Nursery World

**http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/other/1106660/staff-lead-premature-independence**

**Dr Louise Emanuel explains why she believes that proposals to reduce ratios of staff to children could harm children's development**

Zoe Williams' robust claim (Guardian Sat 2.2.13) that the proposal to decrease the ratio of staff to babies and toddlers is the 'worst idea a person in government has ever had', is no understatement.

Williams, who takes on the challenge of caring solo for six toddlers, 'in the interest of public policy research',  describes her difficulty attending to their basic physical needs, and points out that the least demanding child in the group received minimal attention, interacting little with the other children or his carer.

These apparently 'undemanding' children may be a godsend to pressed carers, but close observation may reveal a child who has 'cut off' from the hurly burly of a busy setting, as the only way he can cope with an overwhelming/stressful/unmanageable situation, turning away from contact as a form of self-regulation in the absence of an attentive caregiver.

Research has shown that infants and toddlers need an emotionally available carer, who is 'attuned' and responsive to  their communications, in order to develop psychologically, socially and cognitively. They need to feel there is someone available to help them manage their 'mess', whether it be an overflowing nappy or overwhelming feelings, someone they can depend on to be tuned in to their needs, and to contain their feelings by responding to them in a thoughtful, attentive way.

The reduction of staff to toddlers may lead even young babies to find ways of coping with the frustration of having to wait too long for the attention of adults they depend on for their care.

They may resort  to intense self-soothing, hyper-kinetic activity, or develop signs of 'premature self-sufficiency' or ‘toughening up’, to evade feeling dependent on others for their gratification.

This kind of premature independence may be encouraged by staff in a busy group care situation, and these children are often seen as developmentally advanced. However, this push to encourage/endorse excessive self-sufficiency can backfire, as when they are in situations where they have to rely on adults, eg school, their early coping strategies become maladaptive; thinking/feeling they have to 'do it all themselves' , manage everything by themselves.

This causes a problem for learning,  as they become anxious in a situation of dependency towards the adult figure, in this case the teacher. The moment when a new concept or task is being introduced is often when these children become disruptive, lose concentration, or set themselves up in competition with the teacher.

While we would endorse the encouragement of higher qualifications for early years carers, this should not be at the expense of the ratio of adults to children, as it could have deleterious effects on their long-term development. The government minister needs to come up with a better plan!

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