

## Holding the child in mind<sup>1</sup>

The emotional quality of the interaction between young children and their caregivers and its implications for the capacity to learn

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### Introduction

My views and understanding of small children under three in day care are based on observations of them in various settings over the past twenty years. But my understanding of toddlers has been deepened and informed by the writings of the Object Relations theorists John Bowlby (1984,1986, 1987, 1989), Donald Winnicott (1970, 1982, 1985ab) and Wilfred Bion (1991). Object Relations theory was originally a British development of Freudian theory. But rather than seeing the human being as a system of biological drives, Object Relations places relationships at the heart of what it is to be human. It also places the human being in a dual world of external and internal relationship. Its premise is that the human being is essentially social and that our need for others is primary and cannot be explained in terms of other needs or reduced to something more basic, such as food and drink (Gomez 1997). My aim in this paper is to try to explore the use of Object Relations ideas and perspectives in the practice of the daily work in daycare in order to provide an environment in which the children will develop a mental state of wellbeing as a starting point for exploration and learning.

I especially wish to focus on the importance of the link between early relationships and learning. I will try to illustrate at least two aspects: the effect of early relationships upon the capacity to learn, and the importance of the emotional quality of the relationship, that is to say the dialogue, within which learning takes place.

An intersubjective relationship where the “reading of each other” is mutual (I feel that you feel that I feel) is a condition of humanness according to Stern (2004) and is of course of great importance to the very young. Mutual reading of each other is also one of the major motivations that drive a relationship forward. The children learn about the world and themselves through a mutual interaction in the relationship. Object Relational research

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of holding/holding environment was introduced by object relational theorist D.W. Winnicott (see Winnicott 1985).

helps us to illuminate the development of children's capacity to learn and think. It presents us with an interesting widening of perspectives on learning and thinking and its association with secure attachment (Bowlby 1989). The research also heightens our awareness of what an emotional experience learning and teaching is.

### The world in small doses

The transition from home to daycare and coping with separation from parents, the children's primary attachment figures, is a crucial developmental achievement. Both parents and staff need to help each other in order to present the transition in small doses for the individual child (Winnicott 1970). It is a demanding challenge for the very young and also for the parents both physically and emotionally. The experiences of leaving and being left are profound and may evoke strong feelings. Separation can, therefore, be associated with feelings of being abandoned or of being rejected. Because of this, children may need both help and empathic support with their separation experiences.

In Norway the parents are encouraged to accompany their child for most of the first week of daycare whilst the child gets to know the new environment and her new key person. This process might be seen as the first stage of developing the necessary secondary attachment bonds (Abrahamsen 2010b). The staff also recommends a few minutes of separation as a starting point, and gradually increasing the time during the week. The duration of care each day should also be kept short while the secondary attachment bond is developing.

Routines like these, help the children to realize that they can take comfort from their key worker and feel more secure. It also helps them to gradually accept the separation because they have experienced the much longed for reunion with the parent time and time again. They will eventually be able to bear the separation because they have learned through experience that the parent is trustworthy and always returns. This gradually gives the individual child the necessary space and freedom to explore and learn.

Providing for the use of the individual child's transitional object (Winnicott 1985a) in daycare is also important for toddlers' ability to holding their parents in mind. A transitional object may be a teddy, a particular blanket or some other soft object. What Winnicott is referring to here has an infinite variety and is also universal. The transitional objects all come to stand for a comforting aspect of the parents, and young children invest these objects with meaning. "Blankie" or teddy can provide comfort and ease and may become vitally important to the children, creating very great stress if these cannot be found or not be allowed to use at the time of going to sleep, when upset or as a defense against anxiety etc.

In the individual child's experience the transitional object forms a bridge of transition between the parent in the world and the parent in the child's mind, an area of illusion. Winnicott (1985b) named this phenomenon "the potential space".

### Understanding the importance of attachment

The majority of children develop what is called a secure attachment (Bowlby 1984) to their parents and a reasonable balance between dependence and independence. Secure attachment means having a predictable, safe and affectionate bond with an attachment figure. But for a small proportion of children their relationship with their parent are insecure and troubled. Insecure attachment means having a less predictable bond with the attachment figures. These children might experience the parent as patchy and not reliable enough during the transition from home to daycare and during the daily separations. As a result they may be overcome by panic or anger at the absence (Davids 2010). Experiences like this over time can be too much of a burden for the very young. They will need help and empathic insight into their emotional needs to be able to tolerate the daily separations and the absence of their parents. Good quality care is important because as Winnicott (1985a) points out, it strengthens the child's sense of self. He noted that deprived children are often notorious restless and unable to play. A failure of dependability or neglect might involve a loss of the play area and hinder their capacity to learn. It is therefore imperative that the staff has theoretical understanding of the attachment needs of toddlers and if possible actively encourage them to form long term secondary bonds. Personalized care might be the necessary starting point for these children's wellbeing and for enabling them to play and learn in a purposeful way according to R. Bowlby (2007) and Davids (2010).

### Attachment theory

The development of Attachment Theory by John Bowlby (1969, 1973 and 1980) has made a major contribution to our understanding of the early emotional development of children. Attachment is the condition in which a person is linked emotionally with another person, usually, but not always, someone perceived older, stronger and wiser than themselves. A primary attachment figure refers to the person with whom a child develops a main lifelong emotional bond, and whom they most want to be comforted by when they are frightened or hurt, most often their parents. Evidence for the existence of attachment comes from proximity seeking, secure base phenomena (following, crying, clinging, reaching out etc.) and separation protest, all of which is named *attachment behavior*.

The term secondary attachment figure refers to a few special people in a child's life with whom they have developed a close subsidiary or secondary attachment bond, such as siblings, grandparents, nannies, nursery teachers etc. These people provide the young children with comfort and security in the absence of primary attachment figures. Having

three or more such people will usually increase children's resilience and act as a protective factor throughout childhood (R. Bowlby 2007).

However the pattern of attachment varies. A child may be either secure or insecure attached, and is according to Bowlby (1989) the product of how the primary attachment figures have treated the child. Thus one child may have a secure attachment with the mother but not with the father, a second may have it with the father but not with the mother etc. However, Ainsworth (et.al 1978) has shown us that children with secure relationship to both parents are found to be most confident and competent. Each of them provides "a secure base" that includes a stable feeling of safety and a freedom for the child to explore and learn through the interaction with the parents which also helps the child to establish and cope with new relationships both to adults and other children.

### A secure base

Mary Ainsworth (1982), a co-founder of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, introduced the concept of "a secure base" in connection with her research. She used the concept to describe the emotional environment created by the attachment figure for the child. The essence of the secure base is that it provides a springboard for curiosity and exploration. When danger threatens, a very young child will cling to their attachment figures. Older children will also keep in more or less close proximity to their attachment figures depending on their subjective need for safety. The central feature is that the child can return to the secure base knowing for sure that she will be welcomed when she gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened. But the role of the base is also to encourage and perhaps assist the child's autonomy after a period of comfort. In essence the adult's role is one of being available and ready to respond, but to intervene actively only when clearly necessary. Much of the time the role is a waiting one but it is none the less vital for that (Bowlby 1989:11-12).

### Attachment – based daycare

The notion that learning takes place within relationships and in dialogue has great implications on daycare. The quality within the interaction between adults and children in daycare centres is of crucial importance. In any situation where babies and toddlers under 3 are separated from their parents, they feel safe only when they are with someone else with whom they have an affectionate attachment bond. If the children don't feel safe it will obstruct their capacity to play and learn. This needs to be recognized by staff in daycare. One and two year olds are vulnerable and dependent in many situations and in need of a

“secure base” through the adults’ caring behavior. Care in this context is associated with the staff’s capacity for intimacy, tenderness, warmth, kindness, in short: an attentive and emotional availability (Bowlby 1989). Toddlers need to develop and maintain a relationship to a secondary attachment figure within daycare, very often the key person, to ease the daily separations from their parents. If each child experiences the relationship as stable and reliable no matter what happens, a secure base for demanding exploration and endeavor is felt to be in place, and the stage is set for both formal and informal learning.

### Key persons/key workers

Some day care centres practise the routine of trying to offer secondary attachment figures for the children through appointed key workers to each child, mainly to ease the transition from home to day care centre. Other day care centres maintain the practise of secondary attachment figures on a more permanent basis. The assumption is that when the key workers are consistent, sensitive and responsive they can benefit the toddlers’ social and cognitive development and also provide support for families (Rustin & Bradley 2008). But for a secondary bond to develop the key workers must be willing to make an emotional commitment to the child that is in their care. Ideally, this means that a key worker should not be looking after more than three toddlers at a time. I would argue that the way the staff responds to children indicates how interested they are in them, how able they are to “see” them as having a unique experience, to attribute meaning and value to them, and to allow them personhood from the very start.<sup>2</sup> The children will then be seen as human beings and not merely as human be comings (James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Prout 2000).

But staff illness and absences, and staff comings and goings due to rotas, are unfortunately very common in most daycare centres. Abrahamsen and Mørkeseth (1998, 2001) observed that this kind of instability has a severe negative impact on young children’s experience of safety, their capacity to play and explore and their general state of emotional wellbeing. Attachment theory as developed by Bowlby might help us understand these reactions among the very young when they are separated from their parents. Attachment theory and also the work from current post Bowlbyan researchers (Fonagy and Target 1997, Fonagy 2001) might work as a source of inspiration and new learning for the staff. It might also help the staff to prevent some of the above mentioned instability for the children.

One way of making these theoretical perspectives accessible to the staff is for the day care centres to provide supervision to those who work directly with the toddlers on a daily basis. Research has shown that geographical proximity and emotional availability during the day is

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<sup>2</sup> The appointed key worker may not always become a secondary attachment figure to the child in question. Sometimes children seek out somebody else among the staff with whom they develop an affectionate attachment bond.

of utmost importance for toddlers' feeling of safety and wellbeing (R. Bowlby 2007). If the key workers are encouraged to make a habit of positioning themselves on the floor while the children are playing it will give the children the needed access to eye contact with them, and thus make them secure enough to explore and learn (Legendre and Fontaine 1991 in Röthle 2001). Mutual gaze can be experienced as a symbolic equivalent of touch for the children and reassure them while playing.

Donald Winnicott's (1985b) expression "environment mother" springs to mind. He claims that the capacity to be alone and the ability to play is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of reliable attachment figures and that without a sufficiency of this experience the important capacity to be alone cannot develop properly. He argues that learning through play is rooted in the relationship of trust that may develop between the toddlers and their primary and secondary attachment figures. The ability to play is an achievement according to Winnicott's theory of emotional development:

*Put a lot of store on a child's ability to play. If a child is playing there is room for a symptom or two, and if a child is able to enjoy play, both alone and with other children, there is not very serious trouble afoot. If in this play is employed a rich imagination, and if, also, pleasure is got from games that depend on exact perception of external reality, then you can be fairly happy.....The playing shows that this child is capable, given reasonably good and stable surroundings, of developing a personal way of life, and eventually of becoming a whole human being, wanted as such, and welcomed by the world at large (Winnicott 1970:130).*

## Observation – a corner stone for maintaining quality

Sustained observation is an important and necessary tool to help staff to maintain and improve their insight into children's play and social interaction and also into the individual child's ability to interact with others, both adults and other children. Observation of the adults' emotional availability in their interaction with the toddlers is another important basis for maintaining and improving the quality of the pedagogical work in daycare centres.

There are many different ways in which child observational practice is carried out due to theoretical, cultural and institutional influences. I would like to present an observation method called *Relationall Observation*<sup>3</sup>, rooted in Object Relations theory<sup>4</sup>, which corresponds with the paradigm shift concerning toddlers and the importance of relationships. Relational Observation method was developed at the University of Stavanger

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<sup>3</sup> The observation method is an adapted form of the English method ; Infant Observation, initiated by Esther Bick and John Bowlby at the Tavistock Centre, London. For further reading see Reid 1997, Sternberg 2005, Magagna 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See Gomez 1997.

by Abrahamsen (2002, 2004) and has become part of a 30 ECTS course in Early Childhood Studies, in the third and final year of Early Childhood Education, Bachelor programme.

Relational Observation consists of serial observations in daycare centres (one hour's observation a week over 8 weeks of the same child and her relationships with the staff) to allow for the emergence of interaction patterns which might be invisible among the events under occasional observation or in single observations. The method focuses on the *interactions* and the *relationships* between children and their secondary attachment figures and not merely on the child's own ability to relate to others.

Supervised training is a vital part of the observation method. Doing Relational Observation is therefore a learning experience. It is not a diagnostic method. It is an acquiring of an ability to observe without intervention. The students are thought to take up an unobtrusive, non-interfering position, an observer stance best described as a "modest guest" (Abrahamsen 2004), neither too engaged nor too distant. The observers are never to reject a child but on the other hand never to initiate interaction and contact while observing. No notes are taken during the observations. The students are thought to focus and to make use of their own feelings as a guideline in trying to understand the emotional climate in the observed relationship. Their challenge is to contain their feelings until the observation is over. The observers can then put words to their emotional experiences in a written non-judgemental but detailed report of what they saw and heard during the observation (see observation example below).

The students attend a weekly hour-long observation seminar with no more than six or seven members together with their supervisor during the eight weeks. In each seminar one of the students presents a current observation report for discussion and reflection. The central question for the seminar group is always: *How can we understand or make sense of what is happening in the observation?* It is an inductive method, and it is important that the theoretical interpretations always emerge in the light of the reflections in the seminars. The core of learning is formed from what the observers experience and their ability to reflect on that experience. The reflective process is carried out with the help of the seminar group and the supervisor and is a starting point to an emotional learning process for most students.

## The importance of learning from experience

Training in Relational Observation has proved very useful for students of preschool education in preparing them for their daily work in daycare centres, including supervision of the staff. Their observing eyes and sustained focus on the interaction and the quality of the relationships between children and staff is essential in realising what kind of relational



phenomena are required to create a “good enough” environment (Winnicott 1985a) which can contribute to the individual child’s development and wellbeing. Most students are deeply moved by what they observe. They obtain live experiences of seeing the importance of atonement and attunement. They observe rejections but they also observe interactions put right again. They see key workers offering children “live company” (Trevarthen 1978, Alvarez 1992), and they see children’s capacity to make their needs known. According to Wilfred Bion (1991), this is what leads to what he calls “learning from experience”. He argues that it is the space between feeling and action; *watching, waiting and wondering*, that is so important for an emotional learning process.

The seminar discussions are also important in helping students to understand their personal reactions to the observations. I quote from student responses to my yearly questionnaires on their thoughts about the training:

*“Training in Relational Observation has taught me new and different ways of being with children. I look upon them in a different and more careful manner. I try to understand what they might want to tell me through their body language, facial expressions and their tone of voice. This has come as a surprise to me, and I realise that I have changed pace in order to try to understand the children’s non-verbal intentions. “What does she want?” “Why does he do that?” “Oh, I have seen this expression before, what does it mean?”*

*“I enjoy being able to observe in a completely different manner compared to earlier. I notice more, especially the children’s non-verbal language and their eager efforts to make contact with both adults and peers.”*

*“It is hard to observe children being ignored by the staff. Is that why I haven’t noticed it before?”*

These three student responses reveal important and different aspects of learning. But they have also something in common; the students have learned from their own experiences. A new understanding seems to have been reached over time. There was something they did not know or had not understood before which they now have become aware of and are therefore able to reflect on in another way. Sternberg (2005) argues that if the observer can wait, then understanding of a sort will emerge from the pattern of the observation material. Waiting and holding back from premature conclusions is imperative for meaning to emerge.

In the quotes from the responses of the students’ one can also pick up the tone of delight and warmth that they experienced when discovering something new in the interactions



between children and adults. There is a sense of excitement and discovery engendered by this new insight into young children's body language and their non verbal intentions and the way the adults respond to this. They can now stop and try to make sense of it. They are no longer blind to these phenomena or ignoring them by concentrating on more familiar perceptions and interpretations.

The method represents an approach where the aim is for the observers to understand their personal experiences of individual children interacting with the staff and to gradually build a mental picture of what is required in a "good enough" (Winnicott 1985a) relationship emotionally and developmentally. During the observation period of 8 weeks, the students have been close to the child and the child's relationships. In other words having been close to a particular child's experiences over time, most of the students were deeply moved by what they observed. The impact of these experiences will more often than not start an emotional learning process that will hopefully remain available to be drawn on in their future work with children. An extract of one of the students' written observation may illustrate this point:

### **A little walk**

*Tim, 1 year and 8 months, Martha 1 year old and Linda (one of the staff) are playing in the sandpit. Tim stretches his arms towards Linda and says "eeeh". She gives him a questioning look and sits down beside him. Tim gets up, takes her hand and leads her out of the sandpit. He then points to the small grassland which is part of the outdoor area some distance from where they are. Two of the staff, Jenny and Lisa, together with a small group of children are playing near a slide. "Would you like to go down and play with them?" Linda asks. Tim grabs her arm and says "Linda". "No I can't, I have to be here with Martha, but I will be down shortly, you go on first", she says. There is a small path on the way down to the play area, and Tim starts down the path. After a short while he turns and looks back at Linda. She smiles at him, and he continues his little walk. Then the path curves and Tim is partly hidden behind some bushes. He has now come quite far away from Linda, and on the other hand there is still some part of the path left before he can reach Jenny and Lisa. He starts walking faster and all of a sudden he trips and falls over. He starts crying. Jenny starts walking towards him and says: "Come on Tim, up's a daisy!" When she reaches him she squats beside him, takes hold of his arms and lifts him up looking at him, but Tim is still crying. After a minute he turns away from her and starts walking back up towards Linda. Jenny stands watching him walking away from her but at the same time she keeps an eye on where Linda is. Linda walks immediately towards Tim and squats beside him. "Did you fall over?" she says softly. She takes hold of his hands, looks at them and brushes away the sand in a careful*

*manner. Tim looks at her and cries. She cuddles him and he puts his head on her shoulder. She carries him up the path and Tim's crying subsides.*

This short observational vignette displays many of the aspects of Relational Observation and of the emotional learning process. The observer has created for the reader a vivid picture of Tim trying to cope on his own, and his reaction when he meets with his vulnerability venturing too far away from the adults. When he trips over on the path and has no immediate access to his "secure base" (Bowlby 1989), his attachment behavior is activated. He starts crying and gets distressed. Both Jenny and Linda seem to have an intuitive understanding and respect for his attachment behavior. They are both emotionally available. Jenny tries to reassure him and to motivate his resources and independence but without avail; Tim is still crying in a distressed way. She then tries to comfort him by touch and eye contact, but he cannot be comforted. He walks away from her and turns to Linda to be comforted and perhaps to restore their connection. His tie to Linda seems to be very strong. When he attains proximity to her, he seems to calm down and takes comfort from her voice and body. His distress is reduced.

Both Jenny and Linda try to be "companions in Tim's experience" (Trevarthen 1978), but it is Linda that Tim seeks. He seems to distinguish between the two adults when it comes to feeling safe and protected. According to Bowlby (1989: 11-12) it might mean that Linda has provided him with a "secure base" time and time again. She has proven her predictability and may have become his secondary attachment figure.<sup>5</sup> It probably means that Tim knows that he can return to her knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened. Linda's putting word to what had happened to him (did you trip over?) might also attribute meaning to his experience and make it easier for him to digest his painful feelings.

Bowlby (ibid) claims that the essence of the secure base role is one of being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene only when clearly necessary. We might add that one aspect of most young children, as with Tim, will be all for pushing ahead to new experiences. But a contrary impulse will tend to be pulling back, nervous of change, afraid of losing the well-known and well loved, not wanting the pain of loss, and again this is exactly what Tim has shown us.

All these aspects and interpretations and plenty more connected to the observation material, will be discussed and thought about in the weekly seminars. My experience is that these weekly discussions are enabling the students to go on thinking and to stay in touch emotionally. The seminars allow for a space in which pattern of events in the observations

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<sup>5</sup> It was only later on that the observer was told that Linda was also his appointed key person.

can be thought about. They also represent for the students the importance of reflection over time and thus diminish most of the students' impulse to make premature and hasty conclusions. Most of the written observation reports get longer and more detailed during the 8 weeks. The observers are most likely becoming able to better tolerate what there is to see, hear and feel and put it into words.

## Closing remarks

The gap between ideals and practice in child care is often too wide. In day care centres the most obvious reason is the inadequate staff-child ratio. Staff shortage is often the case and is made worse by the often high rate of staff sickness and leave. Another reason is the lack of updated knowledge about children's needs for attachment, dependency and emotional expressions. Quality in day care centres and the pre-school teacher education need to be seen in connection with each other. The paradigm shift (Abrahamsen 2004, 2008, R. Bowlby 2007) in our understanding of the toddler group and the importance of relationships and their particular social style calls for new knowledge<sup>6</sup> and new practice. It is important that day care centres implement these new perspectives and act accordingly in their daily practice.

Toddlers need care and understanding of their toddling style as well as cognitive educational attainment. Their emotional wellbeing must not be overlooked. To establish positive emotional health during this sensitive period of children's development, it is absolutely essential that continuity of personalised care is available throughout the day in day care centres. It is my belief that attachment-based day care where each child is assigned to the care and major responsibility of individual staff members is essential for all toddlers but even more so for those children and parents who are most vulnerable.

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Løkken (2000) and her interesting research on toddler peer culture and the social style of one and two year olds.

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