

## 2

## Ewan: Developing a Ritual for Separating

In this chapter we introduce:

- Ewan and his family
- Observations of Ewan separating from his mother
- Observations of Ewan at other times

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Ewan lived locally with his mum, dad and older brother, who had also attended the nursery. Ewan's parents were very involved in his education and supportive of the nursery. Ewan attended the nursery for two years. He was later than his brother in using expressive language and this caused his parents some anxiety during his first year at nursery. However, Ewan could communicate well and had a good understanding of what was said to him. His parents were very keen to support his language development and when he did begin to express himself, he was very articulate and had a wide knowledge of vocabulary, stories and songs.

Ewan's family were involved in the Well-being and Resilience Study right at the beginning. We began by filming Ewan settling in to nursery and at his reunion with each of his parents. We then viewed the filmed material with his Family Worker (Key Worker), Annette, and his parents to interpret what was going on for him at those times.

We found that each of the children studied had their own unique way of separating from their parents at nursery each day. Ewan seemed to need to go

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through a sort of ritual before he was happy to let his mum or dad leave him at nursery. We were keen to know about and understand the different ways that children settled away from their parents.

Subsequently, we filmed Ewan at different times during the day, playing outside, on the computer, in the block area and at Family Grouptime. Again, we viewed the filmed material with his Family Worker and parents to gain insights.

We have drawn on these video observations to raise questions and to give possible interpretations of Ewan's actions.

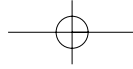
### **Observation: Ewan separating from his Mum and brother**

*Ewan (2:10:23) came into the nursery with his mum, and his older brother. He 'settled' at the marble run with his Family Worker, Annette. Ewan knelt on the floor facing Annette. The marble run was between them. Ewan seemed very engaged with putting marbles in the top of the run and watching them run through to the base of the run. His mother came from behind and rubbed/patted his back, kissed him and told him she needed to go to work. He did not respond ... She seemed a little unsure but walked slowly towards the door. Seconds passed before he turned around and shouted 'Mum'. He got up quickly and took Annette's hand and walked to the door, where his mother was waiting. She crouched down facing him and held him and kissed him and then said 'Bye bye'. He turned back and walked back to the space he had left looking satisfied and sure of himself.*

## DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF EWAN'S ACTIONS AND COMMUNICATION

When we discussed this observation, both his mother and Annette said that it was important for Ewan to carry out his 'goodbye ritual', which included going to the door and seeing his mother or father go. He also developed, over time, a bedtime ritual, which included his mother saying 'Night, night, sweet dreams – see you in the morning'. His mother had to say these words in the same order each night or he would get up or shout down to her to repeat the words correctly.

In terms of attachment theory, it seemed that seeing his parents go enabled Ewan to focus on becoming involved with peers and in other activities. He seemed secure to explore once he knew his parents had gone. Ewan's parents told me that he carried out similar actions at home. If his dad was going to work, he would say goodbye at the back door but then dash to the front window to wave and see him disappear down the road.



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Although we talked about 'Ewan's need' for a ritualistic separation at the time, it is important to acknowledge that it was a ritual negotiated between two or more people. In this observation his mother was waiting. She knew how important it was for Ewan to say that final goodbye at the door to outside and to see her go. Annette, too, was prepared to rush to the door with Ewan. In good nursery practice, we emphasise 'knowing each child and family' (Carr, 2001; Whalley, 1997, 2007) and 'Do you know how I like to settle in each day?' is an important part of that knowing.

We also discussed the possible significance of Ewan's play with the marble run in terms of schemas. Ewan used the marble run, which could be symbolic of his mother disappearing or leaving and reappearing or coming back. The marbles 'go through a boundary' and run in lines and circles to the base. Ewan seemed to give some attention to what the marbles looked like when they formed a complete circle at the base of the run. While he was engaged with the run, he almost forgot (?) to carry out the sequence of actions he, himself, had developed in order to have some control over the separation. The sequence of actions somehow marked Ewan's transition from home or from being with his parents to being at nursery with other people and engaging in different activities. The marbles 'going through' the run could alternatively be a representation of Ewan himself, going from one place to another through a series of twists and turns.

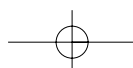
The complete circle formed by the marbles at the base of the run may somehow have represented completion or wholeness. Completing a perfect circle was understandably satisfying to the eye, and understanding that his mum would leave, go to work and return may have been satisfying to Ewan in emotional terms.

The fact that his mother 'held' him at the doorway may have been significant too. Winnicott talked about the concept of feeling safely 'held' physically and also emotionally 'held', as in, held together and without a feeling of falling apart emotionally (Winnicott, 2006, p. 26). Holding Ewan one last time before leaving may have reminded him that he was held in mind by his parents and that they trusted others to hold him while they were at work.

We wondered whether Ewan's use of a separation ritual was reflected in his play with objects later on that morning.

**Observation: Later that morning**

*Mid-session, Ewan was filmed completing a perfectly symmetrical building with maple blocks. He went on to place seven large cylindrical blocks in a line closely connected to each other on top of the building. He made no comment about his building.*



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Other observations made at that time indicated that Ewan frequently placed objects in lines. Lines enabled Ewan to explore space. In view of Ewan's separation ritual, we wondered whether he was exploring time as well as space. Ewan was at the stage of understanding that he stayed at the nursery for the morning. During that space of time, there were some markers. He engaged in different activities with different people. He helped himself to snacks and a drink when he chose to. Annette gathered his group for stories and songs, and then his mother or father would come to pick him up and take him home.

In a similar way, Ewan had negotiated a ritual to mark the departure of his parents. So maybe this sequencing in lines was helping him to understand the sequence of past and future events.

Time is a difficult concept for young children to understand and, as Shaw has pointed out, closely linked to separation from important people (Shaw, 1991, 2005). As adults, we represent time spatially so it may be reasonable to suppose that an interest in closely connected lines helps children with the abstract concept of time as well as helping to work through and understand the concept of separation.

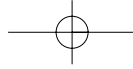
In attachment terms, the close connection of the blocks might represent the continuity or smoothness of the transition. Ewan may have been working through or using the 'line' at a symbolic level to understand the continuity of his separation and connectedness to people at nursery.

Winnicott (1975, p. 124) talked about a child he had been treating, who returned to the clinic and constructed 'a very long road with toy houses'. His interpretation, in this instance, was that she 'was joining up the past with the present, joining my house with her own, integrating past experience with present'. So maybe Ewan's line was connecting past and present, present and future, home and nursery.

Ewan also seemed to be interested in lines of words that connected with each other.

### **An observation at group time**

*Ewan (3:0:17) was filmed participating in action rhymes during group time. He seemed happy and engaged when standing on top of a chair. He particularly enjoyed the phrase 'knocked at the door with a rat tat tat'. He became concerned when playing 'Sleeping Bunnies' and two of the children stayed lying down and did not follow the sequence of actions. When this happened a second time, he removed himself from the game and sat on a computer chair nearby.*



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In this observation at group time, Ewan enjoyed participating in the action rhymes but moved away when two children did not complete the sequence of actions. There was a kind of 'form' to the sequence of actions, like the 'line' of cylinders or the sequence of actions that made up Ewan's ritualistic separation. He seemed to be showing some dissatisfaction with the children stopping part of the way through.

We began to think about the purpose of Ewan's ritual. The ritual gave 'form' or introduced order into an event that may have been highly emotionally charged. It meant that Ewan could predict and trust what would happen. In a similar way, action rhymes are repeated and predictable. The predictability of events can help us to feel safe and secure. When we are first learning any new skill, it is harder to deviate from a plan. As we become more experienced and confident in knowing a plan, we can 'play' with our ideas and make changes and adapt to the unexpected (Athey, 2007, p. 51).

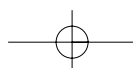
Once Ewan felt secure about what would happen, he could adapt his actions to 'accommodate' to different circumstances.

### **Observation: Ewan separating from his Mother at the gym**

*There was extensive building work in the nursery and the nursery population (children and adults) had to move into the gym for three months. Ewan found this frustrating, first in terms of understanding what was happening, and secondly in terms of carrying out the ritual he and his parents had established.*

*By then Ewan (3:6:0) was talking but not understanding how 'nursery', as he knew it, could be in the gym. Everything was different, the acoustics, the entrance after walking along a corridor, the garden. Ewan got quite cross when adults referred to the gym as though it was nursery. It was impossible for children to move freely indoors and out. Adults had to accompany the children into the garden. Instead of children sometimes settling out of doors first thing in the morning, the adults and children had to adapt and say their goodbyes in the gym, before being accompanied to the garden in small groups.*

*As far as his goodbye ritual was concerned, Ewan had to adapt it. He could say his goodbye at the door to the gym, but then he would dash over to the opposite wall, stack a pile of heavy hollow blocks against the wall and climb up so that he could see his mum or dad through the high window, disappearing. He would give them a final wave.*



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In terms of schemas, Ewan seemed to know that being able to wave his parents off at the very high window of the gym was 'functionally dependent' on placing a tower of blocks underneath the window and climbing on top of them (Athey, 1990, p. 70). He used his experience of lines to create a vertical line high enough to reach the window. At this stage, everything had changed and although Ewan was disequibrated by not being able to carry out his usual goodbye, he was able to 'accommodate' his actions and ideas to a whole new situation (Piaget, 1950/2001, p. 8).

In attachment terms, he still seemed to need to see them disappear in order to trust that they had gone and would return later. So he retained that part of the ritual and fulfilling that goal seemed to satisfy him.

When the children and workers returned to the nursery, Ewan made another adaptation to his sequence of actions around separation.

#### **Observation: Ewan separating from his mother outside**

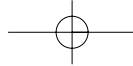
*Ewan (3:8:29) asked Annette to go outside to the perimeter fence with him. He kissed his mother through the railings at one end, then raced to the middle for another kiss through the railings and, finally, ran again to the end of the railings for a final kiss and goodbye. He then walked back towards nursery holding Annette's hand.*

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Ewan enjoyed playing outside and, as outdoor play was usually available to the children right through the session, this extension of his ritual/goodbye routine may have developed out of his wish to say a 'goodbye' at the final boundary (?). Again, he seemed to have a sense of satisfaction when he had completed the ritual.

In schema terms, Ewan may just have discovered that he could kiss his mum or dad by going through the fence with his face/lips. Like all new learning, he may have wanted to practise using his going through a boundary schema.

In attachment terms, the boundary seemed important to Ewan. Was he creating ever more final points at which the goodbye could be said? His mum



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worked at the school opposite the nursery and that meant that her workplace could be seen from the nursery garden. Did sight of the school provide even more security?

Boundaries seemed to link with his interest at group time later that day.

**Observation at group time later that day**

*Ewan was filmed at group time and enjoyed singing 'Wind the Bobbin Up' which his mother told me was a favourite song of his at the time. It is interesting to think about the words:*

Point to the ceiling

Point to the door

Point to the window

Point to the floor ...

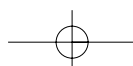
## DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF EWAN'S ACTIONS AND COMMUNICATION

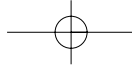
■ In terms of Ewan's wish to say goodbye at the furthest boundary, these words might have been significant or resonated with him. Athey noticed that articulating children's schemas/repeated actions seemed to help them form related concepts (Athey, 1990, p. 179). Athey (1990, p. 181) noted that 'children like to talk about what they are doing'.

John Matthews, drawing on brain research, gives a further explanation about the importance of language in forming concepts:

There are two types of basic attractor systems (in the brain) set off with emergent representation. One traces around the contours of shapes in terms of action, while another system records the features of objects. Gradually, the child learns the names for shapes ('round' for example) and this word may cause families of attractors to form around it. The **word acts like a 'pivot'** around which utterances, and linguistic, visual and kinaesthetic representations (to do with movement and the sensation of movement), are formed. (2003, p. 29, author's emphasis)

I understand this to mean that language acts as a symbol and helps us to recall all related experiences of our actions. Language helps us to conceptualise and to communicate about concepts with each other. Ewan's many experiences of forming lines could be recalled by the word 'line'.





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### A final observation at grouptime

*By now Ewan (4:3:21) was like a 'fish in water' at nursery, extremely articulate and enjoyed playing with words. He really enjoyed 'The Owl and the Pussycat' and Annette read part of each line which Ewan completed. He particularly liked saying 'quince'. He also joked with his friend, Owen, saying 'willy' instead of 'willing'.*

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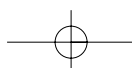
By then, Ewan was feeling very confident and secure at nursery. He loved to experiment with new words, stories and rhymes. He also liked to push boundaries and to make up jokes. Like some of the children in Athey's study, his jokes demonstrated that he knew things so well that he could play with them.

### SO WHAT?

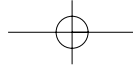
Getting to know Ewan was important to him and to his family. They all felt more valued in a place where people listened and took note of what was important to Ewan and to them. Ewan had negotiated and developed a way of separating from his parents that made the separation manageable for him and them at that time. The ritual was created by Ewan in negotiation with others. He must have felt valued as a person, in his own right, when those around him thought of the ritual as useful and acknowledged its importance to him. I am sure that at times, carrying out a ritual, created stress for the family, however, the filmed sequence of Ewan walking back into nursery after being 'held' by his mum, indicated a high level of emotional well-being and self confidence (Laevers, 1997).

We can apply our learning from this child study to other children and families. I believe that if we notice and understand what is of importance to each child and family using our setting, then their experience can only improve.

We, too, can introduce rituals to help children cope with separations or endings, for example, when it was approaching the ending of a group for very young children and their parents called 'Growing Together' we marked the approach of the ending by blowing bubbles. Even the youngest children attending became used to the idea that after the bubbles, they went home.








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**Table 2.1 Schemas mentioned and links made**

Going through a boundary	Ewan repeatedly used marbles in a run to go through a series of twists and turns
Lines	Ewan seemed to use lines and may have been representing time, closely linked with separation, connecting past and present, home and nursery
Connecting	Ewan was interested in connecting, which may have linked with connecting with others and smoothness of transitions
Vertical lines	Ewan constructed a vertical line/tower in order to reach a high window and making it possible to wave 'Goodbye' at the last possible moment

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

■ Athey, C. (1990) *Extending Thought in Young Children*, Paul Chapman, London.

Athey, C. (2007) *Extending Thought in Young Children*, 2nd edn, Paul Chapman, London.

Matthews, J. (2003) *Drawing and Painting: Children and Visual Representation*, Paul Chapman, London.

Winnicott, D. (2006) *The Family and Individual Development*, Routledge Classics, London.

