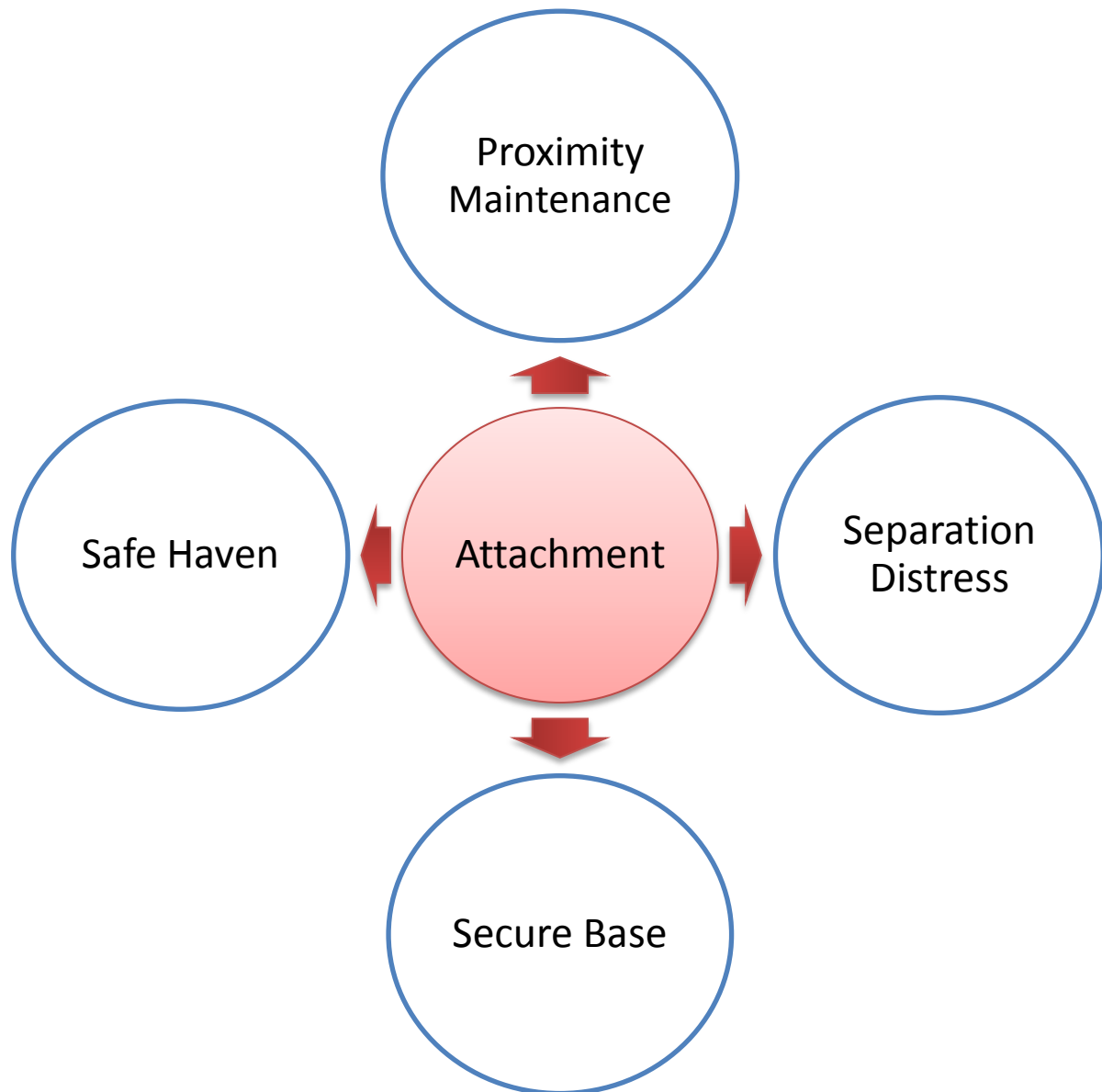


Supporting Students through Understanding Attachment – an illustrated guide



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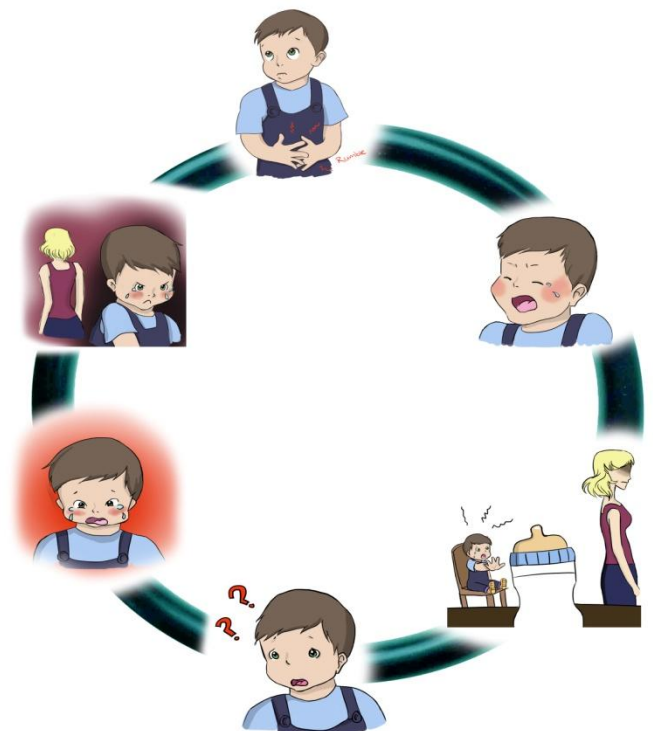
In this pamphlet Gareth D Morewood considers what attachment is and how you can support students in school.

What is Attachment?

- Attachment behaviour is there to ensure the survival of the child (originally proposed by Bowlby, 1969)
- Attachment is an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally
- Attachment experiences are fundamental to emotional/social/physical/cognitive development
- Good early attachments serve to promote resilience to later traumatic (life) experiences
- The foundation of attachment is the early main carer/child interaction
- Its purpose is to enhance survival during infancy and promote adaptive development during the whole life span – based on the central dilemma of human life – the need for closeness and autonomy
- Human infants are very vulnerable for a long time and need the presence and protection of carers who can assist in survival for some time
- Being safe is the basis of survival

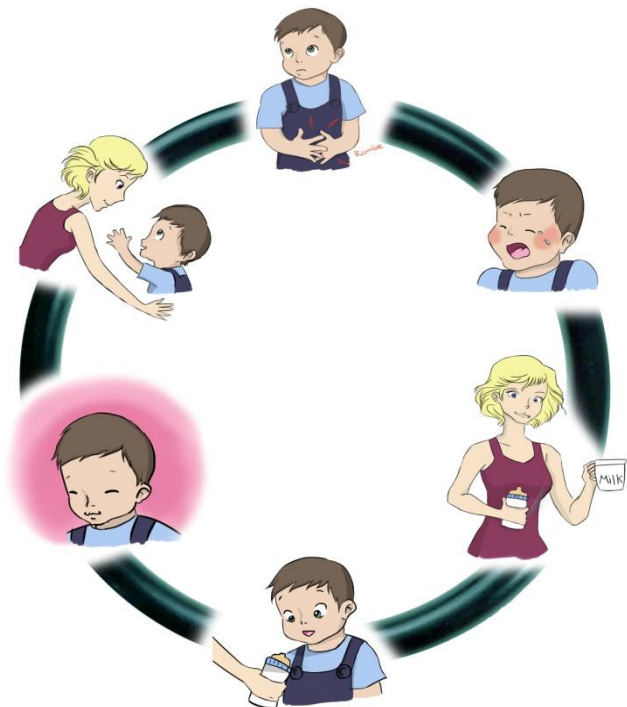
Characteristics of Negative Attachment

- Inability to regulate emotions (rage, panic, depression, impulsivity)
- Basic mistrust (if someone is nice it must be a trick)
- Low self esteem/high shame (I am bad, I deserve to be hurt)
- Need for control (I need to take care of myself, I don't trust/understand others)
- Learning difficulties (concentration, self belief, dissociation)



Negative (abnormal) attachment:

<u>CARERS</u>	<u>CHILD</u>
... are unresponsive	... feels worthless
... are unreliable	... feels unsafe
... are threatening	... feels weak
... are dangerous	... feels afraid
... are unloving	... feels rejected



Characteristics of Positive Attachment

- Are able to emotionally regulate
- Are able to be separated from parents/carers
- Seek comfort from parents/carers when frightened or in need of reassurance
- Greets the return of parents/carers with positive emotions
- Prefers parents/carers to strangers
- Are able to trust appropriate adults – teachers/friends of parents/carers

Positive (normal) attachment:

<u>CARERS</u>	<u>CHILD</u>
... are responsive	... feels worthwhile
... are available	... feels safe
... meet the child's needs	... feels capable

To meet their needs we must have a realistic sense of the self and surroundings and develop a non-confrontational attitude that provides a consistent positive role model. Some more general strategies to support students are outlined below:

- create win/win situations – so that either 'choice' from student is a good one
- give clear, consistent guidelines and boundaries; yet allow some flexibility
- be honest and truthful, with sensitivity to the young person's feelings
- give calm, measured responses in confrontational situations
- always endeavour to let them know it is their behaviour that isn't liked, not them
- listen to them: hear what they have to say – but remember, they communicate in more ways than just verbally
- remember that the adult is responsible for helping young people make appropriate, positive attachments
- give them a safe, secure environment to express their innermost feelings, fears, hurt, etc
- plan with them for their adult life; help them to understand the attachment process and how they can be positive as an adult
- often young people have a mixture of 'attachment styles' – therefore there is a need for personalised support – only about 65% have secure attachment

Why is attachment important in schools?

- There is a population of students in schools who seem unable to access learning, to engage and achieve, and to move on into adulthood with confidence; children whose diminished self-esteem and resilience are limitations on engagement in relationships and emotional and cognitive development.
- Early attachment research clearly indicated that secure attachment is the factor linked to children's more successful engagement in school, in terms of social competence, curiosity, effective play and investigation, sympathy towards others and so a secure enough start prepares the child to become the student.

Most importantly:

'You might be the only adults who can make a difference in a child's life'

'You have the emotional skills and the resources to make that difference'

Attachment and the classroom

- In school it is the teacher who is at the front line of student behaviour.
- Behind every child who misbehaves and underperforms in school there is a story; and the story is acted out in the classroom.
- Teachers are exposed to this stressful experience daily – adding to classroom tensions and challenges.
- Such powerful experiences are felt by the teacher who can begin to feel the helplessness, powerlessness and rage that some students are unable to bear and so project into others. Teachers need to be supported in such relentless encounters everyday in the classroom.

Profile for avoidant attachment:

Approach to school/classroom:

Apparent indifference to uncertainty in new situations

Response to the task:

Need to be autonomous and independent

Hostility towards teacher is directed towards task

Task operates as an emotional safety barrier between pupil and teacher

Skills and difficulties:

Limited use of creativity
Likely to be underachieving
Limited use of language

Response to the teacher:

Denial of need for support and help
Sensitivity to proximity of the teacher

Profile for resistant/ambivalent attachment:

Approach to school/classroom:

Intense anxiety which may be expressed as controlling and omnipotent

Response to task:

Difficulties attempting task if unsupported
Unable to focus on task for fear of losing teacher's attention

Skills and Difficulties:

Likely to be underachieving
Language may be well developed but not consistent with levels of achievement
Numeracy may be weak

Response to teacher:

Need to hold onto attention of teacher
Apparent dependence on teacher in order to engage in learning
Expressed hostility to teacher when frustrated

Profile for disorganised/disorientated attachment:

Approach to school/classroom:

High level of anxiety and uncertainty

Response to task:

Task may seem like challenge to fears of incompetence – feelings of humiliation and task rejection
Difficulty accepting 'not knowing'
May appear omnipotent and to know everything already

Skills and Difficulties:

May seem unimaginative and uncreative, and find conceptual thought difficult
Likely to be underachieving and possibly at a very immature stage of learning

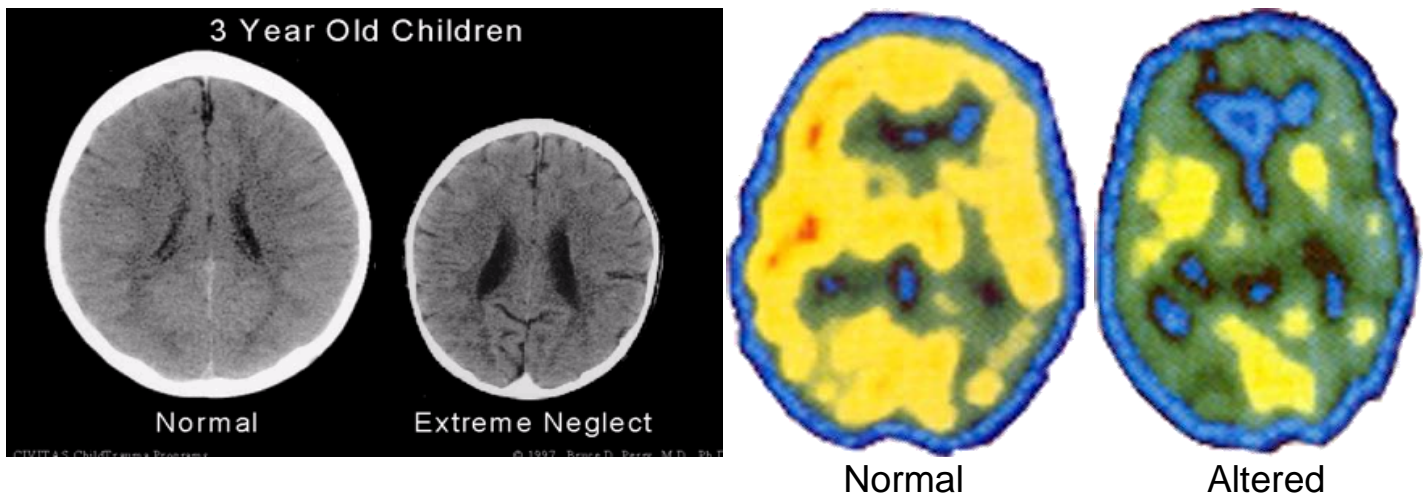
Response to teacher:

Great difficulty in experiencing trust in authority of teacher (may submit to Head of School)
May be unable to accept being taught and/or unable to 'permit' the teacher to know more than they do

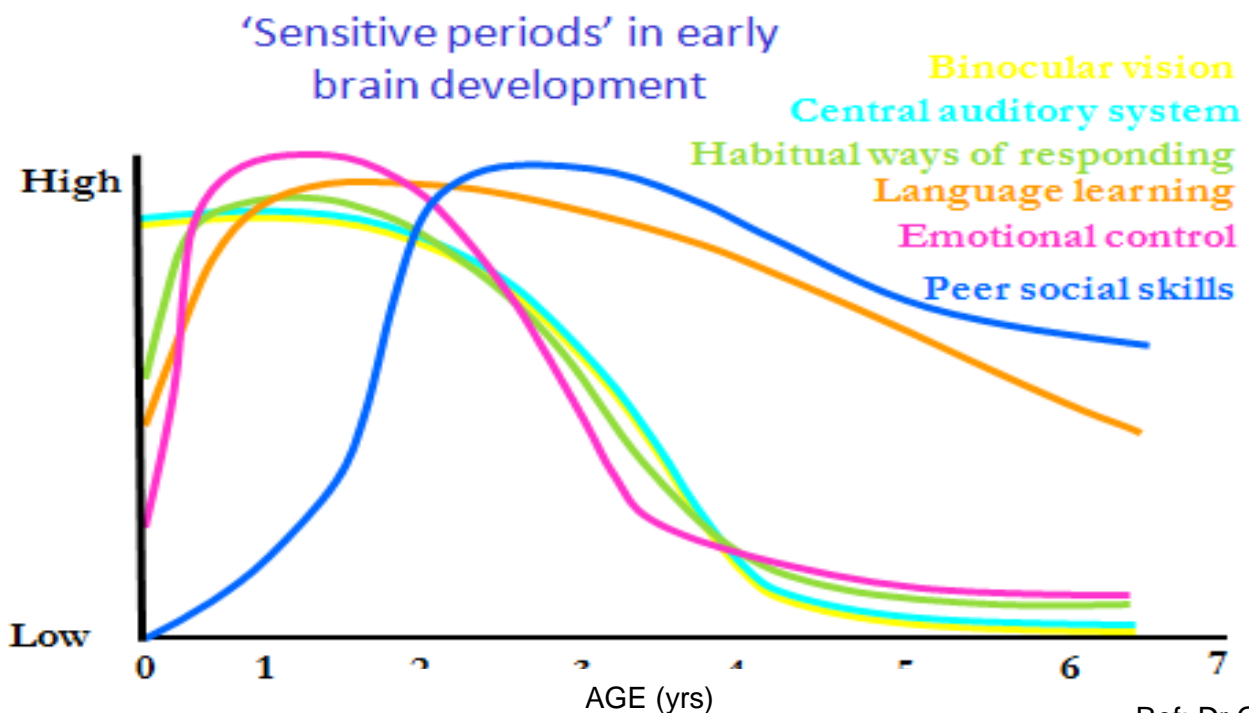
So what can I try in my classroom?

- Structure: clear & consistent routines, boundaries, task completion, rituals, claiming behaviours
- Engagement: positive non-verbal & verbal praise, using child's name
- Nurture: soothing, supportive, non-verbal, positive care routines
- Challenge: learning new skills/small steps/with support and consistency

Brain development:



Negative early attachment can result in lifelong challenges – however attachment can change over time with different experiences



Ref: Dr G Harris
Clinical Psychologist

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- Morewood, G. D. & Wyllie, R. (2013) *Attachment Disorder and the Power of Music*. Every Child Update, Vol. 28, p14-21. Imaginative Minds, www.teachingtimes.com

Also see – <http://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html> – for further information and <http://theraplay.org/index.php/theraplay> re: Structure, Engagement, Nurture and Challenge – the 4 main principles of Theraplay