

Attachment development in children who have experienced attachment disruption

Healthy attachment normally develops through the early months and years of a child's life in response to their needs being met 'well enough' and 'often enough' by a consistent care giver.

Children who have had multiple attachment disruptions may not trust adults to keep them safe or believe that an adult will provide for their needs. This may lead to hyper-vigilance, extreme independence, or alternatively, extreme clinginess.

Trauma and its impact on behaviour

Many children have experienced trauma eg violence in the home or ongoing neglect and abuse. Every child is different in how their early experiences affect them and how these experiences will impact on them later in life.

Children who find the school environment too stressful may manage well during the day but 'melt down' on returning to the safety of the home environment. The stress they are experiencing may make it more difficult to retain or absorb new information, and/or give rise to physical symptoms such as headaches and tummy aches.

There are a number of other less obvious issues which may be seen in children who have experienced early trauma and/or attachment disruption that impact on their ability to respond to common interactions in a home or classroom setting.

Children who have experienced trauma and/or significant attachment disruption tend to respond best to adults who are consistent and calm. If the teacher knows the child well, they may be able to notice when a child is feeling stressed, or predict which activities are likely to cause anxiety in the child. Calmly intervening with nurturing and supportive one on one time ('time-in') is more likely to prevent 'melt downs' and disruptive behaviour than giving the child a warning of consequences or using 'time out'.

'Back to School Strategies for Difficult Children' by Heather Forbes. Found at <http://searchwarp.com/swa385784.htm>

Hyper-arousal and dissociative responses

Children who have had early trauma and/or attachment disruption may respond to management of behaviour in unexpected ways. This may be the result of an ongoing hyper-aroused state with an exaggerated 'fight/flight and freeze' response. These children may be triggered by any *perceived* threat, which may include non-verbal cues, the '*threat of a consequence*' to contain behaviour, or a *perceived* rejection by a classmate or adult.

For example, a child may *perceive* being rejected by a peer who has merely turned away from her during play. A child whose 'fight/flight' response is triggered by a sense of rejection may respond by hitting out aggressively or by withdrawing into themselves and being unable to concentrate on the learning in the classroom for the rest of the day.

A child being calmly told by their teacher that if they persist in a behaviour that they will need to go to the office (for example) may perceive this as a threat, and instead of being able to respond appropriately, may have a 'fight/flight' reaction which prevents them from being able to think rationally and instead brings a strong negative reaction.

Transitions, such as changing classes or teachers, or class to play time, may escalate a child's tendency to hyper arousal or dissociative reactions.

Strategies found to help reduce stress in children with hyper arousal and dissociative responses include:

- Keeping the child close to a calm adult by seating them at the front of the room
- Seating them next to a calm classmate
- Having a predictable routine
- Bringing them close to a trusted adult during transition times, for example having them spend a few minutes with their teacher at the beginning of play time and on returning to class.

Pervasive shame

Children who have experienced neglect and/or attachment disruption may have what is described as a 'pervasive sense of shame'. This sense of shame can lead children to assume that any reprimand or consequence is given because they are intrinsically bad, rather than it being a consequence of a negative behaviour. It has been described as, *'Shame is an all or nothing experience, I am totally worthless from head to foot, other people will fully recognize how full of badness I am.'*

Shame is very different from guilt because guilt comes from doing something wrong and so the person can make amends by apologising, accepting the consequences for their behaviour or changing their behaviour.

A sense of shame may lead a child to behave very negatively because they feel so badly about themselves. They may try to avoid the feeling of shame by:

- Withdrawing from caregivers and peers
- Physical or emotional aggression
- Denying their own needs through extreme dependence, not thinking for self, hurting self
- Being very busy, competitive or thrill seeking.

A sense of shame also significantly impacts on their ability to respond to management of their behaviour. Using 'time out' to manage behaviour may add to the child's sense of shame and perception of being rejected.

'Busy' Behaviour

There are a number of possible reasons for 'busy' behaviour and these include:

- Temperament: the capacity to demand physical and/or emotional nurturing is a protective factor for surviving difficult early experiences
- A state of hyper-arousal resulting from experiences of early trauma
- Lacking the capacity to self regulate. Infants and young children learn self-regulation of emotions through attachment figures. Therefore children who lacked opportunity to attach to a 'good enough' care giver may have not had the opportunity to learn this skill.
- Malnutrition in their early years has been linked to hyperactive behaviour, even when there has been just one episode in the first year of life.

Sensory issues

Children who have experience attachment disruptions may be susceptible to sensory integration issues as a result of poor nutrition, lack of sensory stimulation and little social interaction. A child with sensory issues may be overly sensitive to bright light, noise, crowded or busy environments, and other things which are usual in a classroom setting. This may affect their behaviour.

Younger emotional age

Children who have experienced attachment disruption may have a younger emotional age than their same aged peers. This may impact on their peer interactions, their capacity to self calm (regulate), and their reactions to stressful situations. It may help to consider their *emotional age* rather than merely their physical age, in as far as expectations and management of behaviour. This may be a consideration for teachers and parents around class placement decisions.

Adapted from 'Intercountry Adoption: Information for teachers' Post Adtoption Services, Relationships Australia, South Australia.