

Information leaflet

Managing attachment issues

The ability to form strong 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 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 get all the things they needed as a baby. Aspects of their early development, their foundations as people, may be underdeveloped and these gaps need to be filled to help the child to develop well. Part of your role will be to help fill these developmental gaps.

It is important to remember that each child is different and has experienced different things so there are no easy answers. You will find some information on attachment and trauma below but if you think your child has attachment issues you should seek further support and training.

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 isn't 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 their 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 you think about a baby's brain developing and how to best form strong attachments. 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 early 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 can 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 schools, 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 an 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.

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 your loving home it will take time for them to feel safe.

You can help your child by ensuring you are emotionally available to them and 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 you need to be able to step in a comfort and reassure them.

If you are relaxed and happy it is much more likely that your 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 to celebrate all achievements – no matter how big or small – along the way.

Practical tips

- As a result of their previous experiences children might react differently to physical closeness and touch. Keep this in mind and try different ways of making a connection such as walking together.
- Think about your non-verbal communication. Try different facial expressions, movements and tone of voice.
- Take a note of how the child reacts to different adults. See if you can understand why they react in the way they do.
- Experiment with the way you communicate – smile, use different tones of voice, use humour.
- Remember 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.
- 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. Teenage 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 places within the first three years of a baby's life is important it does not mean that problems cannot be fixed later in life.
- It can be a long road but it is important to celebrate all achievements.

Useful organisations

Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)

Email: info@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 (NFM)

www.eif.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

www.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

T: 020 7254 6251 F: 020 7249 5443 info@family-action.org.uk www.family-action.org.uk

Registered as a Charity in England & Wales no: 264713. Registered as a Charity in the Isle of Man no: 1206.
Registered Company Limited by Guarantee in England and Wales: 01068186.

Patron: Her Majesty the Queen. Chair: Bryan Portman MBA FCCA FCIS. Chief Executive: David Holmes CBE.

Vice Patrons: Christine Davies CBE. Dr Andrew McCulloch. Dame Denise Platt DBE. Katie Vanneck-Smith. Professor Harriet Ward CBE.