

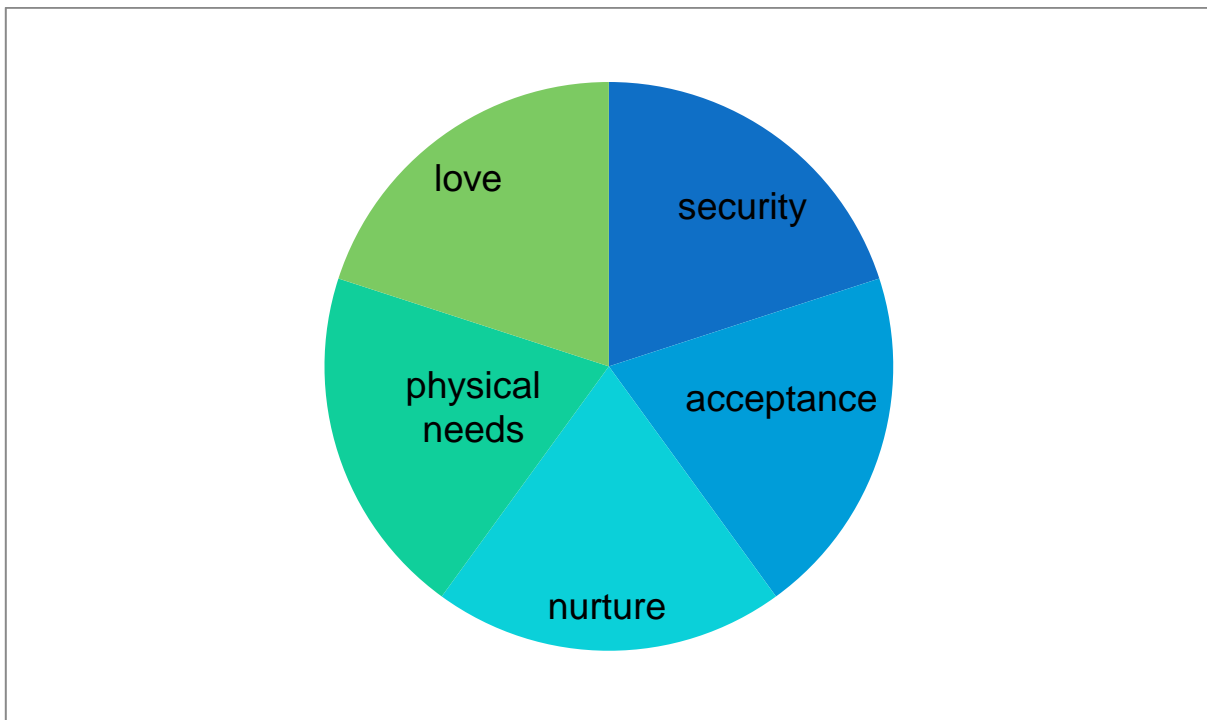


How attachment impacts on children's learning and behaviour

Section One – What is attachment?

Some behaviours we see in school can be strange and confusing, the explosive outbursts that often seem to come from nowhere, the child who craves any form of attention, even negative attention. We are going to be thinking more deeply about these children, exploring the behaviours and trying to understand why they happen and what they mean, and what we can do to help them.

What do children need?



- To feel safe and secure physically and emotionally
- To experience positive relationships and secure attachments
- To have a structured environment with firm boundaries, consistent approaches and nurturing empathic relationships and responses

Understanding attachment

- Attachment can be defined as the relationship between a baby and their primary care giver, usually the mother
- It is assumed that our first attachment relationship provides a 'safe base' from which we can explore and develop safely

- Our different attachment patterns result in us behaving differently

Why is attachment important?

- Babies are unable to soothe their own stress and rely entirely on a caregiver to provide this
- Secure attachments enable the child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight and empathy for others
- A child's initial dependence on others for protection provides the experiences and skills to help a child cope with frustrations, develop self-confidence and positive relationships

There are four attachment styles:

Secure attachment

- Caregiver is sensitive, consistent and responsive to the child's needs e.g. responds appropriately to their cries
 - Child learns that their needs are recognised and they are worth thinking about and caring for, resulting in high self esteem
 - Child internalises a 'safe base' from which to explore the world and develop future healthy relationships

Avoidant attachment (insecure attachment)

- Caregiver is usually unavailable physically or emotionally and can be insensitive and rejecting of the child's needs e.g. Pushing child away when they cry
 - Child learns that if you seek attachment or comfort from someone you will be rejected and that their needs are not worthwhile
 - Child develops patterns of avoidant behaviour as they expect rejection e.g. 'I'll reject before you reject me'

Avoidant Attachment Profile:

- Behaviour is led by self-reliance
- Their aim is not to be noticed
- Quiet and withdrawn, fear of failure
- Don't trust others to meet their needs and therefore reluctant to ask for help
- Self-reliant and independent, especially for their age
- Distress is hidden or denied and can appear settled most of the time
- Fear intimacy and emotional connection with people
- Resist help from adults but lacks confidence in their own ability
- May appear indifferent to new situations
- Child thinks - "I am lonely, anxious and scared, the world is cold and frightening, people are distant and uninterested in me"

Ambivalent attachment (insecure attachment)

- Caregiver is highly inconsistent and unpredictable in response to the child's needs e.g. may comfort or reject child when they cry, dependent on their own emotional needs which are always more important than the child's
 - Child learns to be watchful, clingy or untrusting as responses are so unpredictable
 - Child develops a need to control others as a way of managing their high state of anxiety

Ambivalent Attachment Profile:

- Behaviour is led by separation anxiety
- Their aim is to be noticed
- Preoccupied with relationships and alert to the availability of others
- Highly dependent and attention seeking
- Overly focused on relationships with the adults rather than learning
- May talk excessively or be the class clown to keep the adults attention
- Finds it hard to follow rules, take responsibility for their behaviour and learn from consequences
- Easily distracted and find it hard to concentrate on tasks
- Child thinks - "I am anxious, scared and confused, the world is frightening and unpredictable, people are hot and cold"

Disorganised attachment (insecure attachment)

- Caregiver is often overwhelmed by their own needs or difficulties and can be frightened (due to their own trauma) or frightening, may be unpredictable, confusing, erratic
 - Child learns to not to trust in others and shows behavioural disorganisation e.g. wandering, contradictory and confused responses
 - Child develops a continuous heightened state of anxiety and has sudden and unpredictable reactions to events

Disorganised Attachment Profile:

- May be either quiet and withdrawn or loud and aggressive
- Controlling and immature in peer relationships
- Anxiety may be expressed as controlling, challenging and knowing everything
- Often afraid, don't know how to make themselves feel safe
- May provoke, bully or challenge others to feel in control
- Can be anxious, inattentive and disruptive
- Has low stress tolerance and may have obsessive behaviours
- Sensitive to criticism and can easily feel overwhelmed
- Child thinks -"I am scared, anxious and worried, the world is frightening and unpredictable, people are frightening and frightened"

A child will have one attachment style, however if a child has overlaps with more than one in terms of their behaviour, use the profile as a checklist to identify their attachment style

Activity

Think of a child you know:

- What do you know about this child's background, parenting, significant life events?
- List the behaviours they show
- Describe their relationships with staff and other children
- Identify how you think this child feels about themselves
- Identify their attachment style

Watch video: Introduction to Attachment (15 mins)

Section Two – The impact of attachment

Impact of attachment on a child's brain

- Exposure to normal fears e.g. dark, strangers, is temporary and the child feels scared, is soothed, feels safe again
- Exposure to real fear e.g. neglect, violence and other causes of ongoing fear, child feels scared, isn't soothed and on constant high alert for danger
- If young children experience real fear triggering events, they learn to associate that fear with the situation and conditions e.g. adult shouts, loud noise, cross face etc.
- Early exposure to fear affects developing brain, especially parts involved in emotions and learning

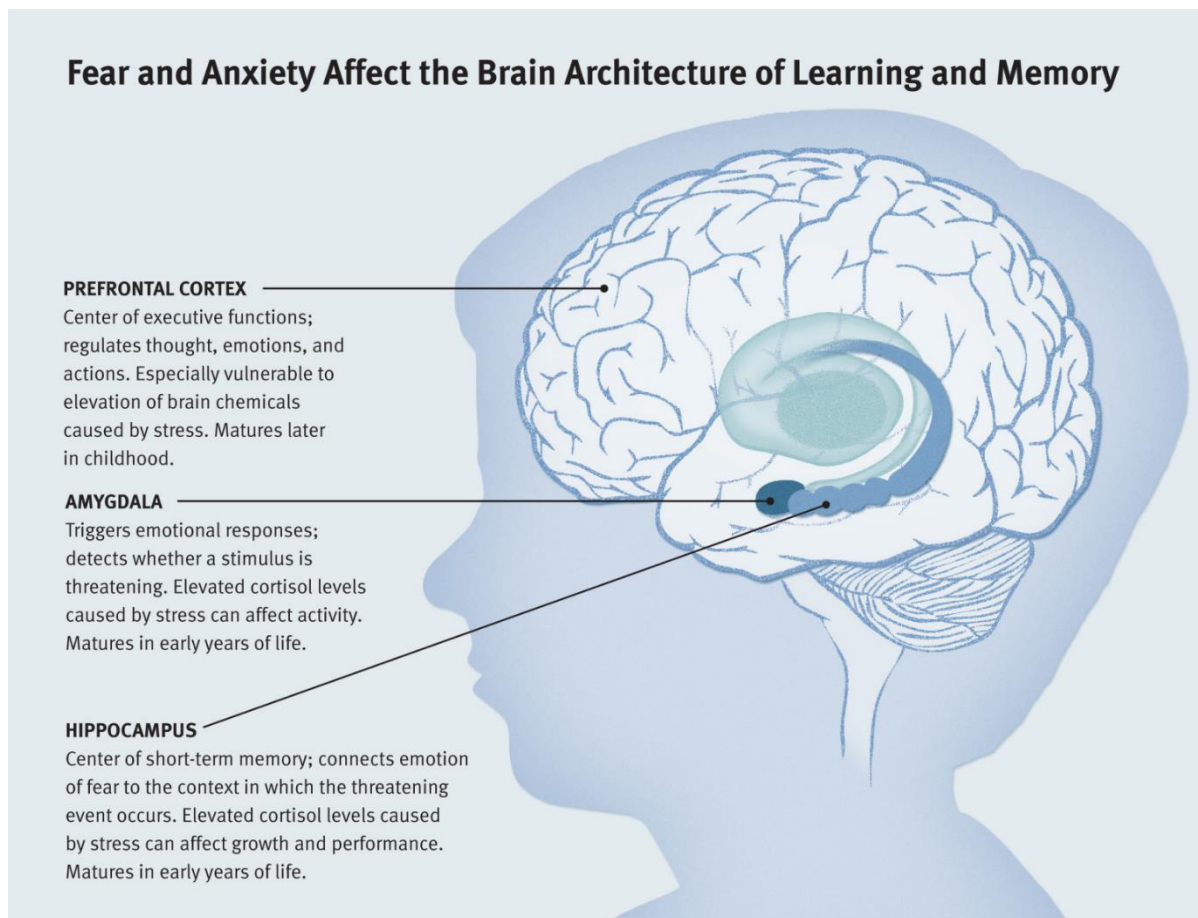


Illustration by Betsy Hayes, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

Executive functioning skills

- Necessary to complete most tasks
- Includes planning, organising, memory, processing, changing activity, self- regulation
- A child with insecure attachment may have difficulties with:
 - **Inhibition** - e.g. running off when challenged

- **Change** - e.g. resistant to stopping activity
- **Emotional control** - e.g. extreme reactions to situations
- **Initiation** - e.g. beginning a task, giving ideas
- **Remembering** - e.g. what they have just been told
- **Organising and planning** - e.g. losing things
- **Self-monitoring** - e.g. unable to think about their behaviour and its impact

Scenario – How attachment impacts on how a child thinks and feels

It's Monday morning in January and the year five class teacher is absent because she is unwell. The class will be covered by a supply teacher who has been in the class once before, along with a teaching assistant who is always in the class.

Child with secure attachment:

Child thinks: "Poor Mrs.Jones, I hope she is ok, but we get to have Miss.Bell and she's nice, I wonder if she'll take us outside to play basketball again"

Child feels: "I am happy and safe and adults can be trusted and are reliable"

Child with avoidant attachment:

Child thinks: "I wonder when we will do our reading today, I need to get that book finished then I can start the next one, I wonder who that person is, I need to stay over here away from them. Where's my maths book, I can't see it, I need to find it on my own, I can't ask for help"

Child feels: "I must be strong and manage things on my own, adults are not there for you and they can't be trusted"

Child with ambivalent attachment:

Child thinks: "I think Mrs. Jones is poorly because she got cross with me yesterday and that made her throat sore, it's all my fault because I didn't do my work, maybe she won't ever come back to school, I will be nice to Miss. Bell then she won't leave, I will go and sit next to her now then she will smile"

Child feels: "I need to be close to adults because I feel scared, adults change their mind a lot and they can't be trusted"

Child with disorganised attachment:

Child thinks: "I need to watch Miss. Bell all the time, she looks scared and I don't like it, I feel sick now, where is Mrs. Jones, will she come back "

Child feels: "I feel scared and confused, adults are frightening and they can't be trusted"

Activity

Think of the child you identified in the last section and describe how they would respond to the following situations:

- Managing conflict with another child
- Getting something wrong
- Having to wait their turn
- Listen to others
- Completing a task
- Playtime

Attachment experiences and shame

- Shame is the fear we are not good enough
- If discipline is harsh, punitive or inconsistent and parent doesn't attempt to repair the relationship, the child experiences overwhelming and unmanageable shame
- This becomes tied up with the child's sense of identity and they feel "I am a bad person" rather than "I have done something bad"
- Instead of developing guilt, a healthy emotion that helps us to make amends, the child gets stuck in shame

When a child feels shame they may:

- Lie – "I didn't do it"
- Blame – "It's his fault"
- Rage – "You always blame me, I'm rubbish"

Watch video: The still face experiment (3 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>

Section Three – How can you help?

Relationships are key

People have let these children down, hurt them, not protected them and not met their needs, school staff need to establish an attachment like relationship with their pupils

- Playfulness - opportunities to experience joy and laughter
- Acceptance - child's thoughts and feelings, meet the child where they are
- Curiosity - ask questions, try not to judge them, invest time getting to know them "I wonder why you did that?"
- Empathy – try to see things from the child's point of view, really understanding them creates a strong connection

Don't use relationships as a punishment or a reward

Relationships heal

- School staff can provide important attachments for children and help them heal from the negative effects of insecure attachment
- Children who have insecure attachment have a distorted relational template
- Positive, consistent, nurturing relationships reduce fear and anxiety and enable children to feel safe
- Adults and children have different ways of communicating their feelings
- Feelings can be overwhelming and frightening
- Accept, acknowledge and validate children's feelings rather than dismissing or discounting them e.g. "I've got no friends, everyone hates me" instead of "that's not true, James likes you" say "That must feel so hard to feel like that"

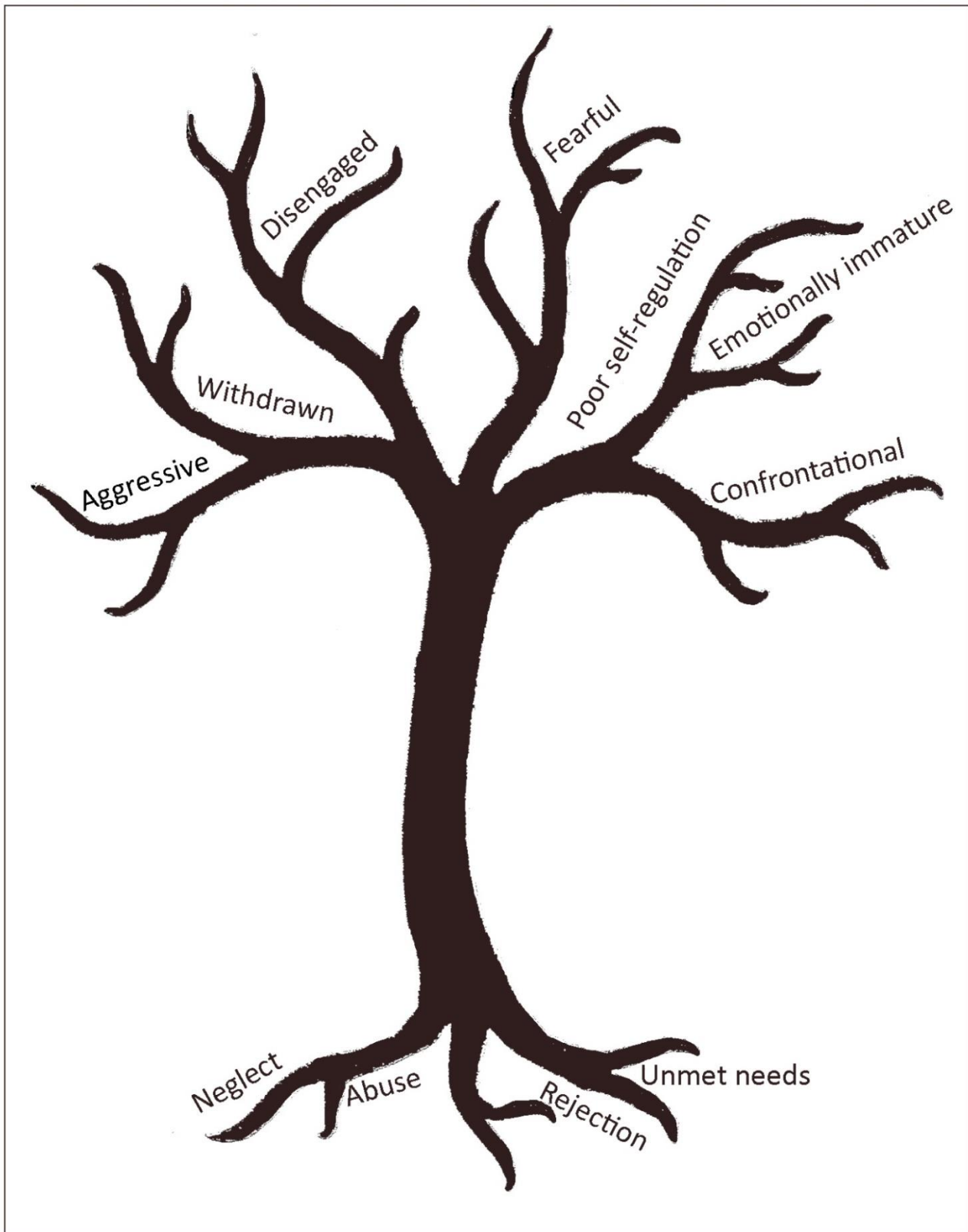
Strategies

- Be curious, what is this behaviour really about? What's the underlying feeling e.g. fear is often behind anger
- Be consistent and committed to maintaining the relationship
- Create structure to help children feel safe, unstructured time creates stress, fear and anxiety
- Provide constant explanations and commentary of what's happening and why
- Use clear and consistent boundaries and similar approaches from all staff, e.g. calm voice
- Try to be reflective rather than just reactive to behaviour "I wonder why he's doing that, I wonder how he's feeling"
- Create additional support for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (as we do for physical and learning difficulties)
- Provide **time in** rather than **time out**, **time out** removes the relationship and can retrigger stress and anxiety and create behavioural responses to cope with this

- **Time out** can affirm the child's belief that he is wrong and bad
- **Time in** is identifying when child needs more relational support and providing it e.g. becoming agitated or frustrated
- **Time in** means bringing the child towards you rather than moving them away
- Provide soothing activities such as sorting, colouring, tidying up
- Provide a calm box (see video)
- Use wondering aloud about what you think may be happening for them e.g. "I wonder if you are feeling anxious about the supply teacher and that's why you are refusing to sit on your chair"
- Model and support them with appropriate interactions and responses e.g. "It must have really hurt when Sasha called you stupid, I wonder if it would help if we went for a walk around school for a few minutes"
- Teach skills that may seem obvious e.g. "I'm going to help you practice asking for help, that can be a really difficult thing to do"
- Provide visual reminders of behaviours and activities e.g. sitting on the carpet, getting changed for PE, lunchtime
- Use timers and hands on the clock, along with verbal countdowns to help manage changes
- Allow the child some control by offering them choices
- Try and remember details about the child, likes, dislikes etc. to show you have kept them in mind
- Remember trusting and believing adults may be difficult e.g. "I know it's hard to stop when you are doing something you enjoy, but after play we will come back and you can finish it then"
- Remember ALL behaviour is trying to tell you something and remain curious e.g. I wonder why he's looking out of the window, maybe he doesn't know what to do next, rather than reprimanding him
- Identify, name and acknowledge possible feelings e.g. "It can feel so frustrating when we get something wrong, it can be hard to feel like that"
- Identify potential trigger times and activities for the child e.g. wet play
- Remember the child's emotional age
- Identify and name small successes e.g. "Well done for waiting, that's a difficult thing to do"

Activity

Think of the child from the previous activity and identify some strategies you can use with them:



Understanding a child's roots can help us understand and empathise with their behaviour

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Look after yourself so you can look after others

“When working with children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties you may find yourself feeling hurt, abused, angry, frustrated, intolerant, anxious, de-skilled and even frightened. One of the reasons is that such intense and painful feelings are somehow pushed [or projected] into the staff (as well as other children). Sometimes it might feel as if it is difficult to know where the feelings are coming from, and the intensity of them might lead you to question your own competence and professional worth”

(Greenhalgh 1994)

Watch video: Making a calm box (2 minutes)