

Attachment Theory in the Classroom

Looked After Children (LAC) or children who have failed to form secure attachments with adults in their early years can exhibit a variety of behaviours at school and in their wider life. If not recognised, it can lead to exclusion and educational underperformance. Attachment theory is based on the pattern of relationships between infants and primary carers. There is now a greater understanding of the influence of these very early relationships on later development. Evidence has emerged which links attachment style directly to expectations and responses in school and it is a useful lens to view behaviour difficulties.

Attachment Styles - Our attachment style refers to our pattern of relation to ourselves and significant others. There are 4 main types of attachment style: **Secure Attachment Style** that generally results from a reasonably healthy and balanced childhood. The other three subgroups are types of **Insecure Attachment Styles** and are generally the result of some level of trauma/disruption and/or neglect in the early years of childhood. The child learns that they cannot rely on an adult to respond to their needs in times of stress. While the 4 main attachment styles are described individually below it is possible to have a combination of styles because attachment occurs along a continuum (Bergin & Bergin 2009). It can be helpful to look at the different attachment styles to provide structure for teachers to interpret why a child might be doing what he/she is doing now in class.

(1) Secure Attachment Style: Secure relation to others, adults are considered reliable, helpful and trustworthy. The person has a sense that **“I am OK, you’re OK, the world is OK!”** About 55-65% of the population have a secure attachment style. Secure attachment relationships correlate strongly with higher academic performance, better self-regulation and social competence. Research by Sroufe (1983, 1986), Waters et al (1979), Arend (1979) Barrett and Trevitt (1991) show convincing evidence concerning the links between attachment experience and children’s disposition towards learning.

(2) Avoidant Attachment style: “It’s not ok to be emotional”. In this style, the child sees adults as rejecting and intrusive and they tend to avoid and ignore adults. There is no trust of adults and some children learn to fend for themselves. It is usually the result of a depressive or abusive care-giver. These children can tend to shut down emotionally and dissociate, becoming very self-sufficient. Achievements and accomplishments are much more valued than intimacy with others. Children with avoidant attachment styles tend to be very task-orientated rather than relationship orientated and they can be at risk of compulsive tendencies. They are often highly functional at school and can display perfectionist tendencies. They may be admired as independent and self-reliant pupils. These children can easily become isolated and anger can flare up with stress building up quietly and often people tend to be surprised when there are angry outbursts.

Learning Profile of a Pupil linked to avoidant attachment	
Approach to school/ classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apparent indifference to uncertainty in new situations • Cannot accept ‘not knowing the answer’
Response to the teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial of need for support and help from teacher • Sensitivity to proximity of teacher
Response to the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to be autonomous and independent of the teacher • Hostility towards the teacher is directed toward the task • The task operates as an emotional safety barrier between the pupil and the teacher
Skills and difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited use of creativity • May underachieve or be a perfectionist • Limited use of language
Intervention Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May tolerate closer proximity with games and tasks with clear rules and outcomes • Pairs/small group work rather than individual support might help the pupil to experience closer proximity to the teacher • The learning task is the starting point for working with these pupils – lessons with a plan made clear at the beginning, structured steps, examples displayed and materials to hand will help reduce the threat of ‘not knowing’ • Structure written responses with writing frames/templates, fill in boxes, multiple choice rather than a blank page. • Use of structured games with rules, maths with defined procedures and clear right/wrong answers, questions which are factual and precise, sorting objects and building structures are recommended. These are concrete tasks that engage the left brain functions which can help prevent ‘flooding’ with intolerable emotions

(3) Ambivalent Attachment Style: “I want comfort but it doesn’t help me”. In this style, the child learns that adults are unpredictable as a result of inconsistent caregiving. It generally occurs with adults who are experiencing their own mental health difficulties, those experiencing domestic violence and generally care givers who sometimes are available and are not at other times. The carer may have very little parental control, are not confident in their own adult authority and the child may be overtly hostile to carers, sometimes hitting and attacking parents. The child becomes tuned into the significant adult in their life - constantly trying to work out what the adult is feeling/doing. They may also try to ‘take charge’ of the carer in order to maintain and predict their attention and presence. These children do not have the experience of being ‘kept in mind’. They are worried about adults/others having sufficient interest in them to meet their needs, they often feel the need to draw attention to themselves to be noticed, they can’t bear to be ignored and are terrified of being forgotten by their caregiver. These children may have poor school attendance and are vulnerable at the transition to secondary school. In class these children are often seen to be, clingy and then rejecting, superficial, ‘in your face’ and charming. They may play helpless to keep connected to the teacher or attempt to be controlling of the teacher and peers. They tend to suffer with separation anxiety from care givers.

Learning Profile of a Pupil linked to resistant/ambivalent attachment	
Approach to school/class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of anxiety and uncertainty • Dependent and controlling
Response to the teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to hold on to the attention of the teacher • Apparent dependence on the teacher in order to engage in learning • Expressed hostility towards teacher when frustrated
Response to the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties attempting the task if unsupported • Unable to focus on the task for fear of losing the teacher’s attention
Skills and difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely to be underachieving • Language may be well developed but not consistent with levels of achievement • Numeracy work may be weak • May be controlling of peers
Intervention Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult needs to remain in charge • Differentiate the task into small achievable steps, take turns to model the experience of two different people working alongside each other • Timers for task to moderate anxiety on independent tasks • Board games with rules and turns • Holding a special (transitional) object can take the place of the teacher for short periods of time ‘please look after this for me for a while’ • Make explicit comments during lessons, use eye contact or physical proximity to demonstrate that you are aware of the pupil and thinking about him/her • Their controlling behaviour can be directed in to being helpful in class, taking responsibility for tasks, not people

(4) Disorganised Attachment Style: “I’m frightened”. This style is generally a result of severe neglect and chaotic or abusive environments. The brain is ‘use-dependent’ and in the earliest years, the right hemisphere is developing, and responsive to stimulation from the environment. In the absence of a stable and caring parent the child is left in a high state of arousal and with little capacity for self-regulation and brain development is dominated by reactivity to danger with reinforced pathways for fight and flight which are then easily triggered. The child does not learn the prerequisite skills for self-awareness and sensitivity to others and children with this attainment style often lack empathy. The goal with these children is to reduce the dominance of the ‘fight-and-flight’ brain responses and allow thinking and self-regulation to occur. Health and safety issues can arise with these children and what works one week may not work the next week.

Learning Profile of a Pupil linked to Disorganised Attachment	
Approach to school/ Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominant fight and flight brain pathways leaving little capacity for thinking • Self-sabotage is linked with the belief that they are worthless and things that contradict that belief are hard to accept so traditional behaviour management approaches (i.e. rewards, praise) may not work.
Response to the teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not trust the authority of the teacher, but may respect the authority of the principal • May be unable to accept being taught • Unexpected eruptions and may display aggressive behaviours
Response to the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They may fear failure and reject the task • May have difficulty accepting ‘not knowing’ • May appear omnipotent and to know everything already
Skills and difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May find imaginative and creative activities difficult • Likely to be underachieving and possibly at a very immature stage of learning
Intervention Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a strong need for safety, reliability and predictability • Structure and consistent application of rules • Be clear about what is up for negotiation and what is not • Positive comments about achievements – specific to the task/behaviour, not generic praise (will often reject personal praise due to own poor view of self) • Avoid direct commands, ultimatums or insisting on eye contact • Explicitly state rules, display them and regularly reinforce positive behaviour, separate behaviour from the person • Use drawing, puppets, sand play, bear cards, as alternative modes of expressing feelings. • Acknowledge developmental stage rather than chronological age when setting tasks • Concrete, mechanical and rhythmic activities which engage left brain functions can be soothing to highly charged states for example; counting, colouring, sorting, building structures, sequencing objects/pictures and copying • A ‘retreat area’ within the classroom or outside, a quiet cushioned area that reduces sensory, cognitive and emotional demands on the child • Time-In not Time-Out

