Professional Love in Early Years Settings:
A Report of the Summary of Findings
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Background to the Project

In recent years, a small number of high profile cases of early years practitioners have been convicted of child abuse, and the continued media exposure of abusive clergy and then of various ‘celebrity’ entertainers has led to a climate of wariness, if not suspicion, which has grown around the general issue of adults’ professional relationships with very young children. A difficulty for those who work in early years settings is thus how to express the affectionate and caring behaviours, which the role characteristically demands of them in their loco parentis, and which very young children need in their development of healthy attachments.

The real issue, of an appropriate professional love, remains for the most part unexamined in the daily practice of early years settings, because it is obscured in the same climate of wariness. This project aimed to address the research gap and give confidence to early years practitioners who work closely and intimately with young children. This project was led by Dr Jools Page and a small research team at the University of Sheffield and was co-produced in collaboration with an external partner group of eight nurseries, Fennies, who are located in the South East of England.

‘Professional Love’ in Early Years Settings (PLEYS) used a range of methods to reveal the conceptions and practices of love, intimacy and care in early years settings. An open, anonymous online survey was developed to capture the views of early years practitioners on constructions of love and intimacy in early years settings. The resulting data set was greater than anticipated with 793 completed questionnaire responses. These were analysed with the use of specialist software and the findings were used to inform 10 face to face interviews with volunteer early years practitioners. Four focus groups were also conducted with 26 participants from across all eight of Fennies nurseries. Participants included managers, room leaders and apprentices. Social media also generated wider interest in the research project and led to numerous email exchanges from professionals with a range of roles and interests providing a further source of rich data, which is beyond the scope of this project but which will be later developed.

The project findings were used to co-produce an ‘Attachment Toolkit’ which includes case studies, narratives and video materials to support early years practitioners in their attachment interactions with young children and in their work with families, particularly during times of parent/child separation. The ‘Attachment Toolkit’ situates children as individual and active citizens who have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, to have their voices heard and acted upon and to be safeguarded by the adults who have responsibility for them at home and in their early years settings. This report summarises the findings of the project.

Through this project it was possible to establish the research ideas around ‘Professional Love’ in work with young children and to generate a debate around the issues. The range and depth of data generated from the PLEYS project supported Jools Page’s professional assumptions about love and intimacy in early years settings (Page, 2014). Practitioners were asked to respond to a range of questions around their beliefs and experiences related to attachment and ‘Professional Love’ more broadly.

The survey yielded **793 responses** from a range of practitioners. Over half of the respondents have been working in early years practice for more than 10 years:

**Figure 1**

- 56%: 10 years or more
- 14%: 4-6 years
- 10%: 7-9 years
- 3%: 1-3 years
- 2%: Less than 1 year

Around half of the survey responses were from early years teachers and teaching assistants, with slightly less than a quarter of responses from childminders:

**Figure 2**

- 53%: Early years teachers and teaching assistants
- 25%: Other (e.g. early years managers, consultants, lecturers)
- 22%: Childminder

The majority of respondents were female; only 31 men responded to the survey.

Figure 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of those surveyed worked across the early years age-range, with most of the 793 participants working with 3 to 5 year-olds.

Figure 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>under 12 months</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 months to 2 years</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3 years</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 years</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey data showed that:

- **An overwhelming majority of practitioners** have a very positive, confident attitude towards the role of ‘Professional Love’ as part of their practice in early-years settings. **Most** practitioners explained that they are comfortable in enacting professionally loving practices such as hugging and using sensitive touch to build security and attachment. For example, **95%** feel that showing affection to the children in their care is an important part of early years practice. **89%** feel that they have a good knowledge of non-statutory safeguarding guidance or advice relevant to their post. Top ten responses shown below (by percentage of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with each statement).

- **Despite the positive attitude towards the role of ‘Professional Love’ in early years,** practitioners did express some worries about aspects of their work. For example participants may be confident and positive about their practices but they may still worry about how attachment affects their work with **10%** of practitioners reporting that they worry about false accusations and how others view the appropriateness of their actions. While participants were very positive about the appropriateness and value of their professionally loving actions, opinion was again mixed on whether or not they would feel comfortable being alone with children. **Around 1 in 5 practitioners** claimed that they avoid doing so.

- Practitioners were asked to describe what they understood by the term ‘Professional Love’ in their own words. There were many and varied views and definitions from the sector. The research team were overwhelmed with the time taken by participants to explain their feelings in such depth. Some definitions were quite broad, often using words such as “care” and “kindness”, or being “available” and paying “attention” to the children.

- There was some disagreement among practitioners when relating ‘Professional Love’ to parental love:
  - Some specifically stated that ‘Professional Love’ **should be parental in nature** (e.g. “Loving a child as if it’s your own” or “act like a mother”)
  - Others felt that ‘Professional Love’ **should not be parental in nature** (e.g. “not the same as the bond for your own child” or “professional love is not parental or family love”)

- **The role of the practitioners’ own feelings was an integral part of ‘Professional Love’ for some respondents.** The majority of these thoughts centred around feelings of genuine affection and fondness towards the children (e.g. “I am fond of the children I care for” or “You have stronger feelings for the children in your care than with other children who are not”).

- **Other practitioners focused on how the child should feel in a professionally loving environment:** for example “safe”, “settled” or “secure”; “loved”, “appreciated” or “valued”.

- **The importance of establishing some form of attachment with the children** was a very common feature when practitioners defined ‘Professional Love’ (e.g. “growing strong attachments to the children in my care” or “it is inevitable that you will form a bond with the children you work with and that they will form a bond with you”)

- **The role of physical contact such as hugging, kissing** was present in a number of definitions often with some demarcation between acceptable and non-acceptable actions. A small number of practitioners went further to describe that displays of affection in general must be initiated by the child.

- There is a very strong relationship between participants’ beliefs about their own practices and what they believe parents would want for their children – this seems to be a central motivation for practitioners.

- **Just over half of the respondents to the survey (56%)** stated that they **were not concerned** about parents’ attitudes towards ‘Professional Love’ practices. Where this was justified, this was usually because:
  - Practitioners feel that they are acting in line with what parents want for their children (22%)
  - Practitioners feel that parents understand there are clear policies or boundaries in place (3%)
There were numerous reasons for concern including the following:

- 10% of practitioners reported concern over parents’ feeling threatened, jealous or uncomfortable about early-years staff developing a relationship with their children. This was more common for childminders (13%) than those working in other early years settings (8%).

- 5% of responding practitioners described their concerns in terms of lack of education/knowledge on behalf of the parents, i.e. they don’t recognise or understand children’s love and attachment needs and therefore question or misinterpret practitioners’ activities.

- 10% percent of participants reported that ‘communication’ or ‘good relationships’ with the parents are central to allaying any concerns they may have.

Less frequent features (less than 5% of participants):

- Some describe how practitioners are vulnerable and are concerned about parents inferring that practice may be inappropriate or even making more specific accusations.

- Several participants made specific mention of the effect of stories about inappropriate practices in the media, and how as practitioners they may be approached for reassurance or even viewed with heightened suspicion following such events.

- Several practitioners made specific mention of their experiences of parents raising concerns about men working with their children.

- In stark contrast, a small number of practitioners responded quite specifically that they didn’t know what the parents felt and that they would be interested to find out more.
In response to a child saying ‘I love you’ nearly half of all practitioners claimed that they would respond to a child by saying “I love you” (47%).

• Further responses typically fell into one of six categories:
  1. Limited reciprocation, “I like you” or similar (20%)
  2. Non-reciprocal acknowledgement; praising or thankful “that’s nice” or “lovely!” (15%)
  3. Diversion phrasing involving love (2%) e.g. “I love spending time with you too!”
  4. Explaining or exploring other relationships, loves... “Who else do you love?” (2%)
  5. Non verbal response only e.g. a smile or hug (1%)
  6. Saying that they are part of a collective loving setting (2%) “You are loved”, “I love all the children in this nursery”

• More experienced practitioners (and correspondingly, older practitioners) tended to have even stronger positive views about the role of ‘Professional Love’ in early years practice than those who were less experienced (or younger). Further analyses of responses across groups of practitioners revealed the following patterns:

• A slightly higher proportion of practitioners that work with under 2s tend to feel that parents approve of them kissing their child than those working with older children

• In relation to men, the survey revealed some concerns about men working close closely with children. Some of these concerns were based on issues reported about parents’ views and other responses related to the views of male practitioners.

• In line with the complete sample, almost all of the male practitioners report a generally positive attitude towards professional love practices in early years. Four of the male practitioners did feel however that parents viewed them differently to female staff, one participant providing a particularly emotive statement:

> What really bothers me is that those parents who argue that there are not sufficient men in early years settings, primary school settings, and child care, are also the first to accuse men of inappropriate behaviour towards (their) children. And only then these parents wonder why so many men shy away from working with children.

Only then society comes to the conclusion that men are insensitive towards children and ignoring/neglecting/avoiding their duty of care towards children.

As a male working with children I simply cannot win, and regardless of what I do I know it is only a matter of time before I get accused.
Interview Findings
As both a student on a foundation degree course and also a ‘professional’ in the early years sector, I am extremely passionate about the emotional well-being of our youngest children. My current role, professionally is ‘Welfare and Safeguarding Officer’ for a Local Authority. This involves advising early years settings and childminders of their responsibilities under the welfare and safeguarding requirements laid out within the EYFS, and also to deliver awareness raising training for the safeguarding of children to all early years practitioners.

The responses I gave throughout the survey represented my views about the challenges of striking the balance between building close relationships with children and protecting ourselves from allegations. I strongly believe though, that as early years practitioners, we need to feel confident about the attention we give to children and be able to explain the reasons behind it. I look at older children in secondary schools and ask myself whether some of the unwanted behaviours being displayed are due to a lack of emotional affection given to them as younger children?

In seeking to understand a bit more about the responses to the survey, one example in particular summed up what other participants also said:

We have always felt strongly at my setting that it was more damaging to deny young children affection such as cuddles (I have worked at my setting for over 10 years and this has always been our view) but I was aware that many other settings do not think this way. I read the first paper on Professional Love as part of my degree studies last year which I felt validated my setting’s views even more but also increased my concern that there are settings out there that still have ‘no cuddling’ policies. This just seems inhumane to me if you are working with young children, especially with all the research becoming available on the importance of affection in healthy brain development.

In my role as ‘Welfare and Safeguarding Officer’, I am extremely passionate about the emotional well-being of our youngest children. Building relationships with children, especially babies, is very important for their social and emotional development and over all sense of belonging and well-being. I was intrigued by the term ‘professional love’ as I think it’s a perfect description of what Childminders, who often care for small number of children in their own home, do naturally as part of their job.

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I remember looking for childcare for my own child and the one thing, 14 years ago, which made me choose the place I did for my child, was the childminder saying to me “you may not get a pretty picture every day, but if your child is upset, I will cuddle him and no matter what, I will love him like he was my own”. I really believe children need to feel loved, valued, cared about and as though they are special to us, through our responses and actions towards them.
Finally, practitioners were asked about the type of professional training they felt was most needed to support them to develop and maintain appropriate attachment relationships with children and families in their early years settings. Example responses included:

All EY practitioners need to have a full understanding about attachments, and about what safeguarding means in everyday terms (and of course how to protect themselves). So a few basic ‘myth busters’ may be useful...

I think some self-delivered training workshop (so practitioners do together) of personal skills around confidence, assertiveness, professionalism, together with case studies and scenarios to work through – and then a few more to support building own setting based guidelines/policies for practice. As then each setting would be able to take ownership of their guidance

What is Professional Love?

As presented in the survey summary there are many instances when aspects of love, intimacy and care are overlapping and because they cannot be compartmentalised it can be difficult to distinguish these concepts from one another within professional early years practices. Yet, when looking more closely at individuals who use a lens of ‘Professional Love’ some practitioners seem to be self-aware and able to recognise the crucial importance of being able to shift their thinking beyond their own needs and instead to become completely absorbed in thinking about and acting with the needs of the other person in mind, in a completely non-judgmental way; this is called being able to ‘de-centre’. When practitioners are able to ‘de-centre’ and to see the world from the view of ‘the other’ then they are less likely to become ‘too attached’ because they will be thinking about and responding to the needs of ‘the other’ as opposed to thinking only about their own needs which will lessen the likelihood of any misunderstanding. When this dialogue and reflection is encouraged it can lead to the creation of policies and implementation of practice which can protect and safeguard young children as the following examples from the research demonstrate.

I define professional love as being entirely present for the children in your care. Giving them your complete attention and energy and wanting the best for them emotionally.

Professional love is based on mutual respect (carer and infant), on bonding and a sense of belonging but NOT overstepping and thinking you know better than a parent.
Professional love is about adults’ sensitivity towards the very young children in their care and “reading” what is needed to make a child feel loved at any moment in time. What is appropriate will vary between children, between different practitioners even towards the same child and even between moments in time (where a cuddle may be needed one day it may not the next). It is this sensitivity which is the difference between an adequate practitioner and an outstanding one.

Practitioners who have mastered the emotional resilience and intellectual capacity to ‘de-centre’ are uniquely positioned to recognise this as the first step to building secure, loving and appropriate relationships with children which are consistent, predictable, reliable and authentic and most importantly are accepted and reciprocated by the children and also by their parents and families. As practitioners get to know children in the context of their home and family, as well as within the setting, the depth of their connection with the child, sometimes called ‘tuning in’, gradually develops within a triangle of relational trust. It is the depth of feeling, investment of time, energy and emotion together with the longevity of these relationships which is what manifests itself in this context as love.

For example:

Having a loving attachment with the children, including kissing, cuddles and appropriate touch. Understanding that you are not their mother and will not replace them. But act like a mother in the absence of their primary caregiver.

‘Professional Love’ provides practitioners with the language to appropriately describe the close, loving intimate and affectionate bond which, over time, is inevitably developed with the children in their care in the context of reciprocity (meaning with mutual agreement) and shared understanding. Here is one example from many similar comments we received:

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This is an important subject and I hope that your survey will provoke a lot of professional discussion

We know that babies and young children are spending many hours a day in early years settings in the company of professionals who are doing their best to provide them with suitable attachment relationships as a requirement within the Early Years Foundation Stage. Defining love in professional roles is problematic because there is no skill set that can be applied, taught or measured. Nevertheless, to deny the existence of love, particularly when research has already confirmed that love matters is unhelpful (Gerhardt, 2004). As this project has demonstrated it is the debate and theorisation of love and care which is important. Providing opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect upon each other’s viewpoint is likely to bring about a more thoughtful understanding and crucially a shift in their thinking. The overwhelming response to the call to participate in the PLEYS project has confirmed this point.

Practitioners should be taught in how to act with professional love and that this is an important part of their work. All those no touch etc policies are greatly contra productive in the first instance for the children and secondly for the professionals.

It has made me, as a manager, reflect on my relationship with children, parents and made me more understanding towards my staff and their attachments.

Professional Development Materials

The main findings derived from the individual and focus group interview data together with the survey results have been used to inform a set of professional development materials. The 'Attachment Toolkit' is intended to complement the safeguarding policies and procedures of any early years setting which are designed to protect children from abuse or harm in all its forms. The materials are designed to assist practitioners to feel more confident about their professional decisions in relation to love, care and intimacy and how to determine the appropriateness of 'Professional Love' in the context of their attachment relationships with babies and young children in their own early years settings.

More information about the 'Attachment Toolkit' can be found on the PLEYS website: http://professionallove.group.shef.ac.uk
Future Research

Further studies are being developed by the team at the University of Sheffield to conduct research on parents’ views and children’s experiences of love and intimacy in early years settings internationally and to further develop the ‘Attachment Toolkit’.
Acknowledgement

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Fennies Nurseries: John Warren (Director of Childcare Services)

For further information please visit the PLEYS website: http://professionallove.group.shef.ac.uk