

### Ideas for difficulties related to attachment

An outline of learning profiles and interventions to help teachers to support pupils identified with difficulties related to insecure attachment relationships. It is based on the following book

**Geddes, H. (1999), *Attachment in the Classroom*. London: Worth Publishing**

#### Learning Profile of Pupil Linked to Avoidant Attachment

##### Approach to school/ classroom

- Apparent indifference to new situations
- Present as self-sufficient and independent
- Responses can be fuelled by anxiety but masked by compliance and often willingness
- Aim to maintain some sense of control to increase feelings of safety and predictability
- Anxiety can present in physiological form, e.g. headaches, tummy aches, feeling sick
- Can internalise emotional pain and be withdrawn rather than 'acting out'
- Can be easy to manage in class and go largely unnoticed or misunderstood

##### Response to the teacher

- Denial of need for support and help from the teacher
- Sensitive to proximity of teacher - aim to keep distance to avoid direct interaction
- Can provoke anger in teacher with teacher feeling no real sense of why

##### Response to task

- Need to be autonomous and independent of the teacher - reluctant to ask for help
- Hostility towards the teacher is directed towards task (stabbing pencil on jotter, tearing up drawings, throwing text books across the desk, rubbing out work, etc)
- The task acts as an emotional safety barrier between the pupil and teacher and avoids need for direct interaction
- Task oriented rather than relationship-oriented

##### Skills and Difficulties

- Limited use of creativity (e.g. may read without expression, may avoid more open ended activities, be concrete in his thinking)
  - Likely to be underachieving
  - Limited use of language due to lack of adult support for development of vocabulary and limited experiences
  - Be distant and withdrawn – 'flat' affect; emotionally frozen, head down and emotionally disengaged At risk of developing compulsive tendencies which can sometimes enhance functioning in school
  - Often observed as socially uncomfortable around others and lack motivation for social interaction and 'connectedness'
  - Excessive pressure to cope can result in unexpected outbursts of aggression
  - Behaviour can be construed as independence rather than a communication of need
- Avoidant Attachment - Intervention Implications**
- Focus on the task initially – the child may feel safer if not forced into more direct engagement with the teacher.

- Engage with pupil in highly structured and predictable encounters – rule based, routine situations and games which provide an arena for safe engagement and play
- To reduced anxiety around 'not knowing', ensure tasks are:
  - Predictable
  - Concrete
  - Structured

Concrete activities such as sorting, building and counting, etc. are left brain functions which can help to keep strong emotions from flooding the brain and triggering anxiety and reactive behaviour

- Provide differentiation which acknowledges the child's need for choice – this may communicate thoughtfulness on part of teacher and support development of trust
- Work in pairs or small groups to moderate the intensity of a dyadic situation and enable the child to experience closer proximity to the teacher with less anxiety
- Use mentors as peers may be less threatening than the teacher and may act as an intermediary between the pupil and the teacher
- Support the pupil to initiate and maintain friendships
- Support development of emotional literacy through stories, films and TV programmes by using the characters as a focus for discussion about feelings, fears, relationships
- Respond sensitively to the pupil's needs to develop trust and understanding

### ***Learning Profile of Pupil Linked to Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment***

#### **Approach to the school and the classroom**

- High level of anxiety and uncertainty
- Pattern of behaviour is dominated by fear of separation 'separation anxiety'
- Can be impulsive and tense or helpless and fearful (2 distinct 'types')

#### **Response to the Teacher**

- Needs to hold onto teacher attention – positive or negative attention
- Can present as 'clingy' and controlling
- Highly focused on need to be attuned to the teacher
- Apparent dependence on teacher to engage in learning – constantly seeking teacher support and reassurance
- Expresses hostility towards the teacher when upset - uncertain whether to expect if needs will be met or if they will be disappointed
- May try to take over teacher role as used to operating on an adult level

#### **Response to the task**

- Difficulties attempting the task if unsupported
- Unable to focus on the task for fear of losing teacher's attention
- Tasks can be perceived as an 'intrusion' to the teacher/pupil relationship

#### **Skills and Difficulties**

- May have poor attendance (absent more due to the parent needs than the child's illness)
- Likely to be underachieving due to absences and inattention in the classroom
- Tendency to be preoccupied with parent's needs and whereabouts

- Language may be well developed but not consistent with levels of achievement in other areas
- Very vulnerable at times of transition
- Numeracy may be weak in comparison to language development
- Can appear bossy/controlling/hostile to peers and some adults
- Have experienced lack of sensitivity to child's needs when distressed - learned to expect frustration and anxious involvement with key adults

### **Resistant / Ambivalent Attachment: Intervention Implications**

- Develop an understanding of the meaning of the child's behaviour within the context of his separation anxiety - the child needs to control adult attention to alleviate fear and anxiety of separation
- Be consistently assertive as 'the adult in charge' and avoid any replication of the 'needy' adult (parent)
- Differentiate the tasks into small independent steps.
- Promote sharing and turn-taking (e.g. Board games, project work) to model the concept of two separate people, working alongside and independently
- Rule-based games can create opportunities to express mild hostility in a safe and structured setting
- Use a timer to help reduce anxiety and promote attention for short periods of time
- Give a special (transitional) object as a reassurance (i.e. use teacher's book as a reassurance that the teacher will return for it)
- Give responsibility for tasks, rather than people to alleviate bossy behaviour with peers and utilise skills positively and helpfully in the classroom
- 'Notice' the child explicitly across the classroom to model teacher's awareness of the child without direct engagement
- Small group work can encourage sharing and model how to interact with other children and provide opportunities to learn that individual children have a mind of their own (thoughts, feelings, imaginations, etc)
- Plan beginnings, separations and endings – teach that separations are normal and safe and offer staged and planned separations for withdrawal over time where appropriate
- Use 'journeys' as a theme for story-telling and writing to develop awareness of separation and new ways of relating and engaging
- Plan for and warn of changes in routine to alleviate anxiety – make environment as predictable and routine as possible
- Implement procedures which quickly explain absence and unplanned change
- Offer reliable and consistent adult support to develop trust and feelings of safety
- Involve the parents / carers to support transfer of understanding of need to develop independence and reduce reliance on the adult

### ***Learning Profile of Pupil Linked to Disorganised Attachment***

### **Approach to school/classroom**

- Intense anxiety which may be expressed as controlling
- Can be hyper-vigilant and constantly in state of alert, with fight, flight and freeze pathways easily triggered by even small distractions
- Often presents as very angry and aggressive with very challenging behaviour
- Gets into trouble a lot in unsupervised settings
- Displays inconsistent and unpredictable (irrational) patterns of behaviour
- Can sometimes display outbursts of emotion for little or no apparent reason
- Can hold a view of the world as dangerous and hostile and perceive things that are not known or not understood as threatening or humiliating

### **Response to the teacher**

- Inconsistent in their aim to seek or avoid contact with the teacher
- Difficulty giving the teacher eye contact and may look away in situations where direct interaction is expected
- Difficulty accepting the authority of the teacher but may recognise the HT
- May be unable to accept being taught and be unable to 'permit' the teacher to know more than they do
- Be extremely sensitive to perceived criticism, humiliation and unfairness

### **Response to the task**

- The task may seem like a challenge to their fears of incompetence, triggering overwhelming feelings of humiliation and rejection of the task. This is due to the child's lack of experiences and support/encouragement for learning
- Difficulty accepting 'not knowing' – a fear of failure and its 'consequences'
- May appear to know everything – a learned defence mechanism
- Have difficulty sharing materials and space with others
- Have poor capacity for reflection and coherent recall of events

### **Skills and Difficulties**

- May seem unimaginative and uncreative
- Conceptual thought may be difficult or inconsistent
- Likely to be underachieving and may be developmentally delayed
- May present as hyper-vigilant
- Have little capacity for self-awareness
- Poor capacity for self-regulation and impulse control
- Often lacking empathy and insensitive to the feelings of others
- Can present with characteristics commonly associated with some other developmental disorders, e.g. Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- May soothe feelings of intense anxiety by engaging in rhythmic activities, e.g. rocking, head-banging, humming, whistling, etc.
- May communicate anxiety through self-harming behaviour (e.g. biting, scratching, nipping)
- Can present as 'frozen', dazed and confused
- Poor sequential memory and inability to describe thoughts, feelings and actions related to past events
- may place more importance on objects rather than relationships
- May bully others – particularly those perceived as vulnerable/reminders of own

vulnerability - opportunities to experience power and dominance is important

- Appear to enjoy very little – loss of capacity for pleasure (anhedonia)

### **Disorganised attachment - Intervention Implications**

- Early identification and early implementation of support is an essential element for successful development and positive change
- Reliable, predictable and rule-based routines to develop a sense of safety and security, reduce anxiety and regulate pathways in the brain
- Visual supports, e.g. timetable, use of cue cards, timer, time-out card
- A 'physical container' such as a box, a tent, an individual workstation or another safe place to retreat to when overwhelmed by stress
- Differentiate tasks according to developmental age and reduce challenge to minimum
- Concrete, mechanical/repetitive and rhythmic activities to stimulate left brain function and balance impact of emotional responses
- 'Emotional containment' - where an understanding adult '*receives*' the child's anxiety and '*gives*' them the language to describe the event and their possible thoughts and feelings and solutions to perceived difficulties
- Give frequent positive feedback as this generates new pathways in the brain and reinforces more positive responses over time
- Name emotions within the everyday learning context - talk aloud about thoughts or feelings to model that 'now knowing' or 'wondering' is normal and to teach the child the language of emotions (emotional literacy)
- Agree procedures and responses to ensure colleague support is available if required
- Organise regular network meetings to reflect upon situations, share information and keep all informed to ensure consistent support for the child
- Implement strategies for emergencies e.g. removal to safe, lower stimulation environment to calm, removal of classmates if more appropriate, etc.
- Once calm, provide opportunity to talk through incident or use drawings, play and stories to support child to express feelings and understand situations