



The Emotional Ecology of Two-Year-Old Daycare

Intro

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I started my full-time working career within two-year-old daycare after a period of working part time with a variety of ages. It was a culture shock! It took me a while to acclimatise to the erratic behaviour, short attention spans and unpredictable emotional responses.

However, once I dropped my adult led pedagogy and learned to go with the flow, laugh and enjoy the crazy times, I fell in love with this age range. I continued my role as key person and Early Years Practitioner with two-year-olds for 5 years, completing my BA Hons Degree in Early Years during this time.

Later I worked within the sector in a variety of roles including Team Leader, Daycare Manager and Centre Lead within Children's Centres for the next 8 years. During this time I did my Masters in Early Years Leadership with Birmingham City University. Since 2016 I have been lecturing in Early Childhood Education and Care at levels 2-6. I now Course Lead and teach on the BA Hons Early Childhood Education and Care Degree at The University

Centre Somerset. I love my work and am still completely in love with the crazy lives of two-year-olds, so much so that in September 2019 I decided to start my PhD journey and am due to complete in November 2024.

My PhD journey has taken me back to practice, with an Investigation into the Emotional Environments of Two-Year-Old Daycare.

I am fascinated by the emotional lives of humans and even more curious about how that feels when we bring two-year-olds together and call it Daycare. Therefore I designed a project to find out how the emotional environment is structured within daycare, what creates this environment and how can we support it within practice. Its been an amazing journey so far and I wanted to share with you some of the key aspects I think are interesting to reflect upon.

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Professional Love

Jools Page (2017) describes professional love as the complexity of labelling attachment and care as 'Love' within the setting. Her work concludes that this terrain of attached relationships being labelled 'loving' can be contentious. My study explored parts of this within practice. For example, I explored what happens if a child says 'I love you' to a member of staff or another child. I asked what the response might be and what were the boundaries of attachment in terms of physical touch.

This is incredibly political for practitioners, while they are often allocated as key people to children at random, how this works in practice can be tricky. Rotas, sickness and holidays often influence the actual delivery. Also – how much care and attention is 'too much' or seen as preferring one child over another? These very human issues are often left unexplored. I wonder if we can start the debate with our practitioners, is it ok if they love children in a professional sense, if its not love then how do we frame it? Also how do we talk to parents about what they think/want and then how do we respond if a child says they love us?

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Post Human Factors

Post human factors sounds complicated as a phrase but it just acknowledges that emotions are shaped from aspects outside the human. For example, have you ever felt extra tired for no apparent reason, ever felt angry and you are not sure why, ever cried randomly?

Humans like to think they are in charge of their worlds but in reality, even science now acknowledges there is much we do not know about our daily lives and what shapes them (Or our subjective reality). This fascinates me, how can two staff or

children be in the same room in daycare but feel differently about it?

Most interestingly I found a co-relation between certain post human factors and the emotions observable. For example, when children were experimenting with gravitational pull (rolling toys, balls and watching things fall) I saw a rise in interest. When children were engaging in chemical compounds (Gloop/Cornflour/Ublex) I saw a rise in joy and during a heat wave I saw a rise in annoyance.

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Emotional Labour

Many jobs can be seen as emotionally laborious. This means that we must use our emotions to conduct the job and this can provide extra strain/stress and joy to the person in question. They are typically lower paid and can be viewed through a feminist lens to be undertaken by predominately females. Peter Elfer (2015) explored what this looked like for staff in Early Years settings, especially interested in the way practitioners were or not, prepared for the attachment elements of their roles.

Like professional love I found that practitioners were often unprepared to undertake these roles and while the environments I studied had 'joy' as an

emotion most frequently displayed, there are a whole range of emotions I observed practitioners display and have to regulate children through. This alongside the fast-paced environments with numerous demands often means that practitioners have many and competing tasks. I wonder how we acknowledge that and how we encourage self-care in our practitioners to de-stress, offload and unwind so the emotions from the day can be processed rather than suppressed?

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Ethics of Care

Our values and ethics lead behaviour, within such professionally loving roles, interactions and the emotions/values behind them are ever more important. Nel Noddings, (1984) suggested that the requirement to care deeply was an ethical consideration within these roles. If our ethics lead our interactions within settings, how does this shape care? For example, are children given choice and autonomy, power, and advocacy? Or do they only decide certain things, do the children with the ability to talk lead the way? How can we analyse our behaviours to discover our ethical approach?

Within my study, the previously mentioned fast paced environments posed an extra challenge. Children were seen displaying joy as the predominate emotion but also common was submission. This was seen as children doing what they were led to do but with no engagement. They were also witnessed being fully engaged and empowered. I wondered how or if we can, develop consistency and reflect on the ethical approaches to develop social justice. We know children are disempowered, so how can we empower them through our ethical approaches?

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Rackets and a Life Script

A life script is the story that creates our unconscious emotions and behaviours, which shape our actions (Erskin et al., 2011). This is written throughout our lives by our experiences and connections. The brain continues to form until we are 25 years old and is particularly influential in early childhood. This means the daycare environment contributes to the later unconscious emotions and behaviours, which shape the children's actions. What is also interesting is that as this is influenced by the social environment and we as humans want to gain reward from those around us, most humans will develop behaviour that gains them social reward.

My study found that we do have a bias for positive emotions within daycare, so happiness is preferred over sadness or anger. This can mean that we dismiss emotions that are more challenging, such as annoyance or anger and encourage children to move through these emotions so they can then be 'happy'. This can mean that we all develop racket emotions, which are fake emotions based on how we feel we should be acting rather than how we actually feel (English, 1971). For example, have you ever responded calmly when you wanted to be angry but felt it was unacceptable? I wonder how children feel they should behave and how this shapes the emotions they display?

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Synchronicity

This aspect appreciates the rhythms and patterns that exist within the emotional environment. For example, I witnessed mirrored engagement levels between children and staff, so when staff were highly engaged in play, so were children. Likewise, when staff were distracted by tasks or disrupted in play by messages being passed to them by other staff, children were more distracted. Our brain has mirror neurons (brain cells) that exist to copy behaviour and emotions. This is part of our survival system. In practice you may see this as what I call crying dominos, one baby cries, looks at another baby (who has nothing wrong with them) and

they start crying. You may also have cried because someone else cried!

Within practice Clark, (2023) identifies that settings are so fast paced, this often leads to children being hurried, rushed and no time to be in play, to wallow, to linger or to dwell on their interests. Emotional states linked to this rushing also means practitioners feel rushed and stressed. Time becomes an important part of measuring what should be happening, along with routines and timetables. In practice this means we are always checking the time and moving on, even when children or us, do not want to. I wonder what would happen if we just flowed, how would we all feel?

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