

Attachment Disorder

What is attachment disorder?

There are primarily 4 main types of attachment that young people develop in early years.

Secure Attachment

The secure attachment style signifies a warm and loving bond between parent and child. The child feels loved and cared for and develops the ability to form healthy relationships with those around them.

Children with secure attachment styles are active and demonstrate confidence in their interactions with others.

Those who develop secure attachment styles in childhood are likely to carry this healthy way of bonding into adulthood and have no problem building long-term relationships without fear of abandonment.

Young people with secure attachment are more likely to:

- Have good self regulation
- Learn more easily and quickly
- Show more persistence and resilience
- Succeed at creative tasks
- Become part of strong social networks

Insecure Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

This style of attachment often occurs as a result of a caregiver intermittently meeting the needs of the young person.

Young people a negative self view and often carry a feeling of rejection.

Anxious-ambivalent children tend to distrust caregivers, and this insecurity often means that their environment is explored with trepidation rather than excitement.

They constantly seek approval from their caregivers and continuously observe their surroundings for fear of being abandoned.

Those who developed under the 'anxious-ambivalent' attachment style, tend to carry what they have learned into adulthood, and very often feel unloved by their partners whilst finding it difficult to express love and connection themselves.

People who developed attachments under this style are usually emotionally dependent in adulthood.

- Young people will often cling to their caregivers (this means transitions for these young people is particularly important.)

- They find it hard to engage in academic tasks instead worry about caregivers leaving.
- They engage in persistent attention seeking behaviours. The nature of this type of attachment can put young people at increased risk of exposure to CCE and CSE.
- Young people are hypervigilant of what adults are doing.
- Due to intermittent care given during early years young people find cause and effect very difficult to understand meaning rewards and behaviour systems are hard for them to follow.
- Young people may exhibit short bursts of dysregulated behaviour but often are able to calm down quickly.

Insecure Avoidant Attachment

Children who have developed under the 'avoidant' style have learned to accept that their emotional needs are likely to remain unmet and continue to grow up feeling unloved and insignificant.

They often struggle with expressing their feelings and find it hard understanding emotions – in adulthood; they tend to avoid intimate relationships.

These young people can remain highly distressed even when the primary care giver or trusted adult is present.

- Young people are so self resilient as a result of unmet needs that needing an adult help can cause major stress responses.
- Young people suffer from high levels of anxiety and have a strong fear of failure.
- May not want to communicate with adults when stressed or dysregulated.
- Can appear isolated or withdrawn.
- May show a lack of desire for attention or relationships.
- Have a strong desire for choice and control over situations.

Disorganised Attachment

Disorganised attachment is a combination of insecure avoidant and insecure anxious attachment, and children that fit into this group often display intense anger and rage. They may break toys and behave in other volatile ways – they also have difficult relationships with caregivers.

Children developed under the 'disorganised' attachment style, tend to avoid intimate relationships as adults and can very easily explode and have a difficult time controlling their emotions.

Sometimes young people with disorganised attachment can become quiet, withdrawn or even overly compliant as a result of a stress response.

- Young people will seek control in most situation including social situations.

- Often young people will present a limited range of emotions.
- High levels of anxiety will be exhibited and responses to stress exaggerated.
- Young people often “mask” anxiety with overly assertive behaviours.
- Young people take a long time to regulate and can quickly become overwhelmed with their emotions.
- Hypervigilance is prevalent.
- Suffer from inattention in class.
- Will often treat an adults respectfully at first but once the fear of danger and anxiety has decreased will completely change their behaviour.
- Young people will often be unable to accept that they find learning difficult and will feel threatened by others knowing more than them. This can lead to attempt to disrupt learning for others.
- Behaviour and rewards systems for young people with disorganised attachment are often ineffective. A relational approach is often the only answer.

Strategies to support pupils

- Schools will need to take a differentiated and proportionate approach to their behaviour policy to support young people with attachment disorder.
- Young people will need to work with a trusted adult in order to feel safe. For many young people this means literally one key adult. Many schools are wary of this in case it causes over reliance on this one member of staff or may be absent or ill. It must be remembered that for pupils with severe attachment disorders building a relationship is tough enough (they may never have achieved it before) so a focus should be on building a relationship with a single member of staff and as confidence increases building the team around the child.
- Give the young person a timetable plan of their day and when they will be spending time with their one key member of staff. This should reduce the amount of anxiety experienced. It may also be necessary to share the physical location of the key adult when they are not working directly with the pupil to decrease anxiety levels.
- Visual timetables and before time discussion around changes to the timetable should decrease anxiety and provide reassurance.
- If a member of staff needs to leave a young person for a period of time, reassurance should be given that you will return. Often leaving a personal item, like a pen, that you will return to collect can provide that assurance.
- Positive praise given regularly is highly important however many young people with attachment disorder will prefer the praise to be kept low key. Overt and loud praise in front of others can be viewed as disingenuous. In the same manner low key discussions about inappropriate behaviour is preferable to overtly disclosing the young persons challenging behaviour.
- For pupils with disorganised attachment praise is more likely to be effective than a reward or merit.

- Communication is key – be very careful of the language used to avoid increasing the threat stimulus. Confrontation verbal and body language should be avoided.
- Honesty is key. Pupils need to build trust and they can only achieve this if you are honest, even if this means following up with a sanction you have warned them about.
- Where an event has happened that has potentially damaged a relationship prioritise the reparation of this before focusing on academic tasks.
- It may be necessary to ignore unwanted behaviour to avoid damaging a relationship. Focus on the larger more serious unwanted behaviour first.
- Opportunities to be social through group work, games and sports can be helpful.
- Mirror work to show young people what their face looks like when showing different emotions.
- Support pupils by labelling the emotion that they are experiencing. This should help the young person identify and become aware of their own emotions but also support them in developing empathy for others. Validating their emotions often helps as well i.e “I would be feeling like that too if I was in your situation”.
- Plan to model empathy in social situation between staff.
- Young people will be investing so much effort understanding the social situations around them and interpreting the level of threat they are under than cognitive load needs to be reduced. Do this by chunking information and delivering short concise instructions. Physical handouts are often better than resources on screen which can be removed and cause anxiety for the young person.
- Recognise that pupils with attachment disorder are often dealing with a sense of loss or even feelings of being forsaken. Losing a pen or item of clothing in school can bring about serious stress responses for young people. Staff will need to support young people with organisation as executive functioning skills are often inhibited.
- Extended transitions are vital, particularly if members of staff will be changing. Young people with attachment disorder often find the transition between primary and secondary setting extremely unsettling as it can cause feelings of loss and grief. It is important that key staff support the young person into secondary school – short term swapping of staff between schools can help with his process.
- Hypervigilant young people will often want to sit with their back to a wall or close to a door. This should be allowed wherever possible.
- An element of choice will often keep pupils engaged with an academic task. Remember this need comes from lack of control during early development when needs were unmet.

