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| **Unit No. 6b** | ***Understanding attachment*** |
| **Unit objectives**   * To refresh participants’ knowledge about attachment and its importance for human growth and development. * To consider the importance and relevance of attachment for children and young people’s capacity to learn. | |
| **Outline of Unit**   * Introductory activity on attachment * Video clip Helen Minnis 1 Attachment * Presentation and discussion on attachment * Case Studies | |
| **Resources required to deliver unit**  Hand-outs   * *Attachment questions* * *Attachment Theory,* * *Adoption Attachment Issues and your School* * *Case studies Jamie and Morag*   PowerPoint slides  Video Clip *Helen Minnis 1 Attachment* | |
| **Resources required to support this unit**  PDFs   * *NCERCC Understanding Why* * *IRISS insight 10 Attachment Informed Practice with Looked After Children* * *Attachment Matters for All* | |
| **Introduction to trainer**  Attachment theory is a key underpinning framework for practice with looked after children. An awareness of the impact of impaired attachment can help practitioners to understand the children they work with much better and allow them to provide a more attuned and sensitive response to them. It is important to remember that although most participants will probably have positive and secure attachments in childhood there will be some whose own attachment histories are poor and that this may mean that they find this material difficult or they may be resistant to the ideas presented. It is essential that this is managed sensitively and you should emphasise that many individuals who are able to function very well in relationships and are productive and competent, have had less than optimal attachment experiences. Research demonstrates conclusively, however, that there is an increased RISK of persisting difficulties across a range of domains for children with insecure attachments, particularly disorganised attachments, as they progress through childhood and into adulthood. | |

### Introductory activity on attachment (15 minutes)

In the large group address the following questions and record the answers on a flip chart.

* What does a baby or young child do that elicits a care giving response from an adult
* What is required from the care giver or environment to enable attachment?
* What factors might impede the development of secure attachments?

After the discussion give participants the hand-out “Attachment Questions”

**Video Clip (5 minutes)**

Helen Minnis talking about attachment. Show this clip as an introduction to the presentation.

**Presentation and discussion on attachment (30 minutes)**

Use the PowerPoint slides, hand-outs and PDFs to create a presentation.

Explain the evolutionary value of attachment and emphasise that children will develop the attachments that enable them to survive most effectively in the environments into which they are born and where they grow up.

Securely attached children are characterised by confidence, curiosity and a capacity to show emotions, to make friends and to give and receive affection. The characteristics of their care givers are consistency, availability and sensitivity to the child’s needs. You should use the hand-outs and overheads to provide an overview of how attachments are formed. Explain the cycle of arousal and relaxation. Emphasise that this lays down the pattern for future responses to stress. Those children who do not learn to regulate stress through a positive relationship with a caring adult are more vulnerable if they experience adversity later in childhood. Describe the formation of an internal working model. Outline the different attachment patterns which are described in research literature and refer participants to the hand-out. Point out that developing good attachments leads to a positive self-image which enables children to interact with other people. Securely attached children have the capacity to take risks and to explore. Identify some of the factors that might impede the development of secure attachments.

The impact of insecure attachments can mean that children become preoccupied with meeting their basic safety and trust needs and have little or no capacity to explore and interact in the wider environment. Refer to the types of attachment patterns described in the slides and hand-outs. Emphasise that attachment patterns are a characteristic of the relationship rather than the child and it is therefore possible for a child to have a secure attachment to one adult but an insecure attachment to another adult. The early experiences of looked after children can lead to the creation of disorganised/insecure attachments which are particularly damaging for them and will adversely affect children’s and young people’s ability to manage the process of attending school and learning.

Emphasise that it is through attachment relationships that certain core developmental tasks take place. (Kate Cairns slide). Take time to explore each of these key developmental tasks and engage the group in discussion about the children they work with. Point out that if an individual has not largely achieved these tasks by their early school years they will find it very hard to learn or socialise with their peers. For some looked after children there has been no safe and trusting relationship through which to achieve these developmental tasks even by the time they reach adulthood.

It is important to acknowledge that in the past care givers, particularly residential workers, have sometimes been told not to allow children to become attached to them - something which we now knows flies in the face of children’s need to form secure attachments. Teachers can also be important secondary attachment figures who can provide stability and safety in a child’s world. Discuss the importance of understanding the attachment needs of children in order to provide a positive education for them.

### Give participants the hand-outs “Attachment Theory” and “Adoption Attachment Issues and your School”. You may also wish to direct them to the additional material in the Unit or draw on some of this to help them to think about how to translate attachment theory into practical interventions in their work.

### Case Studies (40 minutes)

In small groups, ask the participants to look at the case study of either Jamie or Morag. Make sure both children are discussed by at least one of the groups. Remind participants of their learning about brain development. Ask them to discuss the following questions.

* What impact may the child’s environment have had on their developing brain?
* What factors have affected the development of attachments in this child?
* How do you think this child has been made to feel about him or herself?
* What understanding do you think they have about the adults in their lives?
* What will they need to help them learn at home and at school?

Each group should provide a brief feedback concentrating particularly on the last question. If not covered in the feedback, highlight the following points.

### Jamie

Jamie has had poor experiences since he was a baby with mental ill health making his mother unable to be proactive or responsive. His own prematurity would have made it more difficult to establish a secure attachment. He has had episodes of positive care but little consistency. Jamie is likely to have been made to feel insecure and anxious. With his mother he is aggressive because he is not receiving the attention he needs, therefore needing to make his presence known. With his father he responds in a different way to elicit attention.

His understanding of adults is that they are unpredictable and unresponsive. Jamie has had almost no help in learning to manage his stress. The positive relationship with his grandmother was important but her death removed this support as well as making his mother even less available. Jamie operates at a much younger level than his chronological age, lacking the confidence and reassurance to explore his environment.

At home and at school Jamie will need consistency, reassurance and to be set tasks and challenges which he can successfully complete and which may be more appropriate for a younger child. He may need the supplementary support of a nurture group or its equivalent to provide structured compensatory experiences which will enable him to develop more age appropriate emotional awareness and control. He will probably find formal learning very difficult as he has a very rudimentary understanding of cause and effect or narrative and meaning.

### Morag

Morag had positive experiences as an infant. This means that she is likely to have developed some capacity to regulate stress even though later adverse experiences have had a damaging impact on her. Since she was a toddler, however, her life has been characterised by moves and rejection. She is likely to have been made to feel insecure and anxious about those who care for her, and this has manifested itself as angry and aggressive behaviour. The racism she has encountered within her extended family and at school has exacerbated her insecurity and low self-esteem. Her understanding of adults is that they are unreliable and that she is not lovable. A strong positive relationship with a sibling and positive relationship with staff and a teacher illustrate that, at some level, Morag still has a positive view of herself. Emotionally and cognitively she is operating at the level of a much younger child. She needs targeted support at home and school to enable her to catch up to the level of which she is intellectually capable. Her recent positive development is taking place in the context of a secure relationship with her teacher and positive relationships at home. The planned move to secondary school is potentially very destabilising and the planning and communication between school and home must continue. Her new school need to be clear about both her vulnerability and her potential to ensure that her particular needs are thought about and planned for. Her previous experience of racism was very destructive and there needs to be a proactive plan to ensure that she receives positive cultural understanding and support both at home and at school. She will soon be entering puberty and her adolescent years are a time of both risk and potential. Morag has a number of very positive qualities and capacities that should be strengthened and supported as she enters this crucial period of her life.

### Key Messages on Attachment

* The quality of early attachments (or lack of them) appears to be significant in relation to subsequent functioning.
* It is vital that children have consistent, reliable, responsive caregivers, particularly in the early months of life in order to provide a secure early base.
* A range of adverse factors can contribute to the formation of insecure attachments
* A child or young person’s attachment pattern has enabled them to ‘survive’. Giving up a survival strategy and adopting more positive patterns of relating will be difficult and may take a long time.
* Forming warm, predictable and consistent relationships with children and young people, even for short periods of time, assists in the development of a more positive internal working model.
* Deliberate withholding of attention, regard or comfort from a child or young person is likely to damage his/her sense of self-esteem and self-worth.
* An understanding of a child or young person’s attachment behaviour allows appropriate intervention to be planned both at home and at school.
* Not all children who are looked after have attachment difficulties, nor are attachment difficulties only present in children and young people who are looked after.