



Introduction to Attachment and Foster Care

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What is attachment?

Attachment refers to the bond between someone who needs care to their caregiver. If the person needing care is scared, distressed or in danger, they will look to the caregiver for help.

In babies, attachment occurs regardless of whether the caregiver meets their needs sufficiently, so long as they can identify someone to latch on to. Attachment in its simplest form is about survival but can also help babies to feel secure, and develop in a healthy way, both physically and emotionally.

How young children try to form an attachment

Young children are born with an instinct to seek out and form attachments with the caregivers around them to help receive comfort and protection. They might do this by behaving in a certain way i.e. by crying, suckling, smiling, or clinging to the person caring for them. These actions are designed to make the caregiver react, so they will feel drawn to respond to the baby and invest in them physically and emotionally. For instance, these actions may prompt caregivers to comfort, feed, or attend to the baby's other needs.

Children who experience this attachment are likely to grow up feeling safe, secure, and happy to explore and emotionally develop. The first two years are particularly important as until the age of 2 normal parental bonding forges neural pathways in the brain and provides the basis for social behaviour that will be carried on through life. This continues until the baby is a toddler and eventually the child is confident to leave the safe base created by the caregivers and begin to explore; whilst always knowing there is a warm welcome when they return to them. This way, they will also view the world as a 'good' place. The security of a strong bond or attachment helps the child to build trust in those around them and to form new relationships with confidence.

Attachment Issues

Some circumstances can make it more challenging for a child and their caregivers to form a secure attachment and can lead to attachment issues. These may include:

- abuse, neglect and trauma experienced by the caregiver or child
- parental mental health difficulties
- parental substance misuse

- the child having multiple care placements
- parents being separated from their baby just after birth, for example if the baby is receiving neonatal care
- stress such as having a low income, being a single parent, or being a young parent
- bereavement or loss of another caregiver that a child had an attachment with

Signs that a child may have attachment issues

As a result of their lived experiences including some of those listed above, children and young people may feel unwanted, unsafe, and anxious. They may think they are unlovable and unworthy of affection and ultimately feel rejected.

Attachment issues often emerge as a pattern of behaviour over time, particularly during moments of stress or discovery. This pattern might include:

- being fearful of or avoiding a caregiver
- becoming extremely distressed when their caregiver leaves them, even for a short amount of time
- rejecting their caregiver's efforts to calm, soothe, and connect with them
- not seeming to notice or care when their caregiver leaves the room or when they return
- being non-responsive to their caregiver
- seeming to be depressed or angry
- not being interested in playing with toys or exploring their environment

As children with attachment issues get older, these behaviours may change. As well as being evident during times of stress, some behaviours may start to become obvious at other times.

These may include the child or young person:

- finding it difficult to ask for help
- may inaccurately read non-verbal cues and misinterpret communication.
- may not seek positive attention
- struggling to form positive relationships with adults and peers
- struggling to concentrate
- struggling to calm themselves down or control their emotions

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- both demanding and rejecting attention or support at the same time
- becoming quickly or overly angry or upset, at times with no clear triggers
- appearing withdrawn or disengaged from activities
- daydreaming, being hyperactive or constantly fidgeting or moving
- be very anxious and may mask their fear or disability through opposition

What Foster Carers can do

All children and young people in foster care are likely to have some attachment issues as they are separated from their birth families. As foster carers you may have the privilege of being the main caregiver in those first few years and helping give a child the best possible start in life. More often, you will have the challenge of helping to improve the outcomes for an older child or young person who did not receive adequate care and so could not form a reliable attachment to their caregiver in their early years.

Key things foster carers can do to welcome children and young people into the family and build attachments include -

- **Establishing boundaries** – setting boundaries and limits often comes with its challenges, but can be beneficial in the long run, as the child or young person feels safe when boundaries are consistently reinforced.
- **Routines and consistency** – routines in a child's life allows them to know what to expect and feel more settled. Consistency helps a child to know what responses they will get from their caregivers.
- **Empathy and child focus** – Empathise what it feels like to be that child or young persons from their experiences and viewpoint; how they might be thinking or feeling and why they respond the way they do in your home. To see the world through the child's eyes involves looking beneath the child's behaviours to see the emotional needs driving the behaviour.
- **Establishing trust** – it's important that the child or young person in your care feels safe and trusts you. Letting the child know they are loved and taken care of is vital to helping them – so continue to listen, talk and play, dedicating quality time with them and continue to build on your relationship.
- **Focus on small steps** – Fostering is all about small steps and successes and not aiming too high with expectations. A gradual drip, drip approach to developing a trusting relationship with a child or young person is the best approach. Things will at times feel like they are going backwards and then move forward again and this may be to do with what's happening in the child or young person's life rather than what is happening in your home.
- **Health** – keep them on track with a healthy and balanced lifestyle. Exercise, good sleeping patterns and healthy eating habits are likely to improve a child or young person's mood – so it's important these are considered when tackling attachment issues.

A combination of consistency, trust, empathy and child focus enables children to understand the routine of day-to-day events as being proof of their needs being met and helps to build a trusting relationship and create a sense of belonging.

Supervision and support from your fostering service and any other professionals involved can help foster carers to stand back from the day-to-day events and look at these from an objective point of view. It may then be possible to track progress and identify where things need to be developed further. It can also assist foster carers in managing their own feelings and identify any need for additional support in relation to themselves.

Challenging, irrational and rejecting behaviours can bewilder, frustrate and demoralise even the most committed and experienced foster carer. Looking at the child's behaviour from an attachment viewpoint can help foster carers find alternative explanations, make sense of difficult situations, have empathy with the child, and develop parenting strategies that can reduce a child's distress.

Foster carers should try to understand:

- the impact of attachment on children and young people's development from birth to adolescence.
- that because a child or young person does not show obvious feelings or behaviour at separation does not mean that the child does not feel it
- that some children and young people, because of their early experiences, may have very unpredictable and sometimes self-defeating strategies for getting help and support.
- that what children and young people learn from their early experiences may be very resistant to change regardless of the carer's skill, effort and commitment
- how to use information from professionals who have assessed the child or young person and formed views about how to best help them including the part that the fostering household can play
- that even where children and young people have been abused, they will have intense feelings towards their attachment figures and may still want to turn to them for comfort

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- that while most children and young people come to have an attachment relationship with their birth parent(s), other people may also become attachment figures, particularly grandparents or other family members

Training and support

Each Fostering Service will have their own support and training approaches to support their foster carers both pre and post approval in caring for looked after children and young people who have attachment issues. There are a lot of reading materials available through book stockists and fostering organisations which will give you further information about attachment issues and how to care for your foster child or young person. It is advisable to discuss which approach to parenting or attachment parenting your Fostering Service may use and what reading materials they recommend. Whilst attachment issues can be a key challenge for foster carers you are not alone and your Fostering Service, other foster carers and other professionals can help and support you.

Attachment Disorders

Attachment disorders are a more complex psychiatric illness that can develop in children and young people, who struggle to develop emotional attachments to others.

Although the exact cause of attachment disorder in children and young people is not clear, it's suggested that failure to provide sufficient caregiving can have negative effects on a young child. The impact of attachment disorders on child development, if not rectified, can affect their future perspectives of relationships, and their social and emotional development.

If you feel your foster child or young person may have a diagnosable attachment disorder, you should seek advice from the child's social worker and your supervising social worker who can arrange the necessary assessments and support.

Remember, overcoming attachment issues in looked after children and young people can be a challenge, and at times you may feel rejected or unappreciated. Maintaining patience, understanding and consistency will allow you to manage attachment issues more effectively and when you do make small steps in the right direction the feeling of satisfaction and achievement can be huge. Embrace support, both formal and informal and any training that will further your development as foster carer(s) to help you on your way.

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