TUTORIAL

Understand children’s needs in relation to emotional well-being

Have you heard of the nature/nurture debate? These are two basic theories about how children develop: biologically, i.e. nature, and through learning, or nurture. The first, nature, is inherited and relates to the genetic characteristics children inherit from their parents. The second, nurture, is more about how children’s upbringing, the people around them, the environment in which they interact and the skills that they learn all contribute to a child’s development.

There are many viewpoints about the impact of relationships on children’s development and well-being. Early experiences of caring relationships, or the breakdown of such relationships, is said to have a significant impact for children’s emotional development.

So what happens when children have little contact with other people as they grow up? It is well documented in case studies, such as those that emerged after December 1989 of life in Romanian orphanages, that where children had very little contact with people as they grew up, they were seriously underdeveloped and did not develop recognisable human emotional responses.

Whilst we recognise that some characteristics of children's personalities are inherited, most evidence points to the fact that their social and emotional skills are learnt.

What is known is that from birth and throughout children’s early years, the bonds and close relationships that are made with significant carers are the most important. Everyone needs roots to feel that they belong and are safe and secure. Through these relationships children learn trust, value themselves, care for others, adjust their behaviour and develop a moral conscience.

Children begin to feel a sense of security when they are close to their familiar carers, in familiar environments and with familiar objects. This familiarity aids children’s ability to cope with the ever-changing world around them.

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage\(^1\) recognises Personal, Social and Emotional Development as one of the three prime areas of learning, which is crucial for building capacity to learn, to form relationships and to thrive.

In this lesson we will explore further attachment theory and the importance of secure relationships for children’s emotional well-being.