

# Attachment Difficulties

Children are born with a range of innate behaviours to maximise their survival. Among these is attachment behaviour, which allows the child to draw their primary caregivers towards them at moments of need or distress. Children whose caregivers respond sensitively and appropriately to the child's needs at times of distress and fear in infancy and early childhood are thought to develop secure attachments to their primary caregivers. These children can also use their caregivers as a secure base from which to explore their environment. They have better outcomes than non-securely attached children in social and emotional development, educational achievement and mental health. Attachment patterns and difficulties in children and young people are thought to be determined by the nature of the caregiving they receive. Attachment patterns can be adaptations to the caregiving that they receive from all primary caregivers, including birth parents, foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents. Repeated changes of primary caregiver, or neglectful and maltreating behaviour from primary caregivers who persistently disregard the child's attachment needs, are the main contributors to attachment

difficulties (NCCMH/NICE, 2015b). It can be helpful to think more broadly about children's attachments in terms of 'belonging' since it is a more everyday word and helps us think more broadly about children's identities and relationships (Hart et al 2007).

## Risks for attachment difficulties

Any of the following conditions, especially if they have happened to a child under 18 months old, put a child at high risk of developing attachment difficulties:

- pre-birth trauma
- sudden separation from primary caretaker (such as illness or death of parent, or the hospitalisation of the child)
- frequent moves and/or placements (e.g. foster care, moves in/out of the care system)
- undiagnosed and/or painful illness (such as colic or ear infections)
- chronic maternal depression
- parents with poorly developed parenting skills
- inconsistent or inadequate day care
- neglect

## Behaviours and characteristics

Children or young people with attachment difficulties may show some of the following characteristics:

### Interaction:

- Be indiscriminately affectionate with strangers
- Lack the ability to give or receive affection (i.e., will not be 'cuddly')
- Be inappropriately demanding and clingy
- Be unable to trust others
- Lack of kindness (be cruel) to animals
- Display erratic behaviour, tell lies
- Show poor peer relationships
- Be destructive to others

### Aggression and lack of impulse control:

- Display passive aggression (provoking anger in others)
- Show signs of repressed anger
- Have low or no impulse control
- Lack cause-and-effect thinking
- Lack a conscience
- Be pre-occupied with fire, blood and gore
- Exhibit extreme control problems - often manifest in devious ways (e.g. stealing from family; secret solvent abuse, etc.)

### Communication:

- Be superficially engaging, charming (phony)
- Avoid eye contact
- Ask persistent nonsense questions and incessantly chatter
- Have abnormal speech patterns

### Other signs:

- Self-destructive behaviours
- Sabotage placements such as school, foster family etc.
- Show signs of depression
- Exhibit pseudo-maturity
- Have low self esteem
- Show signs of a guilt complex
- Have abnormal eating patterns

Fundamentally the child or young person has lacked the sufficient conditions to flourish, which has compromised their ability to relate to others and themselves in an “optimal” way. They will struggle to understand normative ways of being in relationships, will be hyper sensitive in their interactions, have difficulty in trusting others, and can often feel that the world and people in it are against them.

### Experience of...

- Not being connected in relationship

### Leads to learnt ways of coping

- Clinging (due to fear of losing people)
- Withdrawing (due to fear of connecting)

- Needs constantly being unmet

- Belief that their needs are not important
- Not knowing how to ask for what they need
- Not able to communicate in an ideal way

- Not being responded to or held and contained

- Struggling to understand their feelings
- May either react to feelings with strong outbursts of anger (an expression of fear) or
- withdraw into their feelings and isolate themselves from others

- Being treated negatively by other people

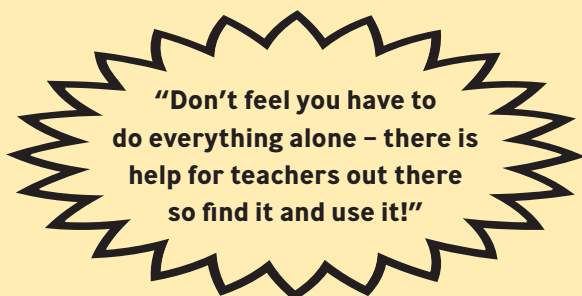
- Learnt unhelpful ways of coping with their feelings e.g. self-harming, eating difficulties or other harmful relationships (confirming the learnt negative beliefs about

## How to support children and young people with attachment difficulties

A child or young person with attachment difficulties has some of the following needs:

- A relationship with someone that is committed, offers consistency and is trustworthy
- To have around them, people that believe in them and support their aspirations and praise who they are
- To be supported to develop their sense of responsibility in the world and in some cases, reduce their feeling of over-responsibility to others
- Support in understanding and complying with the basic rules of society
- Clear boundaries that keep them safe emotionally and psychologically
- To be able to respond to reasonable requests
- To have a realistic sense of self
- To learn to be non-confrontational with others
- To accept responsibility for their own actions
- To feel valued
- To feel like they belong
- To manage temper / anger appropriately
- To understand the world around them
- To understand their own wants, needs and feelings, and that they are important
- To have a sense of their own identity.
- To be able to make sense of their feelings and articulate these in a way that means they will be heard
- To develop a hobby/interest that will support their sense of self-efficacy and belonging

Table 10 below offers some examples of challenges that children and young people with attachment difficulties may face and how to support them using the Resilience Framework



Challenge	How to support the child or young person
<p><b>A child or young person is constantly misinterpreting your actions and losing their temper</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give clear, consistent guidelines and boundaries at all times as this will support their emotional safety. <b>(Coping)</b></li> <li>• Help them understand what has triggered their feelings. When children and young people have attachment difficulties they may get upset when to them you feel like someone in their past or the situation feels similar; help them understand this. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Be as honest and truthful as possible, with sensitivity to the child or young person’s feelings. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Give calm, clear, measured responses in confrontational situations. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Create win / win situations. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Mirror the child or young person’s world using role play, video, etc., so that they can see what it feels and sounds like. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Always endeavour to let them know it is their behaviour that isn’t liked, not them. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Tell them what behaviours may annoy / irritate others, and explain why. They can’t change behaviours they do not recognise as causing problems. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Allow your emotions to be seen (anger, frustration, sadness, happiness, etc.) appropriately: Teachers are people too. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> </ul>

Challenge	How to support the child or young person
<p><b>A child or young person is constantly misinterpreting your actions and losing their temper (continued)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a card system that helps them articulate when they feel their emotions are escalating and they can take time out of the classroom. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Do an activity with them that supports your understanding of each other and the development of the relationship with statements such as:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Things work well between us when.....</li> <li>2. I feel safe with you when.....</li> <li>3. I get upset when.....</li> <li>4. What I would like more of is.....</li> <li>5. I am willing to do.....</li> </ol>               This can be really useful for children and young people who struggle to articulate what they need and how they feel, and offers positive role modelling too (Sunderland &amp; Armstrong, 2015). <b>(Belonging)</b> </li> </ul>
<p><b>A young woman shares with you that she is engaging in relationships that are sexually exploitative</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge the bravery of her disclosure and that there is hope that she is able to recognise that such relationships are not good for her. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Explore with her any risks around sexual health and support her to make an appointment at the local sexual health clinic; offer support to attend with her if possible. <b>(Basics)</b></li> <li>• Explore with her what support she feels she needs to support herself differently in relationships. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Discuss with your safeguarding lead, who can make a referral to the Single Point of Advice Service where appropriate. <b>(Enlisting)</b></li> <li>• Run workshops within the school for all children and young people on identifying if they are being placed at risk in relationships: Consult with children and young people in the school to plan lessons and highlight unmet needs and issues that need addressing. (Lesson suggestions can be found at: <a href="https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/ceop-exploited-film-and-resource-pack">https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/ceop-exploited-film-and-resource-pack</a>) <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Invite children and young people to create a drama or art piece that communicates the issue to others. <b>(Coping)</b></li> <li>• Run empowerment workshops for children and young people focusing on relationships. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Run workshops for parents so they can identify the issue and support their children. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Support her to understand about healthy boundaries in relationships, asserting herself and barriers to putting these in place. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Have an anonymous process in school where children and young people can share their concerns generally about issues such as this that may be affecting them. <b>(Basics)</b></li> </ul>

Table 10: Supporting children and young people with attachment difficulties.

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## Recommended further reading on attachment difficulties and development

Angie Hart, Derek Blincow & Helen Thomas (2007) *Resilient therapy: Working with children and families*. Hove: Routledge.

Kim Aumann & Angie Hart. (2009) *Helping children with complex needs bounce back: Resilient Therapy for parents and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong (2015) *Draw on your relationships: Creative ways to explore, understand and work through important relationship issues*. Abingdon, UK: Speechmark Publishing.

Nicola Marshall (2014) *The teacher's introduction to attachment: Practical essentials for teachers, carers and school support staff*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Louise Michelle Bombèr (2011) *What about me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day*. Duffield, UK: Worth Publishing.

Jo Adams (2002) *Go Girls: Supporting girls emotional development and building self esteem*. Sheffield, UK: Centre for HIV and Sexual Health.

Vanessa Rogers (2010) *Working with young men: Activities for exploring personal, social and emotional issues*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

PSHE lesson suggestions on sexual exploitation can be found at:

<https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/ceop-exploited-film-and-resource-pack>

Chelsea's Choice is a local charity that delivers a drama based performance on sexual exploitation:

<http://www.alteregocreativesolutions.co.uk/chelseas-choice/>

Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (n.d.) How can CEOP help my child? National Crime Agency

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre/How-can-CEOP-help-me-YP/How-can-CEOP-help-me-parent/>