

# Learning to reattach

Kinship carer *Tina Hendry* discusses her own experiences of caring for children with attachment issues – and why understanding attachment, and reattachment, is so important

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Seven years ago I became a kinship carer. Overnight my family dynamics changed, as I became the carer to my cousin's children - C who was two years old, and L, who was newborn. I didn't think twice about the decision, but, on a practical level, I required time to facilitate this addition to my family as it was made clear that the likelihood of the children's parents ever being in a position to care for them was negligible. The reality was this would be long term.

It was decided L would be placed in temporary foster care and C would be placed immediately in my care. I was told that C had “attachment issues”. I was not familiar with this term but had no real concerns - I had been a parent for years and was doing OK.

However, very quickly I became aware of the reality of the impact of the “attachment issues”. I had a wee girl who was distressed a lot of the time, which manifested itself as aggression. She struggled to allow me to comfort her during her times of distress, she displayed very chaotic behaviour, she was hyperactive, and didn't sleep.

She struggled to let me build a relationship with her. I was a police officer who was struggling to cope with the behaviour of a two-year-old.

I started reading the work of experts in this field and sought support from various agencies, only to be met with: “We only work with foster carers and adoptive parents.” I found the more I read, the more I was able to understand behaviours I was being met with. I spent a fortune on attending conferences on attachment and trauma.

I soon realised I was seeing trauma-related behaviour. After a lot of preparation, L came to join our family. She was now one, and had been in foster care from birth. During her first year she had been placed with five different foster carers, including respite carers. She was meeting all her milestones, and there was no talk of “attachment issues”, but her issues were greater than her sister's.

When L joined us I found my struggle increased tenfold. She didn't like being held, in fact, she couldn't even sit with me for snuggle time, she always pulled away to potter about on her own.

The girls struggled with each other and fought for my attention constantly. Although both had nursery placements they were struggling to cope in the nursery environment and, to be honest, staff (like me) were struggling to cope with their behaviour. Most days I was advised of some kind of incident, lashing out at other children or staff, unable to play with other children, unable to sit for any length of time.

I used books and storytelling to divert reactive behaviours, I found that the usual sticker charts, and reward/consequence behaviour management that I had used with my birth children had no real impact.

Finally I had a light bulb moment. I realised that I couldn't parent my girls the way I had parented my older children. A wise woman told me, "your girls will push your buttons to the limit; in their wee minds you will leave them too, so it may as well be just now."

I cried when I heard that.

No wonder they were reacting. This behaviour was not about me, but about the girls - who they are and what they have endured. I realised that I couldn't mould the girls to suit me, I had to mould to suit their needs.

The most important words in my vocabulary became structure and supervision. I learned to choose my battles. I realised that if my girls became too excited this excitement very quickly turned to chaotic reactive behaviour, often volatile, towards anyone who crossed their path. As they continued with their behavioural issues and attention seeking behaviour - or so it was labelled - they needed me to help them regulate, and to help others understand.

I experienced what I called "the circle of chaos", (yes picture them running wildly round in circles). I wasn't getting the girls' attention when, in a calm way, I tried to reduce the chaos. So I had to join the circle of chaos. However, when I joined it I was able to control it and gently reduce their chaos by slowing it down. The girls reciprocated and slowed as I slowed. I was helping them to regulate.

I shared all my resources with nursery and school staff, I used the structure and supervision model. I used a calm box that contained sensory and crafting materials, things they liked.

Raising my awareness helped me understand. The more I understood attachment and trauma the more I was able to see their behaviour as communication - they didn't have the language to tell me how they were feeling so they communicated in the only way they knew how. Unfortunately, this communication was perceived as unacceptable "bad behaviour".

Trauma or disrupted attachment effects brain development. Think fight, flight or freeze. I had to react and I had to turn this around.

When my girl hides under a table she is telling me she is frightened. Instead of scolding her I would put cushions under the table or a blanket to make her comfortable. I was lying on the floor beside the table one morning, after she had just had a massive meltdown about going to school. I saw her picture on the side board and started talking to it, wondering out loud if perhaps C was scared to go to school. I told her a story about the little girl who was scared to go to school and wondered what would be going on in school that day. On our journey we went to her school, wondered what the teacher would be saying, wondered about her friends and what would be for lunch. The visualisation ended at three o'clock with mummy (she called me mummy) being at the door of the school waiting to take her home. She was listening but not looking. Coming out from under the table she asked me: "will I always come home?"

I shared everything with the school. They introduced the calm box and safe space (gazebo with sensory items). This had a real positive effect as C became more settled, felt safe and was able to learn. We still have difficult days at school, but generally things are improving.

Recently, I was met at school by a teacher who verbalised how appalling C's behaviour had been. Naturally, I made arrangements to attend school to discuss. I asked the teacher how she felt. "Stressed" was the reply. I calmly reminded her that she was a professional who was able to process these big emotions and asked her how she thought C felt. I gave her some more reading material and reminded her that when you, as a teacher or other professional, might be stressed, our children are feeling the same stress - but multiply it by 100.

This is where reattachment was born. I aim to share my personal and professional experience the knowledge I have acquired through self-education and make this information accessible to the people who need it.

Our children are part of our communities. I hope in 2014 more people will be having a conversation about attachment and why it matters, how it maps us through to adulthood and, more importantly, the impact trauma and disrupted attachment has on a child's development.

***Tina Hendry is Director of Re Attachment. She is a Kinship Carer, and a police officer.***

*For more information on Tina and the workshops she delivers on reattachment, visit <http://reattachparenting.co.uk/>*

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