

# attachment strategy

for Education Resources



# A to Z of attachment-informed practice

## A=C

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

#### A



#### Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory is one of the most influential psychological theories of the last century, of relevance not just to children but all of society. It is a theory of personality development and is crucial in shaping how we grow and develop in all areas – neurologically, physically, emotionally, socially and psychologically.

Gain a thorough knowledge of Attachment Theory as it is essential for understanding child and adult relationships as well as relationships between adults. Take time to read the Attachment Strategy for Education Resources and speak to your line manager about training and e-learning.

#### B



#### Behaviour is communication

It is essential to understand and accept that ALL behaviour is a form of communication. When individuals present with distressed behaviour it can be difficult for those supporting them. Remember that people are often communicating an unmet emotional need and it's important to respond appropriately.

Recognise behaviour as a form of communication and explore what feelings and emotions might be behind it and what messages the person may be trying to communicate. Try to be non-judgmental, curious and consider behaviour as distressed rather than challenging. Be aware of your tone of voice and be positive, hopeful and light.

#### C



#### Compassion

Compassion is an essential component of attachment-informed practice. It is a process of connecting by empathising and identifying with another person's pain and acting to relieve their suffering. Compassion arises from empathy but is characterised by action.

Respond with compassion by listening attentively to someone who is in emotional pain and validating their feelings. Try to look at the world through their eyes and consider what actions you could take to make a difference.



## D=F

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

# D



**Discourage  
labelling**

Attachment-informed practice discourages the labelling of individuals or diagnosing conditions when people are displaying distressed behaviour. By looking outwardly we can better understand a person in context and the environmental factors that may be contributing to distress rather than only looking internally.

Move away from a focus on 'what might be wrong with someone' (internal factors) and consider instead 'what might have happened' or be happening for them within the context of their relationships. Consider whether this could be impacting on how they manage and experience the world around them.

# E



**Ensure a  
secure base  
and safe haven**

Children, young people and adults need a secure base and a safe haven to flourish. It is essential that attuned, sensitive and responsive relationships are core components of all establishments and organisations. Not being or feeling safe is often at the root of much of the distressed behaviour we see from children and young people.

Provide opportunities for someone to develop the confidence to explore and grow safely. Ensure that people have access to one or more sensitive and responsive individuals who are attuned to their needs, and who can respond with comfort and reassurance when they feel diminished by something that has happened in the world around them.

# F



**Feelings**

It is important to be aware of a person's feelings and emotional responses and respond to these appropriately. Often people with insecure attachments have greater difficulty labelling their feelings which can impact on their ability to self-regulate. It is important that we support people to be more aware of their feelings so that they can better understand how to regulate them.

Recognise that all emotions are natural and not always a matter of choice. Try to look for physical and verbal signs of someone's emotional state and try to take on the other person's perspective. Use words to reflect back the emotions you hear and name feelings. You might want to use phrases like 'I noticed that you were....and think you might be feeling... it's normal to feel...'



## G-I

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

# G



**Give positive messages**

It is important to give positive messages of worth to people by noticing and praising behaviour and by focusing attention on an individual's positive 'qualities'. By acknowledging positives you can send messages to someone that they are valued and appreciated and create opportunities for further positive experiences in the future.

Give positive messages by emphasising a person's strengths and noticing positive changes. Remember some people with insecure attachments can find praise difficult to accept, therefore it is helpful to provide a concrete example of what you like/notice about them, e.g. "I thought it was really kind when you helped X with their work," as opposed to saying "I think you are kind".

# H



**Healing**

Often the most important healing experiences take place within the context of positive relationships, outside therapy and inside homes, schools and communities. Research indicates that only about 60% of the adult population have been securely attached, yet many go on to become well balanced adults. It is highly likely that they have had enriching relationships with extended family members, teachers or other adults.

Create a climate of trust by encouraging open and honest communication with a focus on learning rather than blame. Ensure that there are opportunities to repair relationships following disagreements and identify key attachment figures people can go to for help and advice. These are usually people who the individual has a good connection with and where there is a trusting relationship.

# I



**Identify resilience potential**

Resilience is the ability to cope with adversity and to 'bounce back' from life's challenges. Many of the key building blocks of resilience involve relationships with others and an individual's resilience potential can often be dependent on the supports a person has around them. It is therefore important to consider attachment and resilience as connected since individuals who are considered resilient often have secure attachments.

Try to work with someone to identify what strengths and needs they have and support them to establish realistic and manageable goals to help enhance their resilience potential. The South Lanarkshire Council Framework of Assessment and Intervention for Resilience (FAIR) can support you to work with children and young people to do this.



## J=L

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

# J

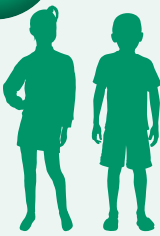


**Joined up working**

Attachment is important for everyone as we are all shaped by our relationships. It is crucial that we all work together with a common knowledge of Attachment Theory to better understand our own behaviour, support people along their healing journey and ensure that children, young people and colleagues have the chance to flourish.

Encourage joined up working by using attachment-informed language in your daily practice as well as to inform policies and procedures. Continue to develop a shared understanding with colleagues and celebrate good practice. Remember to share important messages about attachment with children, young people and families using the South Lanarkshire Council A to Z of Attachment and Resilience Leaflets.

# K



**Kept in mind**

To 'Keep in Mind' is to think of or remember someone or something. This is crucial for attachment – informed practice as often people who have experienced insecure attachments have been let down or experienced rejection and might not trust others to be there for them. Letting people know that they are 'kept in mind' can shape, reshape and transform their developmental journey.

Show someone that they are 'Kept in Mind' by using phrases like 'I was thinking about you when...' or providing a 'transition object' or 'keeping in mind' object to remind them that you think about them when they aren't with you. Try to remember and ask about the little things people tell you as this can make a positive difference to relationships and can let people know they are valued.

# L



**Life pathway**

It is important to believe that through relationships we can change a person's life pathway. Research has shown that a child forms an internal model of relationships in early childhood which continues to be updated and revised through later experiences. This means that even though past relationships may have been where things went wrong, new relationships can become a source of safety, stability and confidence and can often be where healing takes place.

Attachments are the glue which connects families and creates healthy organisations and communities. Being loved, respected, understood and connected to others can have a profound effect on a person's health. Try to strengthen bonds between families, schools and communities and within organisations by letting children, young people and colleagues know that they matter and are appreciated.



# M=O

## Why is it important?

## What can you do?

# M



**Manage transitions**

Transitions can be particularly hard for some people, especially if they have a history of insecure attachment. Whether its changes to daily routine or changes in placement, unexpected changes can be a part of everyday life. For the majority of people this can be manageable, however, for others it is important to remember that this can be a very anxiety provoking time.

Take time to explain any changes that are expected to happen and carefully plan these as much as possible to minimise anxiety. Try to keep the school or work day as consistent and predictable as possible and support people who are finding any changes difficult.

# N

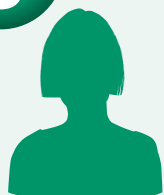


**Nurturing approaches**

Nurturing approaches are underpinned by attachment theory and the principles are consistent with attachment-informed practice. Using nurturing approaches at an establishment or service level can support attachment-informed practice.

Try to use nurturing approaches consistently to ensure attachment-informed practice is embedded in ethos and evident within policy and practice. Organisations should explore opportunities to incorporate nurturing approaches into practice by using the Education Scotland Nurturing Schools resource as a framework for practice.

# O



**Open, engaged and curious**

When working in an attachment-informed way it is important to be open, engaged and curious about the meaning behind someone's behaviour. This helps them see that you are trying to understand them. When people are feeling safe and relaxed they are less likely to feel judged or criticised.

Create an atmosphere of openness and interest by using a light tone of voice, like you might use when telling a story, rather than a harsh or lecturing tone. Be curious and wonder aloud by using phrases "What do you think was going on?" or "I wonder what...?" Be aware of the child's developmental age as children who have experienced insecure attachments are often younger emotionally and socially.



## P=R

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

P



**Provide structure and consistency**

Attachment-informed practice is about providing care and nurture as well as routine, structure and consistency. Having structure and consistency can help people feel safe and secure and providing these within the context of nurturing, empathic relationships can help people understand what will happen and what is expected of them.

Be consistent in what you say and do when interacting with people and provide predictable routines as far as possible. Ensure changes are shared and planned for as much as possible and when working with children and young people provide clear expectations around behaviour and set limits while helping them to problem solve.

Q

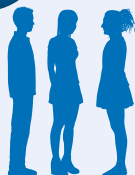


**Quality relationships**

Everyone needs relationships to thrive. It is important that schools and other organisations promote quality relationships between staff, children, young people and families by creating a culture of safety, trust and respect.

You can encourage quality relationships within your establishment by being attuned, communicating effectively and showing encouragement. Pay attention to language used and notice people as individuals ensuring that everyone is treated equally and valued. This often needs to be conveyed face to face to make it 'real'.

R



**Restorative practice**

Many people who have had insecure attachments can have difficulties with relationships. They may behave in ways designed to promote their survival but which may be difficult for others to understand and manage. Therefore relationships can often break down. The use of restorative approaches can provide a framework for repairing relationships and address the different needs that can arise from conflict or harm.

Try to use restorative language and questions to allow people to understand the impact of their behaviours by asking what has happened, what the impact has been on those involved and what needs to happen to put things right or to make things better in the future. It is important to bring people together following conflict to create a shared responsibility and to build, maintain and repair relationships, particularly following school exclusion.



## S-U

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

# S



**Stop shaming**

Individuals with a history of disrupted attachments often have feelings of low self-worth and shame, it is important we do not further add to this through our use of language or our actions. Someone who already feels shame will likely expect others to be angry with them or rejecting of them. By taking the time to understand and listen we have a greater chance of addressing and altering behaviour in the future.

Be aware that for some children, a 'rewards and sanctions' behavioural approach can perpetuate their feelings of low self-worth and shame and can lead to further negative behaviour and stigmatisation. Where appropriate offer natural consequences that encourage growth, and consider alternatives to public consequences. Giving consequences in front of others can increase feelings of shame and alienate people from those around them.

# T



**Talents and interests**

Everyone is special and has their own unique abilities. By noticing, encouraging and valuing an individual's talents and interests we can support them to flourish and be 'all they can be'.

Try to emphasise an individual's strengths and abilities by noticing and acknowledging them. By drawing attention to positive qualities we can help individuals recognise their talents and encourage them to take forward interests and abilities.

# U



**Understand early childhood experiences**

Understanding that early childhood experiences can affect how people grow and make sense of the world around them is an essential part of attachment-informed practice. When people have experienced insecure attachments in the early years, a range of attachment behaviours can develop which are evident when they are fearful, anxious or feeling unsafe. This can impact on how relationships develop.

Recognise that for individuals who have experienced a secure early attachment the world will seem safe and others will be perceived as trustworthy and dependable. However, for those who have experienced insecure attachments the world can seem unsafe. This can lead to difficulties in forming meaningful relationships and developing trust.





## V=X

### Why is it important?

### What can you do?

# V



**Value  
contributions**

All individuals need to know that they are valued. This means respecting and appreciating others as unique people with their own individual qualities, feelings and needs. Even very young children have their own standpoint and experience of the world, which is different from ours and they have a contribution to make.

Try to encourage contributions from children, young people and colleagues and ensure that these are acknowledged and valued even if you have a different view point. It is important to notice when someone is trying.

# W



**Whole person**

An individual who has experienced trauma, pain or fear may present with distressed behaviours, which can seem inappropriate and unrelated to the current situation. It is possible that they are reliving a painful past experience that could have been triggered by something that is not obvious to others, such as a smell or even a noise.

Try to see the 'whole person' in the context of their home life, community and early experiences. By seeing people in the context of their relationships we can start to recognise triggers of past trauma and pain and understand that distressed behaviours may not always be a matter of choice or within a person's control.

# X



**Xxx  
Show you care**

Everyone needs to feel loved and showing affection to someone can let them know you care. It is important to understand that affection doesn't always need to be about hugs and kisses and that within education we can show we care through our actions and behaviour.

Show someone you care through eye contact, laughter, kind words and gestures. Sometimes just noticing little things like positive changes in how someone presents or behaves can make all the difference to their self-worth.



## Y-Z

### Y



#### Your day to day interactions

#### Why is it important?

It is important to be aware of your day to day interactions and how you communicate with others. How you greet people and respond to what they say on a daily basis can have a huge impact on their wellbeing. Positive interactions can speak volumes to others about how much they are valued and cared for.

#### What can you do?

Consider your verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware of how you greet people and respond to them to ensure that you are showing warmth and giving positive messages of acceptance, interest and understanding. Try to avoid the use of sarcasm with children as this is insincere, confusing, and can cause hurt.

### Z

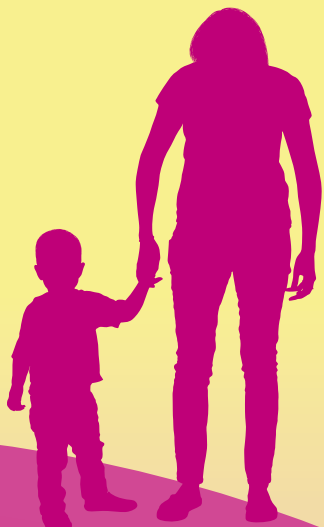


#### Zone in

We often unconsciously care for others the way we were cared for; it is therefore important to understand that perhaps this type of response may not be what an individual needs at that time. By reflecting on our own emotional responses and attachment experiences, we can better understand our triggers and how best to support others.

Take time to reflect on how you respond to challenging situations or distressed behaviours and think about your own attachment experiences and how attachment theory can help you better understand your behaviour. Remember it is important to prioritise your own wellbeing and relationships in order to effectively build relationships with children and young people.





If you need this information in another language or format, please contact us to discuss how we can best meet your needs.

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