Attachment Toolkit' which includes case studies, narratives and video, which has been trialled and evaluated by Fennies, our collaborating group of nurseries," said Dr Page.

"As this project has demonstrated, it is the debate and theorisation of love and care which is important. Providing opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect upon each other's viewpoints is likely

to bring about a more thoughtful understanding and crucially a shift in their thinking."

John Warren, Director of Childcare at Fennies, added: "We got involved in the research because of our vision to create the right start for under-fives. During the settling-in period children need a great deal of what can only be described as care and attention - or, as Dr Page would call it, professional love.

"Creating the right start for children and families is imperative, but it is also important for the parents to know where we are coming from as professional practitioners and to understand that we are not trying to take over from them as the child's main care giver.

"Our managers attended a boutique-style conference with Dr Page and Dr Clare, the project research assistant and were enthused by the outcomes. They can see the benefits it will have for our children and families, ensuring that [children](#) feel safe and secure in their environment and are predisposed to learn."

He added: "Following the initial trial of the toolkit full implementation within our settings is still at an early stage at Fennies We are delighted to be continuing our collaboration with Dr Page and the University of Sheffield and are planning to extend the case study examples to inform a company-wide professional development conference in March 2016 which will focus on Fennies approach to 'professional love'.

Provided by University of Sheffield

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