

# attachment strategy

for Education Resources



# attachment

# strategy

How our establishments and services can provide a secure base and safe haven for children and young people.

How our establishments and services can be a secure base and safe haven for staff.



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As an employee or volunteer you will be aware of how early childhood experiences will have affected the way in which children have grown and are able to understand the world around them and will be able to empathise and communicate with children in a way they are able to understand and respond to, informed by your understanding of the significance of your own attachment relationships.

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Scottish Government's Common Core of Skills, Knowledge and Understanding and Values of the Children's Workforce in Scotland (2012)

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## Foreword

### How does this strategy fit with key Scottish agendas for children and young people?

This Education Resources document is an acknowledgement of the commitment in Education and our partners in Children's Services in South Lanarkshire to "develop an attachment strategy to inform the implementation of training on attachment-informed practice" (Getting it Right for Every Child in South Lanarkshire's Children Services Plan 2017-20).

The document has a focus on Education Resources but it has been prepared in collaboration with a multi-agency Children's Services Attachment Strategy consultation group.

The Attachment Strategy is relevant to all of the Education Resources workforce. It aims to promote the key understandings from attachment theory and how the theory can inform the ways in which we support our children and young people. This document will therefore promote attachment-informed practice from early years to secondary aged children and young people and will also inform training plans for the Education workforce.

Attachment theory supports both the understanding of early childhood trauma and the impact of loss, and it also provides the theoretical underpinning needed to fully comprehend the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) dialogue.

Attachment-informed practice supports the Scottish Government vision of transformational change required to improve outcomes for children and young people by creating emotionally supportive learning environments which optimize learning experiences. Attachment-informed practice supports key Scottish central and local Government policies and agendas, such as GIRFEC and in particular, the motion lodged before the Scottish Parliament on 13 March 2013 on the Scottish Government's ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world for children to grow up.

I am delighted to commend this document which will support you in making even more progress towards achieving the goal of closing the poverty related attainment gap.



Tony McDaid  
Executive Director of Education Resources



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## Aims of the strategy

The aim of this strategy is to **promote an understanding of attachment theory and support the implementation of attachment-informed practice by:-**

- highlighting why attachment theory and practice is important for everyone working within Education Resources, whatever their role and remit, so that we all realise the difference we can make.
- discouraging labelling or diagnosing conditions when people present with distressed behaviours and instead think about what their behaviour is communicating.
- making recommendations for awareness-raising and training on the implementation of attachment-informed practice.

Responding to distressed behaviours in an attachment-informed way can be emotionally challenging. The aspiration of this document is that it will build understanding in the workforce and highlight the need for adults to support each other in this drive to improve outcomes for all.

The Attachment Strategy aims to promote the key understandings from attachment theory and how the theory can inform the ways in which we support our children and young people



# What is attachment theory and practice?

Attachment is a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings”  
(John Bowlby, 1969)

Attachment theory is one of the most influential psychological theories of the last century, of relevance not just to children but all of society.

Over past decades to the present day, attachment theory has been tested, researched and refined across the world since the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth. It has influenced therapeutic interventions, child development as well as parent and teaching approaches, and child care policies. It is now a well-established theory relevant to understanding all child and adult relationships, as well as relationships between adults. This includes the relationships within the organisations in which they work.

The theory was first developed by the child psychiatrist John Bowlby. In collaboration with the psychologist Mary Ainsworth, the theory focused on the early child and parent / caregiver relationship, although Bowlby argued the theory is applicable to human beings ‘from the cradle to the grave’. The theory proposes that the development of secure attachments with the parent / main caregiver, serves a key purpose i.e. provides emotional security, protection against stress at times of fear and ensures survival.

Attachment is a process. It is about the quality of the ongoing relationship from the child’s perspective i.e. the enduring relationship which develops between a child and their caregiver, in particular during the first two years of life.

When a baby needs something – food, comfort, play – they may feel stressed and signal discomfort through, for example, crying, seeking to have their needs met. Parents / caregivers ‘tune in’ (attune) to their baby’s unique cries and signals. Parents / caregivers become a secure base from which the child has confidence to explore and grow. They also provide a safe haven to which the child can retreat to for comfort and reassurance.

This attachment process, in the first few years of life, is crucial in shaping how we grow and develop through childhood and into adulthood – neurologically, physically, emotionally, socially and psychologically.

When a child feels secure, the ‘Attachment Behavioural System’ is closed down allowing them to explore and learn to regulate their emotions

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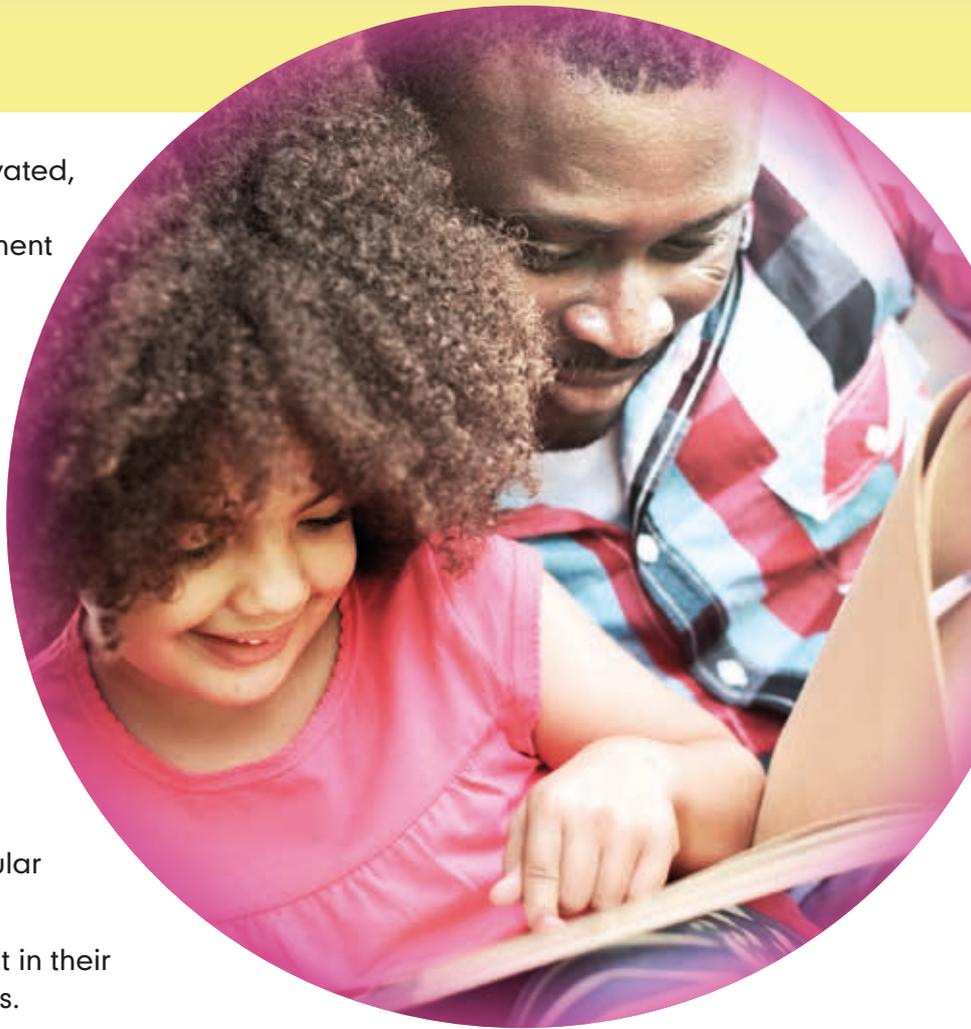


When the child's fear response is activated, what Bowlby called the 'Attachment Behavioural System', a secure attachment profile develops when the parent / caregiver responds reliably and sensitively over time with comfort and reassurance. Stress hormones are reduced each time the child is comforted and beta endorphins are released, leading over time to a profile of a generally happy, playful child who learns to express genuine feelings and form close relationships. When a child feels secure, the 'Attachment Behavioural System' is closed down allowing them to explore and learn to regulate their emotions.

Some children do not experience regular reassurance and this happens when:

- the parent / caregiver is inconsistent in their response to the child's fear / distress.
- the parent / caregiver is very needy and almost relies on the child.
- the parent / caregiver is the source of the danger.

These children may continue to experience fear and discomfort whenever they are under stress. Some infants have learned to either hide their distress in order to keep the parent available or to escalate their distress in order to get a response. A range of insecure attachment behaviours / profiles therefore can develop. Insecure children are all prone to experience stress without healthy coping strategies, but with some children the stress is obvious. The hyperaroused child is in a perpetual state of distress which is clearly noticed by everyone around them. Some children also experience high arousal but there are few behavioural signs of this distress.



The patterns of insecure attachment behaviour which develop therefore have a logic embedded from early childhood – the children learned these ways of trying to keep the parent / caregiver responsive. However, these behaviours do not work well for them in school or the community. Depending on the attachment profile which develops, children can either be too independent and avoid asking for help, or too dependent on adults and constantly in need of attention and reassurance. With most insecurely attached children, unexpected events can trigger past trauma and pain and a young person can present with behaviour which seems totally inappropriate and unrelated to the current situation; they are actually re-experiencing the panic and fear.





“In healthy families a baby forms a secure attachment with her parents as naturally as she breathes, eats, smiles and cries – this occurs easily because her parents are attuned to her needs: they ‘dance’ with her. There are other families where the baby neither dances nor even hears the music. In these families she does not form a secure attachment. Rather her task – her continuous ordeal is to learn to live with parents who are little more than strangers. Babies who live with strangers do not live or grow well”  
(Hughes, 2006)

Attachment-informed practice will involve:

- embedding a culture of positive relationships throughout education.
  - seeking to have positive relationships with children and young people. Research shows that few factors in education can have a greater impact on the experiences of children and young people.
  - re-interpreting the behaviours which can cause children to be alienated from the adult and maybe also from their peers. In an attachment-informed approach, behaviours are understood as unmet developmental needs which have led to inappropriate and unhealthy responses.
  - being aware of any background factors in children’s lives which may indicate a risk of insecure attachment.
- reflecting on your own attachment history – often we unconsciously care for others the way we were cared for and perhaps that is not the type of response a particular child needs.



# Why is attachment theory and practice important for all of us working within education?

The role of health and economic factors in positive outcomes is acknowledged. However, although you cannot see, touch, taste or smell 'attachments' they are the 'glue' which connects families, creates healthy organisations and communities and fosters a life-enhancing and stable society. Effectively promoting and fostering meaningful attachments and positive relationships throughout life, has a great potential for a positive influence on the workforce and for successful outcomes for our early years establishments, schools and communities.

It is significant that in the Scottish Government's GIRFEC resilience / vulnerability matrix that poor attachment is the first indicator mentioned (Scottish Government, 2012). A key risk factor for insecure attachment includes being care experienced.

Care experienced children whose early experiences of trauma continue to affect their lives may find aspects of their education and community challenging. However, it should be remembered that insecure attachments in children and young people may occur in families which are apparently very privileged. It should also be noted that research would indicate that only about 60% of the adult population have been securely attached, yet many go on to become well balanced adults. It is highly likely that they have had enriching relationships with extended family members, teachers or other adults supporting them within the community, which have compensated to some extent.

Not all relationships in educational establishments will be what the research literature calls 'attachment relationships', i.e. where a child or young person has developed a dependency on the adult in order to feel safe and secure. However, an attachment-informed, relationship-based approach can make a significant difference to the outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. The most important healing experiences occur outside therapy and inside homes, schools and communities.

Research has shown that there are patterns of care and attachment relationships which are passed on over generations. It is therefore crucial to intervene as early as possible with children and families.

If all of the workforce in education can try to understand the young person, that itself is a form of recovery. Successful intervention is based on providing a structured environment with firm boundaries and nurturing, empathic relationships. From this secure foundation other areas – developing social skills, self-esteem, emotional literacy, autonomy and self-identity – can be developed. This in turn will promote readiness to learn. To support children and young people with insecure attachments, as well as support their parents / caregivers, a developmentally sensitive informed approach is needed to create experiences for vulnerable children that can shape, reshape and transform their developmental journey.

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# How do we recognise attachment-informed practice?

The exact detail of attachment-informed interventions will be different depending on a number of factors, e.g. specific needs of the children and young people.

There is not a 'one size fits all' solution, but all children will benefit from establishments and services who strive to provide a secure base and a safe haven for children, young people and staff alike. Given the Scottish Government's statement on the Common Core quoted at the beginning of this strategy document, all of the Education Resources workforce will benefit from opportunities to receive support where elements of their own attachment childhood history is impacting on how they cope with children who are insecurely attached. The Local Authority has a range of counselling and support services for employees.

There are various organisational approaches which can support this drive to attachment-informed practice, e.g. restorative, nurturing approaches. If these are used consistently attachment-informed practice will then become embedded in the ethos and be evident in policy and practice.

Research would indicate that **60%** only about of the adult population have been securely attached, yet many go on to become well balanced adults

The most important healing experiences occur outside therapy and inside homes, schools and communities





# Attachment-informed practice

Following a research programme involving Glenlee Primary and St Cuthbert's Primary, the examples below are taken directly from data collected from the research group in St Cuthbert's Primary.

## How can all establishments and services be a secure base and safe haven for children and young people?

- Empowering staff to get to know the 'whole child'.
- Transitions are carefully planned and tailored to the needs of the child. This is particularly relevant to change of placement of home or school and also at various points throughout the day.
- Enhanced transition for vulnerable children year on year.
- Consistency of approach from all adults.
- Routines and structure are clear so that there is relative predictability for pupils.
- The school and services involved with the child or young person explore how to establish trust.
- Children know they are 'kept in mind' by the adults who are supporting them.
- Schools and services working with children and young people reflect on how best to motivate children and what works.
- Encouragement is provided for the child and young person to be all they can be. Talents are noticed and recognised.
- Opportunities are built in to ensure every child's voice is heard.
- Information about the child's story is shared as relevant and appropriate, and good communication is maintained.
- All contributions from children are valued. This can be a challenge in insecure children and young people who are withdrawn.
- Children and young people are set manageable / realistic goals.





## Key messages

Attachment theory is one of the most influential theories of personality development within the context of relationships, of relevance not just to children but all of society.

'Attachment behaviours' are evident when a child or adult is fearful / anxious / feels unsafe and these behaviours are ways of communicating unmet developmental needs, preoccupations and past experience.

It is important for **everyone** working within Education Resources to understand attachment theory and practice, whatever their role and remit – we can all make a difference.

Adults who understand the attachment process and the effects of unmet attachment needs and trauma are better equipped to build resilience.

Attachment-informed practice improves outcomes for children and young people and changes life trajectories.

Attachment-informed practice involves everything from our day to day interactions with children, young people and colleagues to organisational approaches such as nurturing and restorative practices.



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