

ATTACHMENT & TRAUMA



If pupils haven't got a worthwhile relationship with at least one adult they aren't really at school Tim Brighouse

An understanding of the impact of trauma and attachment on the developing brain of the child enables schools to recognise behaviour as communication and develop approaches that address the underlying needs of the child.

Understanding attachment theory, so the school can become a secure base where there are strong adult child relationships, enhances learning outcomes and wellbeing for all children as well as supporting those that have unmet attachment needs or have experienced trauma and neglect.

Attachment – what you need to know

- Human babies are born ready to connect with adults
- They need adults to care for them in order to survive
- Adult response to the baby 'shapes' the developing brain
- If adults are caring and responsive the brain is shaped so children can develop healthy relationships and gradually learn to regulate emotions
- If adults are unreliable or threatening or if the child's physical or emotional needs are neglected, the child may see themselves as worthless or undeserving
- They may see many situations as threatening and revert to 'survival mode' they dysregulate (lash out or kick off) to protect themselves

Attachment styles

Secure - caregiver attuned to babies needs, child learns to regulate and read social situations

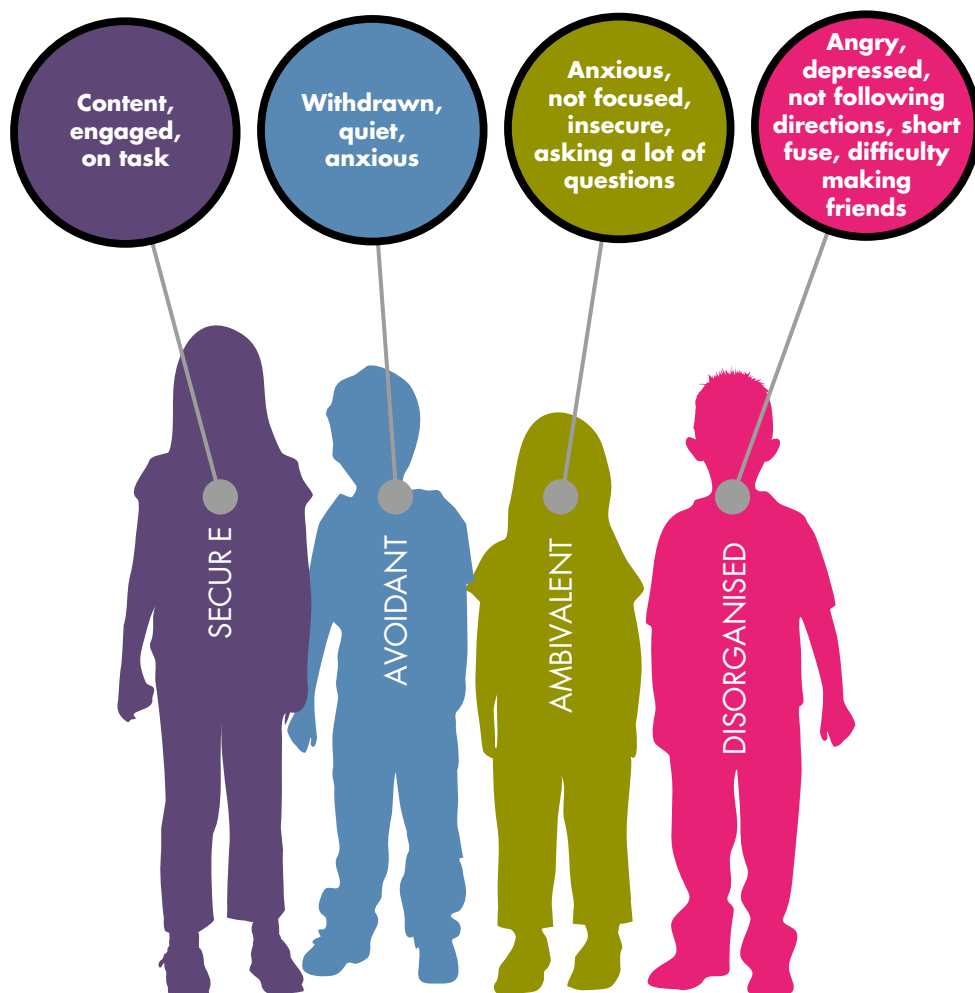
Insecure avoidant - the baby acts with indifference to their mother's presence or absence but are anxious inside.

Insecure ambivalent - needs not met so can't trust adults. Child feels insecure and may show anger or helplessness towards caregiver

Dis-organised - caregiver who is meant to keep baby safe is abusive or frightening – child can't trust adults or the world

Without secure attachments pupils can appear unfocused, un co-operative, disruptive, withdrawn, controlling, manipulative.

What you might see in school



Jamie

Always seems like he is daydreaming and not paying attention. His brain may engage in dissociation at the sign of threat or perceived threat. School maybe stressful for him so his brain is protecting him.

Cara

Always checking with the teacher about her work – even really small details. She has low self esteem. She is worried about getting things wrong as she might make the teacher unhappy. She feels it's safer to please adults around her

Josh

Always seem to have an outburst during maths. Josh feels insecure which he gets something wrong. In maths it is easy to see the wrong and right answers.

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At least one third of children have an insecure attachment with at least one caregiver (Bergin and Bergin 2009)

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Children need to be

Seen - this is not just seeing with the eyes. It means perceiving them deeply and empathically - sensing the mind behind their behaviour

Safe - we avoid actions and responses that frighten or hurt them

Soothed - we help them deal with difficult emotions and situations

Secure - we help them develop an internalised sense of well-being

(Adapted from Dan Siegel)

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Nurturing adult attachments provide children with protective, safe havens and secure bases from which to explore and engage with others and their environment (Bowlby 1988)

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Underpinning values

Being an ATTACHMENT AWARE SCHOOL means creating a culture of care that reflects the values of inclusion and acceptance and a commitment to meeting the diverse needs of each child.

Every policy and practice should reflect a commitment to the values below.

- Respect and value for every individual communicated through all practices – nothing tolerated that shames or humiliates
- Fairness – addressing individual need (equity) NOT treating everyone in the same way (equality)
- Behaviour is a form of communication
- Compassionate approach to children and adults used in all situations
- Curiosity and empathy towards all behaviours - focus on what drives the behaviour rather than the behaviour itself
- Ensure language reflects values - distressed rather than naughty, attachment needing rather attention seeking
- Relationships are central, relationships support strong learning and are the vehicle for healing
- Feelings of safety promoted through predictable routines, well managed transitions and supportive strategies
- Recognition that some children live in environments that are emotionally distressing or difficult and that this can affect their mental health and well being
- All adults aware of the need for self-care, self-regulation and regularly check in with own emotional state

Trauma – What you need to know

The impact of trauma depends on the event and the person it 'happens' to. It can be a 'one' off event – an accident or a bereavement or loss. It can also be several or continuous events such as childhood sexual, physical, emotional abuse or neglect, or living with domestic violence or addiction.

Trauma affects everything; relationships, health and the way that the world is understood. The 'toxic stress' associated with trauma can have a detrimental impact on the developing brain reducing the body's ability to regulate. The extreme fear experienced during trauma causes activation of survival instinct.

When threat disappears child will still revert to survival mode when something is perceived as a threat or makes them feel afraid, stressed or anxious.

What you might see

Many behaviours in children and teenagers who have experienced trauma relate to the Fight flight or freeze (survival) response usually activated when they feel stressed or under threat. This is a neurochemical response and will involve physical symptoms racing heart, muscle tension etc

Fight - aggressive or confrontational behaviour - this can be physical or verbal, can also be shouting and being argumentative, it may involve damaging work, books or anything they lay hands on and hurting others

Flight - physically running away or avoiding things, people situations that cause stress, if unable to get out of the situation they may go into 'fight' mode

Freeze - disengaged though physically present, refusal to answer questions or follow instructions

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Our own stress drops dramatically when we shift from trying to enforce compliance to reducing the cause of challenging behaviours and teaching kids how to do this for themselves

Stuart Shanker

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What you can do

1. Spot the early signs that a child or young person is becoming 'deregulated' – feeling stressed or overwhelmed (different for each child but as staff you will get to know the signs)
2. Avoid public confrontations – this will increase stress and exacerbate situation
3. Have an adult available to help them regulate (isolation won't help)
4. Explain to child that their brain has become used to responding in a particular way but that they can learn new responses
5. As adults work at helping child identify things that help them calm
6. Explicitly teach about the stress response so child recognises it is happening
7. Look for stress triggers (busy lunch halls, difficult work, change in routine and many more)
8. Ensure adults know that they need to stay regulated as well (stressed adult can make child feel unsafe)
9. Identify places where student can calm
10. Support child in recognising when they need help



Here are some further practical strategies that will help children who have experienced trauma or have insecure attachments.

What adults can do

- Identify key/trusted adult attuned to child, relationship, emotional support, strong enough to deal with child's intense feelings, behaviours, reactions
- Establish a safe place to escape noise and chaos of school
- Develop a range of calming activities that can be used (repetitive rhythmic activities, movement, sensory play, calming music, being outdoors, (regulation before reflection)
- Teach the child the hand model of the brain, how to ask for help/support, how to talk about/label emotions, how to recognise signs of stress in body and how to use breathing
- Allow time to nurture relationships play games, get to know the child, and use humour!
- Help child develop positive self talk – I am safe, everything is ok, I know where my trusted adult is if I need them
- Aim for Collaboration and co creation of other ways of doing things (not compliance)

Emotion coaching

This was first introduced by John Gottman and his colleagues in the USA. Emotion coaching provides a value-added dimension to behaviour management strategies and creates opportunities for longer-term solutions to children's well-being and resilience. Adults work with children setting limits where appropriate and problem-solving with the child to develop more effective behavioural strategies.

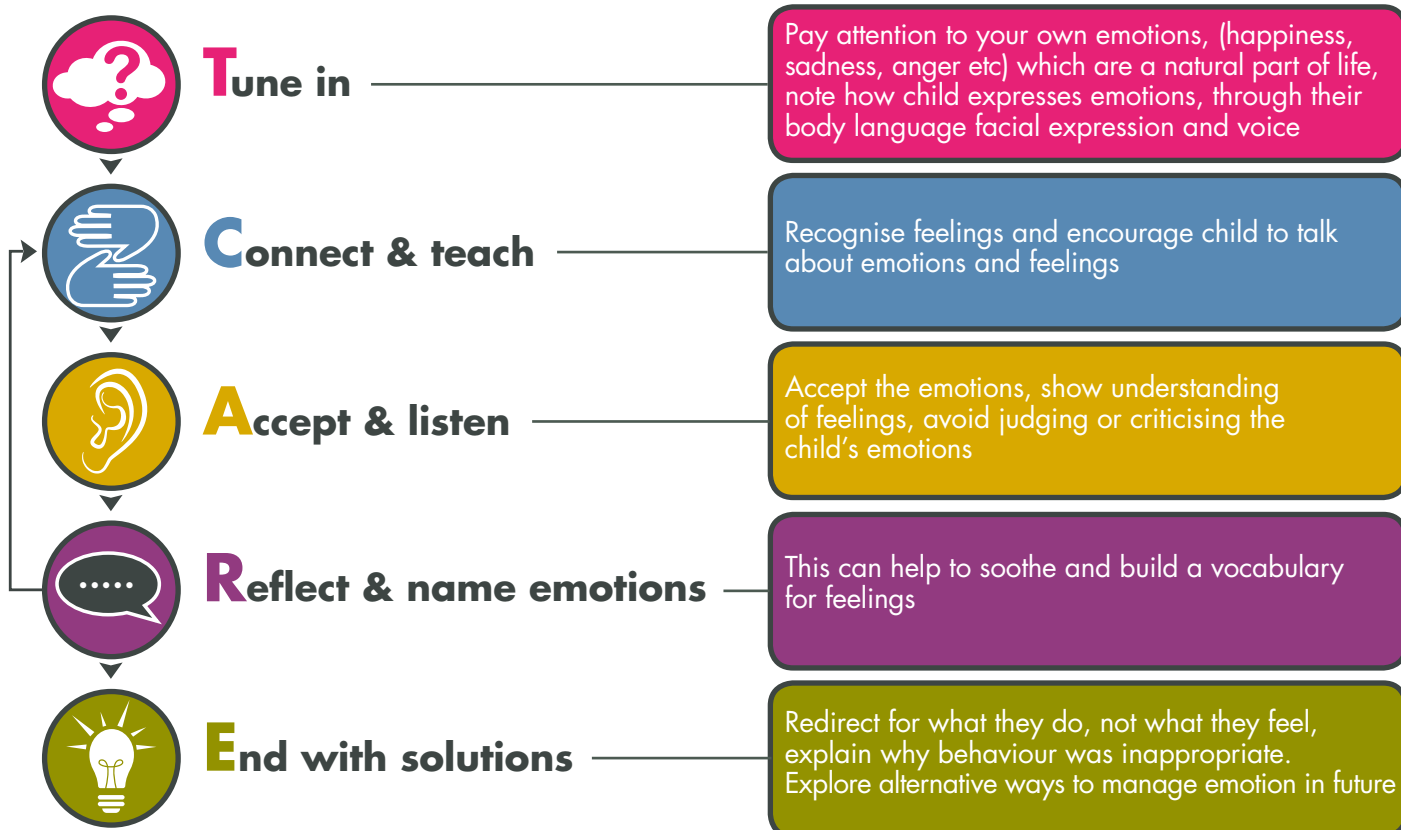
It validates emotions and helps children

- Become more aware of their emotions
- Manage their own feelings, particularly during instances of misbehaviour
- Instils tools that help them regulate their emotions and behaviour
- Manage peer relationships more effectively

It enables practitioners to

- Create an ethos of positive learning behaviour
- Have the confidence to de-escalate situations when behaviour is challenging
- Create opportunities for longer-term solutions to children's well-being and resilience
- Supports communication and relationships
- Improves behaviour
- Feel empowered and less stressed as they know how to deal with situations as they are more tuned into child

HOW DO YOU 'COACH'?



“**Relationships are the agent of change and the most powerful therapy is human love** Bruce Perry”

Relationships Relationships Relationships

- Relationships are central to well-being
- To build relationships with pupils and parents/carers, school staff need to prioritise their own emotional well-being and relationships
- Relationships create the space for co-regulation, the attuning and support provided to another person from an adult who is calm and is self-regulated
- Home-school communication is seen as being a two-way relationship with communication from school being positive rather than reactionary and punitive

This includes:



Staff-pupil



Pupil-pupil



Staff-staff



Staff-parent/carer



Child-parent/carer

AS ADULTS WE ALSO NEED TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES – WE CAN'T POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP!