

Supporting parents with empathy and compassion

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The aim of this article is to provide guidance and strategies for professionals working with children and families during the current cost-of-living crisis. Currently, there are many families living in poverty in the UK and around the world and the need for support is significantly higher than it has been for decades. Professionals working with children and families are in a good position to support families, so we give practical advice on ways to do this. An important underlying principle is to do so with empathy and compassion, which is something that professionals in the early childhood field are skilled in demonstrating. A consequence of this emotion work is the impact on professionals, the emotional burden often resulting in stress or burnout. Early childhood settings need to ensure that they are doing all they can to support those who are supporting others.

Keywords: support, cost-of-living, empathy, compassion, poverty

It is widely known that the UK is currently experiencing a cost-of-living crisis. With the shocking statistic that almost one in three children is currently living in poverty (JRF, 2022a). This is reflective of a global cost-of-living crisis, influenced by an impending global recession (Health, 2022). There is an urgent need for support for children and their families around the world. This urgent need is heightened for infants in the critical first 1000 days of life. In this article, we aim to outline the problem and suggest ways that staff working in the early childhood sector and parent educators can help to make a difference. This article has been written by an academic working at a UK university who has a special interest in the welfare of early childhood practitioners, and the manager of a childcare centre which exemplifies good practice based on an empathic philosophy. Both authors are passionate about empathy and compassion, and we strive to show these qualities in our practice and through our actions. Empathy and compassion are different, and the terms are defined in this article and related to the work of early childhood practitioners. The issue of poverty, and ways that early childhood settings can make a positive impact are discussed, with practical examples of strategies taken from Busy Bodies, the childcare centre managed by James Boddey.

Providing support to others in a crisis requires emotional labour, an integral part of early childhood work. Most early childhood professionals and parent educators choose their profession as they want to make a difference, but it is important to acknowledge the emotional impact of working with families under stress and to recognise the importance of support for these workers too.

DEFINING EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

It is generally accepted that empathy and

compassion are two of the most important qualities to have when working with people, even more so for those working with children and families. Empathy and compassion are terms sometimes used synonymously, but they are very different things. Whilst compassion is care or concern for another person, empathy is about understanding the feelings of others from their point of view, sometimes even sharing the feelings of others. In simple terms, compassion is 'feeling for' and empathy 'feeling with' (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Compassion is usually a considered, planned response, rather than an automatic one like empathy (Galetz, 2019), although compassion can often be the result of empathy. Compassion is concerned with benevolence and kindness; it is a desire to help. For many people working in the caring professions, compassion is a part of who they are, the sort of people who are naturally caring and who want to make a difference (Ely, Eley, Bertello & Rogers-Clark, 2012).

Much of the research around empathy focusses on Carl Rogers' theorising. Rogers (1980) developed the 'core conditions' to describe conditions of human worth which, when provided, promote ideal circumstances for people to thrive. Rogers' theory has its roots in counselling therapy, but Rogers himself suggested that the conditions are important in any relationships. Of the six conditions that Rogers described for use in therapeutic interactions, three 'core conditions' that relate to all interpersonal relationships are: empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. These are considered core as they are necessary and sufficient for positive change to be facilitated through a supportive relationship (Rogers, 1980). Empathy enables us to see things from others' perspectives and to understand their actions and reactions, thus fostering strong interpersonal relationships (Boddey & Hodgkins, 2015).

THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners who work with children and families often enter their profession in order to make a real difference to people's lives (Prowle & Hodgkins, 2020). One of the most effective ways of doing this is building strong supportive relationships with others and demonstrating empathy and compassion. Many of us can identify a person in our past who made a difference or had a lifelong impact on our lives. The modern parable below demonstrates the impact of making a difference, however small.

A man was walking on the beach. He noticed a child picking up objects and gently throwing them into the sea. The man was intrigued and approaching the child, he asked him what he was doing. The little boy explained that the surf was high, and the tide was going out, leaving the starfish stranded on the shore. He was returning the fish to the ocean so that they would not die. The man was incredulous and pointed out the miles and miles of beach littered with starfish. It was impossible to save them all. It was impossible to make a difference. After listening politely to what the man had to say, the boy picked up another starfish and returned it to the sea. He looked at the man, smiled and said, 'I made a difference to that one!' Loren Eiseley (1978, p169)

Making a difference is not always about solving problems for people; however, approaching problems with the intention of identifying the positives and inspiring hope in a strength-based approach (Saleeby, 2013) is powerful. The strength-based approach sees people as experts in their own lives and acknowledges that there are always strengths within families and communities, which can be built on. Empowering others to solve their own problems and come up with their own solutions is a positive way to help in the long term. For example:

- A family known to you are struggling financially and you know that they are upset at not being able to afford to buy fresh fruit and vegetables every day for their children.

Solution 1- In a traditional deficit approach, you may organise a collection to provide fruit and vegetables for families in need like these.

Solution 2 - In a strength-based approach, you may identify that there are allotments available in the local community and you could signpost the family to these.

In solution 1, the family gets what they need, but this may only be short term. The family may also feel embarrassed about having to take 'hand-outs'. In solution 2, the family are much more likely to feel that they are helping themselves. There are opportunities for family activity, learning about nature and for economic growth. In the current time of global austerity, this sort of self-help initiative is beneficial.

POVERTY IN THE UK

A significant percentage of people in the UK today are living in poverty. More than one in five of the UK population and almost one in three children are living in poverty, according to the 'relative poverty rate' (JRF, 2022a). This rises to 46% of children in black and ethnic minority families. Nearly half of children living in poverty are in lone parent families and even in families where parents are working, the numbers of children in poverty have increased (Action for Children, 2022) in the current crisis. Poverty reduction has slowed globally, with it predicted that the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will push 100 million more families into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020).

A cost-of-living crisis is defined as a time when the cost of everyday essentials rises faster than household incomes. Closer examination of the data reveals that those living in poverty are spending a much larger percentage of their money, around 53%, on housing, energy and food than the richest in the country who spend on average 28% on these (JRF, 2022b). The outcome of this is that families on low income are struggling to pay for the basics needed for life; shelter, heating and food. The current crisis in the UK has been caused by a combination of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, and shortages of staff and goods (Action for Children, 2022). There is evidence that the situation is likely to worsen in 2022/23, with a forecast of a further 1.3 million people falling into absolute poverty, including 500,000 children (Resolution Foundation, 2022).

The effects of poverty are wide-ranging and can last a lifetime. The Child Poverty Action Group (2022) explain that children living in constant poverty have cognitive development scores on average 20% below those of children who have never experienced poverty. Similarly, the Millennium Cohort Study (UCL, 2022) shows that they are four times more likely to suffer a mental health problem before the age of eleven. The effects of poverty have been shown to influence babies even before birth. A study by the University of Aberdeen revealed that 'babies were smaller at birth if they came from a lower-income household and that size differences were already apparent at 20 weeks' gestation' (Turner et al, 2022). Low birth weight can influence health problems such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, heart attacks, asthma and ADHD. It is very clear, then, that there is a need to support children and families and to alleviate the potential effects of poverty.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

Since the pandemic first reached the UK in 2020, practitioners have been trying to make a difference to families in need. During the pandemic 'lockdowns', staff in schools made efforts to make sure that children who weren't attending school didn't go hungry, making sure that all pupils received at least one meal a day, 'in some cases distributing food directly from the

school to families' doors themselves' (Morton, 2021, online). Despite the hardships endured by families, there is some very positive work being undertaken within the early childhood and parent education sectors, work which is having a real impact. A great example of a setting taking steps to make a difference comes from Busy Bodies, a childcare centre in Ludlow, Shropshire, managed by James Boddey. The following are some of the strategies the centre has developed recently.

• UBUNTU

Busy Bodies' philosophy is based on a child centred approach, inspired by the philosophy of Ubuntu, a Zulu phrase translated as 'a person is a person through other people' (Ifejika, 2006). Ubuntu has its roots in humanist African philosophy, where community is one of the building blocks of society. The idea is that it takes a community to raise a child, so the centre aims to embed itself as a part of the local community, a physical and emotional environment that supports children and families. Knowing the local community and the families within it helps the centre to allow each child to reach their own unique full potential. The Ubuntu philosophy focuses on how we can only reach our full potential through the support of others. We play a vital role in each other's life, and even the smallest actions have consequences, as seen in the earlier parable by Easley (1978).

• COMMUNITY CUPBOARD

It is important to Busy Bodies that they react to the current cost of living crisis and offer support to families. For some time now, they have supported the local Food Bank with regular donations and information sharing. In recent months they have changed how they do this, in order to be more flexible and support more families. With their knowledge of the referral process, they have now created a Community Cupboard outside the front door of Busy Bodies. This cupboard is used by families and members of the community to donate items for the Food Bank. When the Community Cupboard gets too full, staff take it to the Food Bank. Having a cupboard full of vital supplies available all the time allows parents and carers to take items out when they need them. They might be having a difficult month with unexpected bills, they might not have enough money on that one day, so they can take the items they need out of the cupboard to get them through temporarily. It is important to understand that life can be a rollercoaster; families have welcomed the cupboard and it has become very successful. When times are good, families donate what they can, and if times get tough, they take items out. The centre sees itself as a community, and the cupboard is one physical example of the way they are all connected and able to support each other. The centre has plans to develop this approach to include a toy, shoes and clothes cupboard, an idea suggested by one of the families.

• A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO FEES

At Busy Bodies, James tries to be as flexible as he is financially able to with the charging of fees (Boddey, 2016). Parents and carers can choose the hours their child attends the centre. The centre has a deeply embedded Key Person approach, where each child has an allocated Key Person with whom they have a special nurturing relationship. The key person is the person in the setting who knows the child best and who liaises with the child's family and builds a relationship with them too. At Busy Bodies, regardless of which hours the child attends, their key person will be there. Every practitioner knows every child and their needs, so parents and carers can choose to drop off and collect their child at whatever times they need childcare. Having this approach means that parents and carers only pay for the childcare they need. If a parent works from 10am till 2pm but must pay for a full 8am to 4pm day, they are paying for childcare they do not need and not being paid enough to cover the childcare fees. Busy Bodies have been able to adopt their flexible approach as they employ a higher staff ratio than they need to, but this would not be an option for some nurseries, as many are struggling financially since the pandemic (Jarvie, 2020). Where possible, though, nursery managers should try to be as flexible as is viable to help families at this difficult time.

• SIGNPOSTING FAMILIES TO SUPPORT

The staff team at Busy Bodies are aware of the signs that parents and children may need extra support and they work hard to approach these situations sensitively, with empathy and compassion. They know what support they can offer at Busy Bodies and they hold details of outside agencies who can offer additional support. They regularly identify support services on the weekly newsletter and display board, so that every parent and carer has the information when they need it.

• WELCOMING PARENTS

One of the ways that Busy Bodies supports families through life is by being there for them, ensuring that parents and carers know they can talk to staff who genuinely want the best for them and their children. There are regular meetings with parents and carers to celebrate children's fantastic achievements. At Busy Bodies, they understand that raising children is a non-stop adventure full of ups and downs and they are always there to point out what a great job parents and carers are doing. Being a parent can be hard; social pressures and financial worries result in stress and a feeling that they are not doing enough. It is important to support parents, to explain the progress their child is making, and to provide praise and encouragement for parents and carers.

• EMOTION WORK

It is important to acknowledge that supporting

families through this difficult time is likely to have an impact on practitioners too. The role of the practitioner, whether working with new babies, in nurseries, in schools or in family support services, is one that involves continually 'giving' to others (Solvason et al, 2021). Practitioners form close responsive relationships with the children and families they work with, and these can be powerful and intense (Datler et al., 2010). In this environment, practitioners are expected to manage or suppress inappropriate emotions and demonstrate endless patience (Elfer, 2012). Hochschild (2013) calls this emotional labour, the 'management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild, 2013, pg.7). There is evidence to suggest that suppressing the emotional burden of this work can result in stress or burnout for the practitioner. Being around families who are suffering and worrying, suppressing one's own distress and 'putting on a fake smile' (Hochschild, 2013) is stressful, leading to guilt when one is unable to make a difference, and even depression (Zahn-Waxler Van Hulle, 2012). As Lyndon (2022) points out, most early childhood practitioners in the UK are also on very low pay and may be living in poverty themselves, adding to the personal stress.

However, there is considerable satisfaction in working with children and families and the more we empathise, the more satisfaction we feel at times when we can make a difference. Research has shown that doing things for others and alleviating others' suffering raises one's self-esteem, self-worth and social skills (Inagaki & Orehek, 2017). Despite the negative effects of emotional labour, practitioners want to continue to have a positive impact on families' lives. This is apparent in Solvason et al's. (2019) research with early years practitioners, who identified 'descriptions of the relentless exhaustion of the role with their deep passion for it'. Practitioners are passionate about their work with children, being exposed to people who are in need can generate a positive self-image and stronger appreciation of different values in life (Jeon and Wells, 2018), which, in turn, can make us more effective 'helpers'.

Practitioners need emotional support; this is clear from the literature. At Busy Bodies, James ensures that his staff, who he calls the most precious resource, are treated with care and respect. James says, 'they are walking, talking, teaching, hugging, creating and caring all of the time. We hold them in the highest esteem and want them to know how valued they are.' Early Years care and education is at its best when everyone is happy and feeling confident and that they are part of a community that wants every member to reach their full potential. Regular supervision meetings are important and provide an opportunity to talk about how practitioners are feeling, about any concerns or issues they might be having at home or work, as well as celebrating all their successes and good work. The Management Team

is encouraged to be flexible and understanding of the staff home / family life. Too often, there is a mismatch between settings' espoused values (Schein, 2010), i.e., values they claim to hold, and those enacted in practice. An example of this would be 'an organisation that advocates children spend quality time with their parents yet seems incapable of supporting staff's requirements to work flexibly' (Prowle & Hodgkins, 2020, p125). Congruent messages about settings' philosophy should extend to the workforce too. When staff are treated with care and respect they can work to the best of their ability and thrive.

CONCLUSION

The Ubuntu philosophy values community and values relationships above all. The unattributed African proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child' is one that is more relevant today, as many children's needs are not being met. As the article by Morton (2021) substantiates, schools and community groups are having to help to support families in need. There are many ways that practitioners can help families during the current crisis and using resources available in the local area fosters community spirit and increases self-esteem. Consider ways that your organisation/ setting may be able to help families.

SOME IDEAS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND PARENT EDUCATORS:

Research your local community and try to locate organisations with the potential to help families. Some examples might include food banks, school uniform banks, breakfast clubs, toy libraries, free activities and days out, benefits advice. Provide information on services for parents.

James' 'community cupboard' offers a way for families to access things they need in a place they visit regularly. Could your setting/ organisation do this? What sorts of things do you think would be useful to stock?

Buying new clothes is not always necessary; re-using clothing makes good environmental sense too. What about holding a second hand children's clothes sale? Or hosting a fashion show of vintage clothes with a sale following the show?

Consider developing a vegetable plot and planting your own food – children will learn a lot from the experience and the harvested fruit and vegetables will be a welcome gift for parents/ carers.

New toys and games can be very expensive and Christmas / birthdays can be very stressful times for families. Could you set up a toy swap? Or find people who are able to repair and refurbish used toys to sell?

Look into the possibility of a flexible approach to fees; could this work for you? Even a little flexibility could make a real

difference to a family's weekly expenditure.

Include parents/ carers whenever you can and get to know them and their needs. Encourage parents/ carers to get involved in as many aspects of the setting/ organisation as possible. There will be people with all sorts of talents and skills who would be willing to help.

Never forget to support staff, colleagues and managers too. Caring for others can be draining, so caring for the carers is essential for maintaining a secure and happy team.

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