

Supporting secure attachment in the Early Years

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Outcomes: By the end of this session, you will be able to

- ✓ Explain the importance of understanding attachment theory to those working in early years settings.
- ✓ Describe the different attachment styles we may see in early years settings.
- ✓ Offer a Secure Base in your setting.
- ✓ Promote secure relationships in your setting.

RESEARCH

In the medium and long term, positive Personal, Social, and Emotional Development outcomes have been shown to be more influential than cognitive abilities for personal, career and academic success.

DfES, 2003

In order to learn children need to be...

- Supported to make responsible and thoughtful choices
- Encouraged to think for themselves
- Able to plan and organise their own activity
- Able to take charge of their own learning
- Able to have enough 'grit' and 'staying power' to learn in many ways and to not give up.

This all links to Attachment Theory!

Key aspects of Attachment behaviour....

- Feeling Secure
- Separating and Exploring -
- Seeking Help and Comfort – forming relationships

Why is attachment so important?

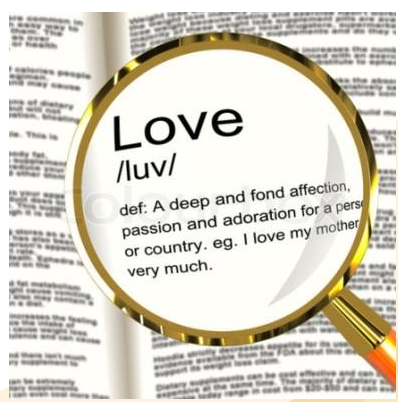
The attachment-aware practitioner takes into consideration the child's past, thinks about it and understands it in order to accurately target the relationship with the child.

This relationship is the tool through which CHANGE can take place.



Defining Attachment

- "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194)
- 'My hypothesis is that the pathway followed by each developing individual and the extent to which he or she becomes resilient to stressful life events is determined to a very significant degree by the pattern of attachment developed during the early years' (Bowlby, 1988)



Attachment...

Attachment is about **relationships**, and our *mental models* of relationships. A child's first attachment is vitally important. The carer's ability to **attune** themselves to the infant's needs, and to **respond** appropriately, is important for the development of a secure attachment.

Through consistent, sensitive and timely responses to their needs, the infant acquires a basic **trust**:

- ❖ in others as responsive
- ❖ in the world as a benign place
- ❖ and in themselves as able to communicate their needs



Mirroring and still face experiment

Attachment figures

How do we know who our attachment figures are?

- Primary - primary carer/mother
- Secondary - father, siblings
- Tertiary - extended family
- Base level - everyone else, 'strangers'

Sir Richard Bowlby

Attachment Theory is not.....

- Parent blaming
- A diagnosis (styles vs. difficulties vs. disorder)
- Fixed over a lifetime or across different contexts



Underlying principles

Below the Surface..

Behaviour is communication



How the brain evolved :

Higher human brain
(thinking)



Mammalian brain
(feeling)

Reptilian brain
(primitive)



Emotional Regulation

How can we help a child feel regulated, not so stuck with negative feelings?

It is impossible to sit still with nervous energy.

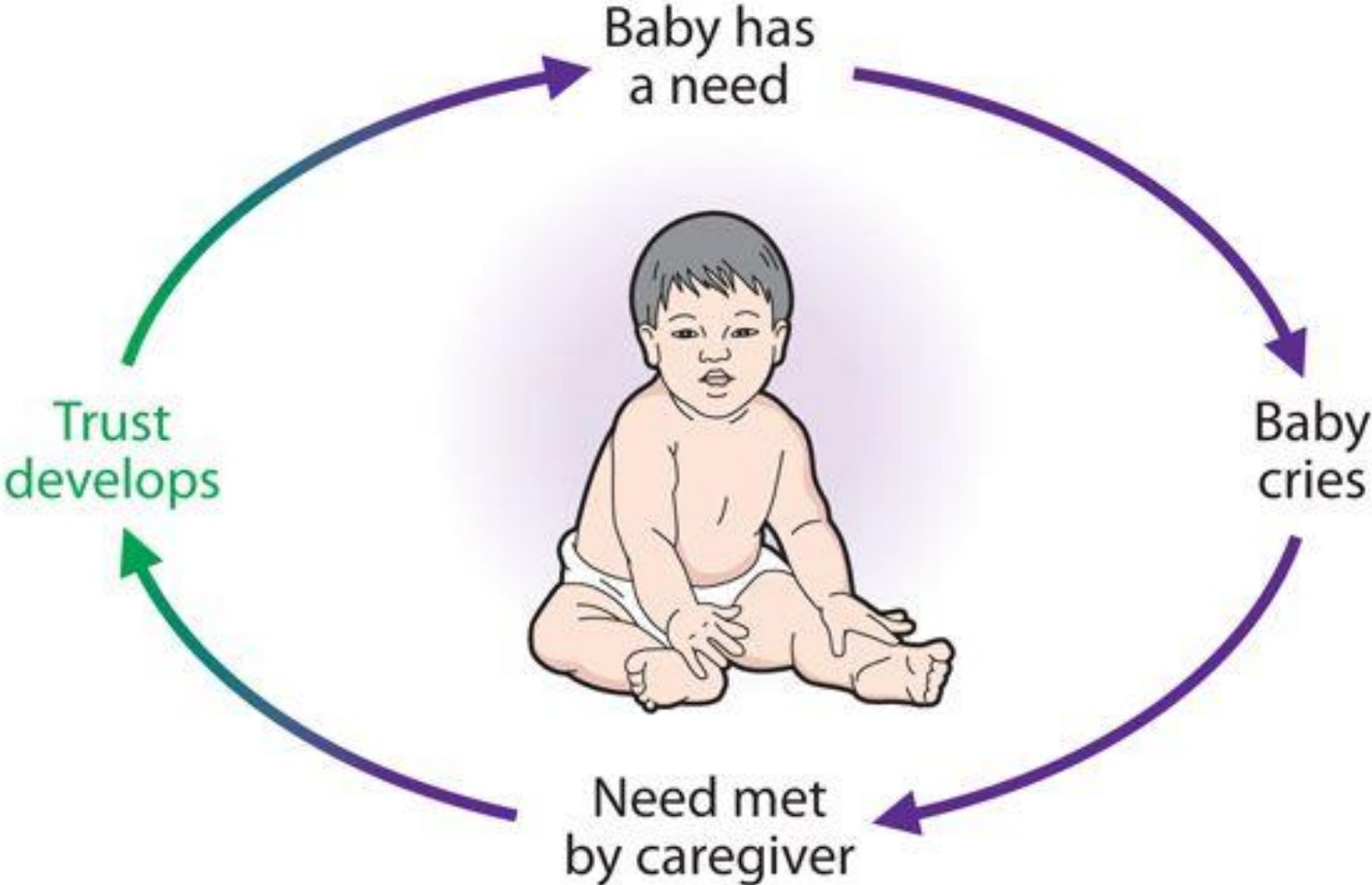
PHYSICAL

SENSORY

REPETITIVE



Infant Attachment Cycle



Other people are....



I am...



The world is...



The tape recorder of our lives



The experience of Securely attached children

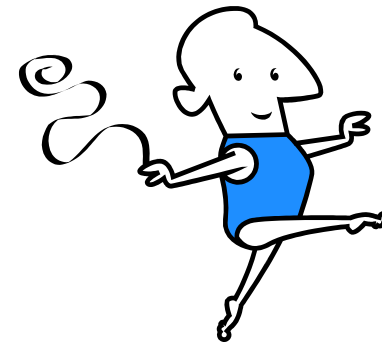
- They trust in adults – to keep them safe for example
- They know the adult will be there when needed
- Know adults can be relied upon
- Feel good about themselves
- Know they are valued

Secure Base

A secure base is a Springboard....



...for exploration and learning.



Impact of negative responses

Brief periods of moderate, predictable stress are not problematic.

If caregivers are regularly unresponsive or threatening, the attachment process is disrupted.

Prolonged, severe and unpredictable stress results in a **negative impact on physical, cognitive, emotional and social growth.**





I am...
loveable
and valued.

**Other people
are...**
Available,
responsive,
reliable and
helpful



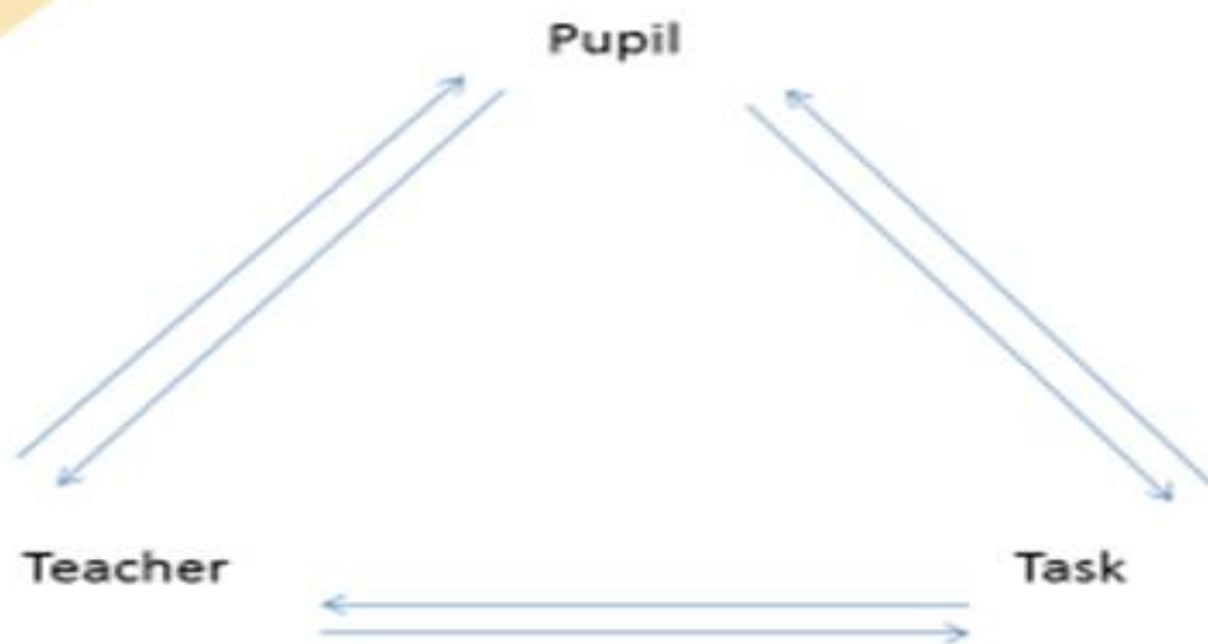
The world is....
A a safe place
that I can
explore with
confidence



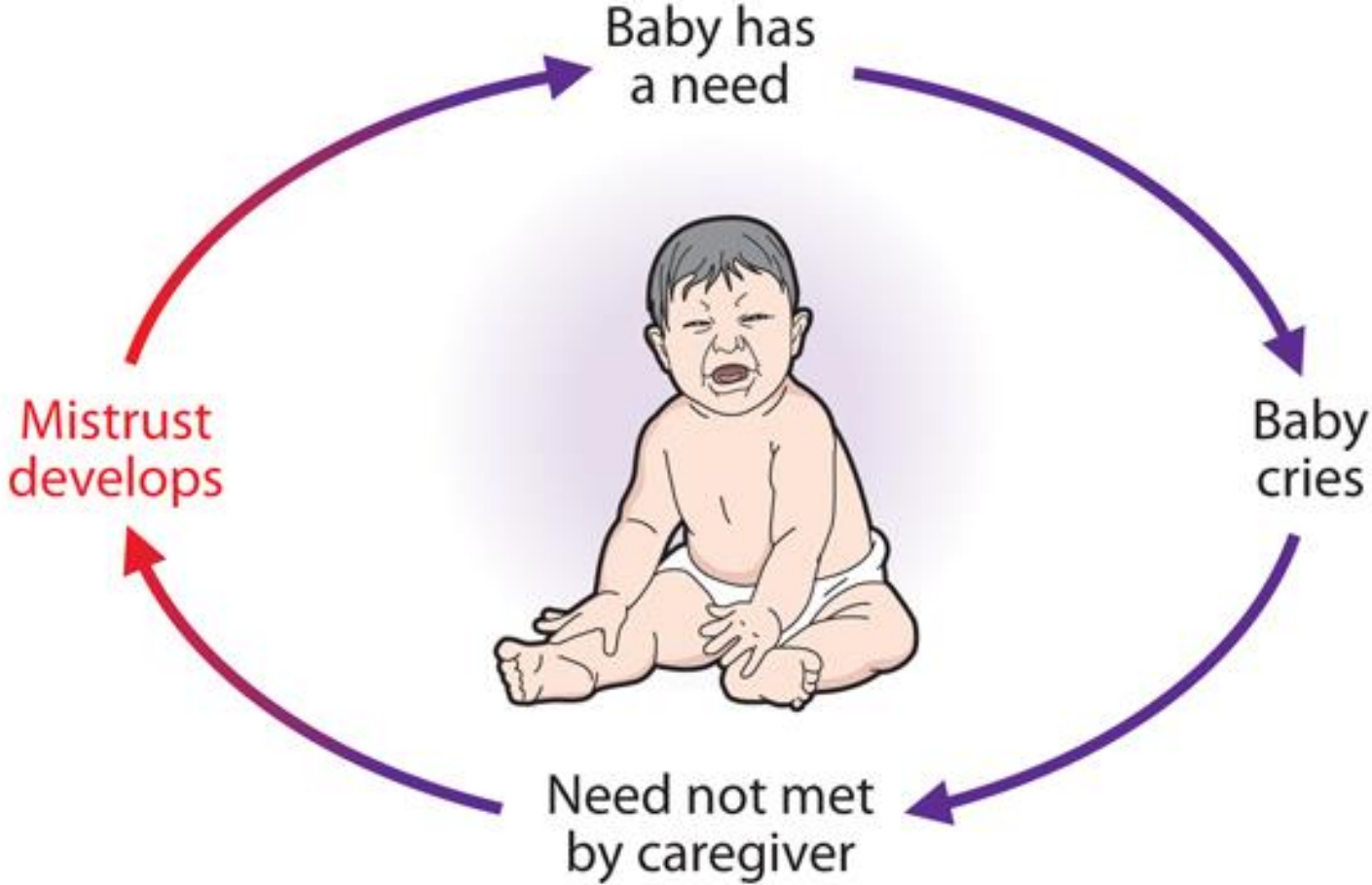
**Internal Working Model
Secure attachment**

(Bowlby, 1980)

What this looks like in the classroom



Infant Trauma Cycle





I am...
unworthy of
interest,
love and
sensitive
treatment

**Other people
are...**
Unpredictable,
neglecting, A
source of
emotional pain



The world is..
Not a safe place.
I don't have a
secure base
from which to
explore



**Internal Working Model
Insecure attachment**



Case example



Claire's mother describes her as 'needy' and 'clingy'. She cries when mum leaves her at nursery...but will quickly 'attach' herself to a member of staff when she leaves. At home, she follows her parents around the house, and at nursery, follows the adults around, particularly her favourite, Ms Baker. She has not yet learnt to play on her own, always wanting help, even if she does not need it.

She is always trying to get the attention of Ms Baker. During carpet time, she has to be right next to her and loves to sit on her lap. Claire will always find something to talk to Ms Baker about. She will ask questions repetitively, not paying attention to the answer.

She is possessive and jealous when Ms Baker talks to other children. When Ms Baker explains that she can't talk to Claire now as she needs to focus on making sure all the children understand what they are doing, Claire gets upset.

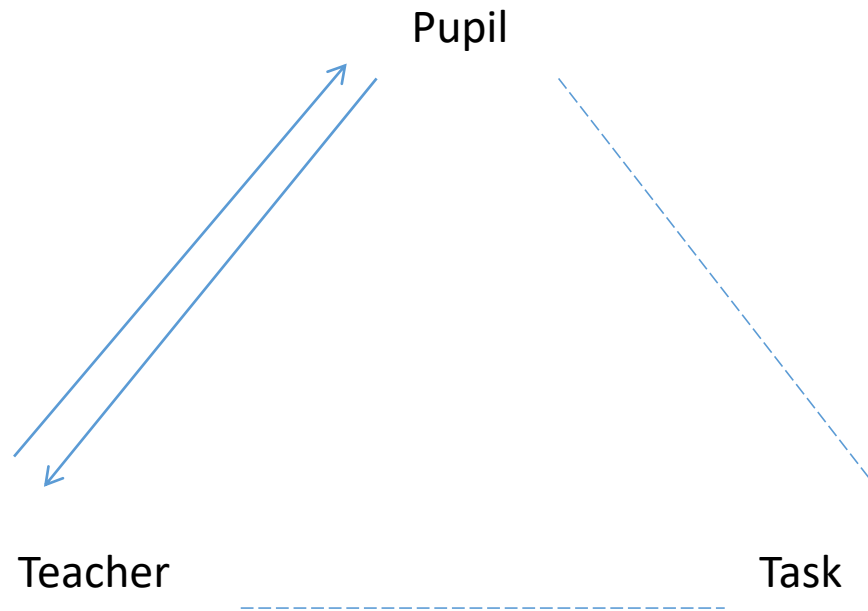
If she falls or bumps herself, Claire is inconsolable, clinging to the staff member who has come to help.



Ambivalent attachment

- Mother either over attentive, often needing the baby to meet her own needs or
- Not there - the baby feels anxious that if not in mother's presence will be forgotten – not in mother's mind
- Child has inconsistent messages about caregivers availability. Therefore they can't predict their response to meeting needs.
- Fear of abandonment

What this looks like in the classroom



Internal Working Model

Insecure ambivalent attachment



I am...
Not important /
valued enough
for you to
remember me...I
need to always
draw attention
to myself to
make sure you
'hold me in
mind'



**Other people
are...**
May forget me



The world is...
Not a safe
place, I don't
have a secure
base from
which to
explore, I'm too
busy making
sure you
remember me



What strategies can work with children with an Insecure Ambivalent attachment style?

- Set them small timed tasks and gradually increase the duration of tasks.
- Let the child know that you will get back to them, and when that will be.
- Make sure that you do come back, and if you get distracted acknowledge what happened.
- Avoid the temptation to over-help.



Alan is independent. When he arrives at nursery, he enters confidently on his own, barely looking back as dad leaves.

He follows rules and routines, making little demands on staff.

He sometimes approaches other children but tends to hang back, waiting to be invited to join. He enjoys running around at the fringes of their games in the outdoor area. Sometimes he falls over, but he generally just picks himself up and continues with the game.

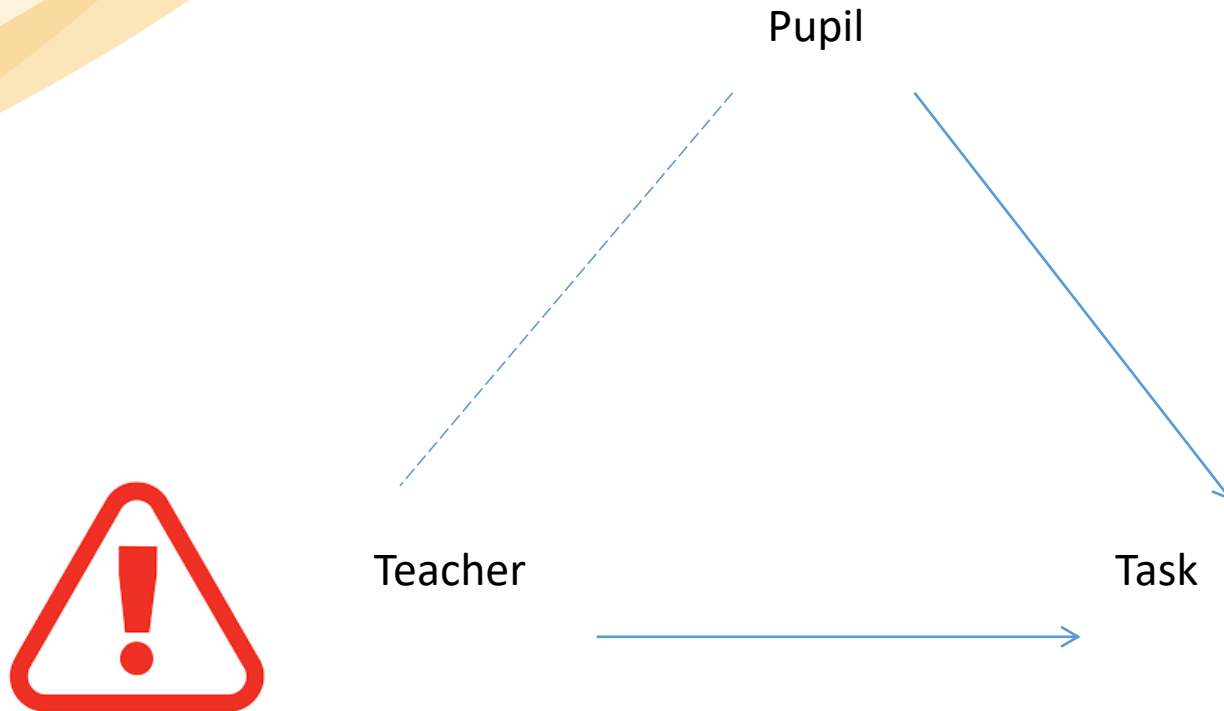
Alan prefers to play and work alone. He lacks confidence but does not like to be helped. He often seems pre-occupied, 'in a world of his own'. He is unresponsive when his teacher tries to get his attention and may move away to play on his own.



Avoidant attachment style

- Parent tends to be insensitive to child's neediness
- Unable to 'tune in' to their pain or suffering
- A very practical parent – just have to get on with things
- Have inadvertently given the child the message that it's not good to be emotional

What this looks like in the classroom



Internal Working Model
Insecure avoidant
attachment



**Other people
are...
Unable to help
me**

**The world is...
Not a safe
place, I'm
better of
relying only on
myself**

**I am...
Self-reliant,**



What strategies can work with Young People with an Insecure Avoidant attachment style?

- Allow children like Alan some control and choice over their activities.
- Find tasks that they enjoy, ones on which they can be fairly self-directed or work with peers.
- Work through a task to develop your relationship.
- Give them responsibilities in the classroom.
- Give task specific praise, rather than relationship based praise.

Relative dependency vs pseudo independence

- Children need to experience relationships in which they can depend on adults, trust them and rely on them.
- Consistency, consistency, consistency.
- Firm, fair and kind.

Relative dependency strategies...

- Meet and greet – “I need continuity and certainty.”
- Help with organisation – modelling please!
- Check-ins – “I need reassurance that you’re still there keeping me in mind.”
- Home/school partnership, partnerships within teaching teams

What to watch

- It is important not to collude with the behaviour.
- Be mindful that their rejections can provoke extreme annoyance in staff or feelings of helplessness.
- At this stage, if we are not careful, we may start to ignore them (as this is what their behaviour is telling us they want on the surface). This is colluding with the pattern of rejection.



Case example



Everyone in the setting knows Thomas...

Thomas is angry, hyperactive and exhausting to his mother. He is on the go all the time, playing loud, active games. He frequently puts himself in danger and needs constant supervision.

When Thomas arrives at nursery, everyone knows it. He comes in loudly and tries to tell other children what to do. Thomas prefers to be outside, running and chasing the other children. He does not like to come back indoors and it is difficult to help him adjust to being back in the classroom. Thomas does not settle during carpet time, he is busy seeing what everyone else is doing.

His is unpredictable and can 'explode' with anger. He doesn't appear to show a wide range of positive emotions, for example, he doesn't show contentment or joy when playing.

His play is often chaotic and he can be very controlling in his play with others.

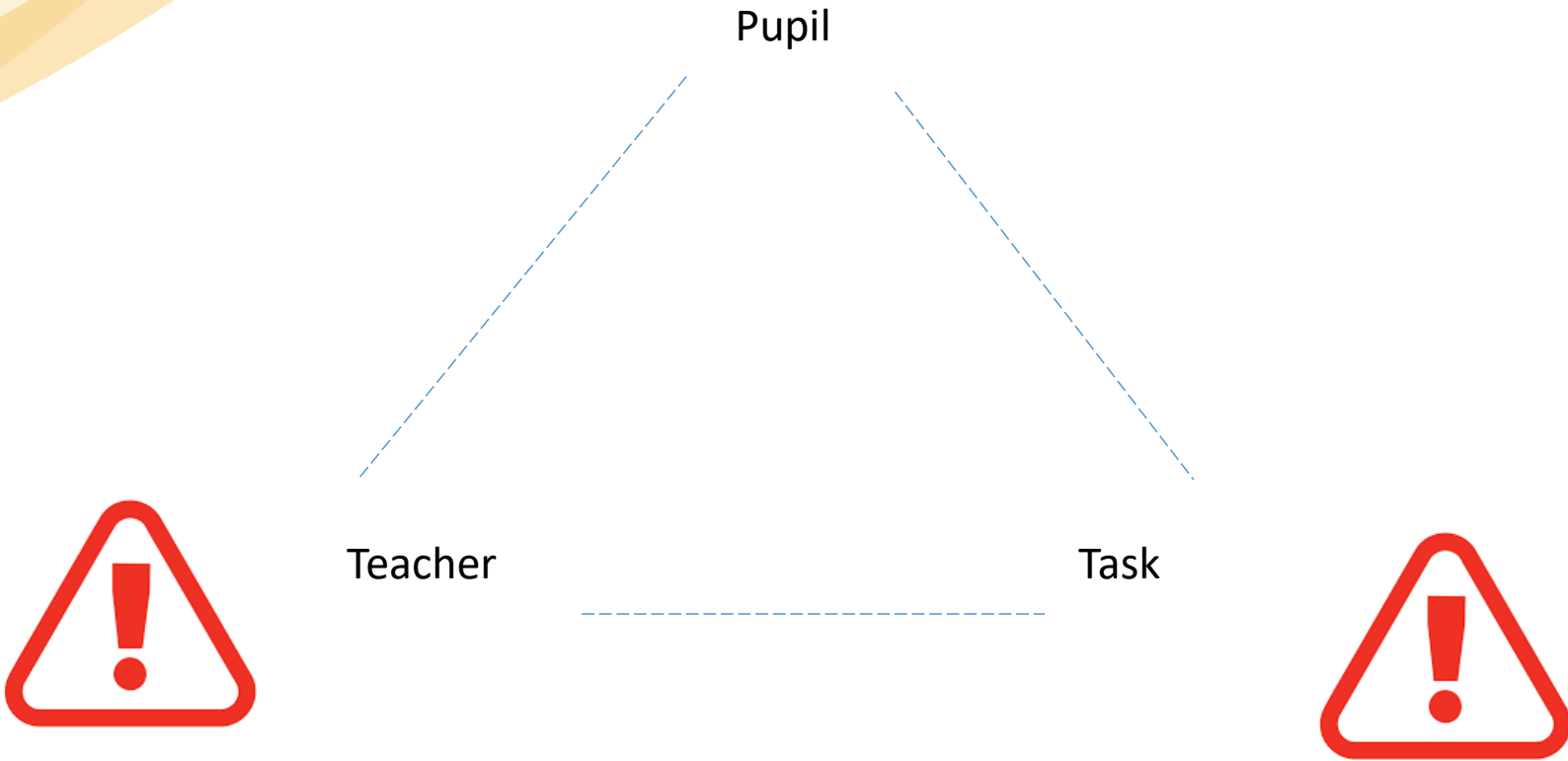
He wants friends, but finds this difficult, often being best friends with a child one day and fighting with them the next.



Disorganised attachment

- The most concerning & most damaged child
- Has often suffered abuse by their attachment figure and neglect
- Attachment figure is both the source of danger and the only solution to alarm/danger
- Child has learned that no adult figure is trustworthy
- Have to rely on self for protection to survive emotionally

What this looks like in the classroom



**Internal Working Model
Insecure disorganised
attachment**



I am...
confused, bad,
unloved



**Other people
are...**
frightening,
unavailable



The world is...
a very unsafe
place to be,
anything could
happen
suddenly and
without
warning

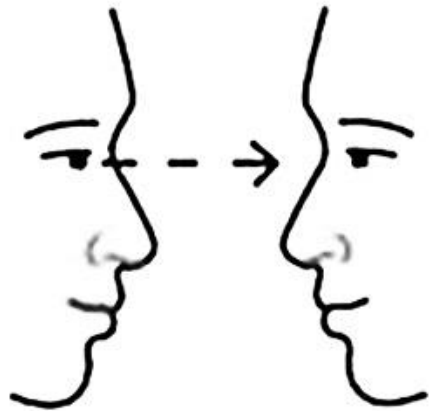


What strategies can work with children with an Insecure Disorganised attachment style?

- Recognise and acknowledge the strain put upon adults by chaotic behaviour.
- Offer support to adults to enable them to maintain and restore their own capacity to think, and subsequently the student's.
- Clear structure and routine to classes.
- Flag up any changes to routine, consider a back-up plan... Prepare for endings.

Creating emotional safety vs. increased power/authority/control

- These children find control difficult.
- Their home life may feel out of control, so they seek to take control in order to balance their anxieties.
- They need to have experience of taking turns with control, in order to gain trust in an adult taking control.
- Consider body language and positioning. Side-by-side at their level works best, reducing intensity of eye contact





What can we do?



**achieving
for children**

How can we support insecurely attached children to develop...

- Trust in adults – to be able to use as ‘Secure Base’
- Confidence in the availability of adults
- Know adults can be relied upon
- Feel good about themselves
- Know they are valued

S.S.S.: the big 3 that can help

Therapeutic ingredients that appear to promote attachment when provided by teachers and caregivers include the following:

- **Security** (sense of psychological safety)
- **Stability** (permanence of the attachment figure)
- **Sensitivity** (emotional availability)

Settling troubled children to learn

- Relational traumas and attachment difficulties can cause children to have confusing and complex profiles of behaviour.
- **Every** relationship has the power to change or alter a child's way of functioning.
- Experience of a consistent attachment figure can help a young person develop '**LEARNED SECURITY**'.
- Traumatized young people need relationships to heal.
- All children need relationships to thrive.

What can we do?

- **IDENTIFY** your 'at risk' children.
- Risk factors: DV, maternal health pre and post birth (e.g. drugs, depression, mental illness), infant health (prematurity, medical complications, disability), bereavement, neglect and abuse, home instability, poverty, multiple home and school placements in Early Years.

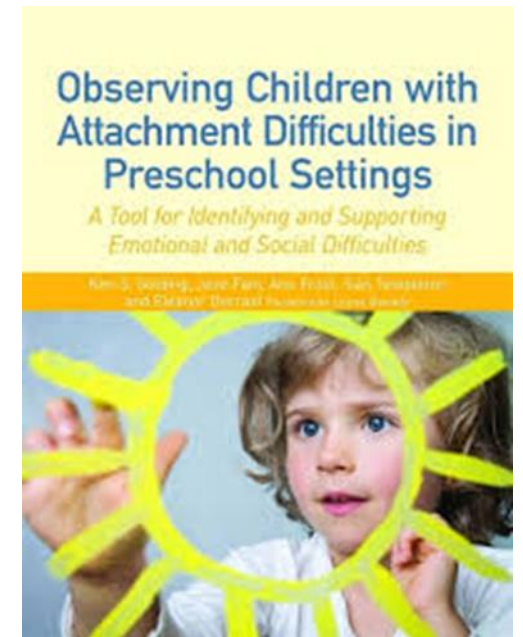


Classroom observations.....



Identify children who may need additional focus and support in this area:

- Everyone will know those who continually seek adult attention, or are loud and boisterous....
- Make sure to notice those that are: quiet; independent; don't ask for help; don't gravitate towards adults.





What do you do already?

- Transitional objects
- Gradual transitions
- Home school link
- Supported risk (within comfort zones)
- Supporting parents to let go, making comfortable experience for children
- Routine and consistency



Communication between staff and carers?

How does this happen? When? How often? And what about?



Classroom support - interactions

1. Using directives

Communicate what the child needs to do, rather than what they should not do.

If it is a safety issue, saying 'no', or 'stop' is enough

- Simplify use of language
- Give bite sized chunks of information
- Check out understanding
- Set up links for them connecting pieces of information
- Repeat on an individual basis
- Use multisensory forms of communication, e.g. Social Stories, visual timetables, sand timers

2. Supporting self-esteem

- Pupils with attachment difficulties are likely to hold negative views about themselves and have a heightened sense of shame.
- Making a 'success book': keeping records of good work, successful lunch breaks, positive comments etc.
- Praise: Use often but be specific about what is being praised and do not be too effusive, as praise can be overwhelming.

3. Wondering aloud

This strategy is a very helpful technique. It gives a concrete expression of the child's experience of **'being attuned'** to.

"I wonder if you are feeling anxious about the different adult in the class today and that's why you are refusing to sit in your space?"

Using this with extended commentary and use of strategies...

"I can see you have lots of energy right now, lets take a brain break and walk quickly up and down the corridor, so we can use up some of this energy! Great! In a minute we are going back into the classroom to do some number work.... we need to get ready to use our thinking now. I know that now you've had a break you'll be much more able to get your thinking back"

5. Letting the child know they are kept in mind

- Visual images- carrying photos of family/carers
- Transitional objects- being asked to keep hold of an item, like a pen, so that the child will know they are being thought about when key adult isn't available.
- Personal touch (touch top of child's head, making a connection with them)- at times of possible increased attachment seeking e.g. Carpet time. **KEEP SCHOOL POLICY IN MIND**
- Verbal reassurance - ***“I haven't forgotten you. You are in my mind, I will be with you in a moment”***

6. Respond to 'emotional' ability level

- Have expectations of children based on their emotional age
- When the student misbehaves try **not** to ask *“did you...?”*, *“why did you...?”* *“what did you...?”* questions.
- Instead if a child misbehaves, try saying *“I see you need help with ___”*; this strategy helps to promote self-reflective capacity
- If the student behaves inappropriately, try to seat them close to your rather than sending out. If they have to be removed, try to do so positively e.g. *‘Lets go and get a drink’*.
‘Time in, not time out’ – ‘The absent presence’

Why are trauma & attachment difficulties challenging to professionals?

What it may evoke in you?

- Leave you feeling de-skilled and worthless (which may be feelings about themselves)
- Make you think that they don't need support
- Push your emotional limits
- Reject you overtly or make more subtle rejections of help
- Attempt to shock or frighten you
- Get into your thinking so that you don't forget them (good or bad)
- Provoke you to behave out of character (shout, retaliate etc)

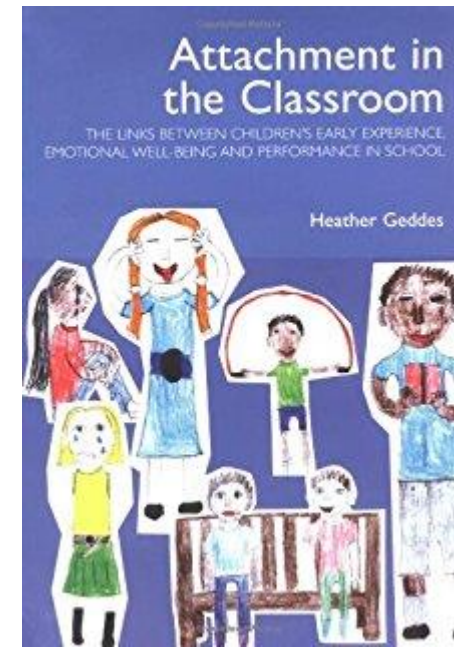
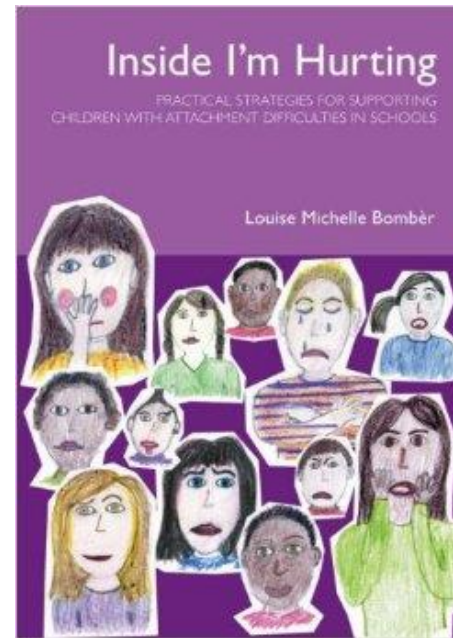
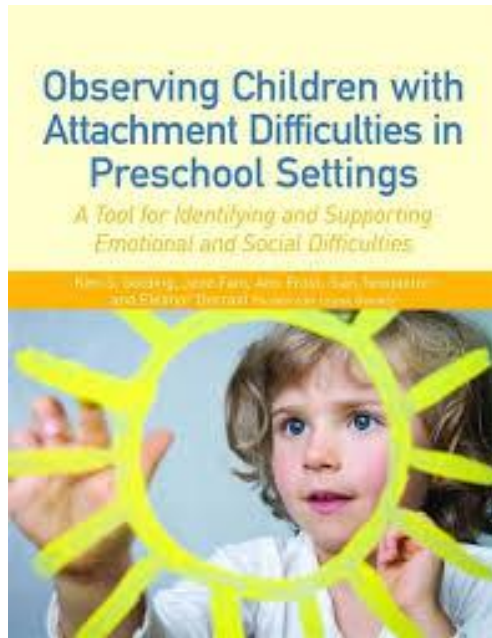
Key messages:

- Respond to the **needs** behind the behaviour
 - all **behaviour** is a **communication**, it is an interaction between people and the environment
- **Relationships can** make difference
- Be **mindful** of what the behaviour / situation **evokes in you**

What next if difficulties continue?

- Assess, plan, do review
- If you or other early years practitioners have already tried to put above actions (discussed in presentation today) in place and no change is seen, consider making a referral (self referral) to a **parenting group**, or to the **Emotional Health Service** for more specialist work

Useful resources



<https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/>

Attachment type	Behaviour	What this means for child	Possible triggers	What might you do?
AVOIDANT (I'm OK, you're not OK)	Withdrawn Unable to make or keep friends Bullies other vulnerable children	I have to rely on myself and nobody else. I respond to frightening situations by fleeing. I don't expect other people to like me. I pretend to be strong by making other children do what I want.		Introduce a buddy system. Consider 'circle of friends' approach. Encourage the child to help around the school.
	Refusal of help with work	I was left helpless before. I'm not going to be left helpless again.	Singled out for 1:1 support	Encourage work in pairs or small groups. Ask the child to help another who is less able.
	Loses or destroys property	I have no sense of the value of anything. I have little interest in things if they are not mine. I am angry and I take it out on things.		Validate the child's feelings, "I can see that you are angry. Help the child repair/restore where possible - together.
AMBIVALENT (I'm not OK, you're OK)	Talks all the time, asking trivial questions	I feel safer if I do all the talking. I want to communicate but don't know how.		Have set routine. Make sure all first tasks are simple and achievable. Seat child close to you. Allow child to wait quietly.
	Demanding teacher attention all the time	I fear that if I don't let you know I'm here you may leave me on my own. Even negative attention is good. I fear getting it wrong.		Notice the child explicitly. Give child something to look after for a while. Give child responsibilities for things (not people).
	Hostile when frustrated Poor concentration, fidgeting, turning round	I will feel shame and humiliation if my difficulties are discovered. I must scan the room all the time for danger. I must stay hyper-aroused. I dare not relax.	Task that is hard/new/unusual Sights, smells and sounds can trigger panic as reminders of past trauma	Small step differentiation. Use timer to divide tasks. Arrange seating so there is no one behind the child but who you can stay in contact. Laugh with the child, even at silly things.
DISORGANISED (I'm not OK, you're not OK)	Refuses to engage with work	Getting things wrong is frightening. Being wrong will lead to rejection AGAIN.	Task that is hard/new/unusual	Offer choices. Make sure both are acceptable! Make lessons/tasks very structured (multiple choice/cloze/sentence completion. All materials to hand.
	Tries to create chaos and mayhem	It feels chaotic inside so it feels safer if it is chaos outside as well.		Focus on modifying most serious behaviour. Validate the child's feelings. "I can see that you are angry/upset....."
	Oppositional and defiant	I need to stay in control so things won't hurt me. I do not want to be exposed as stupid. You are horrible like all adults.	Task that is hard/new/unusual	Be assertive but keep emotional temperature down. Avoid showing anger, irritation or fear. Start each day with clean slate.
	Sexually aggressive	I know from past experience that sex = power and I want to be in control.	Variety of stimuli including stress	Record all incidences very clearly. Seek advice from other agencies (see back page).
INDICATORS OF ATTACHMENT DIFFICULTIES GENERALLY	Unable to accept praise or to have fun	I am not worthy of praise and you are stupid if you don't realise how bad I am. I am unlovable.		Do praise but don't be too effusive and be specific about what you are praising. Privately may be more acceptable to child.
	Physically or verbally abusive	I respond to frightening or threatening situations by fighting, fleeing or freezing.		Avoid threat of removal or rejection. "Time in" not "time out". If unavoidable, do so positively "I need to get on with the class - you come and sit here till you feel better. Speculate aloud why it might have happened (don't ask child to explain).
	Ignores instructions	I have too much anxiety to be able to listen. I can only retain one instruction at a time as too much going round in my head. I am easily distracted.		Keep format same each day. Describe plan of activities for session at outset. Do the child's remembering for him/herself. Let the child make lists on Post-Its.
	Sulkiness, avoids eye contact	I don't dare see what others think. I have no words to describe my feelings - looking sulky is a cover-up.	Face-to-face contact. Being told "look at me when I'm talking to you"	Find ways to reassure - smile, thumbs up. Encourage playing games to make children laugh. Sit side by side.
	In trouble at break times	I fear rejection by my peers. I panic in crowds. I cannot self-regulate when stressed.	Unstructured time	Reduce time in playground, introduce tighter structure and supervision, create inside 'retreat', establish nurture group.
	Lying or living in fantasy	I prefer to make things up how I would like them to be. I'm not sure who I am or what the truth is. I don't know the difference between fantasy and reality.		Avoid accusing child of lying or fantasising. State the truth of the matter briefly and simply.
	Stealing	I have no expectation of getting something so I'll just take it. I have no idea you may feel hurt or anger and when I see the effect I have I feel powerful.	Rejection by peers	Do not insist on 'sorry'. Suggest an action that might repair damaged relationships. Try not to leave desirable things lying around!
Behaviour suddenly deteriorates	There is a painful anniversary coming up. A new sibling has arrived. I have got contact with birth family coming up/ have just come from contact with birth family.	Special occasions like Christmas, birthdays or Mother's Day Before and after weekends	Be sensitive in curriculum delivery. Allow child time and space to manage feelings away from the classroom.	

End of session reflection

Based on this session....

