

Information leaflet

Attachment issues

The ability to form strong attachment is important for all children and adults, however children who come to live with a special guardian have often experienced trauma and can have attachment issues.

The experiences we have shape our brain and the person we become. The brain grows when connections are made between cells in response to what is happening to us. These connections are forming and changing all the time throughout our lives.

The human brain takes 25 years to reach maturity and every relationship we have will shape and change it in some way.

A child's emotional and chronological age can be different if they did not receive all the things they needed as a baby. Aspects of their early development, their foundations as people, may be underdeveloped and as these gaps need to be filled to help the child to develop well. Part of a special guardian's role will be to help fill these developmental gaps and professionals should seize opportunities to talk to special guardians about attachment issues.

The early years

A baby's brain grows quicker in the first three years than at any other time. During this time their brain makes connections and patterns which are based on the relationships they have with their primary carer and other adults who are caring for them.

If during this time the baby is living in a stressful environment their brain can find it challenging to grow and develop as it should. Ideally the brain needs the baby to be relaxed and feel safe – this is called a 'state of balance'. If this balance is not in place, the patterns that the brain makes can be slowed down and can result in the baby feeling unsafe and unable to make sense of the world around them.

This can take place during pregnancy too resulting in the brain becoming wired to view the world as hostile. High levels of stress can affect the baby's immune system, ability to think, retrieve information and manage behaviour.

Babies and young children communicate their needs, either by crying or by asking for something. If their needs are not met by their primary caregiver, feelings of anxiety, fear and a distrust of adults can form. This can be difficult to change as they get older.

To make good brain connections a baby and child needs cuddles and a loving touch. Their body responds and works in tune with the person who matters to them so if that person is worried and stressed, the baby will feel worried and stressed.

There are some key things to consider when thinking about a baby's brain development. It is important for the baby to feel that their carer thinks about and is aware of them. A baby also needs soothing when they are distressed and stimulation in order to engage them and help them learn.

After childhood the development of the brain slows down but it continues to make new connections throughout their lifetime.

The teenage years

The brain changes dramatically during the teenage years. During these years the patterns that the brain has made change and teenagers begin to rely on peers rather than their caregivers to provide support and further develop their brain. If the teenager has lived through a stressful childhood this transition to becoming a teenager can be difficult and result in challenging behaviour.

The connections in the brain made during the teenage years are often less strong than those that were produced by repeated childhood experiences. The brain makes the best new connections by having good relationships with other people of all ages.

Trauma

Many children living with special guardians have experienced some form of trauma. It is natural for most children to think their new home will be just the same as their old home.

Children and young people who have experienced trauma and stress can often have a number of triggers that bring back bad memories. These triggers can include images, sensations, environments or emotions. For many children transitions and changes taking place within their life, be it moving home or house or school, can result in them showing challenging behaviour.

Most children who have experienced trauma will have difficulties forming attachments. They will be unsure of the people around them. Many will become withdrawn and have difficulties with boundaries and building relationships. They might struggle to describe and show their feelings.

For some children traumatic experiences can result in them having physical problems such as hypersensitivity to physical contact, problems with coordination and increase in general medical conditions.

Looking forward

Throughout our life our brain works best when we have caring and loving people around us who show us attention and respond to us. Although the development that takes place within the first three years of a baby's life is important it does not mean that problems cannot be fixed later in life and this is something that professionals can emphasise to special guardians.

Many children living with special guardians have experienced stressful environments and traumatic events. It is important to recognise that a child makes connections through repeated experiences and will expect things to stay the same. So when moving from a difficult environment to the special guardian's loving home it will take time for them to feel safe.

Professionals should remind special guardians that they can help the child by ensuring they are emotionally available to them by recognising when they need attention and responding to them. Depending on their age and emotional development, children are much less able than adults to self-regulate their feelings so special guardians need to be able to step in and comfort and reassure them. If the special guardian is relaxed and happy it is much more likely that the child will be too. All verbal and non-verbal communication will help the baby and child form attachments and develop.

It can be a long road but it is important that special guardians celebrate all achievements – no matter how big or small.

Practical tips

- As a result of their previous experiences children might react differently to physical closeness and touch
- Special guardians should think about their non-verbal communication. They should try different facial expressions, movements and tone of voice.
- They should take a note of how the child reacts to different adults and see if they can understand why they react in the way they do.
- Remind special guardians that children are more affected by the way you say something rather than by what you are saying.
- Try and use positive language. Words are powerful and shape the way babies and children think, feel and behave.
- Special guardians could try new ways of communicating such as singing, poetry and telling jokes. These will help children form new connections in their brain.

Key points

- The ability to form good attachments is important for all children and adults, however children who come to live with a special guardian have often experienced trauma and can have attachment issues.
- The human brain takes 25 years to reach maturity and every relationship we have will shape and change it in some way.
- A baby's brain grows quicker in the first three years than at any other time.
- The brain changes dramatically during the teenage years. Teenagers rely on peers rather than their caregivers to further develop their brain.
- Most children who have experienced trauma will have difficulties forming attachments.
- Although the development that takes place within the first three years of a baby's life is important it does not mean that problems cannot be fixed later in life.



Useful links

Early Intervention Foundation

www.eif.org.uk

Tel: 020 3542 2481

EIF provides evidence and advice on early intervention for tackling the root causes of social problems for children and young people. It provides a range of online and video resources including what the evidence says about what works to support attachment and parent-child relationships, good behaviour and strong cognitive development in the early years.

National family Mediation

www.nfm.org.uk

Tel: 0300 4000 636

NFM delivers family mediation through affiliated members in over 500 locations across England and Wales. Their website explains how mediation works and provides a local service finder.

Young Minds

youngminds.org.uk

Hotline: 0808 802 5544

Young Minds is a leading charity that provides information, advice and support for young people about their mental health and wellbeing.

Family Action Head Office 24 Angel Gate, City Road, London, EC1V 2PT

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