

The Longest Journey: From Attachment-Aware to Attachment-Friendly

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There is a population of pupils in schools who seem unable to access learning and the social life within the school. They do not engage and achieve, nor develop with confidence and enthusiasm. These children and young people are often reactive, impulsive and frequently in a highly aroused state; they are vigilant for danger and possible vulnerability. Increasingly, educators are becoming aware that many such children and young people have issues relating to insecure attachment to primary carers, and often have complex trauma histories.

Insecure attachment

Attachment problems occur when children have been unable to connect consistently with a parent or primary caregiver and this can happen for many reasons. Not only Looked After and adopted children suffer from issues around attachment; indeed, there are many causal factors, and it is known that many educational practitioners have too narrow a view of the subject, considering only the extremes of neglect and abuse, and not recognising that they are likely to have attachment-fuelled issues within every class that they teach.

Any of the following conditions, particularly if they happen to a child under the age of 18 months, put a child at high risk of developing attachment difficulties: pre-birth trauma; sudden separation from a primary care giver (though divorce/separation, illness of child or carer, imprisonment, death); undiagnosed or painful illness; maternal depression or substance abuse; teenage mothers with poorly developed parenting skills; inconsistent or inadequate day care; abuse and/or neglect; and frequent moves or placements within the care system. There are many more children with significant attachment difficulties than are identified and diagnosed, and many of these have a misdiagnosis of autism or AD(H)D.

Signposting to success

Despite schools seemingly becoming more aware of attachment difficulties, many of them have yet to embark on the journey from being attachment-aware to attachment-friendly. This momentous journey requires nothing less than a paradigm shift in our thinking and practice, challenging us to re-evaluate our previously held assumptions and perceptions of the way things are and should be in our schools. This article aims to signpost specific changes that will benefit the pupil who is insecurely attached, but the reader should be aware that the journey is not for the faint-hearted as it demands long-term commitment to an approach which places secure, attuned relationships, nurture and kindness at the centre of the child's school life, and initially, places these above academic achievement and age-appropriate behaviour.

There are three major areas in which schools can change existing approaches towards what will work for children who are living with the effects of developmental trauma: honouring and facilitating the development of a safe, consistent, relationship with a key adult; abandoning the 'age-appropriate' mantra, that does not take individual, emotional development into account; and developing positive approaches to behaviour shaping, that do not include shame, humiliation or harsh outcomes.

The Key Adult Relationship

Attachment-friendly schools recognise that the key adult is a necessity rather than an optional extra for children who have experienced developmental trauma. Consider an infant in a 'good-enough' (Winnecot (1973)) household: a primary carer delivers most of the care to the infant in a consistent, loving manner; whilst secondary carers (usually family and friends) provide support to the primary caregiver to enable the development of that most significant relationship. In short, they honour the relationship and try to free up the primary caregiver to spend as much time as possible with the baby. Thus, the baby experiences consistency of care and learns that he/she will not be left to endure distress.

Many children arrive in our schools not having had the benefit of learning that adults are kind and trustworthy; in fact, their experiences have led them to believe the opposite: the world is a hostile place and they can trust no one to meet their needs or treat them with dignity and respect. The key adult has the opportunity to change the child's misconception, but he or she must be given the time, the support and the space to build a relationship, and that relationship takes a minimum of two to three years to develop and become strong.

So then, schools need to move away from two fundamental obstacles to the development of a key adult-child relationship. The first obstacle is the fear of 'over-dependence' on the key adult, which often results in the key adult being moved to a different class at the end of the school year. The child, who by then is learning to feel safe and protected, experiences separation anxiety and loss, often manifested in jealous, aggressive behaviour, thus exacerbating earlier trauma. Therefore, not only is it appropriate, but necessary for the key adult to move through year groups with the child. The child will not become 'over-dependent', but in fact needs to learn to depend on an adult, as he or she, up until this point, has been accustomed to being in control and looking out for themselves. The key adult takes the child back to an earlier stage of development and actually facilitates the dependency before the child can move forward to become healthily interdependent, rather than controlling and oppositional. This is not an easy journey and it does not always fit comfortably with our schools, which all too often assume that all pupils have experienced good-enough care and are ready to embark on the exciting new learning and relationship journey that school provides. Unfortunately, pupils who are dealing with the effects of developmental trauma simply cannot benefit from the delights and challenges of the school curriculum and multiple interactions with peers and adults; developmentally, they are still infants and need the nurture and intimacy that babies normally find in their birth family. The key adult provides the bridge to healthy interdependence and attachment-friendly practice puts this relationship at the centre of the child's school life.

Secondly, attachment-friendly schools recognise that practitioners who work with the most challenging pupils can face burn-out and secondary trauma themselves when faced with the responsibilities of being a key adult. Schools often deal with this issue by moving the key adult to a different class or pupil, and this too, has a profoundly distressing effect on the child, as outlined above. If a primary carer were exhausted by the demands of a baby or young toddler, no one would suggest that the caregiver discontinued care. Rather, the caregiver is given practical and emotional support and short breaks while another person briefly takes over the responsibilities. Every key adult should receive robust structural

support in the shape of supervision, shared responsibility within the team around the child for problem solving, and contact with other key adults in the form of a mutual support group. Supervision may be formal/clinical from a therapist or counsellor, or informal from a trusted co-worker, who has the requisite listening and empathy skills. The key worker should also have one lesson or hour during the course of the school day working with typically developing children, and away from their designated child in order to have some respite from the demands of working with a challenging child. Gradually, as the child becomes more confident and secure, he or she will begin to ask for another pupil to join in, or even to play or work with another adult, just as toddlers begin to desire contact from peers or adults who are doing things that look interesting or exciting. It is critically important to follow the child's lead rather than try to force progress. Movement through the developmental pathway can only be facilitated, not forced. (See Bomber (2011) for a detailed approach to the role of key adults).

Abandoning the 'age-appropriate' mantra

The earlier a child has experienced trauma, the more emotionally immature he or she will be. Children who have been neglected in any developmental area have a lot of gaps to fill and often try to seek out experiences to fill those gaps, for example by wanting to be spoon-fed, by seeking extended bodily contact or by crying for insignificant reasons. When they instinctively try to get their needs met, educators frequently refer to them as 'childish' or 'silly' and demand that they 'act their age'. This exacerbates the problem and perpetuates the neglect or abuse, because once again, the child's communications of need are not being honoured, respected nor given dignity. For these children, chronological age is not at all relevant as they are trapped in a previous developmental stage. Attachment-friendly schools resist pressure from colleagues, parents, social workers *et al.* to insist that the child be more age-appropriate and recognise that this might involve skills which the child has not yet acquired. Once the gap has been filled, the child will move on to more mature behaviours, and I have been witness to this many times in my own school practice. Start with attunement, empathy and playfulness and prioritise these over academic skills and age-appropriate social behaviour.

Nurturing approaches to behaviour shaping

Children who have experienced developmental trauma are likely to be constantly dealing with issues around terror, fear, loss, power, rage, control, rejection, abandonment, helplessness, pleasing others and identity, to name but a few. This often leads to undesirable behaviours, which adults frequently misinterpret and judge harshly, rather than reflecting on the child's past history and present experience, attempting to see the world through his eyes, and therefore understanding what the child is trying, however idiosyncratically, to communicate.

The nurturing approach to behaviour turns away from traditional reward and punishment methods, and instead, builds upon the sort of strategies used by parents of very young children to build secure and trusting connections. Attachment-friendly schools understand that any behaviour management strategies must be placed upon the secure foundation of trust, and therefore, the context for change is within the relationship between the key adult

and the child. Attachment-friendliness recognises that pupils who have experienced relational trauma are impulsive, reactive and often unable to control their basic survival instincts to fight, flee, freeze or flop. Those impulses are not carefully considered strategies; they are actions that have served the child well in the often hostile and frightening environments they have inhabited, therefore, the threat of a lost privilege or harsh consequence, or even a reward, will not motivate this child; harsh consequences do not build trust.

The PACE approach, developed by Dr Dan Hughes (2009), has proved invaluable for many educators, who are implementing the key principles of Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy. PACE delivers boundaries and limits in a language that the child can understand, enabling the child to grow and flourish. It is vitally important that the adult maintains boundaries and limits, but when the educator recognises that emotionally, the child is functioning as a two-year-old even though her chronological age is ten, it is clear that the limits must be held with kindness, distraction and laughter, just as a parent would with a toddler. The 'naughty-step' approach, indeed, any rejecting and shaming approach, harms the damaged child even further; what he or she needs is 'time in', not 'time out', being held close, being accepted and being helped to learn new ways of relating and being.

Attachment-friendly schools embrace inclusion at its best, successfully removing barriers to learning and participation in the life of the school.

References

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