



# Listening to the Educator

## A Note from Lisa

I like to share stories 'from the field'; stories from educators reflecting openly about their work with young children. I think there is much power and inspiration in sharing of stories – particularly when the reader can relate to and make connections between what is shared and his/her own context. I'm sure you'll make many connections to the story shared here, from Susan Sandow. She was teaching in The Nest at Alberton Primary School in Adelaide at the time of writing this.

Susan's story – well, it's actually Davey's story – is one that reminds us of the importance of BELONGING and IDENTITY. The lens of ATTACHMENT assists educators in seeing and valuing the child's perspective. This lens can be particularly helpful during times of 'big transitions' – starting childcare, Kindergarten, School, moving from primary to secondary school and moving into a new class or group each year.

**Attachment Theory** is a term used in psychology and widely adapted in Early Childhood Education and Care. I believe it has implications for our work with all age groups. It can be defined as, "an affectional tie that one person or animal forms between himself and another specific one – a tie that binds them together in space and endures over time." (*Mary Ainsworth, 1978*).

*John Bowlby (1988)* believed there are four specific characteristics of attachment:

1. Proximity maintenance – the desire to be near the people we are attached to.
2. Safe haven – returning to the attachment figure for comfort and safety in the face of a fear or threat.
3. Secure base – the attachment figure acts as a base of security from which the child can explore the surrounding environment.
4. Separation distress – anxiety that occurs in the absence of the attachment figure

Davey's story explores how one child and his committed and sensitive educators named secure attachment as a priority for his learning: starting with a sense of belonging and identity through the lens of attachment.

## THE RIGHT PLACE FOR DAVEY

By Susan Sandow  
(then of The Nest, Alberton Primary)

Susan currently works as a Reception (Foundation) teacher at Alberton Primary School in Adelaide. She is part of a team of early childhood educators that includes Penny, Diane, Mandy, Nicole, Sharyn, Heidi, Eric and Marilyn. This team has embarked on a professional research project which integrates the Foundation and Kindergarten (prior-to-school) groups, in a space that they call The Nest. This article is taken from a presentation Susan made at the recent EChO (Early Childhood Organisation of SA) conference "Powerful Emotional Attachment and Engagement in Learning." In Susan's words...

This story is about a little boy I will call Davey, who began Reception in January. The first time I met Davey my attention was drawn immediately to him. Davey seemed unable to keep still - and it was more than wriggles, he would race around the room, always managing to collide with every child and every building in his path. He would spit on and hurt the other children and seemed to have no idea that it was not acceptable to do this. Davey did not eat and his body was always stiff. He always seemed on the point of either flight or a huge meltdown. We had little information about his past and were deeply concerned for his future. When we tried to address this behaviour with him he was fearful of us and reactive. No matter how calm or monotone our voices, if we said his name he would yell, "I'm not Davey!!!" Davey was very distrustful, experiencing a massive amount of anxiety and fear. He had no concept of how to play with other children. He seemed to want to be with adults, but was also extremely wary of them.

It was decided that Davey needed to attend school for half days. From his perspective, feeling that anxious all day was exhausting for him, the behaviour got gradually worse as the day went on and it was not helping his image of himself to be constantly "in trouble". We wanted him to leave school feeling good about himself. We also agreed that his day needed to be completely play-based.

Over time we saw some results. Davey was calmer. He had strategies to calm himself. He discovered a large pram outside and began pushing it. This became his strategy for self-regulating his anxiety and we noticed he always did this when his anxiety rose. He was functioning better in the outside learning area and in the Kindy building. However, it was still difficult to engage in any adult-child interactions with Davey. We knew we needed to cement a strong relationship where he could and would respond to our teaching. Compounding our distress about Davey was the fact that he was not the only child like this in the group. There were at least five other children with extremely complex needs in The Nest. Within this situation and within the limited ways we had always thought about what should happen in Reception, we just could not give Davey (and the other children) the individual positive attention he needed to develop a strong attachment to us.

This is what we did. We removed of all except three of our desks and created large areas of floor space for play. We put in areas for story tables, play-scapes, blocks and socio-dramatic play areas. We completely de-institutionalised our space with soft furnishings, calm colours, with little on the walls and no art hanging from the roof. We worked hard to create a warm, welcoming, calm environment that was not cluttered with visual noise and our 'teacher stuff'.



Do I belong?

*Who knows me here?*

Will they still be here tomorrow?

*Who can I trust?*

Who will be there for me if I need them?

*Does anyone care about me?*

We decided that to best meet the needs of our learners, we would completely integrate the Kindy and Reception classes into one large group of learners. Our pedagogy would be entirely play-based and our children would spend most of their day in the outside learning area. We had the Kindy building, the Reception classroom, a beautiful "Reggio" inspired studio and an enormous yard available for learning and all children would be able to access these areas.

And boy did we see changes in Davey! We saw changes in all the children.

Children are more engaged in learning.

Children are more relaxed and happy learning through their interests and are more self-directed.

Children have more opportunities to revisit learning that they have not mastered and are not rushed on to keep up with the rest of the group.

There are less behaviour issues.

For Davey, when he needed to go out and wind down pushing that pram around the yard he was able to do so. There were also more times when Davey could self-manage and get a snack to eat – giving him some 'down time'. Because the children were not confined to one classroom space, they did not gather in large groups, and so the instances of Davey becoming overwhelmed by noise and a clutter of humans were far less often. We had a lot more time to spend with Davey (largely because the other children were so self directed and engaged) and more available adults to do so.

The pressure of needing to keep up with a group of learners was also taken away from Davey. He could now work on projects that were meaningful to him. Suddenly a boy who spent his whole day trying to calm himself to try to cope with all the external and internal noise and messiness could get about the business of playing, learning and building relationships.

After a term and a half I am pleased to say he has stopped calling me Penny and is calling me Susan. He comes regularly to ask for help or to ask if I will play with him. He holds my hand and will come and sit with me without fear. He chooses freely to build his own designs and has just started to really engage in some co-operative play with other children. When Davey first began school his longest engagement time in any activity was 3 minutes (I timed it!). Last week he used a glue gun and built a helicopter that took him over half an hour, he then revisited and improved the design the next day. It was his choice to do that!

Davey still has a long road to travel and we have lots to do but he is now heading in the right direction. The changes we have made to the environment are directly related to his progress so far.

