

Trauma and attachment in the classroom

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Children who are adopted and fostered are likely to have experienced substantial, sustained trauma in their early lives before ending up in, what we would hope is a safe place, in a foster home or an adoptive family. This trauma will have adversely affected their ability to make secure attachments and consequently their ability to manage relationships in the world. Thus, school will usually be a place of fear for them because they are unable to use the safety of adults appropriately and will not be able to make strong peer relationships.

In the article I will explore the following:

- What is the trauma they may have suffered?
- How does this affect their attachment behaviours?
- What might these attachment behaviours look like in the classroom?
- What can be done to help a child to feel safe and to begin to engage in learning?

Although I will be exploring these topics with reference to looked after and adopted children, there may be other children in your classrooms who, due to circumstances, have also experienced early years trauma and may therefore have fragile or insecure attachments and who may also struggle to engage in learning.

Trauma

When I talk about early years' trauma I am not talking necessarily about discreet events, but also about chronic, persistent experiences that continue with no relief over a long period of time. In the table below I list the most recognised traumas which will adversely affect attachments:

Trauma which may affect attachment

Separation from parent

Poverty

***Neglect**

***Physical abuse**

***Sexual abuse**

***Emotional abuse**

Parental Alcohol/Drug abuse

Domestic Violence

An unstable or unsafe environment

Serious illness

Intrusive medical procedure

Premature birth

Postnatal depression

*Criteria used when deciding whether to remove children

Of the criteria used to assess whether or not a child should be removed from their family it is now known that the most harmful and the hardest to recover from is neglect. With physical, emotional and sexual abuses, however much pain is caused at least the child is important enough to elicit a response from others. However, with neglect, the child is invisible. Neglect means that no one interacts with them. They are usually left to cry for hours at a time, spending hours starving, in dirty nappies, too hot or too cold and isolated from the interaction of others. They are not picked up, cuddled, spoken to or played with. When they are fed, they are properly fed. No one meets their needs.

Attachment behaviours

So what is attachment and how do these traumas affect the ability of children to make healthy attachments? Even before a child is born their brain is being formed and their receptive memory is already on line. So if the mum is under stress the developing baby will also be under stress and if the mum is a victim of domestic violence, the child will also have experienced domestic violence. Similarly any drugs and alcohol that the mum takes will be passed to the baby. In addition to substance abuse, the mum is likely not to be eating regularly so the baby will have periods of starvation in utero. In such circumstances the baby is born already traumatised.

When babies are born they display attachment behaviours such as crying, to get their needs met. If there is an emotionally available adult to meet those needs the baby's brain will be hardwired to make secure attachment relationships. The baby knows that whenever they have a need, it will be met. As the baby grows they will be able to explore the world, knowing that if they have a need they can return to their primary caregiver who will manage their needs and enable them to return to exploring the world. If we think of a seesaw, with attachment needs at one end and exploration of the world as the other end, a securely attached child will be able to move smoothly between the two and will know that they are loveable and worthy of care, that others are dependable and that they can manage distress.

However, children who are already born traumatised and whose needs are not appropriately met by an emotionally available and attuned adult, will not be able to manage relationships or the world appropriately. Depending on their experience of adults they will develop an insecure ambivalent attachment, an insecure avoidant attachment or a disorganised attachment.

Insecure ambivalent attachment

This occurs when the primary caregiver is inconsistent in the way they respond when a baby expresses their needs. Such children will realise quickly that they can't trust the adult to respond to them so they increase their attachment behaviours in order to keep the adult close all the time. These children will be very clingy and not easily soothed. The caregiver is likely to find this behaviour overwhelming and may withdraw from the child and this confirms to the child that adults are inconsistent and unpredictable. These children will be unsure whether they are okay, they will be unsure whether people are interested in them and will need to keep adults close in order to feel okay. Their seesaw is not balanced. They will keep needing to get their attachment needs met and will be unable to explore the world appropriately. These children will be the ones in the classroom who are very needy and constantly needing to be noticed by the teacher. They will not be able to develop to working independently.

This occurs when the primary caregiver is not emotionally available and so does not respond when a baby expresses their needs. Such children quickly realise that no one will respond to their needs so they stop expressing their needs. They realise that to stay safe and survive they need to down play feelings, behave so as not to anger others and they learn to be very self-reliant. In other words they avoid relationship with others. They still have the same needs as any child but these needs are internalised and they never ask for help or support. Their seesaw is not balanced. They seem able to explore the world appropriately without the need for support from others. These children will be the ones in the classroom that either are praised for behaving so well or they are the children that slip under the radar because they do nothing to make themselves noticed. Their needs are hidden. They appear to work very well independently but often fail to achieve because any problem they encounter that might need some support from a teacher is never presented.

Disorganised attachment

This occurs when the primary caregiver is scary, either because they are violent and aggressive, or because they are scared and therefore unable to protect the baby from the violence of others. Such children are in turmoil. They need their caregiver to meet their needs and keep them safe but if they approach their caregiver, they put themselves into danger. So they have no idea what to do. They recognise that others are scary, unpredictable, unavailable, threatening and exploitative. They believe that the reason others are abusive or violent towards them is that they themselves are bad and unworthy of being cared for. They learn that in order to survive they must be in control and control the behaviours of others. So sometimes they present highly self-reliant rejecting behaviours that keep others at a distance and sometimes they present highly coercive behaviours that keep others close. They are not in relationship – rather they employ any strategy they can to stay in control. This makes them very unpredictable. Their seesaw is spinning. They cannot get their needs met because of their need to control and neither can they successfully explore the world because they experience it as a frightening place full of threat. In the classroom these are the children who will be labelled as disruptive, difficult and out of control. They are often hyperactive and may spend a significant amount of time excluded from the classroom.

What might these attachment behaviours look like in the classroom

In describing the attachment behaviours I have already touched on what these might look like. In summary the insecure ambivalent child is likely to present as very needy and highly anxious, the insecure avoidant child is likely to appear as independent, quiet, studious and invisible and the disorganised child is likely to appear as disruptive, threatening and controlling and out of control. These are, of course, generalisations but if there is a child in the classroom displaying any of these behaviours, then the teacher should be curious about what is driving these behaviours. Children's behaviour is their way of communicating feelings and beliefs to the world and as such should not be dismissed.

The other important thing to have in mind is 'Think Toddler'. What do I mean? Children's emotional maturity is developmental and builds on previous experiences. Children begin life by having needs. They need to be fed, noticed, clothed, have their nappies changed, made to feel special, helped to feel safe, kept warm and dry and communicated with. As these needs are met appropriately, as described above, the child develops a healthy sense of self and of others. They learn how to communicate, how to play, how to build relationships and how to use others to meet their needs when their primary caregiver is not available. This enables them to move from mums and toddlers groups to preschool, into nursery and finally into school. They will be able to start to make friendships and have playdates.

Children who have experienced attachment trauma in their early life will be stuck at the baby or toddler stage. They won't have the resilience of their peers to manage the complexities of relationships with others because no one has helped them to develop these skills. We wouldn't expect a two year old to manage for a full day in a year 1 or maybe a year 5 class but that is exactly what our traumatised children have to do. They need to be helped to manage as a 2 year old so that they can move on to be a successful 3 year old and then a 4 year old and so on. If they are developmentally 2 and being asked to manage as a 6 year old they will fail. It takes many years of filling in the gaps of their development for them to catch up. It is important to schools to recognise the child in their class not only has distorted attachment behaviours but also has a huge mismatch between their chronological age and their emotional age.

What can be done to help a child to feel safe and to begin to engage in learning

There are many ways in which children with attachment trauma can be supported in the classroom. The first thing to consider is to identify a key adult who can be their attachment figure in the classroom. Their role will be to liaise with the parents at the beginning and end of the day to ensure a smooth transition between home and school. They will also be the person that child can go to if they need help or support and may also be the 1:1 worker for that child in the classroom. Initially the key adult should spend time building a relationship with the child before any learning can take place. Ideally this key adult will have some insight into the early life experiences of the child so that they can understand the behaviour communications of the child and respond appropriately. It is also important that the key adult remains consistent and doesn't change. Children with attachment trauma need one safe adult in school initially with the hope that over time, as they catch up emotionally they may also be able to trust others.

Other things to consider might be:

Sensory breaks

A child who has experienced attachment trauma will probably not have had anyone to help them integrate the sensory elements of their body and the world around them. This may mean that to sit still for too long is painful for them and they may not be able to make sense of and manage the sensory stimuli in the classroom. When a child is overwhelmed by too much sensory information that they can't process they may become overwhelmed and no longer able to learn. Sensory breaks will enable them to regulate and re-engage with learning. A sensory break might be as simple as a few moments on the playground to run and jump. A child for whom sensory regulation is a problem would benefit from an assessment by an occupational therapist who specialises in sensory integration. They will be able to suggest an appropriate sensory diet to help the child regulate.

Location in the classroom

For most children who have experienced attachment trauma the world is a terrifying place. It is tempting for teachers to put the disruptive child near the front of the class near to their desk so they can keep an eye on them. For the child this makes things worse as they believe that all kinds of danger may be coming at them from behind and they are some distance from an escape route. If they are seated with their back to the wall, near to an exit they will feel safer and more able to engage with learning.

Visual timetable

Children with attachment trauma are less able to manage uncertainty than securely attached children. A visual timetable to show the structure of the day, together with advance warnings when the next activity is due to start will help them to manage transitions better

Behaviour management policies

Avoid behaviour management strategies which put children into shame. Using the 'naughty cloud' (or similar) where a child has their name displayed for all to see because of some misdemeanour or unacceptable behaviour reinforces the belief 'I am bad' and because they believe that they will end up on the naughty cloud they will get themselves put there on their terms. Much better to use a system of managing behaviour which uses natural consequences (such as helping a staff member to clean the graffiti they have drawn on the wall) and reparation (such as helping the teacher with a task if they have been rude to them).

Unstructured times

'Think Toddler'. Children with attachment trauma will not have learned the rules of sharing and collaborative play that their peers have learned. They will find break times, lunch times and unstructured times in the classroom terrifying. They may try to control, misunderstand the intentions of their friends or become socially isolated. They need to be provided with support and structure to help them use this time well, without shaming them into feeling that they are somehow being punished by not being allowed to join in.

Noticing the invisible child

These children appear to be managing and self-reliant but may well be internalising their needs and feelings and may in fact not be achieving. These are the children who are difficult to engage with but cause no concern in the classroom, but whose parents may report that they come home from school angry, unregulated and difficult to manage. This may be because they are so exhausted with managing in school that their feelings spill out that minute the school day ends. Don't dismiss the parents as over-anxious if this what they are reporting and don't expect the child to ask for help if they are struggling. Instead use the relationship they have with the key adult in school to build up the confidence of the child and help them to trust enough to be able to ask and know that the adults will respond appropriately.

Homework

The most important thing for a child with attachment trauma is to learn how to build relationships with adults and this starts with their adoptive or foster parents. If homework threatens to damage this relationship then agree a strategy with the parents around whether or not homework is done and don't punish a child who is still trying to learn how to manage relationships because their homework is not done.

Work as a team with the parents

The parents know their children and their children's early life history, so work as a team to provide the right level of support to help the child to feel safe and build relationships. It is also crucial that the adults in a child's life are consistent in the way they deal with challenges that the child might present and that they share information with each other.

These are just a few of the strategies that might help a child to manage school better and start to engage with learning so that they can reach their potential. In summary, understand the trauma a child has suffered and how that has impacted on their attachment behaviours, provide the child with a consistent key attachment figure in school, stand in the shoes of the child and try to see the classroom from their perspective and 'Think Toddler'.