Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties in Primary School





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Working with Children with Attachment Difficulties

(From Why Attachment Matter; Louise Bomber)

Background Information

Schools are set up as safe systems of attachment (they provide nurturing, routines, etc.) For children with secure attachment styles, this system makes sense. They understand the gestures, eye contact, mannerisms and behaviours of the adults. They have learned that adults are to be trusted so it's okay to relinquish control to them. The pupil is then free to explore and learn. Children who have a robust sense of self respond to behaviourist discipline methods; they have internal controls so respond well to external controls.

For children with attachment difficulties, the world is a battlefield. Adults are not trustworthy. These children and young people do not understand the eye contact, touch, gestures and behaviours of the adults in school. Children who have a fragile sense of self lack internal controls and often experience a toxic sense of shame; 'I am bad'. This is all consuming and focused on the self. Guilt - 'I made a mistake' - includes the recognition of the impact on another person and is easier to deal with.

The Shield of Shame

Lie: 'I didn't do it.'

Blame: 'It was his fault.'

Minimise:' It wasn't so bad.'

Rage: 'You always blame me; I'm rubbish.'

Although a minority of children with attachment difficulties can navigate their way through the school system, many need a 'human bridge;' someone who will learn about them and their experiences and gently challenge them into the world of secure attachment. This person will help to move them on from shame ('I am a mistake') to guilt ('I made one mistake and this can be repaired.')

Assessing the Behaviours

Behaviour is communication.

Behaviour is also profoundly affected by what has gone before.

- Underneath the tip of the iceberg may be:
- Unmet primary needs
- Developmental needs. These children and young people may be functioning at a developmental age far lower than their chronological age. 'He has toddler tantrums.'
- Significant issues of permanency. Children with attachment difficulties lack a coherent sense of s
 elf, others and the world. Once you're not talking to them, they think they've dropped off
 the edge of your world.

Principles of Working with Children with Attachment Difficulties

- Quality relationships are the key to change. 'Empathy breeds empathy.'
- Focus on empathy and nurture plus gentle challenge

- revert to their internal working model that grown-ups are to be feared and that they need to protect themselves.
- Every child needs relationships to thrive. Traumatised children need relationships to heal.
- Just as schools differentiate the learning curriculum to address different needs and abilities, schools have to use different ways of developing the health and well-being of pupils with attachment difficulties. This may involve helping children practise dependence, rather than independence.

Transition Planning

- Map the child's relational traumas on a 'fact file.' These should be known and seen by the key
 people who form the team around the child.
- The team around the child should liaise regularly
- Provide flexi-support; this should be dependent on an assessment of the child's needs
- Transition visits to a new school should include; a first visit to the outside of the building; 4 other visits inside building; one final visit including a trip to the canteen.
- Do a full safety tour of the school; 'This is the fire escape. People in this school take safety seriously. If there is a fire drill, you....'
- Provide an exit plan or a map; what should happen if things go wrong.
- On the lead up to Christmas and the summer holidays when the normal routine has changed, children with attachment difficulties will feel more anxious. They will benefit from a temporary timetable to understand what is happening.

The Role of the Key Adult

- A child may be being removed from class to attend sessions with a youth worker, psychologist
 etc. The best practice is to take advice from these organisations and for a key adult to support
 the use of appropriate strategies in class.
- A key adult must get alongside the pupil, notice their more positive 'parts' and bring the child's attention to this.
- On most occasions it is helpful if the key person goes to the child if they are due to meet them rather than the child keeping an appointment in the adult's place of work
- Keep transitions to a minimum throughout the school day
- The key adult should have protected time to meet with the pupil. Provide a 'time-in' room with the key adult
- The child may meet with the key adult here before registration. The child may bring in a 'show and tell' item to talk about
- The child may benefit from talking about or doing a social story on where their key adult will be when they are in class. This may include an exit strategy if things become overwhelming for the child.
- The key adult may use a 'meet and greet' timetable; talk over what is happening that day with visuals
- Provide a 'check-in card' for the pupil; no targets; the child simply brings their check-in card to the key adult to sign
- Have a safe space for the pupil. 'Ok, whenever you are not coping with the class and need to get out, come here and I will know where to find you.' (Provide cushions; corner in library with a beanbag etc.)
- The key adult should have protected time not only for the direct support to the young person but have the chance to offload and gain support/attend training etc.

Provide Translation (then translate what is happening over and over) (Repetition builds new neural pathways)

- TRANSLATE the world of secure attachment for the pupil to understand. E.g. 'I noticed that you moved back there when I reached for the book. It was as if you thought I was going to hurt you. You need to know that in this school we don't hurt people and we keep them safe.'
- To develop self-control, first build up self-awareness and develop an understanding of what is
 going on in the pupil's body. We need to give feedback in a reflective way; 'I noticed that your
 arms get goose bumps like this—that means you are cold."
- 'I noticed that before you started shouting, your cheeks went really red and your face looked like this....'
- Use 'Big Asks' (See sheet.) 'I know that it's a big ask for you not to be in the front of the queue. I don't think you think there's enough food to go round. I'm going to set you some challenges so that you can test it out.'
- Provide MODELLING. 'When I speak like this... and my face goes like this... it's because I want to control the class; it's not directed at you.'
- Provide lots of THINKING and NOTICING; saying what you can see and joining things up. Feedback helps children to build up a sense of self and internal controls
- INTERPRET Expressions; 'Maybe the person was not looking at you like that.' Use the '5 fingers of examples.' The thumb is the child's example. 'So, you thought he was...(holding up thumb.; 'Maybe in fact he was feeling a bit worried because he's new at this school and was lost (holding up first finger)..' 'Or maybe, he... (holding up index finger)
- Match the tone and pitch of the child's voice; 'Now I get what you're trying to tell me' (in voice as high as child's. 'I've got it. You keep running away because you need some space away from the class.'
- NOTICE the child's positive parts and feed them back. 'I noticed that you were good at mixing colours during the art lesson. You've got an eye for colour. That means you'll be good at...'
- Provide lots of EVIDENCE; 'I noticed you managed to wait in the line until the bell rang. That was a good example of you managing to wait for others. So you've managed it at least once'
- 'Did you see that? Those girls were arguing and the head teacher has taken them into his office. I know what'll happen. He'll do some mediation with them to help them sort it out, because that's what we do in this school we take safety very seriously.'
- Provide COMMENTARIES where you speak aloud and make links. 'This is what happened... so this is what we need to do.'
- EMPATHISE before explaining why the behaviour needs to change. E.g. 'I see you're so upset that you couldn't go outside today; you really wanted to go into the playground. But today it's raining, if we let you get wet you might get ill etc.'
- EXPRESSION is really important; flat facial expressions can be misinterpreted by children with attachment difficulties.

Develop a Sense of Permanency; help the child to know they are BEING KEPT IN MIND

- 'Even when you're in Geography and I can't see you, I'll be wondering how you're getting on doing the work on volcanoes.'
- Put a post-it with a message in their lunch box
- Swop a pen etc. with the child
- Use post cards and send to them during holidays
- Play hide and seek games to encourage a sense of permanency (Find it tubes from Amazon;

Increase Structure and Supervision

- If a child has emotional/social age of four, they can't be expected to cope with unstructured playground play. They need supervision and more structure.
- Have a safe place the child can go to with the key adult
- Consider setting up a club around the child. First, the key adult and child meet to talk about an
 interest of the child's. Then gradually invite another pupil, then another two to discuss the
 same interest.
- Rather than use time-out and other forms of relational withdrawal, we should be offering periods of repair and 'time-in'.
- If a pupil throws a chair, the teacher says 'stop' with a gesture and does not get involved in dialogue. A new member of staff comes in. The new teacher may say:
- 'I have no idea what has happened but we need to repair this.'
- Make up repair cards; which say e.g. 'I'm sorry.' etc. which the child can give to the teacher when he re-enters.
- Repair should happen quite quickly. Children need to move from shame to guilt

Provide Sensory Breaks throughout the Day

Some children will need to be up-regulated; some will need to be down-regulated

- 10-15 minute breaks doing active things
- Monkey bars; a run round the pitch; 'safe space.'
- Skipping. Hula-hoops
- Tangles; calm boxes
- Drums; copy rhythm
- Calm box which may contain;
- coloured paper clips to sort (and decrease arousal)
- Theraclay
- Cards with camping scenes on for visualisations
- Music
- Hand creams for hand massage
- Bubbles
- Cards with visuals on: 'drink a glass of water.' stretch and relax'

Food

- Cereal bar to chew on when angry
- Oranges to keep alert
- Carrot or apple to crunch on when angry
- Straws with water bottles for comfort
- Aromabag with lavender

Improve Executive Functioning

- Give writing frames
- Model and practise how to get started on a piece of work
- Build in lots of processing time and give lots of time to prepare for transitions
- se visual prompts
- Provide evidence of a time when they manage a similar piece of work. 'Look, here's a photos of you finishing a phonics worksheet.'
- Use lots of scales to monitor and regulate: 'you've said you're feeling that it's 9/10 in terms of difficulty. Do you think it could maybe be an 8 because remember you did a worksheet like this last week and got 6 of them correct?'

Practical Strategies for Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties

From: Bomber, L. M. (2007) Inside I'm Hurting (Practical Strategies for Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties in School). London: Worth Publishing.

Strategies for developing relationships:

1. Attending to the child. (Bomber p 86)

Take notice of how each child responds to:

- Physical and/or eye contact
- Tone of voice, facial expression, proximity, initiating contact, mirroring
- Timing, location, intensity and reciprocity of communication
- Attending to the child. Continued...
- Tentatively wonder out loud about what you think might be going on inside the child.
- Do this ABSOLUTELY NON JUDGEMENTALLY!!
- Be careful whether the child feels intruded on do you need to distance the comment?
- Always accept the child's view of your comment and sometimes share your different view.

2. Adjusting our Relationship Style – helping children find the balance between AUTONOMY and DEPENDENCY (p.89)

- For the avoidant child we will need to help them to be more dependent.
- For the ambivalent child we will need to help them be more independent
- We will have to persist with the disorganised child

Providing Emotional Containment (p.93)

- We need to help children with feelings that overwhelm them and contaminate their learning experiences.
- We do this by showing them we are not fazed by their emotions, we can tolerate them and we can think on their behalf.
- The children will learn from our example.

3. Keeping Them in Mind (p.95)

So that children know we have them in mind we can personalise a lot of contact through:

- Sensory reminders
- Touch and Eye contact
- Reassurance
- Physical presence
- Playfulness
- Commenting on your process and their process in non judgemental ways (p.95)
- Creating opportunities for them to practice new tasks and skills, e.g. Asking for help(p.99)
- Communicate empathy and hope, especially when you can personalise examples (p.104)
- Plan ahead around key events, anniversaries and known stressful experiences. (p.109)

Strategy Sheet: Attachment Difficulties

- Always be predictable, consistent and repetitive. Children with attachment difficulties are very sensitive to changes in schedules, transitions, surprises and chaotic social situations. This will help the children to feel safe and secure, which in turn will reduce anxiety and fear.
- Model and teach appropriate social behaviours. One of the best ways to teach these children social skills is to model the behaviour and then narrate for the child what you are doing and why. Always be explicit and keep language clear, precise and simple.
- Remember less is more regarding language.
- Avoid power struggles. When intervening, present yourself in a light and matter-of-fact style. This reduces the child's desire to control the situation. When possible use humour. If children can get an emotional response from you, they will feel as though they have hooked you into the struggle for power and they are winning. This will then lead to an escalation of the problem.
- Break assignments into manageable steps to help clarify complex, multi-step directions. This will ensure the child can understand each step as they proceed through the activity.
- Identify a place for the child to go to (time out) in order to regain composure during times of frustration and anxiety. Do this only if the child is capable of using this technique and there is an appropriate supervised location.
- If/when you observe a child beginning to display what for them are 'soothing' behaviours, e.g.
 rocking, head banging, biting, scratching or cutting themselves, ensure that you remove them
 from the public classroom context. These symptoms will generally increase during times of stress
 or threat.
- Do not show anger if the child fails to show remorse for hurting others (including animals, smaller children, peers, siblings). Remember that this is all part of their difficulties and some of these behaviours may be a means of the child engaging you or others in conflict and gaining more control. State why the behaviours are wrong in a firm, precise and unemotional manner.
- Be available straight away to reconnect following a conflict. For children with insecure attachment and attachment disorders, conflict can be especially disturbing. After a conflict or tantrum where you've had to discipline the child, be ready to reconnect as soon as he or she is ready. This reinforces your consistency and support and will help the child develop a trust that you'll be there for them at all times and no matter how they 'behave'.
- Have realistic expectations and focus on making small steps forward and celebrate every sign of success.
- Stay patient. The process of change may not be a fast one and there will be difficulties along the way. But by remaining patient and focusing on small improvements it is possible to create an atmosphere of safety for the child.

- Always acknowledge and praise good decisions and good behaviour but be specific with the
 praise: 'You've been good today' will generally mean little to the child with attachment difficulties whereas 'You have written that down beautifully. Your writing is very neat and clear and
 looks lovely' will mean a lot more.
- Use 'I' statements when administering consequences for poor behaviour and decisions, e.g. 'I'm disappointed you did that'.
- Remove yourself away from the child or situation. Award yourself time out if or when the stress levels become more extreme and ensure that back-up is available in the form of peer support and respite for yourself.
- Ensure an understanding of cause and effect by teaching about choices, i.e. 'You are choosing to distract others from their work'. This can then lead on to teaching about the distinction between helpful and unhelpful choices.
- Avoid using the words 'lying' or 'manipulating' with such children and replace these with 'con' or 'trick', e.g. you are trying to trick me into getting upset.
- Continually check that the child has and maintains a healthy lifestyle with a good diet, adequate sleep and appropriate levels of exercise.
- Use your peer support network and always ask for help. The child with attachment difficulties
 presents a significant and stressful challenge for all involved and this demands a multi-agency
 approach with parents/carers, teachers, psychologists, clinicians and specialist staff all working
 together to identify what works for each individual. Such close liaison should also ensure that
 the child with attachment difficulties cannot manipulate the carers or play them off against one
 another, and ultimately this will aid inclusion and behaviour change.

Relaxation Exercises for Children

Types of relaxation techniques include:

- Breathing
- Muscle relaxation
- Guided relaxation

For each of the three relaxation techniques, a choice of exercises is provided. These are all short and use simple language.

Staff should model an exercise on a number of occasions. The same one or two relaxation techniques or exercises may be practised regularly.

Pupils may benefit from a relaxation technique being videoed and shown back to them.

Pupils may enjoy dong the exercises along to calming music such as the Disney lullaby music.

Pupils may practise group breathing exercises using a parachute.

E.g. breathe in (lift the parachute up); breathe out (let it fall).

The language used during breathing exercises, muscle relaxations and guided relaxations should be kept simple and explicit. Instructions should be supplemented with appropriate visuals or objects.

Visualisation is more difficult since it involves abstract mental processes or an understanding of complex internal states such as 'tension' and 'relaxation'. Visualisation scripts should be kept very simple, with the use of visuals as a means of helping student to understand what is being described.

Throughout relaxation sessions, pupils may be encouraged to use simple language to describe where in their body they feel stressed/calm (e.g. tummy/head) etc. and what this feels like (e.g. smooth/bumpy.)

1. Breathing

- · Strawberry/blow a candle (Smell the strawberry..blow out the candle..)
- · Smell the flowers (Smell the flowers..one by one..)
- · Dragon Breath
- · Tummy breathing
- · Bow up the balloon .. then let it go

2. Muscle relaxation (with visuals)

The process should include the following:

- 1. Tense the muscles
- 2. Notice the feeling in all the muscles that are tight
- 3. Relax
- 4. Enjoy the pleasant feelings

Muscle Relaxation technique websites

- ☑ http://www.yourfamilyclinic.com/
- ☑ http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/
- ☑ http://www.tenzone.u-net.com/
- 1 http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/
- 1 http://www.cwgsy.net/

3. Visualisation/Guided Relaxation with visuals

Try out Christiane Kerr apps – (each one lasts approximately 4 minutes)

Relaxkids.com

Learning to relax

Many people find that learning to relax helps them reduce worry and anxiety. It can also help improve sleep and relieve physical symptoms caused by stress, such as headaches or stomach pains. Learning to relax is a skill and takes practice before it can be done properly.

You may already have learned a relaxation exercise or you may want to try a relaxation or yoga class at an adult education class or other centre near you. If not, here is a guide on how to relax. This exercise should take about 15-20 minutes. However, if you have only 5 minutes to spare, 5 minutes is better than nothing.

Find a quiet and relaxing place.

Choose a comfortable chair where you won't be disturbed. Make sure you take the phone off the hook. You may need to explain to your family or friends what you are doing so that they do not disturb you. Telling them may also reduce any embarrassment you may feel.

2. Clear your mind

Try to clear your mind of all worries or disturbing thoughts. If these worries or thoughts drift back into your mind while you are relaxing, do not try to stop them, just let them float gently across and out of your mind without reacting to them. Let your mind be clear and calm.

Practice the slow breathing method

Breathe in for 3 seconds and breath out for 3 seconds, thinking the word *relax* every time you breathe out. Let your breathing flow smoothly. Imagine the tension flowing out of your body each time you breathe out.

Relax your muscles

For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7-10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds. Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of inducing pain). Don't try to relax. Simply let go of the tension in your muscles and allow them to become relaxed. Relax your muscles in the following order:

Hands — clench one fist tightly, then relax. Do the same with the other hand

Lower arms — bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then relax

Upper arms — bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension in your upper arm, then *relax*

Shoulders — lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax

Neck - stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then *relax*

Forehead and scalp — raise your eyebrows, then relax

Eyes — screw up your eyes, then relax

Jaw — clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then relax

Tongue — press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax

Chest — breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breath out and relax

Stomach — push your tummy in to tighten the muscle, then relax

Upper back — pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax

Lower back — while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc thus tensing the lower back, then *relax*

Buttocks — tighten your buttocks, then relax

Thighs - while sitting, push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax

Calves - lift your toes off the ground towards your shins, then relax

Feet - gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then relax.

Enjoy the feeling of relaxation

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes enjoying the feeling of relaxation.

Practice once or twice a day for at least eight weeks.

During the day, try relaxing specific muscles whenever you notice that they are tense.

Recognising Tension

Many people find learning to relax difficult. This is because being tense has become a habit.

Use the chart below to help you see where and when you get tense. Write in the situations when you've noticed different muscles becoming tense. You might have been doing something (such as shopping). Or waiting to do something (such as a test). Write in what it was. Write it in next to the muscles which became tense. As you become more aware of when you get tense, add the situations to your chart. In those situations, practise parts of your relaxation routine to overcome the tension

Breathing
Hands
Arms
Shoulders
Neck
Forehead
law
Chest
Stomach
Back
Legs

Relaxation Script for Younger Children

Hands and Arms

Pretend you are squeezing a whole lemon in your left hand. Squeeze it hard. Try to squeeze all the juice out. Feel the tightness in your hand and arm as you squeeze. Now drop the lemon and relax. See how much better your hand and arm feel when they are relaxed. Repeat with the other hand.

Arms and Shoulders

Pretend you are a furry, lazy cat. You want to stretch. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Raise them up high over your head. Way back. Feel the pull in your shoulders. Stretch higher. Now just let your arms drop back to your side. Okay kitten, stretch again. Repeat.

Shoulder and Neck

Now pretend you are a turtle. You're sitting out on a rock by a nice, peaceful pond, just relaxing in the warm sun. It feels nice and warm and safe here. Oh-Oh! You sense danger. Pull your head into your house. Try to pull your shoulders up to you r ears and push your head down into your shoulders. Hold in tight. It isn't easy to be a turtle in a shell. The danger is past now. You can come out into the warm sunshine and once again you can relax and feel the warm sunshine. Watch out now. More danger. Hurry, pull your head back into your house and hold it tight. Repeat.

Jaw

You have a giant jawbreaker bubble gum in your mouth. It's very hard to chew. Bite down on it. Hard. Let your neck muscles help you. Now relax. Just let your jaw hang loose. Notice how good it feels just to let your jaw drop. Okay, let's tackle that jawbreaker again now. Repeat.

Face and Nose

Here comes a pesky old fly. He has landed on your nose. Try to get him off without using your hands. That's right, wrinkle up your nose. Make as many wrinkles in your nose as you can. Scrunch your nose up real-hard. Good. You've chased him away. Now you can relax your nose. Oops here he comes back again. Repeat.

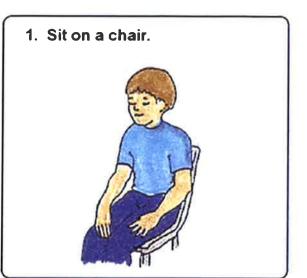
Stomach

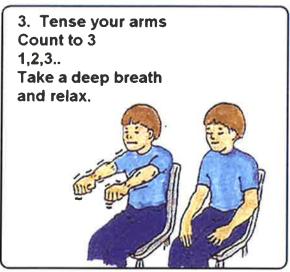
Hey! Here comes a cute baby elephant. But he's not watching where he's going. He doesn't see you lying there in the grass, and he's about to step on your stomach. Don't move. You don't have time to get out of the way. Just get ready for him. Make your stomach very hard. Tighten up your stomach muscles real tight. Hold it . It looks like he is going the other way. You can relax now. Let your stomach go soft. Let it bee as relaxed as you can. That feels so much better. Oops, he's coming this way again.

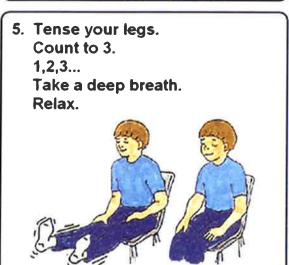
Get ready. Repeat.

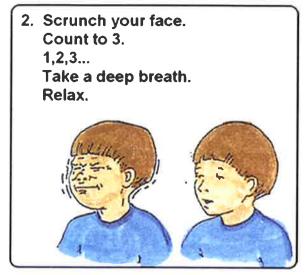
Legs and Feet

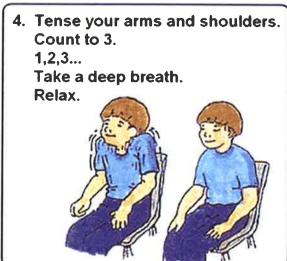
Now pretend you are standing barefoot in a big, fat mud puddle. Squish your toes down deep in to the mud. Try to get your feet down to the bottom of the mud puddle. Push down, spread your toes apart and feel the mud squish up between your toes. Now step out of the mud puddle. Relax your feet. Let your toes go loose and feel how nice that is. It feels good to be relaxed. Repeat.

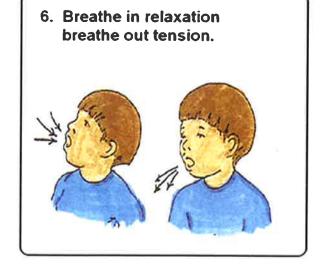












Breathing Exercises

Tummy Breathing



To work out if you are doing tummy breathing, put one hand on your chest and one hand on your tummy.

Now breathe.

Which hand is moving faster? If the hand on your chest is moving faster, you are breathing too quickly.

If the hand on your tummy is moving more quickly, you are taking nice, deep breaths that will help you to stay calm.

Tummy Breathing Exercise

- 1. Place one hand just above your tummy and the other on your chest,
- 2. Open your mouth and gently sigh, as if someone had just told you something really annoying. As you breathe out let your shoulders and the muscles of your upper body relax, down
- 3. Close your mouth and pause for a few seconds.



- 4. Keep your mouth closed and breathe in slowly through your nose by pushing out your tummy.
- 5. Now stop for 3 seconds. 6. Open your mouth. Breathe out through your mouth by pulling your tummy in.
- 7. Pause.

Now do steps 4-7 for as many times as it takes for you to feel calm again.

Breathing Exercises

Sniff the strawberry, blow the candle.



A dragon's head can be made out of a paper cup and some streamers The idea is to blow a deep breath out through a small hole in the bottom of the cup making the fire fly upwards (this can be made out of crepe paper, or even cutup napkins or tissue paper).



Other Resources

Activity Cards

- A Therapeutic Treasure Deck of Grounding, Soothing, Coping and Regulating Cards (Dr Karen Treisman)
- A Therapeutic Treasure Deck of Sentence Completion and Feelings Cards (Dr Karen Treisman)
- 60 Mindful Minutes: Developing mindful behaviour in the nurture group (Tina Rae—The Nurture Group Network)
- 60 Sensory Minutes (Dr Tina Rae—The Nurture Group Network)

Books

- A Therapeutic Treasure Box for Working with Children and Adolescents with Developmental Trauma (Dr Karen Treisman)
- Attachment Aware School Series: Bridging the gap for troubled pupils (Louise Michelle Bombèr)
- Attachment in the Classroom: The links between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school (Heather Geddes)
- Attachment Theory and the Teacher-Student Relationship: A practical guide for teachers, teacher educators and school leaders (Philip Riley)
- The Big Book of Calmers (Jenny Moseley and Ross Grogan)
- The Big Book of Energizers (Jenny Moseley and Zara Niwano)