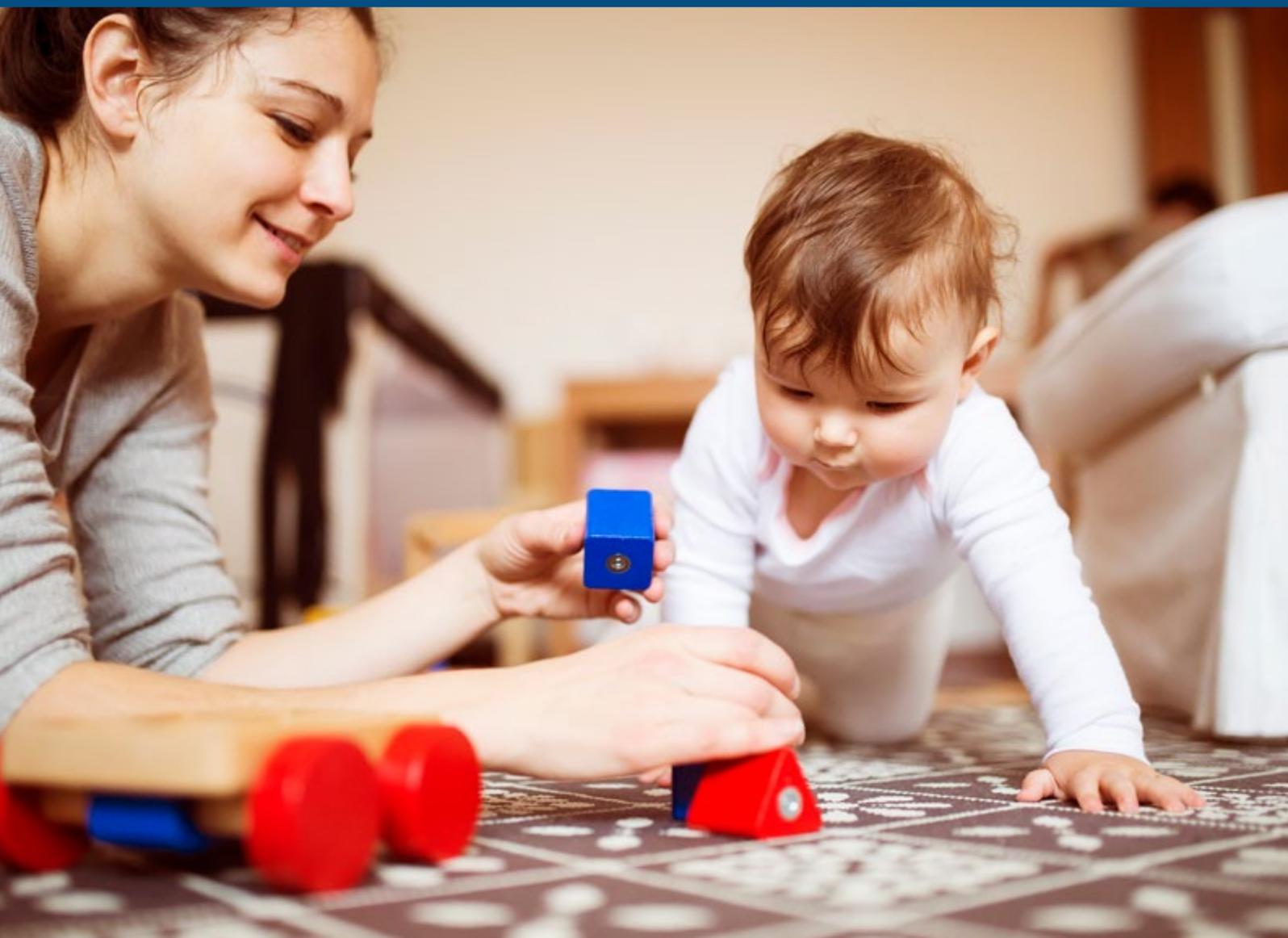


reflections

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CREATING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY THROUGH SCRIPTS AND STILLNESS

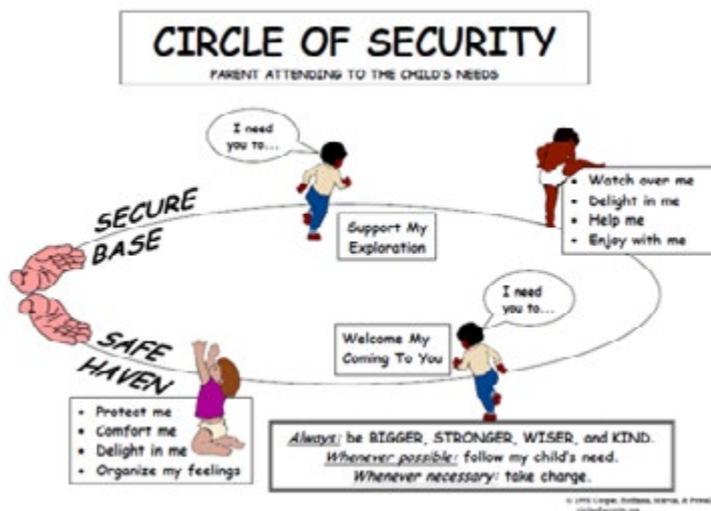
Rosemary Mensforth, Team Leader, Mallee Integrated Infant Toddler room, Gowrie South Australia

Over the last twelve months educators at Gowrie South Australia have been implementing concepts from professional learning with Dr. Robyn Dolby. We listened with great interest as Robyn passionately explained the benefits of attachment theory and her work with implementing fundamentals of the Circle of Security (Powell et al., 2014) with young children. The Circle of Security (COS) teaches about specific systems of Attachment theory:

- The exploration system or the instinct for curiosity, exploration, independence when the child feels safe to go out to explore (top half of COS)
- The attachment *behavior* system or the instinct to seek proximity, protection, comfort and fulfillment of emotional needs (bottom half of COS)

These two systems are activated at separate times.

CREATING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY THROUGH SCRIPTS AND STILLNESS (CONTINUED)



(Image copyright: Cooper et. al., 1998)

The concept of the 'Hands' in COS informs about the role of the adult being a secure base supporting the exploration of the child and being the safe haven welcoming the child when seeking fulfilment of emotional needs. Dr. Robyn Dolby also uses Marte Meo as a complimentary approach to explain the meaning behind what is happening for a child at a surface level (Aarts, 2008). In Robyn's practice of 'play spaces', educators are each stationed at a particular play experience every morning ready to receive children and families as they arrive. This requires educators to be

“still on the outside (not moving around and setting up equipment) and inside (getting to a calm place inside yourself so you have the room – or mental space – to be welcoming...A successful reunion with staff on arrival can give a child a strong foundation for connecting with staff and peers through the rest of the day”

(Dolby, 2007).

Over the course of this learning we heard about scripts to use with families, stillness and secure base games. From this knowledge came questions from Robyn herself:

- How do we feel when we walk into our own spaces?
- Do we believe in ourselves and our ideas?
- Do we talk about feelings at every opportunity?
- Can we support children in their feelings?
- Are the children in our care running on empty, are we recognising when children need their emotional cups filling up?
- Do children have well-worn paths to us as educators?

These questions sparked deep reflection within all educators about how to improve our practices in

strengthening relationships between educators, children and families and thus improve outcomes for children. All educators reflected at various stages on the learning that we had engaged in and how we were going to implement this newly gained insight within our teams.

The Mallee team's conversation started with the use of prepared scripts during transition times with families and children to support with leading families through separation and reunion. The wording as such created a lengthy discussion amongst the team. Asking a family if they were 'ready for us to take charge of their child and keep them safe' at separation and then asking them if they were 'ready to take charge of their child and keep them safe' at reunion, seemed to need a deeper understanding from us as educators. Our conversations were clearly saying that we were feeling uncomfortable using those words. Why did it make us feel this way? What did we need to know more about to change this feeling and understand further?

Robyn Dolby (2015) states,

‘Parents are all different at saying goodbye and that we should assume that most children are on the bottom of the circle when separating.’

If families are all different at saying goodbye then having a set script that is used by everyone can be a welcome relief for many and communicate a sense of trust between adults for children. It can also relieve some pressure from families in judging the right time to say goodbye with educators, reading the cues of readiness from families and taking the lead by using a script. This information made the need for a script more compelling to implement, although the team still needed to feel more comfortable with the wording to ensure they didn't sound condescending or false to families.

The team revisited their understanding of the Circle of Security (Powell et al., 2014) in particular their role on the bottom half of the circle; as the 'safe haven', they are to welcome the child coming to them. To be 'bigger, stronger, wiser and kind' means to follow the child's needs as much as possible and take charge whenever necessary.

The team discussed what taking charge meant within this context. If as Robyn states most children are on the bottom of the circle when separating, then educators are supporting children to know that educators are there for them, can protect them, comfort them and organise their feelings (Dolby, 2007). This was the meaning of taking charge the team needed for clarification.

With this understanding the team began to have conversations with families introducing the script to them, explaining the concepts and reasoning behind why they have chosen to implement something new. Most families responded positively, although some felt uncomfortable with the wording. Educators spent more

CREATING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY THROUGH SCRIPTS AND STILLNESS (CONTINUED)

time with these families, discussing the concepts in greater detail until they felt more comfortable with trialling it. Other families were quite open with their genuine dislike of the wording and memories it evoked for them. We respected their thoughts and opinions and together we modified the wording so they would feel comfortable and still partake in using a tailored transition script.

New families were introduced to the script upon induction to the room where educators talked them through each person's role in regards to the wording. The more the team engaged in using the script, the more genuine and natural it felt for both educators and families. Some families now prompt educators to use the script or take the lead in saying they are ready for educators to take charge of their child. Children have been the biggest supporters of the script and react most positively to the words, some even asking educators if they are ready to take charge of them. Some families have asked what happens if they are not ready to take charge at reunion which has enabled educators to engage in deeper conversations with those families. The team remain flexible and supportive to meet the families' needs.

Once the Mallee team had embedded the script into practice with families, they noticed that morning routines were making it difficult to be as emotionally and physically available to support children and families as

they aspired to be. Creating stillness in the busyness of the morning separation was a vital link to achieving the notion of 'I am here ready to take charge of you'. During our learning Robyn Dolby (2015) stated:

“Children can have a slightly more difficult start if it is from a distance, children need to be seen and noticed and we as educators need to be the translator voice for them. Children will often ask ‘can you be in charge of me? Can you keep me safe?’”

Stillness can assist us in answering these questions for the children along with the consistency of educators using the transition script. To create stillness, spaces need to be inviting, calming and welcoming. The educators are able to relax and remain in one space for an extended length of time, inviting families and children to join them in the space, to chat and pass on information rather than educators frequently moving to meet families.

The Mallee team found ways to prioritise educators being present within children's experiences during the beginning



CREATING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY THROUGH SCRIPTS AND STILLNESS (CONTINUED)

and ends of days, rather than engaging in routine tasks. This has made for a calmer more relaxed feel to the environment during what can be thought of as the busiest times of the day.

With changes being made to how they planned for separations and reunions including a priority on physical and emotional stillness, the Mallee team noticed that children were feeling a stronger connection which in turn, shortened the transition time they needed to move from 'being in' with educators to meet their emotional needs and 'being out' exploring on the top half of the circle.

With the team focused on noticing the goings in and comings out of children on the circle, they began exploring the concept of each child having a 'well-worn path' to their primary caregiver. This encompassed other concepts the team were wondering about including talking about feelings, supporting feelings and filling emotional cups. This provocation itself caused them to scrutinise how, why and when they were meeting the needs of every child in the room. What did each child's path back to their primary caregiver look like? Was there a path at all? How could they create stronger paths?

The team began to reflect on their role within the Circle of Security. Each educator began naming the parts of the circle in action as they saw it with their primary care children. They began exploring how often they check in with children, when they seek out children, when children seek them out and how they invite children in regularly.

Children need educators when they are exploring on the top of the circle as much as when they are on the bottom of the circle. They look to educators for cues to say it is safe and it is ok. They look for educators to notice them and seek connection with them. When educators acknowledge both halves of the circle it assists with filling their emotional cup and instils a positive sense of self within the child (Cooper, Hoffman and Powell, 2009).

Introducing secure base games to children can assist with strengthening the path to educators. This can be as simple as setting up a garage for bikes or a petrol station for the dump trucks, encouraging children to go away and come back on a regular basis for filling up, letting them know on each occasion when they leave that you will be

there waiting for them to come back. A running game where children need to run to touch something then come back to give you a high five, reminds them to come back and that you will be there waiting for them. Playing secure base games when children are on the top of the circle strengthens their knowledge that an educator can support them with all feelings (Dolby, 2015).

Since introducing secure base games the Mallee team have noticed children come to them more often. Children will often come and sit for a cuddle seemingly silently filling up their own emotional cups before going out to explore again. Educators welcome them in with open arms as well as delight in them while they are exploring. Through these actions the team have noticed a remarkable change within some children and recognised a definite well-worn path to primary caregivers.

All of the strategies implemented have ensured that the team talk about and reflect on feelings on a regular basis, with a renewed focus on maximising the natural intentional teaching opportunities as they arise.

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Further information on the Circle of Security:
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