

# Respectful attuned attachment relationships and care: Facilitating connections in everyday interactions in Australian early childhood education and care settings

By Katherine Bussey, Bronwyn Peryman and Shaila Martinez (peer reviewed)



*Care moments including nappy changes, toileting, meal times, dressing, sleep and rest are a significant part of the day in infant and toddler spaces in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. It is estimated that eighty percent of the day for infants and toddlers and their educators and teachers in ECEC settings are based around these types of care and transition moments (Bussey & Richardson, 2020; Fewster, 2010).*

In this article we argue that care can be understood as a vital part of infant and toddler pedagogy and curriculum (Bussey, 2019; Bussey & Hill, 2017; Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer-Eyer, 2009; Rockel, 2009). However, it depends on *how* care moments are undertaken that makes the difference, with respectful engagement or as times to move through swiftly (Bussey, 2019). This article shares the transformation of two early childhood teachers' practice in Sydney, Australia over a period of four years, and their shift towards respectful attuned attachment relationships.

Care moments can provide repeated opportunities for connection, learning about bodies, language and communication and how the world around children works. Or they can be understood and enacted as routine chores to quickly move through and be completed (Elliot, 2007), disconnecting from the child being cared for. The inattention of educators or teachers may only be a short moment in time, however, if this process is repeated many times throughout the day (Fewster, 2010; Bussey & Richardson, 2020) in an ECEC setting, it is likely to leave lasting imprints on children's emotional worlds (Szanto-Feder, 2020). These experiences facilitate the child's building of understanding of how one can be touched by, and connected with another.

This article shares the transformation over a period of four years for two early childhood teachers in Sydney, Australia. Through narrative voice we share their investigation and work on pedagogical practices related to care and attachment relationships. Bronwyn has over 26 years' experience and Shaila, over 20 years' experience of working in ECEC settings. They now work in the same ECEC setting in Sydney's inner-west. Through their narrative voice, we

explore the progressive shift in Bronwyn and Shaila's practice over time while working with infants and toddlers, learning how this occurred with support from managers and mentors. We follow their story from previously working in ECEC settings where care moments were understood as times to swiftly move through in order to get on to the 'real learning', and their transition to other ECEC settings, where new ideas of conceptualising care were introduced to them. Their narrative ends with exploration of the pedagogical commitment to care and attachment relationships in their current ECEC setting where they have further refined their own skill and competence in understanding and enacting care and relationships. Bronwyn and Shaila work in different rooms supporting other colleagues while teaching and learning with children. They work in collaborative ways with colleagues by not only collectively focusing on building and maintaining attachment relationships, but examining and working on the type of attachment relationships that are deepened and fuelled by attuned care moments.

The type of repeated, respectful care moments and connections that Bronwyn and Shaila depict throughout this article, we understand to be a particular type of relationship, hereby described as *respectful attuned attachment relationships*. Respectful attuned attachment relationships can be taken to mean the type of planned, intentional attachment relationships in ECEC settings where educators and teachers facilitate, build and maintain attachment relationships through respectful care moments that encourage participation, connection and learning between the educator or teacher and child.

Working towards these types of care moments and attachment relationships takes time. While it is common to focus on the work done now with young children that has advanced over time through professional learning and development, it is also important to critically reflect on our own sociohistorical context, to understand and clarify where we have come from in order to recognise our own pedagogical development and practice change. It is critical to do so, as the small shifts and turns we make in our work as infant and toddler educators, teachers and leaders

make a difference. Critical reflections that infant and toddler teams engage in can lead to a consensus towards refining practice and collectively developing agreements towards creating sensitive changes that lead to subtle nuances in care moments. Continually working on pedagogy related to care can help bring teams closer to participatory care moments that more actively involve children.

### **Before the transformation**

All of the progressive workeducators and teachers have undertaken contributes to the processes we have engaged in in order to move towards the transformation of our own pedagogy. We can enact new information we learn as we advance our practice by trying different ways of working with children. Shaila shares the first steps in her process of development over time:

*In the past I always thought I was very knowledgeable in what I did in an infant's room, following 'best' practices. I would have the day all planned with scheduled times for the child's routine to ensure we would get through the day. We had 20 children, with a nappy room enclosed by glass, providing educators a clear view of the nappy change room. The educator 'on nappies' brought four children each time into the nappy room, prompting them to sit while changing all four within 8-10 minutes, then placing them anywhere on the ground to be able to get the next group of children in the room. Children were changed every two hours, and on reflection, we treated children like objects. At the time we thought we were providing excellent care, relying on a clock to tell us it was time to meet a child's physical needs. It took a long time to understand the effects I was having on children. I could see that we were really working like robots, rushing each child, working with the clock*

*- especially when it came to each child's nappy change time. This was a real eye opener. Were we really respecting our children? Was it a pleasurable, calming experience for each child?*

The attitude that Shaila describes towards care moments as something to get through, rushing children to follow the clock and get through the day are common, and long-established, sedimented practices in ECEC settings in Australia. "Such sedimented forms of practice eventually cease to be consciously examined and become practices that are best described as "how we do things around here" (Nuttall et al., 2018, p. 84-85). As Fewster (2010) notes, care moments and transition times are commonly recognised as "taken for granted" components of the day" in Australian ECEC settings "that are rarely challenged or studied... and typically adult-directed" (p. 42). Shaila reflects back on this sedimented practice (Engeström, 1993) asking questions about children's experiences. Shaila's current knowledge about nappy changes as opportunities to connect with children to support and facilitate autonomy for children through affective relationships between teachers and children is illustrated through the questions she asked of her previous practice. Rather than seeing nappy changes as times to quickly get through, McCaleb (2014) describes nappy changes as "an opportunity for unhurried, relational strengthening (with poo-be-gone benefits)" (para. 10).

### **Choosing to move into new opportunities**

As they progressed on in their careers Bronwyn and Shaila moved to work in ECEC settings that were newly opened in Sydney. At the time leaders creating these ECEC settings focused specifically on educators and teachers working with children and families in attachment relationships. This focus and experience had a significant impact on Bronwyn and Shaila in their work with young children. The support of management and some mentors, including Dr. Katherine Bussey and later Elena Marouchos helped educators and teachers to fundamentally rethink their work with very young children, as Bronwyn explains:

*Four years ago I had a professional life changing experience, and I began to look at my ways of working in a different light. I was fortunate to work with some inspiring managers and mentors that shifted my way of thinking. I was introduced to Magda Gerber's Educaring®*

*Approach and the Pikler Approach® and this made me really reflect on the practices I previously thought I was on point with. I reflected on my interactions with infants, considering the child's perspective what did my teaching, moments of time and relationships look like from the child's perspective?*

Through resources provided to these ECEC settings such as professional learning workshops, readings, videos and discussion, Bronwyn and colleagues were supported to reflect deeply on their work with infants and toddlers and make some considerable changes in their practice. Shaila also experienced similar resources while working at another newly opened ECEC setting and engaged in as many new learning opportunities as possible.

### **The transformational nature of mentoring**

Attending a professional learning workshop with Katherine as a mentor had supported Bronwyn to integrate new ideas and processes in her everyday practice with children towards adopting respectful attuned attachment relationships, Bronwyn was apprehensive about the additional process of being observed in her practice while working with infants. This observing and mentoring experience was provided to a few ECEC settings in Sydney at the time as Bronwyn illustrates:

*I met Katherine Bussey who was to become a mentor of mine and she introduced me to the concept of care as curriculum. Katherine was going to come and observe our practices. I knew that Katherine was coming into our space wearing a lens of support and guidance, that she would suspend her judgement, but it was still a daunting experience. I wondered "What does she expect from me? What will she think of my practices?" I didn't want to let her down. On the day, if Katherine was sitting outside, I made sure I was*

*inside. I laugh about this today, as at the end of the day through her sensitive observation she saw all. It was literally at the end of the day when she invited me to sit with her and reflect on our work and about her observations. Once again, I was feeling very nervous, however I was also prepared to lean in, listen and to feel uncomfortable about what I may hear about my own practices. Past experiences taught me that when I feel uncomfortable, I am open to learning the most. So I leaned in.*

The process of observation and meeting with educators that Bronwyn shared was a planned and intentional mentoring tool to help support educators and teachers at ECEC settings that were open to embracing respectful attuned attachment relationships. In order to prepare ECEC settings for her visit, Katherine ensured she had sent through information about her role as an observer, providing information about how she would be quietly observing and writing notes in a notebook while being in rooms and outdoor spaces. Later, management supported an opportunity for some educators and teachers to individually meet with Katherine one-on-one in a meeting room in order for them to collaboratively unpack some of their work together, engaging in shared, critical reflection. However, the experience of being observed by someone else is often unnerving, and while the role of the mentor is not to judge, the fear of judgement is often apparent for educators and teachers, something taken into account and sensitively discussed at the beginning of their time meeting together.

Through one-on-one discussion, and clarification that the role of the mentor was to facilitate reflective discussions after respectfully observing practice, Bronwyn felt supported to 'lean' into her discomfort, and shift practices together with her colleagues to plan intentionally for relationships and care moments.

### **Collective team commitment to attuned care moments**

This discussion and ongoing commitment to changing practice provided opportunities for the team Bronwyn worked with to work towards closer attunement between child and educator or teacher and an additional commitment between colleagues to hold space for and focus on attuned care moments. Bronwyn explains the process of the collaborative work she and the team worked on:

*For months following her visit, our practices changed dramatically. The way in which our program was designed changed to reflect our new understanding. We started intentionally planning for relationships and care routines in our program. We learned about the importance of being fully present with infants during their care moments. We no longer interrupted each other during care moments to pass on a message. We physically slowed down in care moments and invited more active participation from infants when engaging in caregiving. Relationships and care moments became a central part of our program, rather than being a large part of our day that we had to get through.*

Through this focus of collaboratively changing practices as a team, Bronwyn started to notice changes in children's behaviour and she started to notice more nuances in children's cues:

*By consistently practicing being fully present with children, we noticed a distinct change in their behaviour. I remember a new child that started at 10 months where I was his primary educator. We connected and built our relationship through care moments. Bottle feedings meant so much more than satisfying his physical need for hunger. During bottle feeds he learnt to trust me and I learnt so much about him, for example, if I hadn't heated his bottle*

*"... the experience of being observed by someone else is often unnerving, and while the role of the mentor is not to judge, the fear of judgement is often apparent for educators and teachers..."*

enough, he scrunched up his nose. Over time, I learnt cues where he asked, "Can I hold my bottle now?" This was my cue to hand a little more autonomy back to him. I held him close, but let him grasp that bottle a bit tighter and I loosened my grasp. Without me being fully physically and emotionally present during his care routines, I am not sure if he would have become such an independent explorer.



Photo 1: Our mealtimes are moments where we invite toddlers to actively participate in their own care activities. As they grow and develop children are keen to learn how to use new tools, working through challenges when they manipulate serving utensils.



Photo 2: As teachers and educators, we pay close attention to the child and intentionally position our hand gently on the table nearby.



Photo 3: Our body language and attention lets children know that we trust in their abilities, respect their sense of self determination and that a helping hand is ready, should they want it.

## Why attuned care moments?

The observations Bronwyn made of children's behaviour led her to automatically adjust her own pedagogical practices in order to flexibly respond to children, following their skill-building, learning and development over time. Developing consistent caring attachment relationships not only benefits children but also allows educators and teachers to experience what it feels like to be physically and emotionally accessible to very young children (Recchia & McDevitt, 2019). "Caring, sensitive, available and responsive adults enable children to develop secure relationships. They help children learn what healthy, connected relationships look like and how to create such relationships later in life". (Bussey & Richardson, 2020, p. 6). An understanding of why primary educator relationships were enhanced during care moments that involved the child motivated Bronwyn and colleagues to be not only physically present, but also emotionally engaged. Bronwyn explained the subtle changes they made to practice to get closer to children, and shared why they were making these changes to practice over time:

*All of the subtle consistent practices that we put into practice, from sitting in the same chair and feeding infants on the same side of our body, to the way that we approach and invite an infant for a nappy change makes a significant difference in the emotional world for an infant. Paying attention to the small details of how we work with infants, communicates that we are emotionally attuned to them in that care moment. We can tell infants through our repeated attunement we see them, we hear them and we hold their emotions.*

Bronwyn recognised the emotional impact this had on children, and how the children were instinctively encouraged to communicate their needs to their special primary educator or teacher, as children started to recognise their other communications were being understood.

Bronwyn and colleagues recognised that fostering attachment relationships in infant and toddler ECEC settings

are not just about grouping children into small focus groups in order to have achieved a key group. Instead, it is the type of care that educators and teachers engage in when working with children that reinforces attachment and connection and that provides opportunities to build trust and comfort. As Bronwyn explains:

*Being emotionally attuned to infants during repeated care moments, we learn and notice the nuances they communicate with us. Their smiles and grimaces as they share an emotion with us, an extended arm during a bottle feed that says, I would like to hold my bottle now or the eye contact that says I see that you hold me and I feel safe. These connected moments of repetition in busy days are wonderful stories to share with families.*

The repetitious, consistent nature of respectful attuned attachment relationships that Bronwyn describes are crucial for children to experience in ECEC settings. Young children that experience repeated, consistent opportunities to connect over and over again with a nurturing and supportive educator or teacher are provided with the stability that healthy brain development requires (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). These types of repeated care moments and relationships not only support a positive sense of wellbeing, emotional connection and partnership between child and teacher, but they also facilitate the child's expectations for future relational experiences.

Growth-promoting relationships are based on the child's continuous give-and-take ("serve and return" interaction) with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world can offer – experiences that are individualized to the child's unique personality style; that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness; and that stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 1)

This type of connection and way of working with children, colleagues and families was something that Bronwyn and Shaila strongly desired. After

changes in management and mentoring occurred at their previous settings, Bronwyn and Shaila both moved to work in the same ECEC setting, moving to work alongside some of the leaders and mentors they had previously worked with. This continued their journey of working with children in respectful attuned attachment relationships, and sharing their experience and knowledge with other colleagues through modelling and collaborative discussions as a team, as Bronwyn describes:

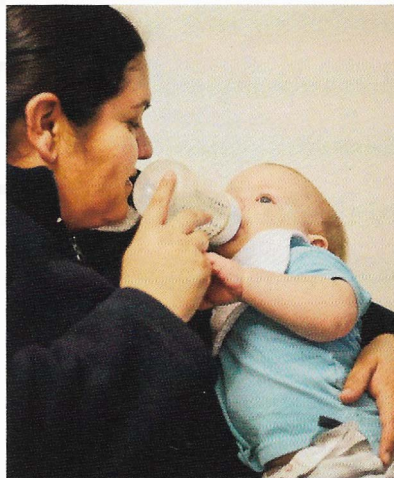
*At the end of last year, I started working in a new setting where we are influenced by RIE® and strongly believe in care as curriculum. I have returned to working with toddlers. While, as a team, we are committed to new ways of practicing with children, we all have different levels of understanding and knowledge. This in itself is a challenge that we are working through – how to develop shared understandings, so that our practices can be consistent with our values and with one another. At the moment in our work with toddlers we are discovering what it means to provide a truly authentic curriculum of care for them. We reflect on practice every day and most importantly, are suspending our judgement of our own and colleagues' practice.*

### **Critical reflection and ongoing professional learning as a team**

At the ECEC setting that Bronwyn and Shaila now work at, they are supported to engage in ongoing critical reflection on their pedagogical practice. This includes a strong focus on working on respectful attuned attachment relationships and care moments. This not-for-profit organisation is aware that in order for pedagogy to be productive and maintained, professional learning and development must be recognised and embraced as an ongoing process over time, not just an event to attend (Loucks-Horsley et al., 1987). Shaila explains the shift not only in her own practice, but in working together to examine their work as a team:

*The difference between my previous experience and now is that I am able to work collaboratively with and educate other educators. We can examine what it looks*

*like to embed practice where we slow down and take our time with each child, we are attuned to each child in our group and responsive to their needs. We work through caregiving moments together, question together and document what worked and did not work and record changes to our practice. We analyse what cues and gestures we missed from each child in the interaction and reflect on what was missed. We learn each day about ourselves, our interactions with each child and recognise children's abilities through the close respectful relationships we have developed between children and primary educators.*



As his primary educator for the last 6 months, we enjoy this one-on-one time to connect together, affirming our consistent, secure attachment relationship.



This intimate care moment is one of our many times to connect together, filling up both of our emotional cups.

Both Bronwyn and Shaila came to recognise that repeated care moments such as nappy changes, sleep and rest, and meal times should happen when each child requires care moments, rather than following the clock or a strict schedule to complete tasks (Bussey

& Hill, 2017; EHS NRC, 2014; Fewster, 2010; NAEYC, 2015). Children are individuals who deserve to be touched gently and actively involved in matters related to them. Active participation supports children to pay attention and learn more about consent when their most intimate parts are being touched (Bussey & Richardson, 2020).

Shaila recognised the importance of attachment relationships being refined and maintained through care moments that were handled sensitively by familiar people. The way in which their team conceptualised primary educator relationships, supported their pedagogy to be “relationship-led, rather than task-led” (Read, 2014, p. 59) as Shaila points out:

*We work in small groups purpose-fully and intentionally. This makes a difference to the children because you are deepening your connections and relationships you have with each child. We have worked on creating a peaceful environment and paying more attention to caregiving moments. This is a key way we provide support for the children, waiting for a response from the child. These are rewarding moments for the children and ourselves. There is a big difference from rushing to get things down to slowing down and being in the moment.*

As Bronwyn and Shaila noted, scheduling care moments in order to ensure they were completed and checked off does not facilitate the countless learning opportunities children can experience when learning is afforded by teachers who know children well. Learning opportunities can include children understanding more about their bodies and how they work. Nappy changes that focus on children's participation and understanding of the process can also be related to concepts in children's language development. Basic mathematical and science concepts such as weight, balance, and angles can be discussed such as, “Can you move your leg a little bit up so we can make sure we can wipe everything?” while dressing children. Ensuring the discussion is related to what is happening in the nappy change process is key so that children remain engaged with what is happening with

their body. This discussion and process of encouraging children to move their bodies to different positions and angles can also facilitate comfortable standing nappy changes. Changing toddlers and older infants while they are standing supports a pedagogy of free movement (Laurin & Goble, 2018) and more easily facilitates developing self-help skills, such as dressing oneself in the process of moving towards toilet learning.

## Conclusion

The journey over four years for Bronwyn and Shaila demonstrates the vital nature that professional learning, mentoring and an overall level of commitment and support from leaders can make to transforming the pedagogy and practice of educators and teachers. While engaging in primary caregiving, key teacher or key educator groups are building in popularity in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important that educators and teachers recognise the difference between attachment relationships being conceptualised as engaging in respectful attuned attachment relationships rather than organising children into what are commonly known as focus groups. Care moments enacted by often changing groups of educators and teachers, rather than by an educator or teacher who is particularly emotionally and physically present for a child, have been described as 'multiple indiscriminate care' (Bain & Barnett, 1986, p. 16). It is not just the process of organising groups, but the way in which attachment relationships are built and maintained through intentional, consistent, respectful care moments that facilitates respectful attuned attachment relationships.

## References

- Bain, A., & Barnett, L. (1986). *The design of a daycare system in a nursery setting for children under five*. Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Occasional Paper 8.
- Bussey K. (2019). Infants and toddlers, early childhood sociocultural contexts. In M. Peters (Ed). *Encyclopedia of Teacher Education*. Springer.
- Bussey, K., & Hill, D. (2017). Care as curriculum: Investigating teachers' views on the learning in care. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187, 128–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1152963>
- Bussey, K., & Richardson, M. (2020). *Attuned routine experiences*. Early Childhood Australia.
- Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC). (2014). Individualizing care for infants and toddlers: Part 1 [Technical assistance paper no. 16]. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/individualizing-care-infants-toddlers/individualizing-care-infants-toddlers>
- Elliot, E. (2007). *We're not robots: The voices of daycare providers*. State University of New York Press.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J., & Widmeyer-Fewster, C. (2010). Designing routines and transitions with children in early childhood settings. *Educating Young Children*, 16(2), 42–44.
- Eyer, D. (2009). *Infants, toddlers and educators: A curriculum of respectful, responsive care and education* (8th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Laurin, D. E., & Goble, C. B. (2018). Enhancing the diapering routine. *Young Children*, 73(3), 18–25.
- Loucks-Horsley, S., Harding, C. K., Arbuckle, M. A., Murray, L. B., Dubea, C., & Williams, M. K. (1987). *Continuing to learn: a guidebook for teacher development*. The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands and The National Staff Development Council.
- McCaleb, M. (2014, August 7). *Rethinking the nappy*. Brainwave Trust. <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/rethinking-the-nappy/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2015). *NAEYC early childhood program standards and accreditation criteria and guidance for assessment. Standard 2: Curriculum*. NAEYC. <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards#2>
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Young children develop in an environment of relationships* (Working Paper 1). Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Young-Children-Develop-in-an-Environment-of-Relationships.pdf>
- Nuttall, J., Thomas, L., & Henderson, L. (2018). Formative interventions in leadership development in early childhood education: The potential of double stimulation. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 16(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X16664555>
- Read, V. (2014). *Developing attachment in early years settings: Nurturing secure relationships from birth to five years*. Routledge.
- Rockel, J. (2009). A pedagogy of care: Moving beyond the margins of managing work and minding babies. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(3), 1–8.
- Recchia, S. L., & McDevitt, S. E. (2019). *Relationship-based infant care as a framework for authentic practice: How Eun Mi rediscovered her teaching soul*. Occasional Paper Series, 42, 29. <https://www.bankstreet.edu/research-publications-policy/occasional-paper-series/archive/occasional-paper-series-42/relationship-based-infant-care-as-a-framework-for-authentic-practice-how-eun-mi-rediscovered-her-teaching-soul/>
- Szanto-Feder, A. (2020). *Moving with pleasure from the beginning: The importance of observation in early childhood*. Xlibris.