

Ministers demand action to overturn nursery 'cuddle bans' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ministers are demanding urgent action to overturn "heavy-handed and draconian" kiss and cuddle bans which have been introduced in nurseries to protect staff from accusations of paedophilia.

The policies mean that thousands of babies and toddlers are spending whole days in childcare without a kiss, a cuddle, or even a hand to hold.

Last night children's health minister Dr Dan Poulter said it was "extraordinary and alarming" that staff could be threatened with the sack - simply for attempting to comfort distraught toddlers.

He said a blanket no-contact approach could have devastating effects on a child's future, with evidence that a lack of affection in early years' can damage future development.

Child development experts said the lack of affection could have devastating effects on the well-being of a toddler, and create psychological damage which could last a lifetime.

Rising numbers of nurseries have drawn up policies which threaten workers with disciplinary action for kissing a child, an investigation has found.

Others instruct staff not to cuddle toddlers, or let them sit on their laps, for all but the shortest periods - claiming that the simple acts of affection harm the independence of the child.

Nursery workers have been told that while some physical contact is "unavoidable" with babies and the youngest toddlers, during nappy changing and toilet training, children who seek affection should be told that their actions are "not appropriate"

Last night, Dr Poulter, who also works as a hospital doctor, in women's and children's health, called on nurseries who had introduced such policies to urgently review their rules.

He said: "It is a natural human instinct to comfort a distressed child, to hold out a hand if they fall, to reassure them if they are crying; physical contact is an important part of that."

"The blanket 'no contact' approach being taken by some nurseries is extraordinary and alarming; there is increasingly strong evidence to suggest that a lack of emotional support and physical reassurance from parents and carers during the early years can be damaging to a child's health, wellbeing, and future life chances," Dr Poulter said.

The findings of the investigation by *daynurseries.co.uk*, a guide to nursery schools, are likely to reopen the debate about the quality of childcare in Britain and about whether nurseries are the best place to bring up children.

The idea that nursery workers should refuse to "kiss better" a grazed elbow or knee was derided by experts, or to cuddle a child who missed their mother, was derided by child development experts.

Penny Tassoni, president of the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, said: "It is actually the duty of anyone working with young children to offer physical contact.

"Young children who are not with their parents are likely to produce a stress hormone known as cortisol. Having access to a hug or even holding a hand of a key person can help to reduce anxiety.

"Policies that are draconian in terms of not allowing children to be reassured are not fit for purpose as they ignore children's right to being nurtured."

The increasingly strict policies have been drawn up in the wake of a scandal four years ago when nursery worker Vanessa George admitted sexually abusing children in her care in Plymouth and swapping images of the abuse with two other paedophiles.

The investigation found the fear of being accused of paedophilia was having a chilling effect in nurseries across the country.

Dr Poulter said the fear of accusations had led some nurseries to draw up policies which were so heavy-handed that children were being denied basic care.

"Of course it is right for nurseries to properly vet the backgrounds of all staff looking after children, but comforting a child that has hurt

itself is part and parcel of good child care,"

The policy of Twinkle Star Day Nursery in Portsmouth says: "Children are encouraged to be independent; therefore prolonged periods of cuddling and sitting on practitioners' laps is discouraged.

"Kissing children is forbidden and may result in a disciplinary."

In Barnstaple, North Devon, Ladybirds Day Nursery's policy says: 'While some contact is unavoidable (nappy changing and toilet training), there are other activities, often instigated by the children themselves, that we explain is not appropriate.

"This includes any form of kissing on cheek, forehead or lips when a parent is not present."

One nursery manager said: "I tell my staff not to kiss children and explain the reasons for it, to protect them from any allegations. Children naturally come to you for a kiss and a cuddle, and we always turn to the side so that they can kiss our cheeks.

"I don't even kiss my own daughter while in nursery."

During discussions about the issue, one parent said: 'The thought of a small baby in a nursery going all day without a kiss from someone makes me quite sad.'

Sarah Steel, managing director of the Old Station Nursery chain, said cuddles were important for young children.

She said: "All the evidence around attachment theory and the guidance in the Early Years' Foundation Stage supports close physical contact with the youngest children and the importance of contact for all children.

"A good, confident practitioner would know exactly what was appropriate, and less experienced staff need to have good role models."

-reprinted from the Telegraph

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