

Meerkat Alert in the Nursery · Pennie Brownlee

While the rest of the family gets about their business, the Meerkat Sentry stands guard. Standing erect, the sentry does about an hour on duty before a replacement sentry takes over. Vigilance or you're dead in the meerkat world - and every meerkat knows it. Even youngsters know that peeping sounds from the Meerkat Sentry mean keep foraging, while loud barking or whistling mean make a run for it.

While we were going about our business in early childhood education it seems that the Sentry for Children's Best Interests must have been off on a tea-break without a replacement. None of us heard loud whistling or barking, but some very unwelcome influences have crept into the nursery unnoticed. Ask the Meerkats, they'll tell you, "You have to be vigilant at all times. You can't go off duty without a replacement".

In a safe early childhood environment, babies' developmental-needs are known and guarded with the level of vigilance that would make a Meerkat proud. Being mammals themselves, they understand that nurturing is the number one requirement in the nursery. Emotional nurturing is the single-most important factor in raising healthy members of society. Even though many of us nod our heads in agreement hearing this, while we weren't looking some very unwelcome and unhealthy practices crept into childcare centres, practices which spell danger to the child in the short and long term.

It isn't politically correct to point this out, but a baby under one year of age is in what is called "the in-arms period" (there's a clue there), the period of extero-gestation (another clue, gestation being completed on the outside), and the "fourth trimester" (driving it home for the clueless). Even a mathematically challenged Meerkat could tell you can't have four tri-mesters; the

term has been coined to get across to people what is actually going on in the baby's development in that period.

Each of these terms is 'biologically correct'. They acknowledge the biological reality for each child, yet it isn't 'politically correct' to point out that for that first year of life the baby ought to be with her mother. Politics and economics have crept up on us and invaded family life, changed everything, but not in every country. In some central European countries three years parental leave is the norm and jobs have to be held open for the parent on leave. But we don't live in central Europe, we live here, so how do we offer care that is as close as possible to what the baby is expecting with every cell of her body?

Meerkats understand nurture in a childcare situation; females who haven't had their own babies often lactate to feed the babies of the alpha female when she is away with the group. While that might be a taking it a bit far, the principle holds good for us: create the conditions the child is expecting, conditions in which the child feels safe at all times, conditions that meet the child's biological-psychological-spiritual needs. I can't say if Meerkats understand this, but we do: The relationship is ALL. It is a matter of Life to the baby. When we do understand this, our policies and practice reflect what that means in real life.

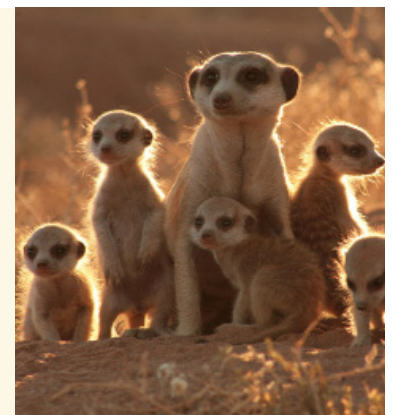
Stress is the state you are avoiding at all cost; a stressed baby is not open to relationship. Stress is the enemy of brain growth and in the baby's first year her brain doubles in size, stress impairs that growth in a way that affects the child throughout her life. Here is a quiz that gives you some idea how safe (stress-free) your place is for a child in the exterogestation period of her growing.

Twenty Questions · Meerkat Quiz

Write your score in the boxes and add them up at the end for your total score.

Group size is a major factor for stress – and in the economics of childcare. Yes, it is legal to have 20 babies in a group, but that is an economic consideration. It has nothing to do with babies' welfare.

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| 1. Is the group size in the room 8 or less? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 2. Is the group size between 9 and 12? | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 3. More than 12? | 0 points | <input type="text"/> |



A child in care is a child in separation from her parents, and separation is super-stressful at any age. 'Settling' is the process of transferring-and-extending trust to another. It is about making new relationships and like all relationships, the settled relationship takes time.

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| 4. Do you have a Settling Policy that is given to parents on enquiry? | 5 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 5. Do parents know that the settling process will take a minimum of 2 weeks? | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 6. Does the parent visit with the child for short periods to begin with, short enough so that there is no care-procedure required (nappies or feeding)? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 7. When the length of the visit is increased, does the parent change the nappy in the presence of the child's designated caregiver, with the caregiver looking on? | 20 points | <input type="text"/> |

It is during this time the parent and caregiver begin to make a deeper relationship and the baby knows this. She knows the 'family' is being extended, and the parent is overseeing that extension.

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| 8. Does the caregiver do her first 1-3 nappy changes with the parent overseeing? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |
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During this time the child witnesses the transfer of the parent's trust to the caregiver. This is a critical part of establishing a safe place for the child: 'If Mum or Dad can trust the caregiver, I can too'.

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| 9. Does the child's first sleep at the centre happen during the first week? | Lose 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 10. Does child's first sleep happen in week two? | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 11. Does the child wake from her first sleep in the centre to the caregiver? | Lose 20 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 12. Does the child wake from her first 2-3 sleeps at the centre to her parent? | 20 points | <input type="text"/> |

Sleeping is the hardest part for the baby because she loses consciousness and wakes to a new world. As adults, we are disorientated waking in an unknown place, let alone to unknown people. Even though the sounds, surrounds, smells in the centre are unknown to the young child, the face and the voice of the parent is known. The parent's presence is a major factor in the child's learning that this new space is part of her expanding world.

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| 13. Does your centre see that every child has a primary caregiver | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 14. Does that same caregiver stay with the child until the child is 2? | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 15. Does that same caregiver stay with the child until the end of infancy which is 3? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 16. Does that same caregiver stay with the child until she leaves the centre? | 20 points | <input type="text"/> |

*One caregiver is handed the role of substitute primary caregiver by the parent. This designated caregiver is initiated as the child's emotional anchor in this different setting, and ideally for the whole of the child's time at that centre. It is much like hairdressers. We know and trust our own hairdresser, and if our hairdresser is away, most of us aren't too keen on trusting someone else to cut our hair. It's not our psyche we're talking about here, it's **only** hair, and hair grows. Some centres of quality have made the change to continuous care; they follow the same Approach as the day-care centres at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. Other centres resist making the change that would go a very long way to meeting children's very deepest needs.*

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| 17. Have you and your team discussed courtesy with babies and children? | 5 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 18. Is everyone on your team vigilant in respecting the relationship between the adult and the child: i.e. you never interrupt a person feeding or changing a child? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 19. Is there a safe place on the floor for non-babies to play without being disturbed, or being used as an obstacle course? | 10 points | <input type="text"/> |
| 20. Does every baby or young child get time outside in Nature every day? | 15 points | <input type="text"/> |

TOTAL

If you scored between 170 and the possible 220, you have turned all the fine words written in the folders at your place into a reality. You see your vocation in childcare as a practical journey of kindness. Lucky children, lucky families. If you wish you had scored between 170 and the possible 220 there's no need to break into loud alarm barking just yet. The quiz contains very specific points that you can work on with your team. Each pointer in this quiz that you achieve with your team means greater short and long-term mental health for babies and children in your care.

If we model ourselves on the Meerkat Sentries we will take the time to see what's going on in the wider picture. We will stay alert and stand up to protect the children in our care from harm. Like the Meerkats we will oversee our environments - and the influences in it - with vigilance. When we get it right we might even hear the soft 'peep peeping' of contented babies, talking among each other, signalling that all is well.

