

RESOURCE SHEET UNIT I: 2: CHECKLIST FOR QUALITY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

ATTACHMENTS AND SEPARATIONS WITHIN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

Often early childhood educators see helping a child adjust to separation from a family member as an one-time event during a period of entry. In fact, a child experiences attachment and separation in different ways throughout their care and education, no matter how secure the child may be. Severe stress caused by hospitalization, divorce, death or immigration can affect a child's ability to separate. It is helpful to think about attachment and separation as ongoing themes that educators need to interweave throughout their program.

Tasha loved attending daycare during her first month. Suddenly she began to cry when her mother said goodbye. Her teachers realized that Tasha was experiencing a delayed response to separation. They needed strategies to ease the separation and to strengthen their relationships with Tasha immediately.

Educators sometimes conclude that if a child experiences a difficult separation, their attachment to family is too strong and they are too dependent on this relationship. In their view, the role of the educator is therefore to encourage the child's independence from the family. *In fact*, the educator's role during a period of difficult separation should be to enhance attachment between the child and family (primary attachment). At the same time, an educator can foster a strong attachment with the child (secondary attachment). When young children have secure attachment relationships with family members and with educators, their growth and development is enhanced.

Strategies for Enhancing Attachments

Between Family Members and Child

When possible, promote gradual entry into a new program. If a mother or father is not available to remain with a child, ask if a relative or close friend can stay. Discuss with families the benefits of gradual entry for children and families. Allow children to visit siblings in another group during the day or group siblings together.

Keep pictures of family members accessible for children to look at throughout the day. Create a book about families.

Work with family members in developing a goodbye ritual. Family members will be able to provide valuable information about a child's personality and interests.

Tasha's mother came a bit earlier in the morning to give her time to play with Tasha as she settled into free play. They played in the block corner because that was Tasha's favourite area. At the same time every day, the same teacher joined the play and continued to play with Tasha after her mom left. Every day Tasha's mom give her a special scarf to take care of until she returned.

Talk about family members every day. Pretend to talk to them on a telephone or make real phone calls.

Create a collection of songs and stories taped by a child's family. Encourage family members to write short notes and give pictures to children. This treasure can be carried about in a pocket.

Encourage children to bring a special toy or blanket from home. Be sure these objects are accessible to children throughout the day.

Choose books to read that focus on close human relationships and how they grow and change.

Use pictures to show the sequence of daily events and when a family member will return.

Tape family members voices in their home languages so children can listen to directions about naptimes and other routines and know what to do.

Between Educator and Child

Make relationships with children a priority. Increase interactions with children. Look for opportunities to talk, play and share feelings throughout the day. Some children may need to be approached slowly as they become more comfortable around new people.

Assign one staff member to be responsible for a small group of children particularly during routines.

Establish set work shifts. Frequent shift changes leave

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children feeling unsure about who will greet and interact with them.

Keep pictures of staff posted so that children can look at them when a staff member is absent. Tell children where their teachers have gone.

Sarah has gone for lunch. Remember we visited the place where some teachers eat their lunch. She will be back after rest time.

Move an educator up to the next group when children graduate to the next age group. Moving children every 10-12 months and expecting them to build new relationships with teachers, may be counterproductive to secondary attachment development.

Acknowledge children's feeling about separation and the importance of their attachment to their family. Children will trust you more if they know you understand the challenges of separation. Avoid expressing frustration or anger at the child's inability to handle separation quickly. These feelings communicate to children that their feelings are wrong and may make children more anxious and distressed. Consider crying as a healthy response to separation.

Elliott stands at the edge of the playground and stares at the parking lot. His teacher says, AI think you are looking for your mommy. She will be here soon. She always comes back for you. Maybe we could do a painting for her on the sidewalk while we wait.

If children continue to cry and despair for a long period of time further strategies may need to be considered:

- Create a special activity that the anxious child is responsible for organizing or showing, e.g. feeding a fish. This may provide motivation for the child to return to school each day.

- Allow a child to shadow a staff member. Sometimes giving children permission to attach themselves to an adult, gives them a sense of control over their situation and thus encourages them to begin to separate.
- Note when children display courage and self-reliance by engaging in parallel or cooperative play with peers.
- Let families know that the staff can handle the challenges of separation. Families will be more willing to persist in helpful strategies if they are reassured that the staff value and respect them.

When educators work with families to achieve healthy attachments and separation, they contribute to the life-long emotional and social well-being of children.

For Further Information

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