Section 4: EMASS Toolkit

Attachment in Educational Settings

A guide for schools

Produced by Family Action’s East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS)

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What is attachment?

Attachment is a biologically driven process that ensures that babies and their primary caregivers develop a positive bond that endures over space and time and enables the child to survive and thrive.

We all have attachments, even as adults, and our earliest relationship experiences can set a pattern for how we interact with others over a lifetime.

A healthy and secure attachment will enable a baby to:

* have their physical and emotional needs met
* learn how to regulate their emotions
* develop an ability to manage stress
* develop empathy and conscience
* develop self-worth
* trust that others can meet their needs
* feel safe enough to explore the world.

Children who are adopted or are living with a Special Guardian are likely to have experienced abuse and/or neglect with their first caregivers, meaning that they have not had the opportunity to develop secure attachments that make them feel safe.

Children may have experienced unresponsive, inappropriate, abusive or inconsistent care and they will have developed different ways of getting their needs met and keeping themselves as safe as possible in these circumstances.

These are sometimes referred to as ‘attachment difficulties’, but really these are just strategies that the child has developed to deal with an unsafe environment.

How do different attachment strategies impact on pupils’ relationships at school?

Even when they are placed in a safe environment where their needs will be met, children cannot easily change their behaviour or how they think and feel. This is especially true when they experience any stressors in their environment or perceive any threat which could be real or not. Memories of past trauma can come into children’s minds at times when no actual threat is present.

Children may have developed a variety of behavioural strategies in response to abusive, inconsistent or neglectful care. Children may try to get attention through being aggressive, loud, controlling, ‘silly’, clingy or risk taking.

Children who have experienced negative or abusive responses to their needs may withdraw and appear undemanding, unresponsive or be overly compliant.

The school environment can pose many difficulties for children who have not had secure attachments in early life. They are expected to:

* form relationships with many different school staff and their peers
* share adult attention with other children in large classes
* ‘wait their turn’
* deal with frustrations and stress
* control their emotions
* manage transitions between classes/activities
* explore their environment.

Some children will also have experienced what is termed ‘developmental trauma’. Early traumatic experiences can impact on babies’ developing brains and their responses to future stress. This means that children affected cannot deal with stress at all well and sometimes the smallest stressors can cause the child to be in a state of alarm.

Some developmental traumas such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder can occur before birth and others such as attachment difficulties occur after the baby is born.

If the brain is in a state of fear, the body responds through:

* fight: aggression to protect themselves from a perceived threat
* flight: running away
* freeze: shutdown
* flop: extreme bodily response where the child may collapse or faint
* friend: attempt to get the perceived aggressor on their side.

This can, again, pose difficulties in a school environment. Unless children are feeling safe, their energy will be put into ‘holding themselves together’ in survival mode rather than in exploring and using learning opportunities.

How to help and support these children and young people in school settings

Relationships

Children can learn new attachment strategies if they are given nurturing, calm, predictable and consistent care from those around them. Positive nurturing experiences in school can enhance the care that adopters and Special Guardians offer their children. Adults have to firstly realise that, rather than thinking the child deliberately ‘won’t do’, they actually ‘can’t do’.

Schools can offer children a small number of supportive adults who are consistent in offering the child a nurturing relationship which offers them a feeling of safety and emotional containment. For example, a key worker who can ‘check in’ with the child on a daily basis and to whom the child is allowed to go when they feel anxious, stressed or upset can help to offer a safe base for the child within school.

Teachers and support staff can also help by considering what might be making the child behave in a ‘challenging’ way and then responding empathically. Logical consequences for ‘misbehaviour’ that are given quickly and without anger are easier for the child to accept. Adults need to ensure that the child still feels ‘connected’ and that any rupture is quickly followed by relational repair.

Situations that help the child build relationships with a small group of their peers but are still monitored by an adult may help the child to develop more socially acceptable behaviour. For example, playing games, group activities and being given responsibilities in the class can help these children understand pro-social behaviours and enjoy being part of a group. Lego therapy uses task-centred work in small groups.

Environment

Stress about the environment can manifest itself in different ways (eg by becoming either withdrawn or by acting out). Some children may: experience sensory overload in noisy classrooms or other school environments; feel anxious at being separated from their parents or carers; find the normal changes during the school day difficult to negotiate (eg transitions between one class and another or one activity and another may provoke attention seeking (needing) behaviour).

Some children will not be able to regulate their emotions well and may be operating at a far younger developmental age (eg tantrum/crying like a younger child).

These children can benefit from predictable routines and repetition in terms of structure, and they may also benefit from access to a safe space and a safe adult to be with.

If children can’t sit still then giving them either a brain break for physical activity or something they are allowed to fidget with may aid their concentration. (See also suggestions in the EMASS Toolkit section focusing on ASD and ADHD for calming sensory techniques.)

Executive functioning

Executive functions help us to focus, plan and control our impulses. All children will benefit from schools supporting the development of their executive functioning skills, as these processes are vitally important in helping children to learn and to problem solve.

Children who have experienced chaotic and unpredictable environments often have not have had the opportunity to develop these skills. Executive functions develop when adults help the child to regulate and modulate their responses in a predictable, consistent and caring way. They may need extra help and patience to practise cause and effect thinking, to plan ahead and to develop the ability to concentrate without becoming distracted. Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences need support to help their behaviour and their brains develop in line with their peers.

The following activities can help children to develop executive functioning skills:

* Plan the day using visual cues.
* Plan and structure any transitions.
* Give one instruction at a time.
* Give alternatives to children who cope badly with unstructured playtimes or lunchtimes.
* Use memory games and games involving structured turn-taking.
* Demonstrate tasks (eg visually).
* Encourage children to plan, do and review their work.
* Give simple choices: ‘this or that’.
* Use social stories to help children learn appropriate responses.

Any activities that help children learn how the boundaries of the day, week and year are arranged will support children to learn about passing time and provide predictability and structure which, in turn, provides a feeling of security for these learners, constancy, shame and conscience development.

Children who have experienced abusive or inconsistent care may have difficulty in understanding that other people see and experience things differently to them. They can struggle with empathy and understanding others’ points of view.

Children with secure attachments know that if they do something wrong it does not mean that they are bad through and through; they realise that if they feel guilty about their misbehaviour, they can make up for it.

They also realise that when someone is angry with you for something you have done, this does not mean that they hate you.

However, children may have had experiences which cause them to feel pervasive shame when they have done something wrong and to think that they are bad and worthless; or they may think that someone’s anger towards something they have done means that they themselves are hated.

This means that children in school need firm but calm correction when they misbehave. Angry responses from teachers and adults merely activate the alarm system in the brain, which will send the child into one of the defence responses discussed above.

Children need to be shown that everyone has different positive and negative emotions and that these come and go. They need to receive the message that they are safe and it is their behaviour which is not acceptable, not them.

Kind and calm correction is far more effective than angry reprimands.

Emotional coaching is an approach that is particularly effective with these children and young people as they can lack reflective reasoning and be unresponsive to traditional reward and sanction approaches. It is an approach where there are three stages:

* **Step 1:** Recognising, empathising, validating the feelings and labelling them
* **Step 2:** Setting limits on behaviour
* **Step 3:** Problem-solving with the child/young person

Emotions Coaching focuses on:

* teaching children/young people about the world of emotion ‘in the moment’
* giving children strategies to deal with ups and downs
* empathising with and accepting ‘negative’ emotions as normal (but not the behaviour)
* using moments of challenging behaviour as opportunities for teaching
* building trusting and respectful relationships with children/young people.

Where to go for further information and support

Emotions Coaching  
[www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/emotion-coaching/](http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/emotion-coaching/)

Adoption UK  
Tel: 01295 752240  
Helpline: 0844 8487900  
Online community: [www.adoptionuk.org](http://www.adoptionuk.org)

Child Trauma  
[www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)

Visual planners  
[www.visualaidsforlearning.com](http://www.visualaidsforlearning.com)

Executive functioning  
How to help kids in school with sensory processing disorder  
[www.ehow.com/how\_5692394\_kids-school-sensoryprocessing-disorder.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_5692394_kids-school-sensoryprocessing-disorder.html)

Social Stories  
[www.asdvisualaids.com](http://www.asdvisualaids.com)   
[www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)

Yellow Kite Attachment Support Service for Schools  
[www.theyellowkite.co.uk](http://www.theyellowkite.co.uk)

Information about executive functioning and brain development  
[https://developingchild.harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/)

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| About us  Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families and brighter lives by delivering innovative and effective services and support that reaches out to many of the UK’s most vulnerable people. We seek to empower people and communities to address their issues and challenges through practical, financial and emotional help.  Our East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS) was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) until March 2018. This document forms part of the EMASS Toolkit, a set of resources produced to support schools that have taken part in the project.  DfE 2955 - Funded by**Training and consultancy**  Family Action’s Training and Consultancy Service can offer a wide range of training workshops for schools and educational establishments, including all the issues covered in the EMASS Toolkit. To book a workshop or inset training day contact:  Family Action, Training and Consultancy  55 Stevens Avenue Bartley Green Birmingham B32 3SD  Email: [TandC@family-action.org.uk](mailto:TandC@family-action.org.uk) or [Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk](mailto:Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk)  Tel: 020 3640 2303  Visit: [www.family-action.org.uk/training](http://www.family-action.org.uk/training)  *Disclaimer: This document includes links to websites and resources used by those involved in the EMASS project. External links were reviewed in February 2018 when this document was produced; however, we are not responsible for the changing content of external websites over time.*  *Last updated 1.3.18* |