

Whole School Awareness to Attachment and Trauma



Attachment

What experience do you have of attachment and or trauma?

What is attachment?

Attachment theory in psychology originates with the work of John Bowlby (1958). Bowlby defined attachment as:

“A deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space”

(Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1969)

- ▶ The theory of attachment was first proposed by the psychiatrist John Bowlby, who described it as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (1988). He considered that children needed to develop a secure attachment with their main caregiver in their early years via sufficiently consistent, responsive, sensitive, appropriate, predictable care. Secure attachments support mental processes that enable the child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning (Schoore, 2001; Sroufe & Siegel, 2011). Bowlby called these mental representations “the internal working model.”

▶ **SAFE**

Insecure attachments, on the other hand, can develop if early interactions are more negative, more inconsistent, more insensitive, unresponsive, inappropriate and/or unpredictable and can have unfortunate 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 soothe themselves, manage their emotions and engage in reciprocal relationships (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011). They do not necessarily develop a view of themselves and others as trustworthy, safe, dependable and deserving of care (Bowlby, 1988).

What are the behaviours of children who are not resilient when dealing with life in school?

- Think about children who find school challenging
 - ▶ What behaviours indicate that a child or young person is less able than their peers to manage everyday challenges?
 - ▶ Be very specific - name the behaviours that make the difference between children who struggle with everyday life and other children who manage and learn from challenges
 - ▶ Which do you think are the most significant behaviours affecting the child or young person's ability to manage everyday challenges?

- ▶ This evolutionary theory of attachment suggests that attachment is
- ▶ a primal need
- ▶ is adaptive in that it enhances the infant's chances of survival. As infants and small children cannot care for their own basic needs they are born biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others.
- ▶ They elicit innate caregiving responses from adults by engaging in 'social releaser' behaviors such as crying, smiling and seeking proximity to the attachment figure when they are upset or threatened (Bowlby, 1969). In this way the child uses the primary caregiver as a secure base from which to explore and, when necessary, as a haven of safety and a source of comfort (Waters & Cummings, 2000).
- ▶ The determinant of attachment is not food or entertainment, but safety, care, protection and responsiveness and there are networks of neurons in the brain dedicated to establishing it. The hormone, oxytocin facilitates this process.
- ▶ (Child at school example)

Behaviourism in schools

- ▶ Current government and a school inspectorate system (Ofsted) that explicitly endorse behaviourist principles have combined to reinforce a traditional view that children's behaviour should be managed through a system of **sanctions and rewards** in order to improve their classroom performance and promote pro-social behaviour. It is fair to say that such a system can work ... for most of the children, for most of the time. **But what happens when it does not work?**
- ▶ It reflects an inflexible, “one size fits all” perspective that does not take into consideration the holistic, constructivist nature of human learning or the power of intrinsic motivation. Nor do such approaches embrace more post-modern perspectives of human agency and the “child's voice,” since they encourage passivity, control and obedience rather than empowerment, autonomy and self-regulation.

Behaviour is self-determined It comes from within

- **External Frameworks**



External regulation
(Sanctions and Rewards)

- **Internal Frameworks**



Internal regulation
(Emotion Coaching)

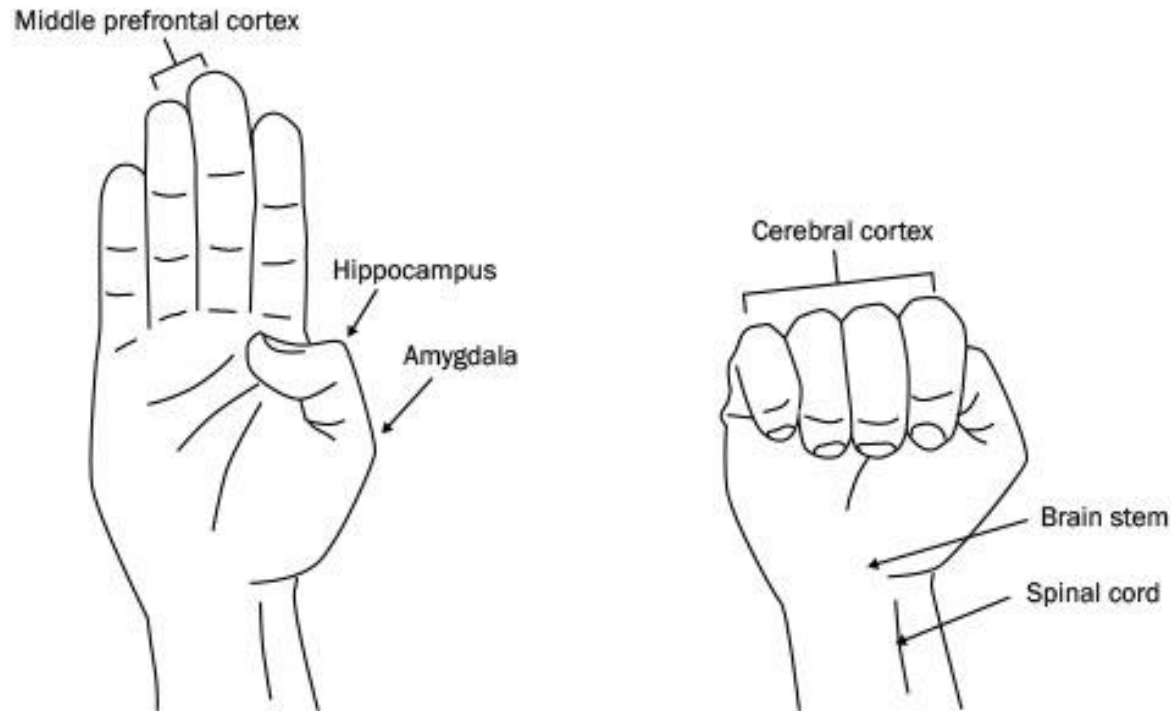
The neuroscience of human development

- Behaviour is the evidence that a brain is working
 - ▶ Understanding how brains develop and function helps us to understand behaviour
 - ▶ We can help children whose behaviour makes it more difficult for them to manage everyday life to develop new ways of using their brains - human brains are constantly developing and changing
- More than 90% of what we now know about the human brain in terms of its development, structure and function has been discovered in the last twenty years
 - ▶ This neuroscientific research is now internationally accepted as robust enough to use in our practice in working with children and families

Why does attachment matter in education?

- Research shows that brains work best when people feel safe
 - ▶ The key to optimal brain function lies in regulation of stress hormones
- Brains develop in response to challenge
 - ▶ The brain enables us to process and make sense of experience
- Challenge leads to the production of stress hormones
 - ▶ Healthy if regulated, toxic if unregulated
- Toxic stress closes down key brain functions
 - ▶ When brain function closes down people cannot learn well
- Humans are not born able to regulate stress
 - ▶ Attachment relationships with adults are essential for children

Use your hands to imagine your brain



Hand model courtesy of Dan Siegel

If we flip our lid...

... the downstairs brain

- *instantaneous response*

- ▶ Fight
 - ▶ Remove the threat
- ▶ Flight
 - ▶ Remove self!
- ▶ Freeze
 - ▶ Infantilise to attract adult help
 - ▶ Immobility, big eyes, smiles, perhaps incontinence

... and the upstairs brain

- *strategies and behaviours*

- ▶ Aggression
 - ▶ Safety through dominance
- ▶ Absence
 - ▶ Safety through concealment
- ▶ Appeasement
 - ▶ Safety through manipulation

... **SURVIVING** not thriving

Putting the lid back on

Escalation

- ▶ HPA (stress) axis
 - ▶ adrenaline, cortisol, etc.
 - ▶ rising blood pressure
 - ▶ shallow breathing
 - ▶ increased muscle tension

- ▶ The downstairs brain is in charge

SURVIVAL

De-escalation

- ▶ Vagus nerve
 - ▶ oxytocin, dopamine, etc.
 - ▶ lowering blood pressure
 - ▶ deeper breathing
 - ▶ reduced muscle tension

- ▶ The upstairs brain is back in action

SAFETY

Attachment and brain function

If for any reason we are unable to regulate stress we need access to an adult who will:

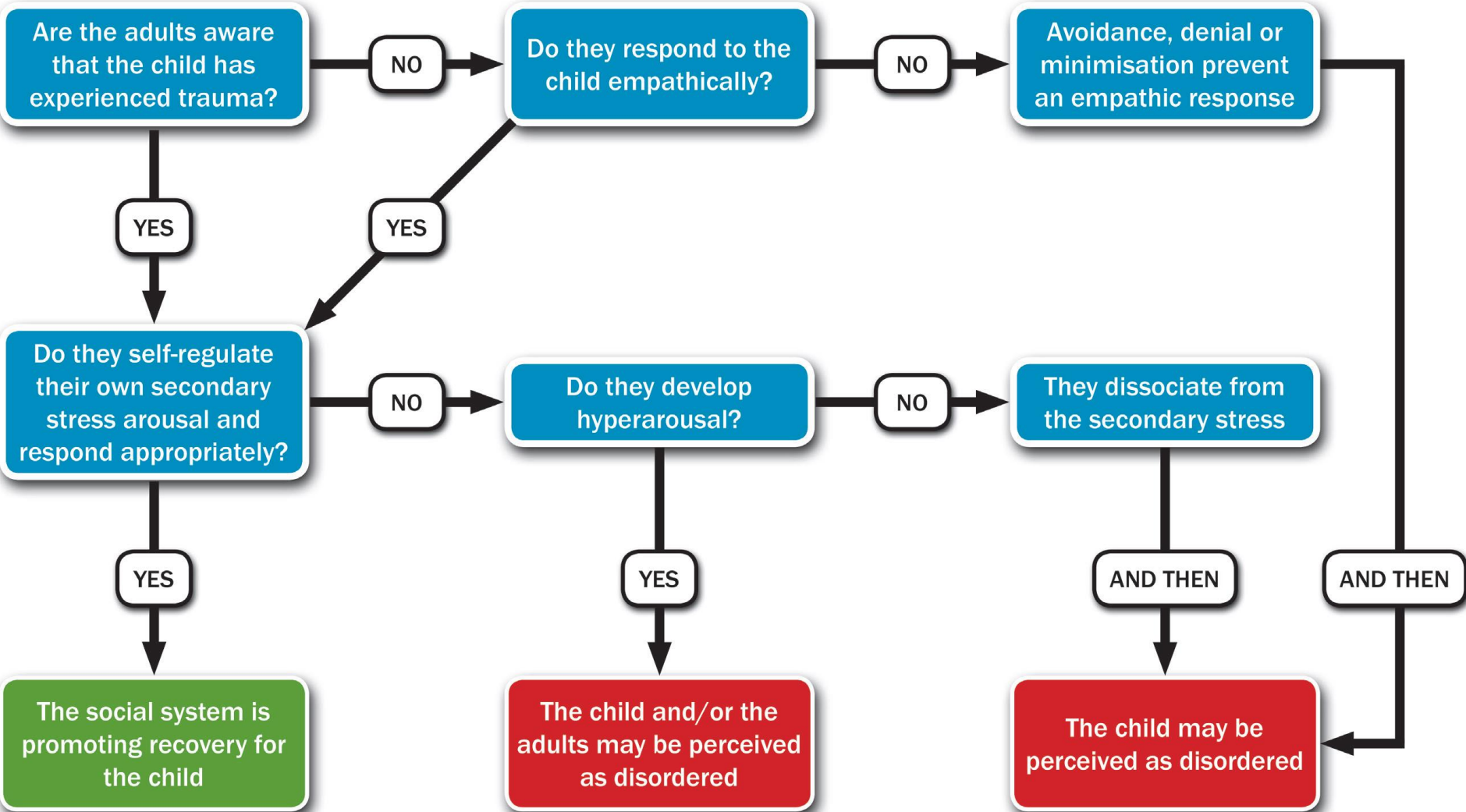
- Hold us in their own mind
 - ▶ Mindful awareness
- Connect with us and self-regulate
 - ▶ Co-regulation, soothing
- Stimulate our brain to integrated activity
 - ▶ Co-learning, teaching
- This attachment relationship creates deep brain patterns for feeling safe
 - ▶ Feeling safe enables our brains to function optimally throughout life

Formative experience: attachment relationships

- Babies are born completely helpless
 - ▶ They must be claimed by, and lay claim to, their birth community
- Claiming takes place through the senses
 - ▶ Sight, sound, touch, taste, smell are all involved
 - ▶ Proximity is vital, babies need close physical contact with their carers
 - ▶ This bonding process means that the adult and the baby become physically and emotionally attuned to one another
- Attunement patterns the brain
 - ▶ Changes in the adult produce changes in the baby which create new patterns in the developing brain
- Children with unmet attachment needs lack a core sense of safety and identity, and struggle to self-regulate

Attachment in practice: helping children to feel claimed and to attune to adults

- How do you enable children in your setting to feel safe, to feel that they belong, and to connect to adults?
 - ▶ Remember that claiming and attunement take place through the senses - sight, sound, touch, taste and smell are all involved
 - ▶ Non-verbal communication and the overall emotional experience of being in a setting are more important in establishing safety than words
 - ▶ Think about what you and other adults do
 - ▶ Think about the setting itself and how that seems to the child



- ▶ “Much of today’s popular advice ignores the world of emotions. Instead, it relies on child rearing theories that address the children’s behaviour, but reject the feelings that underlie that behaviour.”



- ▶ (Gottman, 1997)



Cause I Ain't Got a Pencil

by Joshua T. Dickerson

I woke myself up
Because we ain't got an alarm clock
Dug in the dirty clothes basket,
Cause ain't nobody washed my uniform
Brushed my hair and teeth in the dark,
Cause the lights ain't on
Even got my baby sister ready,
Cause my mama wasn't home.
Got us both to school on time,
To eat us a good breakfast.
Then when I got to class the teacher fussed
Cause I ain't got a pencil.

Attachment theory as an alternative to behaviourism in our schools

- ▶ If a child comes to a school with a wheelchair, a school has to put in a ramp. These children have a different need. We need to make sure the environment is good for them. It's basically inclusion...; It's had an influence on the whole school, making us more sensitive to particular needs. We have much more empathy now. (Rose, et al, 2014)

Why is attachment important in schools?

- ▶ There is a population of pupils in schools who seem unable to access learning, to engage and achieve, and to move on into adulthood with confidence; children whose diminished self-esteem and resilience are limitations on engagement in relationships and emotional and cognitive development.
- ▶ Early attachment research clearly indicated that secure attachment is the factor linked to children's more successful engagement in school, in terms of social competence, curiosity, effective play and investigation, sympathy towards others and so a secure enough start prepares the child to become the pupil.

**“You can’t teach
children to behave
better by making
them feel worse.
When children feel
better, they behave
better.”**

- Pam Leo



What is an attachment aware school?

- An attachment aware setting is one in which everyone can feel safe
 - ▶ The setting values and supports co-regulating and co-learning relationships
 - ▶ Individuals at all levels understand the need for, and benefit from, such relationships
- An attachment aware school is one in which children can learn because they feel safe
 - ▶ Secure attachment = feeling safe
 - ▶ Feeling safe = optimal brain function
 - ▶ Optimal brain function = optimal learning

Developing and demonstrating attachment awareness

- An attachment aware setting would:
 - ▶ Identify each stakeholder group - everyone needs to feel safe
 - ▶ Show a structured and evidence approach to meeting the relational needs of each stakeholder group
 - ▶ Be able to provide examples of outcomes for each of these approaches
- For example, schools might identify the following stakeholders and evidenced relational approaches:
 - ▶ Vulnerable pupils - trauma-informed practice
 - ▶ All pupils - emotion coaching
 - ▶ Parents - Five to Thrive
 - ▶ Staff - trauma-informed supervision
 - ▶ External stakeholders - connected learning

▶ What would be useful for an Educator to have an understanding of?

- ▶ An Understanding of:
- ▶ Attachment theory
Psychological Trauma
- ▶ Basic Neuro-development
- ▶ Basic Neuro-science of Attachment and Trauma

► Stay close

- “Key Adults act as a ‘surrogate secure base’ which can contain the inevitable anxiety engendered by the challenges of learning”
- (Geddes 2006)
- □Physically and psychologically close to pupils
- □Being close communicates acceptance, containment, safety, attunement, attentiveness, responsiveness, structure and supervision

STAY CLOSE

- ▶ Being actively present
- ▶ Practising relative dependency
- ▶ Encourage selective attachment
- ▶ Resistance
- ▶ Relational withdrawal
- ▶ ‘Time in’

- ▶ Stay calm and bring calm

- ▶ “Our emotional states are so contagious! When we’re tense, others around us tend to become tense. When we are happy, we tend to make others a bit happier. If we as educators are feeling angry, our pupils will tend toward anger, or at least toward a tense, defensive state, raised to protect themselves from our anger. Such states reduce our vulnerable pupils’ readiness to learn and our ability to influence them, without resorting to power and control.

- ▶ (Bomber and Hughes, 2013)

- ▶ Maintain our own emotional stability
- ▶ □Calmness with energy
- ▶ □Co-regulation
- ▶ □The shock factor
- ▶ “Emotional regulation is important as it allows learning to occur and enables greater variety of thinking strategies to be available.”
- ▶ (Schofield et al 2012)
- ▶ Facilitating calmness
- ▶ □Create pauses
- ▶ □Settling to learn
- ▶ □Watch out for sensory overload
- ▶ □Sensory breaks
- ▶ □When is enough
- ▶ □Swap-ins

- ▶ “Do these pupils really need more access to study opportunities, better teaching, different reading schemes, more computers, more effective discipline? What if they just needed more access to you and to me? A genuine relationship. Is this a possibility? What if it really wasn't more complicated than that? What if the tool that we had overlooked -ourselves -was the bridge into a world of possibilities, that a genuine relationship with us, perhaps acting as a buffer, could switch on the pupil's 'thinking brain' and integrate it with his 'emotional brain'?”
- ▶ Bomber & Hughes (2013)

Emotion Coaching

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx41SPMLBMg>

Stabalisation

Think individually about your own work with children and young people. What do you do (or what could you do) to engage with the child or young person so that they are able to benefit from your mindful co-regulation in terms of...

- establishing safety - ensuring that every child has access to at least one identified safe place and at least one identified safe person?
- ... identifying words for feelings - how does the child know that their safe person is in touch with the child's emotions?
- ... recognising trauma - how does the child know that their safe person recognises the child's difficulties and the origin of these difficulties in toxic stress?

Think individually about the setting in which you work. How could vulnerable children and young people recognise that this is a setting that promotes stabilisation? What do they say about their experience of being in your setting?

- Feeling safe?
- Feeling that they are in a setting where their emotions are recognised and named?
- Feeling that they are in a setting where their difficulties are recognised and understood?

Think individually about your own work with children and young people. What do you do (or what could you do) to engage with the child or young person so that they are able to benefit from your mindful co-learning in terms of

- teaching physiological self-management - relaxation and self-regulation strategies?
- enabling emotional processing - developing self-awareness and emotional literacy?
- enabling cognitive restructuring - helping children and young people to think without distortions?

■ Respond • Engage • Relax • Play • Talk

Think individually about the setting in which you work. How could vulnerable children and young people recognise that this is a setting that promotes integration? What do they say about their experience of being in your setting?

Think individually about the setting in which you work. How could vulnerable children and young people recognise that this is a setting that promotes adaptation? What do they say about their experience of being in your setting?

Emotions Task

- ▶ Think of the last time that you felt that emotion. How did you manage to regulate and what happened?
- ▶ Consider an Emotion Coaching approach...

