

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

Attachment and parental sensitivity – their role in supporting good child development and lifelong positive outcomes

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Context

Leading research from Harvard University in the US has shown how effective early childhood policies and practices can help to ensure children have a solid foundation for a productive future. Their multiple study evaluation of 40 years of research has confirmed how early childhood is a period when the developing brain is most open to the influence of relationships and experiences and how disadvantages in young children's lives can limit their future economic potential and social mobility.¹ In relation to the provision of effective services for improving outcomes, they draw particular attention to the significance of attachment relationships and parental sensitivity for ensuring lifelong positive outcomes.² Effective interventions and parental behaviours can help to both prevent, inhibit and redress the impact of negative experiences such as economic hardship, maltreatment and/or post-natal depression, and generate more positive trajectories. They have also identified how a multi-strategy approach and a continuum of cost-effective services is necessary to meet the diversity and complexity of needs in vulnerable families.³

Similar conclusions are being drawn in work being undertaken in England. The long-term significance of

warm and responsive caregiving in the early years is highlighted, for example, in the recent Sutton Trust report⁴ which identified the role played in attachment relationships and parental sensitivity in contributing to up to half of the gap in attainment between the least and most advantaged children. A new review by the Early Intervention Foundation also identified attachment and parental sensitivity as a core component for addressing the economic and social cost of persistent societal problems and negative intergenerational transmission.⁵ From different standpoints, the Allen⁶, Field⁷, Munro⁸ and Marmot⁹ reports each made a scientific and economic case for early intervention in order to increase children's life chances. Other reviews have also identified how the quality of parenting affects children's long-term physical, emotional, social and educational outcomes.¹⁰

These reports and research reviews all claim, in different ways, that in order to help generate greater equalities and increase social mobility, a key driver in policy and practice should be interventions and approaches that focus on empowering parents and professionals to generate positive attachment relationships and sensitive attunement to children's needs.

What is attachment and why is parental sensitivity important?

Emotional and psychological good health requires secure attachments with children's main significant adult or adults, alongside experience of environments that provide consistent and warm relationships.¹¹ Having a secure attachment with a significant other or others supports important mental processes necessary for health and development such as emotion regulation, engaging in social relationships, understanding of self and moral reasoning.^{1,2,13} The early years of life are highly influential in terms of attachment and the patterns that are laid down in the early years can have a lifelong impact on individuals, families and society.¹⁴ Children are born with an inbuilt system for attachment that influences and organises affective and cognitive processes. This system motivates them to seek proximity to their parents and other primary caregivers and becomes internalised as their working model of attachment. This internal working model of attachment (IWM) is a mental model or schema which ultimately serves as a lifelong model for all relationships.¹⁵

The internal working model of attachment may be secure or insecure depending on the child's experiences and is based on the parental and/or caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's signals. This communication is known as 'attunement' and is a two-way process whereby the caregiver sufficiently recognises the emotional and physiological states experienced by the child and reflects them back with relative consistency.¹⁶ It entails an interactive 'dialogue' between caregiver and child of sensory signals which can sometimes last only milliseconds. This 'dialogue' oscillates between normal states of attention and inattention, engagement and disengagement, taking on a rhythmic structure which eventually become patterns of behaviour during which most young children's essential needs are met with sufficient reliability.¹⁷

If the parental and/or caregiver's responses are adequately in tune with the child's, then the child will feel secure and be able to develop in a healthy way. If there is insufficient attunement or too much inconsistency between adult and child, then the child will not have a sense of security and development will be compromised. Thus, secure attachments develop from nurturing relationships and support mental processes that enable a child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others and have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning. Insecure attachments can develop if early interactions are more negative, insensitive, unresponsive, inappropriate and/or unpredictable and can have long-term deleterious consequences. If a child cannot rely on an adult to respond to their needs in times of stress, they are unable to learn how to self-soothe, manage their emotions or engage in reciprocal relationships

later on.¹⁸ They do not necessarily develop a view of themselves and others as trustworthy, safe, dependable and deserving of care. A secure attachment is necessary for healthy social, emotional, physical and emotional development and success in school and life.^{19,20,21}

Parental sensitivity has been shown to be a key factor in maximising children's developmental potential and more positive outcomes.²² Shore, for example, has shown how the early attachment communications that occur between infant and caregiver help to wire the maturing brain in areas essential for self-regulation.²³ Various factors might account for lack of parental sensitivity and the inability to attune appropriately, which include parental mental health issues, experiencing domestic violence, poor parenting experiences and ability, and having their own insecure attachment as a child.²⁴ Therefore, the parental/caregiver role and relationship with a child is critical in the development of a secure attachment with the potential for intergenerational effects to compromise or promote this. In addition, poor attachment can be moderated by the experience of positive relationships and family context.²⁵ Insecure attachments are amenable to change either through subsequently experiencing positive and attuned relationships with caregivers and/or through intervention.²⁶



Examples of interventions

Research reviews show clearly that caregiver-child interactions in the early years are arguably the most important factor in affecting positive outcomes.^{27,28} One of the key ways in which optimal caregiving relationships can be promoted, and insecure attachments prevented, is through the use of a parental style known as emotion coaching. Attachment research has shown how 'emotion-focused talk' by the adult can teach children to use appropriate strategies to cope with stress, literally helping to build the architecture of their brains.²⁹ Emotion Coaching helps children and young people to become more aware of their emotions and to manage these feelings more effectively. It entails recognising and validating children's emotional experiences, setting limits where appropriate and age-appropriate problem-solving with the child to develop more effective behavioural strategies. Emotion Coaching views all behaviour as a form of communication. It is essentially an empathic and dialogic process which enables children to feel appreciated, to explore their feelings and relationships, to reflect with others and to regulate their core emotions, such as anger or anxiety, rather than projecting them through challenging behaviour.³⁰

Randomised Control Trials around the world have demonstrated that Emotion Coaching enables children to have fewer behavioural problems, achieve more academically in school, be more emotionally stable and resilient, be more popular and have fewer infectious illnesses.³¹ Emotion Coaching has been used to support children with conduct behavioural difficulties³², depression³³ and those exposed to violent environments, including inter-parental violence, maltreatment and community violence.^{34,35} Emotion Coaching instils the tools that will aid children's ability to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour.^{3,6} In England, some pilot research^{37,38} suggests that emotion coaching can be utilised just as successfully by any multi-agency professional working with children and young people.

Emotion Coaching also engages with the adult's beliefs, attitudes, awareness, expression and regulation of emotion, as well as their reactions to children's expressions of emotions. Research identifies the importance of adults' capacity to self-regulate which, in turn, increases our ability to manage life, work and parenting effectively.³⁹ Self-regulation helps to guard against reactive or impulsive behaviour and to adopt more pro-social, proactive behaviours and implement longer term goals despite adversity. Emotion coaching can play a part in supporting the development of self-regulation and helps to build adults' interactional skills and responsiveness to children's social and emotional needs, helping to create the security children need in order to flourish.

In a recent study, Emotion Coaching was effectively utilised in professional and parental practice as part of a wider, national project called Attachment Aware Schools.⁴⁰ This Project addresses key government policy which seeks to raise the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, improve provision for children with SEN and promote positive mental health and wellbeing.⁴¹ The Project provided a coherent and integrated theoretical framework, discourse and practice, along with practical, effective tools and approaches, underpinned by a programme of training and online training support to meet a spectrum of need. In addition to training in Emotion Coaching, the project offered support for the development of other attachment-based and trauma-informed strategies, such as the creation of 'safe spaces' in schools, the incorporation of a 'key adult' system and the adoption of nurture groups. 'Safe spaces' entailed establishing a room or area in the school to which children or young people could retreat to sooth and calm themselves when dysregulated. The key adult system involved identifying school staff who could develop 'attachment-like' relationships that more vulnerable children could trust and rely upon in times of need during the school day. Nurture groups are classrooms in mainstream schools where small groups of children with a range of emotional and attachment difficulties are offered specialist support.⁴²

Although the evidence base for attachment research in school contexts is limited, early pilot studies are yielding some promising results. Attachment Aware Schools and attachment-based/trauma-informed strategies can significantly improve academic attainment for pupils not meeting expected levels, thereby helping to reduce the attainment gap. Results also show that being an Attachment Aware School can not only reduce exclusions and improve behaviour, but can also have a positive impact on professional practice with increased adult self-regulation and reductions in stress levels, thereby enhancing well-being within the school. Enriched relationships were recorded with an increased adult sensitivity and understanding of pupils' needs and the underlying causes of their behaviours, which enabled pupils and staff to work together more effectively. Case studies also showed how interagency collaboration and home-school relationships were enhanced with greater parental engagement and joined up working.⁴³ It has been suggested that 'schools may be the optimum sites for buffering the impact of stress, building resilience and enhancing individual capacities for learning.'⁴⁴ This evidence supports the claim that an attachment-informed approach for all professionals working with children, including those within the universal services, offers the best prospect for effective early intervention for children, whatever their age or family situation.⁴⁵ The National Institute of Clinical

Excellence has recently reiterated how attachment is an important influence on school students' academic success and wellbeing at school.⁴⁶

A higher level of intervention that seeks to redress the effects of poor attachment and insensitive parenting, is play therapy. This well-established intervention has a long history and encompasses many theoretical orientations beginning with the psychoanalytic focus of Klein and Freud to the humanistic and child-centred focus of play therapy today.⁴⁷ Play Therapy is a relationship-focused approach which utilises play as a form of communication between adult and child and meta-analyses of studies indicate positive outcomes for traumatised children.⁴⁸ Although play therapy is not

currently recommended for children with attachment difficulties, group therapeutic play for primary school aged children is. This type of intervention is based on the principles and practice of play therapy. Other play therapy-based interventions that are considered to be promising include Theraplay⁴⁹ and Filial Therapy.⁵⁰ These interventions have recently been reviewed in relation to support for adopted children.⁵¹ Theraplay is an attachment-focussed play intervention that helps children feel safe and secure, to better regulate their emotions and to build parent-child relationships through sensory and physical activities. Filial Therapy is an integrative family play therapy, designed to treat a range of family problems, including issues related to attachment and trauma.

Ways forward – a pyramid of support

A key component of the intervention illustrations outlined here, is not only their relative cost-effectiveness, but also the way they address key criteria for 'what works' in transforming society. For example, the Attachment Aware School's project's actions correlates with many of the key messages within the recent report 'Narrowing the Gap' from the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services.⁵² To ensure the health and wellbeing of children, research indicates a multi-systemic 3 tiered approach is needed to facilitate real change⁵³ – at the first level is broad-based services and approaches that operate as a preventative tool, such as multi-agency adoption of Emotion Coaching. At the second level are more targeted interventions which aim to inhibit the impact of negative experiences, such as nurture groups or key adults within an Attachment Aware School. At the top and final level are more specialist interventions which focus on redressing the harm caused by toxic stressful experiences in the early years, such as play therapy or theraplay. Two recent government initiatives that have attempted to operate preventative and inhibitive programmes are the targeted Parenting Early

Intervention Programme⁵⁴ and the more universal CANParent Trial.⁵⁵ But these partial policies did not systematically address all three tiers in the pyramid of support and impact was therefore intermittent. Local and national government can help to close the attainment gap, increase social mobility and reduce intergenerational cycles of abuse by implementing a comprehensive and sustainable pyramid of support which rests on building nurturing, attachment relationships across all aspects of children's lives and enhancing parental sensitivity in order to appropriately meet young children's needs, thereby creating stable and secure environments in which children can thrive.



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