

MONDAY 20TH APRIL 2020 SESSION 10
STAYING CONNECTED AND CURIOUS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

EARLY YEARS SPECIAL – BUT RELEVANT TO ALL!
Knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma

The developmental pathway of healthy secure attachment-Prenatal Attachment
Attachment in the womb: baby

Attachment does not begin at birth, but in the womb. In Session 5, we considered the mother's perspective during pregnancy. Today, we move now to the unborn infant and explore the pre-birth period. During pregnancy (and early childhood), the brain develops at an incredible rate. At sixteen days after conception, the neural plate forms and this is the foundation for the spinal cord and the brain. A week later, incredibly, the brain begins to function. Like a sponge, the baby's brain absorbs experiences and sensations. Interactions, relationships and the environment all influence the architecture of the developing brain, both positively and negatively. Foetal memory and learning have been widely explored and research has demonstrated that that foetuses learn through smells, tastes and sounds in the womb. It is helpful to think of the womb as the first introduction to the world, the first experience of relationship and connection to another person, the first classroom, the first learning experience (Treisman, 2017), the first playground, the first restaurant. Feelings of safety or unsafety begin in the womb, and for babies whose mothers are largely content, in good mental health and without unmanageable worries, the in-utero experience is characterised by feelings of safety because maternal mood crosses the placenta. A well-regulated mother passes on to the baby the chemicals that promote feelings of well-being, leading to well organised, and efficiently regulated brain structures in the baby. Thus, after birth the child may be easier to soothe and engage more easily in social connection behaviours with caregivers. This can make even inexperienced caregivers feel competent, and it facilitates maternal-infant interaction and those strong attachments which form the foundations for myriad social and emotional learning that will take place over the first year of life.

As the mother visualises her unborn baby, the baby is using his senses to build a concept of 'mother'. Even before birth; the unborn baby recognises mother's voice,

smell and the pattern of her heart beat, so both have an intimate knowledge of the other before they see and are seen.

Questions for reflection

FREEZE FRAME Read the 'snap shots' below.

Jess's father dies suddenly when she is in her third month of pregnancy. Jess is devastated and plunges into overwhelming grief...

Maryanne breaks up with her partner when she is seven months pregnant and she has ongoing money worries, frequently failing to pay the rent and under threat of eviction...

Maya is married to a man who is extremely violent and regularly beats her when he is drunk. She is afraid to break up with him because he has threatened to find her and kill her if she does...

Nadia feels unwell during her pregnancy but her boss is not sympathetic. She is worried that she will be 'let go' and be unable to support herself, her partner who is a student, and her baby...

Camilla is pregnant from her sixth IVF treatment. She has miscarried four babies at various stages of pregnancy...

1. What impact may the events described in the freeze frames have on the developing babies and their mothers?
2. Metaphors of the womb as first introduction to the world, the first classroom, the first playground are used above. Can you think of a metaphor to describe the wombs in these freeze frames?
3. Are you familiar with the prenatal histories of the children with whom you work?
4. What might prevent a mother telling you about difficulties during pregnancy?
5. What other obstacles may there be to you being well informed about the pre-birth experiences of the children with whom you work?
6. How do the metaphors of the womb as the first introduction to the world, the first experience of relationship and connection to another person, the first classroom, the first learning experience, the first playground, the first restaurant resonate for you? Can you think of any other metaphors that are useful in helping us to understand the impact of events and experiences in the womb?

7. Covid-19 relevance

Pregnant women are being advised to stay at home for 12 weeks whether they are currently working or not. They are also having limited access to antenatal care and appointments, which they must attend alone. Some hospitals require women to labour alone, and are not currently allowing birth partners, including fathers. Increasingly, mothers are planning unattended home births.

- How do you think these necessary restrictions will impact on the mental health of unborn babies during the current situation?
- Do you think the restrictions might disrupt attachment bonds for babies and their mothers, pregnant during this time?
- Consider again how you and others in your setting can support pregnant women throughout the pandemic?
- Consider again future actions: What protective factors can you put in place to support mothers and babies/toddlers whose attachment bond may have been disrupted through anxiety, loneliness, fear etc. during the pandemic?

Extension

This may be enough for you for today. If you want more, start or continue to develop a questionnaire to use when welcoming new families into the setting, where the mother has been pregnant during the Covid-19 pandemic. This may simply be an add-on to your current induction interview, or it may form a separate assessment tool. **While you may not want to develop this questionnaire at the moment, it is essential that it forms part of your Return to School Policy.** Is it possible to task a small working party with the development of the questionnaire? Example questions could include:

- Did mother receive consistent antenatal care?
- What support systems were available during pregnancy?
- Who were the most significant people in mother's personal support network during pregnancy?
- What were the stresses and anxieties during the pregnancy?
- Were there any significant losses, such as bereavement, loss of income or home, during pregnancy?

- What were the mother's dominant thoughts, feelings, reactions during the pregnancy?
- Was mother able to engage in healthy mental and physical self-care routines during pregnancy?
- Did the mother have a hospital or home birth? If a home birth, did she have professional support?
- How was the labour and delivery? Did mother have a birth partner or doula?

NB Prompt to recall Covid-19 pandemic if necessary, throughout.

Next Monday, we are going to have a creative activity based on the inter-utero world, so get your playdough, paint, collage materials ready!

Don't forget your self-care today, and be sure to walk in a green space.

Have a good day, keep safe and healthy and ring or email me to chat if that would help. **Jenny x**