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Adult-Child Relationships in School Age Childcare

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Introduction	1
1: The Importance of Relationships in School Age Childcare	2
2: Relationships in Practice	11
3: Nurturing Peer Relationships	25
4: How the Service Can Support Relationship Building	37
A Final Word	39
References	40

Introduction

Children¹ learn and develop through their experiences, their environment and, most significantly, through their relationships with others. While the relationship a child has with their parents² or primary caregivers is their most important, the relationships they have with other adults, including their extended family, neighbours, teachers and the staff in their school age childcare (SAC) service, all have a role to play their development. Trusting, caring relationships with the adults in their lives helps to build a child's social and emotional skills, foster their sense of belonging, and enhance their well-being and self-esteem.



In a school age childcare service, adults play a key role in welcoming each child in an inclusive environment, paying attention to them, getting to know them as individuals and intentionally building an emotional bond with them. Adults also play an important role in nurturing the child's friendships with other children.

This booklet provides those working in SAC with an understanding of the benefits of building warm, positive, collaborative and respectful relationships with the children in their care and the impact these relationships can have on a child's social and emotional development.

1 The *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* refer to children and young people from 4 years to 14 years. In Ireland, the legal definition of a child is up to the age of 18 years. The term 'children' is used in this booklet to refer to all children and young people who attend a school age childcare service.

2 The general term 'parent' is used in this booklet to refer to anyone in a primary care role for a child, including parents, guardians, kinship carers etc.

1

The Importance of Relationships in School Age Childcare

Many children in Ireland attend a school age childcare (SAC) service. A high quality service, where children feel accepted for who they are, provides a wide range of benefits for children, their families and the community. The SAC service is a space for children to rest, relax and engage in recreation, 'it is also a place where children can grow and develop socially and emotionally, following their interests and widening their horizons' (DCYA, 2020, p.2).

In a quality SAC service, children are provided with opportunities to enjoy a range of recreational activities, and interesting and novel experiences, with friends and kind, fun-loving adults that they may not get to engage with at home. They are encouraged to develop their interests, skills and ideas in a relaxed and creative environment.

In 2020, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs published *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* (DCYA, 2020) to assist and guide SAC service providers and staff 'to reach beyond and aspire to achieving more than the minimum standards set out in regulations' (p.i). One of the guidelines focuses on Nurturing Relationships and Supportive Interactions within SAC, highlighting one of the key roles of adults in a service in building 'warm, positive, collaborative relationships that support children's/young people's social skills, self-esteem, well-being and identity' and ensuring that 'all children and young people attending the service feel welcome, secure and valued' (p.45).

Nurturing, stable relationships with caring adults are essential to healthy human development, beginning from birth and continuing throughout childhood into adulthood. While parents should be the main, stable foundation of enduring relationships for a child, adults in SAC also have a vital role to play in the provision of consistent relationships in which children know they can be themselves.



The Benefits of Supportive Relationships in SAC

Benefits for children

Having trusting relationships with adults in the SAC service enables children to feel accepted and safe, which builds their self-confidence and allows their social and emotional skills to flourish. When adults really listen and respond to children's opinions and interests, and acknowledge their feelings, children learn that they matter to others. They know they can come to us to talk about their day and to encourage them when they are having tough times.

When relationships are consistent and secure, children are able to concentrate on play, rest and recreation, engaging in activities that they enjoy and that provide them with enjoyment, satisfaction and pride in their endeavours.

A nurturing and supportive relationship with an adult provides a child with the space to be who they are.

Positive relationships with adults can also facilitate and strengthen a child's friendships with their peers. When we demonstrate care and responsiveness towards the child and towards others, we are providing them with a road map on how to behave in their own relationships and giving them an understanding of what good friendships look like. This supports the child's prosocial skills such as empathy, kindness, co-operation, negotiation and self-regulation, all of which are necessary for them to be able to live happily in the world. By nurturing their relationships with their peers, we are also supporting them to be better able to cope with any issues that might arise with other children in the service such as conflict or bullying.

By modelling inclusion for children in our relationships with them, showing an interest in others and in our community, and celebrating diversity we will promote children's understanding of social responsibility, equality and fairness. A quality SAC service can also provide children with the chance to meet with others from cultures and backgrounds different from their own, and with different abilities, and to engage with the wider community.

Warm, consistent relationships that model gratitude help children to learn to be grateful for the people in their lives and for what others do for them. Learning to be thankful is an important part of social development and is a great mood enhancer that has been strongly and consistently associated with greater well-being (Harvard Health, 2021).

Children and young people need to feel secure, relaxed, included, connected, valued and nurtured in the SAC service they attend. These all contribute to their feelings of well-being and belonging.

Benefits for staff

When we build good relationships with children in our SAC service and take time to discuss their interests and how they feel, we gain a better understanding of each child. Through this we become more motivated in our work as we want to learn more about the children so we can provide them with what they need, and support them to carry out their ideas and explorations. This leads to increased job satisfaction, less stress and a more harmonious environment.

Benefits for parents

When parents know that their child is really understood and valued in their SAC service, and has a positive relationship with adults and with the other children, they will feel reassured that their child's well-being is being considered and that they will be kept informed should any issues arise.

Developing Relationships in School Age Childcare

In a SAC service, there will be children from four years to 14 years of age, and it can be a challenge to build up meaningful relationships with each child. It is important, however, that we strive to build a one-to-one relationship with each child in our group, showing that we care about and are interested in them. Caring relationships built on trust and open communication will ensure that the child feels safe and will positively impact their social and emotional as well as their cognitive and physical development.

The SAC environment is an informal one and we can be relaxed with the children in our charge. As we are neither a child's teacher nor their parent, we are in a unique position where we can provide a neutral space for children to express themselves and to communicate freely. As we get to know the children, they should also get to know us as we share information about ourselves and our interests, likes and dislikes. This helps to build a genuine trusting relationship.

It is important that children know they are trusted to make decisions for themselves. We can do this by giving them opportunities to be independent, for example, making their own snacks, determining how to spend their time in the service and building friendships they have chosen for themselves.

Strong, positive relationships are foundational in children developing confidence, social skills and resilience.

What Children Need From Relationships

Social and emotional development

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to:

- Recognise and manage their emotions.
- Set and achieve positive goals.
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others.
- Establish and maintain positive relationships.
- Make responsible decisions.
- Handle interpersonal situations and conflicts well.



When supported to develop these skills, children are better able to initiate and sustain friendships, calm themselves when angry, resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute in a positive way to their family and community. With these skills, children can interact with others, both peers and adults, in a harmonious way that offers space for the stimulation of ideas and involvement in further learning.

Children's social and emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). This development begins at birth and continues as children go through their years in school and into adulthood. Secure attachment relationships with caring adults are key for babies and young children's development. The same is true for older children. As children get older and they develop their thoughts and ideas, as well as their personalities, their relationships with the adults in their lives matures and their needs change. At different stages of development, children need different types of supports from adults they can trust.

To understand how best to approach relationships with children in our care, it can be helpful to consider the stage of development they are experiencing. Age is not always a clear indicator of development and we need to be cognisant that children develop in different areas at different times and in different ways. Before we consider the individual needs and development of each child, however, it can be useful to have a general understanding of what we might expect at the different stages.

Each child is a unique person who will develop at their own pace and in their own way. This development is shaped by their experiences, and their social and environmental influences.

Early years

During the first few years of life, the synapses in a child's brain multiply at a rate that is faster than at any other time in life, creating new pathways as they internalise information. The core features of emotional development, such as being able to identify and understand their own feelings, and accurately read and comprehend the feelings of others, begins in the early years.

As infants, children depend on adults for all of their caregiving needs. As they progress through the preschool years, adults are still the main influencers in their lives.

Middle years

In the early primary school years, children are learning more about the world. By the time they have reached their later primary school years, while still reliant on adults to help them navigate home life, school and community, children also live in their world of friendships, engage with a variety of media, and are involved in the wider community through clubs, sports and extended family relationships.



Children in middle years develop and hone their social and emotional skills when given opportunities to make and maintain friendships, and engage in both team activities and solo experiences.

Adolescence

In the adolescent years, children are exploring who they are and striving for self-identity. They experiment with interests, causes and ideas; they try out new ways to dress and new social groups to see where they fit. They may express their opinions, particularly about the fairness of the world, in very strong terms, which can sometimes cause disagreements and conflict with others.

In adolescence, children are transitioning to greater independence from adults and require more privacy. While they look more to their peers to explore their identity and for validation, they still require support from caring adults to be able to do this successfully.

Children of all ages

All children, and all adults for that matter, need positive relationships with others that make them feel cared for, valued, respected and secure. This, along with a sense of connection to others, will increase their resilience, confidence and happiness. Whatever their age or stage of development, all children in a SAC service need:

- An inclusive environment.
- A key person to provide them with tender care and support to settle in and to gain a sense of belonging.
- A plan for their transition into the service that meets their individual needs.
- Adults who are approachable and who listen to them, and with whom they feel safe to talk about any issues affecting them.
- Affection. While for many this will be physical affection such as appropriate hugs, a high five or a touch on the shoulder that acknowledges their achievements and shows them they are valued, it is important to remember that not everyone likes to be touched and we must be conscious of each child's individual preferences.
- Encouragement and recognition for all of their contributions.
- Fun activities that they can engage in regularly, with adult involvement when this is wanted.
- Cosy spaces to relax in and talk with others.
- Opportunities to contribute their ideas and opinions, and to see these being appreciated and acted upon.
- Opportunities to explore and experiment with their ideas. Engage with children when they are testing their hypotheses about something, even when you may know the outcome, and allow children to develop their reasoning skills, problem solving and persistence.
- Opportunities to explore their emerging interests and skills.
- Opportunities to exercise choice and control.
- Opportunities to be involved in the planning, carrying out and evaluation of their programme and activities.
- Guidance in social and emotional skills that support resolving conflict in a peaceful and empathic way, for example, listening, trying to see other points of view, learning the root causes of the conflict and the negotiation skills to move forward.

The Role of the Adult in School Age Childcare

In order to understand the significance of the relationships between adults and children, it is important to consider the multifaceted role of the adult in SAC. We are not a child's parent, but we still have a responsibility to provide care, support, stability, kindness and fun to children who are developing their ideas about the world. Nor are we their teacher, but we still play an educative role, acting as both role model and mentor to children as they mature into their role as responsible citizens in their community.

Mentor

We can act as mentors to children and young people, supporting them to develop their ideas and helping them to make sense of their lived experiences. Some children may not have anyone they feel they can share concerns or feelings with, and the SAC service may be a secure space for them to talk. If a child is having an issue in school, for example, they may want to discuss it with someone they consider 'neutral' before they talk with a parent or a teacher. By really listening to children, we can provide them with a sounding board for their feelings and their ideas, and the space to process their experiences. We can guide their actions by acknowledging their feelings and not minimising what they understand.

Role model

Children and young people constantly observe and learn from the behaviour of those around them, both adults and peers. While we can establish rules about appropriate behaviour and respectful communication, the most effective way to guide children is to model these behaviours in our own interactions with others. Children learn from us when we:

- Demonstrate values such as kindness, inclusivity and respect.
- Listen respectfully and attentively when others are talking rather than interrupting or dismissing what they say.
- Compromise and cooperate with others and work together to reach a solution to differences and resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Show respect for our environment and the things within it, and demonstrate care towards our own and others' belongings.

- Demonstrate self-care, incorporating wellness practices into our daily routine and practising stress management and stress reduction with children.
- Guide and support younger children in the service in their activities, showing patience and respect for their efforts.

Motivator

Through supportive relationships, children will develop intrinsic motivation. This means that rather than being driven by external factors, such as recognition from others or rewards, they are driven by things that will satisfy them internally, such as the work itself, a sense of achievement, and the opportunity to grow and advance their skills. In a SAC service, we can support children to develop intrinsic motivation by providing them with opportunities to explore what they are interested in and to collaborate on projects, for example, sustainability projects or volunteer work, in an informal environment.

It is important that children have the opportunity to explore a variety of activities and experiences so that they can find out what they are interested in doing and what they are good at. This increases their sense of purpose and motivation in activities that are meaningful to them.

Persistence coach

Another key role of an adult in a SAC service is to encourage children, foster their confidence and growth, and bolster their perseverance to keep going even when they feel discouraged or unsure about how to proceed. We can use persistence coaching to support a child to remain calm, focus on the task in hand and persist at difficult tasks.

- Provide encouragement and praise – emphasise effort rather than result, 'I know that was hard but you kept on going. That took real determination'.
- Provide opportunities for them to succeed in what they are doing.
- Provide opportunities to take on responsibilities where they will succeed.
- Allow children to think out solutions to their problems with your support.
- Help children to break tasks down into smaller steps so that they seem manageable.
- Acknowledge when things get hard but emphasise the benefits of trying.

2

Relationships in Practice

The Key Person Approach

As outlined in part 1, children learn best in the context of positive relationships that promote feelings of security, which are fundamental to their feeling of belonging (DCYA, 2020). One of the most significant ways to encourage positive relationships between adults and children in a SAC service is to introduce a key person approach.

What is a key person approach?

In a key person approach, each child is assigned a particular adult who will be the 'go to' person for the child and their parents, building a unique, supportive relationship with them. This approach is often used in early learning and care services but is just as effective for older children.



It is important for a child's wellbeing that they have a person with whom they feel connected. By having a specific knowledge and understanding of the child, the key person can show warmth and sensitivity in their communication with the child.

(Barnardos, 2016, p.2)

In order for the key person approach to work, we need to be clear about the complexities of the approach, what it entails and our responsibilities within it.

As a child's key person, we intentionally build good relationships with both the child and their parents. We work in partnership with parents to support the child to settle in to the service, get to know the routines, understand the ethos of the service and to make new friends. We will also gather information about the child's interests, needs, like and dislikes, as well as the activities they enjoy, and find out about the child's background, culture and the languages spoken at home. We can use information from parents about the child's disposition, along with our own observations of the child, to provide meaningful support for the child and develop an emotional bond with them, and to plan activities based on their individual interests and development needs. We will also feed back to parents on the child's learning and development throughout their time in the service.

It is important that both parents and children understand the purpose of the key person approach. The service should provide both formal and informal information to parents about the approach, why it is in place and how it is implemented. Parents should also be clear as to the role and responsibilities of the key person.

If a situation arises where a child does not like or 'gel' with their key person, we should take steps to address this. It is the responsibility of the key person to build the relationship and take the time to create trust through one-to-one interactions. If, having worked consistently to form a relationship, it still has not developed, we should talk with the child, their parents and other staff members to determine what should be done to ensure the child feels attached to an adult. This may require assigning another key person to the child.



Benefits of a key person approach

The benefits of a key person approach in a SAC service should not be underestimated.

By having the opportunity to get to know a small group of children as individuals, we can develop a close bond with them, rather than the more generalised or surface knowledge that we might have with a larger group. This will lead to higher satisfaction and engagement in our work. Parents will also benefit, feeling confident that there is a person in the service they can link in with who understands their child's needs. Most importantly, having one adult who understand their needs and provides a stable, secure environment will impact positively on a child's well-being.

As well as supporting the transition into the service, as a key person, the knowledge we have of each child is invaluable in supporting them through other changes and key events in their life, for example, the transition from primary school onto secondary school. We will also be better able to support the child through any difficult events or issues that may arise, such as bereavement or difficulties in peer relationships.

Helping a Child to Settle in to the Service

Both children and parents will benefit from a visit to the service before the child's start date. During this visit, they can see what the environment looks like, get an understanding of the layout and get an idea of the types of activities on offer. They can also meet the adult(s) who will be responsible for them, in particular their key person, and discuss any concerns they might have. Parents and children can learn about the attitudes and expectations of the service and outline what they expect from the service. This visit is also an opportunity for the child to meet some of the other children so there will be a few faces familiar to them on their first day.

As a child's key person, you might consider the following to help a child settle in:

- Arrange a welcoming 'get together' or some 'getting to know you' activities among the group. It is always a good idea to check in with the child first to find out what they are comfortable with.
- Spend time explaining the environment and the activities and experiences on offer, and sharing information about the service that will help the child. Even something as simple as not knowing where the toilets are can be stressful when starting in a new place.
- Provide a children's handbook that includes information about the key person approach, and guidance about what to do if they need assistance with anything.
- Encourage the child to come to you with any queries they might have.
- Ask the child about their likes and dislikes, their interests, and any other information that may be relevant to help you get to know them.
- Intentionally provide opportunities to help others also get to know the child, such as activities and games that require children to work together.
- Organise a buddy mentor approach to help the child with the transition (see page 27).

When children do not know what to expect or how to fit into a new service, the situation will become stressful for them and they may show this through their behaviour. Good transition processes will help circumvent feelings of anxiety or uncertainty about what to expect and help the children to feel secure in the environment.

To help a child settle in, we must be available, sensitive and warm towards them, engaging with them in their activities when requested to do so or when required, and facilitating them to have fun with other children.

Transitions and Key Person Policies

All SAC services should have a clear Transitions Policy and set of procedures to support new children to settle into the service. As well as providing guidance on how to support new children coming in to the service, the Transition Policy might also include strategies for preparing for new events and strategies to support children's transition from primary to secondary school. The service should also have a Key Person Policy that outlines how the approach works, the benefits, and the role and responsibilities of the key person. As with all policies, these policies should be accessible to all and regularly reviewed in consultation with the staff team, children and families.

Identity and Belonging

Just as it is within any family or community, it is essential that everyone in a SAC service feels welcome and accepted, and knows that others value their presence and that they belong. It is within our relationships with children and families, and the way we support and nurture children's relationships with one another, that we can ensure that the SAC service is as open and inclusive as possible, and free from any discrimination and prejudice.

Belonging is not about everyone being the same; rather it is about recognising and celebrating our differences.

The *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* (DCYA, 2020) require that the adults in a SAC service understand the importance of developing positive attitudes in the service and challenging inappropriate practice and attitudes in a supportive and educative way. For this to occur, we first need to be aware of our own values and belief systems, and consider how our biases might be impacting our daily practice. Most people are raised with certain prejudices or biases based on the beliefs of their families, the media, education and their lived experiences in their community. By engaging in anti-bias practice, where we not only celebrate difference but also challenge the effects of inequality and work proactively to support meaningful inclusion, we can create a service that supports all dimensions of human differences, 'including culture, race, language, ability, learning styles, ethnicity, family structure, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, and socioeconomic differences' (Lesley University, 2022).

As we strive towards the delivery of child-centred, equality driven services that involve and support all families attending, we need to understand and respect the different cultures, abilities and experiences of all. To do this, we must educate ourselves about others' lived experiences to ensure that we are inclusive in our conversations and actions, and promote an environment that is conducive to learning about others.

Understanding and acceptance come from genuine relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and abilities that allow for exchange of ideas and stories, the celebration of various cultures and traditions, and accessibility for all.

Below are some key things you can do to ensure everyone in the service feels like they belong:

- Ask questions in a sensitive way to find out more about others' experiences. When you are genuinely interested, people are usually happy to share their experiences. With increased exposure and enhanced knowledge, some of our prejudices naturally disappear as we learn to respect people from other cultures.
- Engage with children who have English or Irish as an additional language in both one-to-one and small group conversations. This allows you to form and maintain relationships with them and gives them the opportunity to gain confidence in using another language.
- Understand basic facts about gender and sexual orientation. It is likely that you will be working with children who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex +. Understanding and respecting the diversity of sexuality and identity provides for a safe, secure environment for all children and all families. Respect each child's wish to identify in whatever way they feel comfortable. If a child asks you to use a different pronoun or name when speaking with them or referring to them, for example, you should respect this. If a child opens up to you about their sexual identity, respect any wish they might have to privacy and do not 'out' someone without their permission.
- Resist grouping children together based solely on one attribute. Each child is a multi-faceted individual with their own unique identity and we should actively strive to learn about people as individuals. Encourage children to talk about their home life, the things they like to do, the food they eat, the friends or family they play with outside of the service.

- Part of your role in preparing children for an ever-changing world is to support them to develop the skills and understanding they need to respect diversity and value equality in their relationships with others. You can do this by modelling fairness, openness, inclusivity and respect in your interactions with others, and through the activities and play experiences you provide.
- Challenge any negative perceptions children and families might have about others and make clear that any behaviour that undermines the dignity of another, such as any inappropriate language or practice, will not be accepted.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy

National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services (DCYA, 2020) advocate that SAC services have a comprehensive Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy that supports the participation of all children including 'children from identified minorities, regardless of their cultural background, ability or disability' (p.45). The policy will recognise everyone's right to be seen, accepted and respected, which will ensure that the practices within the service are inclusive and responsive to every individual's cultural identity. Review the policy regularly and adapt as appropriate to ensure that that inequity and unfairness is addressed. Support parents and children to become familiar with the policy and involve them in any reviews that take place to ensure that it meets their needs and is respectful of difference.

Supportive Interactions

Supportive interactions between adults and children are important for building trust and creating a safe haven for a child. We should engage warmly with children and show that we are interested in them through positive, respectful, clear communication. Individual relationships built on trusting, caring and understanding interactions will foster cooperative and motivated children.

Adults in SAC need to know and respond to each child as an individual with their own unique thoughts and ideas.

We should be proactive in ensuring that conflict is minimal, supporting children to express their feelings respectfully and following through consistently with guidance around behaviour. We can model negotiation skills in our interactions with others to help children learn how to express their own opinions in a positive manner and accept other people's ideas. We can do this with empathy and with the understanding that children's brains are still developing and they will require support in processing their emotions.



Communication

Open, reciprocal communication means listening to children as well as talking to them. Asking open-ended questions and wondering aloud about a child's thoughts, ideas and opinions will create opportunities for them to share and communicate with ease, safe in the knowledge that they are being heard. We also need to ensure we are clear in our own communications with children. When we are unclear, for example, making unspecific, vague or ambiguous requests of them, it can be confusing for children, which can lead to them becoming frustrated and annoyed.

Watch for communication obstacles such as lecturing, judging and preaching. This ensures that we are keeping doors open for dialogue.

There are many ways to communicate that we care for the children in our services:

- Meet and greet children daily by name to make a personal connection. 'Hi Cian, good to see you today. How did your Irish test go?', 'Hi there, Saoirse, I see you were playing football out there, looked like you were having fun!' Adults greeting children by name enhances their feeling of belonging in an environment, which can reduce behaviour issues.
- Be specific in your communication. Replace any vague statements to children, 'It's time to tidy up', with more precise, bite-size statements, 'The paint pots need washing out' or 'The tools need to be placed back on the wood work station'.
- Initiate individual undivided attention regularly.
- Ask open-ended questions to learn more about the children's backgrounds, interests and feelings. 'How did that make you feel?', 'What was that like?' Listen carefully and respond appropriately.
- Encourage children by asking questions and providing specific comments to convey interest in what they are saying. 'What happened next?', 'How did you come up with your idea?'
- Reflect or paraphrase during conversations with children to show that you are listening and that you understand. 'So, you feel that... you think... ?'
- Remember context and details from past conversations and experiences with children to show that you are paying attention and are interested in their lives. 'How did the hurling game go last weekend?', 'We're having nectarines for snack today. I remember you told me they were your favourite.'
- Participate alongside children to show that you are interested in what they are doing and to encourage skills in planning and reflection. 'How do you think we should prepare?', 'What did you think of that activity?', 'What should we do differently next time?'
- Support opportunities for children's input, shared responsibility and leadership to help children develop positive self-efficacy. 'Your ideas on how we should approach this are important. What do you think we should do?', 'How would you feel about leading the group meeting tomorrow?'

(Adapted from National AfterSchool Association, 2015)

Smile, have fun and show the children that you enjoy what you do and you enjoy being in their company.

Effective listening

Effective listening is a very important aspect of good communication with anyone. We all need to feel that we are being heard. In a SAC service, children need to feel seen, heard and understood, both in one-to-one conversations with adults and in larger groups. They also need help to be able to express themselves confidently. This comes when adults listen and attempt to see things from their perspective.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1992, states that children have the right to be involved in matters that affect them. In a SAC service, this means seeking children's opinions and ideas, and listening to and acting upon these. It also means actively involving children in decision-making and in selecting their activities and projects, if they so wish. As outlined in *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* (DCYA, 2020), management, staff and children should all work together to develop policies and procedures, make decisions, and agree about other issues that impact upon the children, including a Code of Behaviour (see page 31 for more on this).

Strategies for effective listening:

- Sit with the child at their level and use eye contact to convey respect and show you are interested in what they have to say. For younger children, this may mean kneeling beside them, for older children, sitting next to them. Standing over children does not convey that you are listening to them as equal partners in the conversation.
- Ensure your body conveys an open and relaxed manner.
- Pay attention to what is being said. Do not interrupt.
- Paraphrase what the children have said back to them to ensure you have understood.
- Stay with the thread of conversation and do not go off on your own tangents.
- If the service is loud or seems chaotic while you are speaking with a child, take a few deep breaths. This slows down the heart rate and centres you, and you will be better able to focus on what the child is saying.

We should strive to listen to children in a non-judgmental way, using the language of respect, showing that we are interested in their feelings and experiences, and have concern for their well-being.

Attuning to children

Attuning to children is an important way to get to know how a child may be feeling so we can acknowledge their emotions and respond in a sensitive manner. To be attuned to a child, we need to observe them carefully and form an emotional connection. For example, if a child is behaving in a way we perceive to be negative, instead of making assumptions about that behaviour, it is helpful to think about how the child might be feeling and the emotions behind the behaviour. This enables us to consider how best to support the child rather than immediately acting in a punitive way. By attuning to the child we are able to reflect their emotions back to them by naming the feeling, which, in turn, will support them to better identify and express their feelings themselves.

As the children in our care develop, it is important that we keep abreast of their maturing minds as they experiment with their likes and dislikes, and their interests. Sometimes, what once fascinated a child and held their imagination does not necessarily enthral them three months later. To ensure that children remain engaged in the service, we need to attune to and support their emerging and developing interests.

When adults truly know children and are interested in their individual temperaments, interests, likes and dislikes, children will feel secure enough to talk about their hopes, dreams and fears.

Showing empathy

Empathy is the capacity to see things from another person's point of view and be able to acknowledge how another may be feeling. Being empathic provides us with a way of understanding what might be happening for a child, rather than perhaps feeling frustrated with them when they appear to be 'acting out'. Empathic interactions create feelings of security for both adults and children, and acknowledging a person's feelings can act as a de-stressor for all.

The best way to show empathy is to first focus attention on the child and acknowledge how they might feeling, 'You seem frustrated/sad/angry/worried'. Then show that we are interested in and care about how they are feeling by listening to what they have to say and being non-judgemental about their emotions. We can then offer our support.

When we show empathy to a child, they will feel understood and know that their thoughts and feelings are valued. When they feel valued, they will develop in self-confidence and respond more positively to boundaries and limitations.

We learn to be empathic and understanding towards others when we have received empathy from our own caregivers. When they learn empathy, children will be able to see things from another person's perspective, which will enable them to get along with their peers now and into adulthood.



Partnership with Parents

Policy makers, practitioners and researchers have emphasised the importance of supportive relationships between staff and parents in early childhood education settings and in schools. The same is true of school age childcare services. We should not underestimate the significance of the relationships we develop with parents in terms of positive outcomes for children.

The relationships we have with the parents in our service should be based on the principles of respect and inclusivity, and they should know that their values and beliefs are respected and their input welcomed. Sharing information between the home and the service enables us to better understand each child's interests, and how best to provide opportunities for the child to make friendships, gain mastery in their skills and become confident in their competency as an active learner.

It is imperative that we think carefully about how best to get to know the parents of the children in our care and the strategies we can use to engage and involve parents. This should begin from the very first conversations we have with parents when they are thinking about enrolling their child.

- Be friendly and approachable and make it clear to parents that you appreciate their input.
- Use a key person system. Ask parents questions to become more familiar with any interests, likes and dislikes that new children have.
- Share information about the service in conversations, on notice boards and on the service's social media, and seek parents' opinions on the service activities and environment.
- Make the service's policies available to parents and involve them when reviewing policies.
- Organise family evenings/events so that parents can meet one another.
- Provide information about other agencies as appropriate.

Links with Community and School

Children learn from their ecosystems of home, community, schools and virtual worlds.

Developing partnerships with schools, and engaging in both formal and informal communication with them, provides us with further opportunities to support children. We will gain a better understanding of what children are learning in subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education, and about global issues such as environmentalism, that we can build on further in the service to extend children's learning. Engaging with a child's school means we are also more likely to be aware of any issues arising for a particular child.

By linking in with local businesses, activity centres, community centres etc., we can find ways for children to learn more about their surrounding area, engage in environmental activities, and support the local community. There may be opportunities to do volunteer work such as baking cakes for a day centre or taking part in a local area clean up, for example.

The Environment

As discussed above, relationships are key to providing school age children with the opportunity to learn, relax, and build and maintain friendships. However, if the environment is not suitable, it will be harder to foster positive interactions, as time will be spent on controlling the behaviour of children in an environment that does not work for them. An environment that does not have interesting areas and opportunities for children to engage in play and recreation, for example, will not hold the children's interests. A cluttered environment or one that does not have adequate space for children to store their belongings is not conducive to order and relaxation. Spaces that have been designed to appeal to differing interests create an environment of engaged activity and happy children.



The physical environment and resources and materials we have in our service will go a long way to supporting inclusive practice and ensuring that everyone feels valued. It is important to look around the environment and consider whether children attending the service can see themselves reflected in the spaces they inhabit. Families will be from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientation and family structures, and they all need to see themselves reflected in the environment.

Think about the festivals and celebrations honoured in the service and whether they are culturally responsive and support feelings of belonging. Do they unintentionally exclude or prioritise some over others. Christmas is a major celebration for many in Ireland but for families who do not celebrate, consider how this is managed. Do festivals from other religions such as Diwali receive similar attention, preparation and activity? Think also about how other celebrations might make children feel. When Mother's/Father's Day comes around, for example, it may bring up difficult feelings for children who have one parent, same sex parents or are bereaved. Thinking about how all types of families are recognised and depicted is an important aspect of respect.

Always involve children in decision-making processes in the SAC service, including how the environment is structured and the activities on offer.

Some practical steps that will ensure the environment is inclusive for all include:

- Ensuring the physical environment is accessible to all, including those with issues with mobility and visual or hearing impairments.
- Creating an open and safe environment for children who are LGBTQ+.
- Celebrating festivals in an appropriate and culturally sensitive way.
- Using and displaying materials that are representative of all of the children and families within the service.
- Participating in conversations with children about other cultures so that they learn facts instead of myths or stereotypes.
- Incorporating materials reflective of the languages used in the homes of the children in the service.
- Talking with parents about anti-bias practice and what it means.
- Understanding and respecting the diversity of sexuality and identity.
- Supporting children to wear whatever clothing, hairstyles and accessories they wish that reflect their affirmed gender.
- Making sure that any books, games, posters etc. reflect the children in the service and that these do not reinforce stereotypes in their portrayal of people.
- Asking the children to make their own choices, for example, the food they want on the menu, the books they might like to read, and the events or festivals they would like to celebrate, and asking them what they would like to see in the service.

Every child is unique. Do not make assumptions about what children feel, like and dislike. Check with them to find out.

3

Nurturing Peer Relationships

A key aspect of the relationship we have with the children in our service is to nurture their relationships with one another, helping them to develop and maintain friendships. Every day we can encourage and support peer relationships through conversations, discussing the importance and benefit of friendships, and by modelling how to be a good friend. We can also support children to build and develop relationships with other children by offering specific games and activities that foster peer relationships, and by providing them with opportunities to collaborate. In doing so, we will also foster our own relationships with the children as they will value us as an interested adult who is invested in supporting them to develop important skills.

Supporting Collaboration and Communication

The SAC service is an ideal environment to support children to develop the skills required to get along with and work collaboratively with others, such as effective listening skills, patience, willingness to support others, and the ability to share and to compromise. While we can do this through everyday interactions and by modelling openness and kindness, it is also helpful to organise activities that lead to discussions among children as to what they think supports communication and what makes a good friend.

The activities overleaf will support positive relationship building between children, as they learn to cooperate with one another and work in collaboration, and to consider the attributes of friendship.



Communication activity

Through this activity, children will identify how the way they communicate can enhance or damage their relationships.

Discuss with children what kind of things help to build open communication, for example, honesty, and what might damage it, for example, being dismissive towards someone. Write these down in two columns on a large sheet of paper and post in a visible location. Discuss some activities the children can carry out together as a group such as a rubbish clean-up day at a local park or making a large thank you card for community volunteers. Together, choose an activity and devise a plan to carry it out. Afterwards, discuss how the activity went, what helped or hindered in terms of the way everyone communicated, and what the children learned from working together as a team.

Building relationships activity

Through this activity, children will reflect on ways they build relationships with others.

Ask the children to think of ways to build or strengthen their relationships with one another and write these on a large sheet of paper. These might include inviting a new child to join their group for a project or actively listening to a friend talking about a problem. Discuss how successful these methods have been for building relationships in the service so far. Encourage children to pick an idea from the list to try out over the coming weeks. They can keep this to themselves but you can regroup in a few weeks to discuss how it went in a general way.



(adapted from National AfterSchool Association, n.d.)

Buddy Mentor Approach

Children benefit from playing and collaborating with other children of different ages. We can challenge misconceptions or fears that they may have about different age groups by supporting older and younger children to work together.

One way to nurture these relationships is by encouraging a 'buddy' approach in which older children act as mentors to younger children, guiding them and looking after their welfare. Not only is this a helpful way to support young children to settle into the SAC environment, it is an effective way to support the social and emotional development of both children. The older child is given the opportunity to act in a caring role, developing their empathic responses to the requirements of the younger child and nurturing the relationships the younger child has with others in the service. They are also being given leadership responsibilities, which allows them to use their own initiative, strengthens their confidence, makes them feel respected and enhances their feelings of self-worth. The younger child will feel more secure in the service as they learn from the older child, and are encouraged to practise new skills and create new friendships with their support.

For this approach to be successful, it needs to be discussed with the children in advance to ensure in particular that the older child feels comfortable about taking on a mentoring role. We also need to observe children carefully before matching up 'buddies' to ensure we create suitable pairings.

Supporting Inclusion among Children

In the SAC service, we can foster a positive attitude towards others by encouraging children to consider things from different perspectives. Engaging children in conversations about respecting everyone's right to be who they are and their responsibilities as a citizen will help to ensure that all children feel included and that they belong in the service.

We can build awareness of cultural differences and promote inclusive behaviour by planning and creating opportunities to help children people learn about equality, diversity, fairness and respect for others through their play, activities and interactions. We can create discussion groups on human rights, for example, as well as on specific topics such as gender identity.

We can also provide opportunities that support children to:

- Learn about different cultural groups and their history from others in the setting and through research.
- Learn the multiple components of identity, such as personal and social identity, and how these identities are influenced by family and by society.
- Recognise differences and commonalities in people.
- Learn about injustice to individuals and to groups.
- Become confident they can make a difference and commit to take action when they see unfair treatment.

Always challenge inappropriate practices and attitudes, including discriminatory remarks or comments. Children must understand that any remarks based on discrimination and prejudice cannot and will not be ignored.

Children's Behaviour

Challenging behaviour

Children may sometimes exhibit behaviours that we find challenging. The relationship that we have built up with the children in our care will determine both how we respond to these behaviours and how the child responds in turn. We might choose to ignore some behaviour while other challenging behaviour will need to be addressed in a calm, sensitive and specific way. The better we know and understand a child, and the closer the relationship we have with them, the more able we will be to consider the appropriate way to address the behaviour.

Challenging behaviour is often the sign of an unmet need or stressor in a child's life and it will be helpful to consider what it may be like for them when they are engaging in unwanted and self-defeating behaviours, as well as the feelings that might be causing them to behave in this way. We will not find the behaviour as challenging when we understand the place it is coming from.

Being aware of our own triggers can also help us to be responsive rather than reactive to behaviours. For example, if we find ourselves getting impatient when a child continuously approaches us to 'tell' on someone else, we should consider why we feel impatient with that behaviour and what our reaction may feel like to the child. Rather than reacting instinctively, we can think about how we could respond in a way that acknowledges the child's need to check in with us.

Addressing challenging behaviour is not just about being sensitive to the individual child, however. We must also to keep the needs of the other children in the service in mind. We should also be mindful about how a child's behaviour impacts on their relationships with the other children in the service. There should be a plan in place to counteract and respond to challenging behaviour as it occurs. This should be discussed and reviewed regularly at team meetings, and appropriate training made available.



Any actions taken to address challenging behaviour must always be in the best interest of the child and with the intention that a child will learn and develop from the situation in a positive way.

Persistent or out of character challenging behaviour

Some children can persistently display behaviours that we find challenging or may engage in behaviour that is out of character for them. It is important to consider how a child's experiences outside the service may be impacting on their behaviour. There may be ongoing issues at home or in school. Some children will have experienced or may still be experiencing trauma in their lives due to bereavement, domestic violence, homelessness, parental separation, or parental mental health challenges or addiction. There may also be children in your service who have fled areas of conflict such as Syria or Ukraine. As a result of their experiences, children may experience feelings of confusion, anger, sadness or anxiety, and there may be persistent behaviours that we might find challenging. We do not always know a child's individual circumstances so it is important not to jump to conclusions about what is going on. We should, however, always consider what might be going on and the feelings behind the behaviour. These feelings may be complex and hard for the child to explain.



We can check in with parents to see if they want to share any information that might help us support their child. Think also about the resources available in the environment that provide guidance on expression of feelings and emotions, such as posters, books, activities and games. Where appropriate, and with the support of parents, we may wish to link in with other organisations that can provide information or support, for example Barnardos Bereavement Counselling Services.

Promoting Positive Behaviour and Relationships Policy

The service will have a policy on behaviour that outlines how children are supported to engage in regulating their behaviour and resolving conflicts, and the procedures in place to ensure there is positive support for and cooperation between children.

Code of Behaviour – agreeing limits and boundaries



Adults can support children to avoid inappropriate behaviour through their relationship and interactions with them, and by helping them understand basic guidelines. When children do something inappropriate, adults can help them look at the consequences of their actions and think about what they can do to make things better. Appropriate guidance requires a balance of patience, love, firmness, understanding, mutual respect, mutual trust and consistency.

(Barnardos, 2020, p.26)

Children feel secure when they have limits and boundaries to guide their behaviour. These boundaries will be based on an ethos of respect for one another and will outline the rights and responsibilities of all those in the service.

The boundaries set should be neither excessively strict nor controlling, and should focus on safety, well-being and respect for all. They should also be phrased in positive ways, for example, 'We will speak to each other in friendly terms' rather than 'No swearing', and 'We will listen when others are speaking' rather than 'We will not interrupt'.

The *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* (DCYA, 2020) advocate that a Code of Behaviour 'is developed in partnership with children/young people, which encourages development of children's/young people's self-esteem, well-being and positive relationships with others' (p. 49). It will be more effective if children are encouraged to take the lead in establishing and agreeing limits within the service, with the adults guiding and facilitating. Focus the discussion on ways that we will treat others with respect, ways we show we care about one another and ways we might resolve conflict in positive ways, writing the points made down on a large sheet of paper. When everyone has reached agreement, share the Code with all children, staff and parents, and display in the service. Review and revise the Code regularly, particularly when new children arrive into the setting.

The Code of Behaviour can be used as a starting point for the service's policy and procedures on supporting positive behaviour.

When conflict arises

While we will have developed the SAC service as a space in which listening to one another supports everyone to express their feelings in a constructive way, inevitably conflict situations will sometimes arise. Fostering positive peer relationships for children involves de-escalating this conflict before it becomes disruptive and possibly unsafe, and supporting children to be able to resolve conflicts themselves.

When conflict arises among children in the service, it is important that we remain calm, keeping facial expressions neutral and using a low, even tone. We can intervene in the conflict in an unthreatening way, engaging in eye contact with the children involved but making sure not to enter their personal space. We should help the children to use an imaginary pause button and breathe deeply before trying to resolve the issue with problem solving and negotiating skills. Distraction and diversionary tactics might be appropriate in some instances. When a child has calmed down, listen to them in a non-judgmental way and acknowledge their feelings about the situation. We can then remind them about the boundaries that have been set for their safety and to show respect to others, and talk with them about how their actions impact on others.

It is important to acknowledge the emotions of all children involved and never to minimise or dismiss a child's feelings. While a good sense of humour is helpful in many situations and is a great attribute when working with children, in a situation of conflict between children, we should not use humour unless we know the children will respond to it positively. Used inappropriately, it can further exacerbate the situation as it might appear to the children that we do not care about the issue at hand.

By modelling how to communicate effectively by both listening and speaking in a calm manner, and showing how this supports successful collaborations and maintains friendships, we can promote the communication and social and emotional skills needed to manage any conflict situations that might arise. We can also support children to resolve their own conflicts by discussing how to prevent disagreements from escalating and ways to minimise or dissolve conflict quickly and successfully should it arise.



Problem solving suggestions might include:

- Stating the problem
- Thinking of ways to solve the issue
- Listening openly
- Expressing feelings calmly
- Remembering that we are all different and we all deserve respect
- Being empathic
- Being assertive when necessary

As outlined in *National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services* (DCYA, 2020), services 'should be supported in managing children/young people's behaviour through support, supervision and training where appropriate' (p.50).

Understanding emotions activity

This activity can help children to understand how emotions and actions are connected, and to consider how others might be feeling and what might be prompting their behaviour. This will help them to relate to and support one another.

With the children, discuss the emotions we all have such as sadness, anxiety, happiness, anger and fear, and write these down on the surface of a small plastic ball.

Now talk about behaviours that we might exhibit, such as kicking, shouting, crying, laughing, glaring, and write these onto the surface of a large sponge football.

Cut an incision into the sponge football so that smaller ball will fit inside it.

Discuss how our behaviours are an expression of how we are feeling inside but that the action may not always seem to match the feeling. For example, we might shout at or fall out with a friend who doesn't include us in an activity, not because we are angry but because we are sad to have been left out. Encourage children to think about how the ways they act might impact on other's feelings and behaviour.



Bullying

Bullying affects the lives of children and families throughout Ireland. When working with children, we need to know what bullying looks like, recognise the different forms of bullying behaviour that may occur and be clear about how we will respond to it. Equally important, it must be made clear to children what bullying looks like and that it will not be accepted in any way, shape or form. We can use a variety of mediums to help children learn about bullying and how to prevent it, for example, group discussions, art projects, research projects, creative writing and drama.

One of the most significant ways we can prevent bullying is to ensure children know they can trust the adults in the service. When we have built up caring, open and trusting relationships with the children in our group, they may share with us if they are being bullied or feel unhappy about behaviour directed towards them. They are also more likely to tell us if they have witnessed bullying of others. We can then take the necessary steps to address the issue, working with both the child who has been bullied and those who are bullying.

It is important that we reflect on our own experiences and how these might influence the way we view certain behaviours. We should also evaluate our own behaviour when managing a large group of children and reflect on the strategies we use and whether they are positive and supportive or could be construed as controlling.

If a child says that they no longer wish to attend a service and we suspect they are being bullied, it is important that we talk with the child, and with the child's parents, and really listen to what they say. We should acknowledge and be responsive to the child's feelings about the situation.

Children should see by our actions that we are not ambivalent about behaviour that excludes or humiliates others.

Anti-bullying Policy

SAC services must have a policy on bullying in place, accessible to staff, children and families, that outlines the procedures and actions that will be taken should bullying happen in the service so that all staff understand and know how to respond to incidences of bullying in a decisive manner. Staff should engage in training on understanding and recognising bullying. The Anti-bullying Policy should be regularly reviewed by the staff team and also with children so they are informed about bullying and know that they will be supported should bullying occur. The policy should:

- Clearly name what bullying behaviour looks like and the impact it has on individuals.
- Outline guidelines to support positive behaviour.
- Include clear procedures for reporting bullying behaviour.
- Outline how records of bullying incidents and steps in resolution will be kept.
- Outline how parents will be communicated with if a bullying incident has occurred.



4

How the Service Can Support Relationship Building

The importance of adult-child relationships in the SAC service should be borne out in the policies and procedures, and in the supports and training available to staff, including supervision and team meetings.

Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures are integral to a good quality SAC programme and are a framework for practice. Policies provide a road map so that adults understand what is expected of them in their role, including in the development of their relationships with children, parents and families. Policies relevant to relationships in a SAC service include but are not exclusive to those on anti-bullying, child/young person induction, interactions, involving parents/guardians, key person, participation, promoting positive behaviour and relationships, and equality and diversity.

Policies and procedures must be reviewed regularly in consultation with all stakeholders to ensure they are fit for purpose. Actions should be taken to ensure that staff understand the ethos/culture of the service and the policies and procedures that underpin it, as well as their responsibilities under each policy and how to implement them appropriately.



Team Meetings and Supervision

Team meetings provide a forum to reflect on practice, giving staff an opportunity to discuss any issues that arise in relationships as well as behaviour we are finding challenging. Team meetings also provide an opportunity to build relationships within the team as we listen to and learn from one another.

Supervision provides us with a space to discuss issues, express our needs and solve any problems that are coming up with the support of our manager. Dealing with issues in our relationships with children and families in a timely fashion through regular supervision sessions can prevent them from escalating, and supports us to understand and work within the boundaries of practice set by the service.

Both supervision and team meetings are integral to a quality service to:

- Ensure all staff understand what is expected from them in terms of practice.
- Review and discuss policies and procedures.
- Increase understanding of children and families in their service and support positive relationship building.
- Support staff in their role as key person.
- Create an inclusionary, safe and secure environment.

Training and CPD

Adults working in SAC services should receive appropriate training for their role. Ongoing CPD is also important to ensure that we are fully equipped with the skills and knowledge to support us to carry out quality practice to deliver a caring, responsive and nurturing programme that intentionally supports children's social and emotional wellbeing.

A Final Word

In school age childcare settings, we invest time and resources in meeting children's needs and interests, building trusting and caring relationships with them and nurturing their relationships with one another. Adults working in SAC love working with children and families, but it can be emotionally demanding and stressful at times. Even the most skilled and experienced among us can find our role challenging. We have all heard the saying, 'You can't pour from an empty cup'. It is important that we look after our mental and physical health to enable us to manage any stress we are experiencing. This will support us to provide the warm, positive, responsive relationships that children need.



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