

Plastic Attachment

Alison Stewart

Prior to Christmas, and completely off her own bat, my eight year old daughter went through her bedroom and deposited into a box a selection of toys that she wanted to donate to charity. Among them was a plastic, baby doll.

I teach the nursery school class at a Local Authority Maintained Nursery School and Childcare Provision in North Yorkshire. Amongst our resources are three rather careworn plastic dolls. I do not know how old they are, they are not 100% complete, missing the odd finger or thumb, and generally are naked, save for an ill fitting nappy. They are played with regularly, but there is no differentiation between them, they are just dolls. They are not something that I have thought to replace, especially with the mantra of 'plastic free nurseries' being so ardently shouted. So, I hesitantly picked up the doll and thrust it in my bag to take to school. I had doubts, would I be frowned upon for bringing in a plastic resource? Hardly a loose part or in line with the loudest opinions currently being voiced online. As a childcare provision, we have children who enter the classroom at 7.30am, long before I even set foot on the premises. On this occasion I started work just as a little girl came in for the day, this little girl was not keen to let her mum go off to work, so I asked her to help me unpack my bag ready for school. She let go of her mother's hand and came to investigate. The first thing she spotted was the doll. She lifted it out and cradled it into her arms. Then with some extraperceptionary sense, took her index finger and pressed its belly. It immediately began to giggle, and she giggled along with it. I have to admit, at this point that my heart sank just a little as crying/giggling dolls can, for want of a better word become annoying to staff rather quickly in the confines of a classroom. I decided that I would take the doll away at the end of the day and didn't think any more about it. However, a month on, the doll is still here; and it is one of the most sought after and loved resources in my classroom, and what is the reason? Attachment.

Recently TES published their TES Scotland People of the Year. One of which was "Furball: One of the army of teddy bears deployed at three West Lothian schools, whose presence symbolised changing attitudes to issues such as "adverse childhood experiences" in Scotland" (TES, 2019). "When teachers from four schools in West Lothian were asked by noted research scientist Dr Suzanne Zeedyk to grow their inner teddy bear, an idea was sparked. After receiving their Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) money, the schools devised a Teddy Bear Policy which has helped create a culture of positivity and openness among staff and pupils. Each class, from P1 to P7, has a teddy bear; the teddies are named by the pupils, dressed up and treated as another member of the class. They have become a way for pupils to self-regulate, express themselves and ultimately find comfort" (GTCS, 2019). The project stirred memories of an article I had read back in 2010, about the company Fujitsu who were developing a prototype, interactive bear to comfort lonely, elderly people in Japan. A bear able to see hands waving or to feel hands caressing it (AFP, 2010). A further example of the value of toys is one invented by a 12 year old girl called the Medi-ted, designed to take the fear away from IV's, it is a teddy bear cover for IV fluid (CNN, 2019). The role that bears like Furball have taken in these classrooms is the same one taken by this interactive doll in my own classroom.

One child whose relationship stands out in particular is age three, has below expected development in his language and as a result he is unable to articulate to his peers using language his wants and needs; instead he uses physical force, takes toys that he wants, will push and hit children who get in his way. He started in nursery in September and now it is December; he prefers to play alone and has not made any attachments with other children in the nursery school. However, when he heard the doll crying he took possession of it and immediately attached to it. Carrying it and putting it into the dolls cot, covering it with a blanket and giving it a hug and a kiss. A relationship which continues to this day. Attachment.

The plastic doll, with electronic components has helped him to find comfort and self regulate. The initial interaction was triggered by the sound of the baby crying. Since developing an attachment with the doll he has become more settled, and will now approach staff if he wants a toy, rather than taking it from a child, he is calmer and happier. I appreciate that this could be coincidental and that as he became more settled in nursery, and as he developed, these things would have happened naturally. But, seeing the effect of this doll first hand makes me confident that if he had been in a 'plastic free' nursery it wouldn't have happened so readily. I appreciate that we need to reduce plastics, particularly single use plastics, but by rehoming the doll in the nursery classroom, rather than depositing it on the rubbish tip, less harm is being done to the environment. I can't begin to imagine the effect on the environment if all of the nurseries in the UK dumped all of their plastics and I believe that there is a place for rehoming some plastic toys, and not to throw them all out with the proverbial bathwater, especially as we are short of that too.

References

AFP (2010) Japan teddybear robot comforts elderly, snores [Online]. Available at: <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-japan-teddybear-robot-comforts-elderly.html> (last accessed 30.12.2019).

CNN (2019) A young girl was afraid of IVs. So she invented a teddy bear to disguise them [Online]. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/13/health/iv-teddy-bear-medi-teddy-trnd/index.html> (last accessed 01.01.2020).

GTCS (2019) On their best bear-haviour [Online]. Available at: <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/News/teaching-scotland/81-on-their-best-bear-haviour.aspx> (last accessed 30.12.2019).

TES (2019) Revealed: TES Scotland's top 10 people of the year [Online] <https://www.tes.com/news/revealed-tes-scotlands-top-10-people-year> (last accessed 30.12.2019).