

Understanding Attachment



The team that has created this guide has come from a diverse group to try to make attachment something that young people in South East Essex can understand. There is no doubt that for young people who can't stay with their birth families, foster care and adoption is a life changing experience that will have deep effects on their lives – and this doesn't take into account what they have already experienced before coming into care. This is why this project has worked with the SE Essex community so that the voices of those young people who have experienced the care system can be heard.

Young people who experience this separation from their birth families need carers who are fully equipped to help them cope with their behaviour as well as then being able to continue to support them to be able to grow up happy and healthy.

Everyone recognises that close loving relationships are key to feeling safe and well. Attachment Theory offers a framework for everyone who wants to learn about it in order to understand the power of relationships. When a young person is in crisis, they often behave in ways that don't make sense to adults.

This project is trying to support foster carers and the young people they look after in the SE Essex area to know more about this important subject in order to be able to unravel some of the mysteries of what young people in care need to be able to move forward in their lives.

Welcome to Understanding Attachment.



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What is Attachment?

Attachment is the idea that healthy and happy children need to believe that they can trust the people who are looking after them to care for them. If a child or young person of any age is without this certainty, they will feel isolated and many will blame themselves. In serious cases this can influence how young people's bodies grow and develop.

Being loved and cared for at all stages of childhood is essential in the process to becoming a balanced human being and sadly this isn't available to everyone. Many children come into the care system lacking or having lost their initial attachment with their Mum or Dad and they need to have their trust in adults rebuilt.

When an older child or young person enters the care system there will have been a massive disruption to their lives and the attachments they have experienced so far. Foster carers should be aware of this challenge. However, young people are very resourceful and when they are angry, they can often be difficult to approach. This also can put up barriers to attachment on both sides.

The first person to talk about attachment was a man called John Bowlby who was a British psychoanalyst, who is best known for his work in attachment theory. His idea of how vital a good and solid attachment or bond to a parent or carer is to emotional wellbeing in was taken up by many other academics and professionals working with young people, like social workers and foster carers. It is an area that people still study and try to learn more about, such as



David Howe who has written a book called "Attachment Across the LifeCourse".

Beka is a teenager who was in care from the age of 7 and she explains how she has experienced adults and attachment:

"I think some people (adults) do understand attachment and they know that



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it's not going to happen overnight or straight away but I think some people don't. I think it's 50/50. I think a lot of people if you're wise enough or mature enough you're going to know, like that, that's not going to happen straight away but some people are a little bit naive and they are thinking that, yeah yeah, they are going to adore me, they are going to dote on me and we are going to have this great buddy relationship and we are all going to sit around a campfire talking about our feelings, but no it doesn't happen like that."

If you would like to see more of Beka's clips, they are online at:

<https://bladeeducation.wixsite.com/attachment/beka-clips>

It is also common for young people who enter the Care System to blame themselves and think they have not been good enough to love. When fostering is successful a young person has to allow the connection of attachment to take place because a foster carer is able to convince a young person that they can be trusted.

John Bowlby described attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings." What this means is that the bonds between people, especially parents or carers and children need to be seen as vitally important in life.



Deborah Trotter is an experienced foster carer and explains what foster care Attachment means to her:

"I think it's important that a foster carer understands what

attachment is so that they can make sure that they are helping the young person to settle into their new home, to feel comfortable with them – and to be patient. It is a two way thing because I think one of the crucial things is if you understand how important it is to attach and for that young person to feel comfortable with you." Deborah continues, "Especially with teenagers we have



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found understanding that when somebody first moves in with you that they might have had bad experiences and that they might do some things that are difficult, and then recognising that they might be testing you to see whether you are still going to be there for them because they have had some bad experiences and that is all related to attachment.”

If you would like to see more clips on attachment then they are online 24/7 at: <https://bladeeducation.wixsite.com/attachment/advice-for-young-people>

Initially, it was thought attachment was just about who feeds the child but researchers quickly realised this was far too simple and that the reason why babies cry and young children can act out is because they've built up trust with their parents or caregivers and they look to them to be made to feel safe.

Why is it important to understand attachment?

Attachment to those who care for young people is an essential part to help them feel safe and happy. Children and young people need to have experienced healthy emotional bonds with the people who look after them, whether they are related or not. People who have grown up without feeling attached to their families or those that cared for them as children, can often find it difficult to behave well and let their anger get the better of them. This means they get into trouble and find it hard to make friends or do well in education or at work.

If a child or young person has been fostered or adopted it is even more important that they feel that they can trust the people they are placed with and feel safe and secure. This is asking a great deal when a young person is taken into care or must change foster placements.

Building relationships takes time and it is important that young people are able to try to give these new carers a chance to see if it could work out, because there is a real and serious reason why they have been taken away from their original families that they might not be fully aware of or have been able to accept.



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It is always a good idea for young people to find out as much as they can from carers if they are confused or need reassurance. If they don't get the answers they can understand or need, they need to ask their social worker to support them in getting the answers that help them to feel more settled.

When a young person is taken into care there is a support team that is there to help them and the people who take care of the young person. Each of these staff will be trained in different skills, such as understanding how to keep a young person healthy or negotiate the best outcomes for them at school or college. They should listen to a young person's point of view as well as explaining what they can do for them clearly.

No young person should feel cut out of the decision-making process and any adult working in their interest should explain things in a way that the young person can understand. If they feel that the adults aren't doing that, young people can talk to their teachers or carers directly.

Many young people who are fostered won't stay with the first carer they are sent. Where the social workers choose for the young person to live is called a placement. Constant changes of where young people are cared for is difficult and is something that the adults who are looking after the young person should try to make sure happens as little as possible. Feeling lost and angry is difficult and normal in these circumstances.

It is very hard, but it does help if the young person tries to be respectful to their foster carers and those looking after them. However, if the young person doesn't feel safe and really can't settle, they must talk to the people who look after them to try and find a way through.

If you would like to see the government advice on attachment in foster care then you can read it at:

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng26/resources/attachment-problems-in-children-and-young-people-2825525572549>



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Helpful Hints on Attachment by experienced members of the Fostering Community

This page is for the Fostering Community, both young people and adults, to share anything they have learned about Attachment with you.

If you would like to contribute please email us at contact@understandingattachment.org.uk

Advice from Beka:

“Every teenager is different, so you have to treat each of them differently. What works for one person isn’t going to work for another and you have to learn that and deal with that.”

“You have to treat teenagers as their own independent person, because yes they are living under your roof but at the end of the day we individuals and need to be treated as such and not as prisoners.”

“When I was a kid I got sent to see someone because I got angry about a perfectly normal thing to get angry about and that made me worse. You need to discuss the issues with the young person and deal with it.”

“Adults need to understand that attachment doesn’t happen straight way.”

“You can’t treat a foster child as you treat your own children because they are a totally different person with totally different experiences.”

Advice from Jordan:

“Sometimes kids won’t want to talk at the first point and a lot of people might think they need to bond immediately. It has to be little by little by little to get the attachment.”

“Sometimes children are scared to talk about something because they are



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scared of what will happen if they do.”

“You can’t discount a child’s opinion because they have gone through hell and you think they don’t know better.”

“I got to a point where I’d had so many placements that I thought ‘oh here we go they are just going to get bored of me after a year or so’ You don’t know the people and you have no confidence in them.”

“You have to look at yourself and your reasons for being a foster carer and if the first thing you consider is money then you are in it for the wrong reason, but if the first thing you think is that you really want to help somebody and make a difference in their life then you’re in it for the right reason.”

“If you treat them like kids then you are going to hit a wall because they have been through what most adults shouldn’t have to go through and treating them like a kid is patronising.”

“Structure is important to attachment and children like to do the same things and if they are constantly changing then they just get used to change and will not think anything is permanent.”

Advice from Dean:

“Attachment is a long term thing that isn’t built up over a week or a month and it deepens as it goes along - if you both allow it to.”

“Attachment is built on consistency and the young person needs to know that you will be there for them in the long term and are not going to say ‘See you’ if you fall out.”

“We think that long term fostering works better for the adults and young people as it supports attachment by allowing you to commit for the long term.”



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“Think about your reasons for going into fostering. Think about what you can give and what you can gain from the relationship but be prepared for difficult circumstances and be ready for really rewarding experiences.”

“Everybody that comes to live with you has come from difficult circumstances and their behaviour might reflect that but only give up if you really have to because the good times could be just around the corner.”

“Trust is really difficult to establish and if a young person has been let down by countless grownups then when the next one comes along they don’t know if they are going to let you down or not.”

Advice from Deborah:

“The attachment training for foster carers is getting better but the people who build the relationship on a daily basis could really do with as much as possible.”

“Sharing your experience and not feeling isolated as a carer is important and you need to have support to help you work through your own emotions.”

“The highlight of fostering is watching young people grow and expand and it feels really good.”

“It's crucial to understand attachment and how it works so you can give it the time it needs and be patient because it takes time for the young person to get to know you and to trust you after all of the difficult things that have happened to them.”

“A young person has to want to be in your house and needs to be open to the new experience even though they have been through a difficult time – give it a little bit of time and it a go and try not to judge this placement on a bad experience you might have had in the past.”



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Attachment Resources and Research

There is a lot of academic research on attachment and these are links to just some of it.

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng26/resources/attachment-problems-in-children-and-young-people-2825525572549>

<https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide07/carers/profiles/simmonds.asp>

Howe, D. (2011) Attachments Across the Lifecourse: A Brief Introduction – Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan - ISBN 13 9780230293595

What's Happening to Me? www.whtm.org.uk

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>

<https://positivepsychology.com/attachment-theory/>

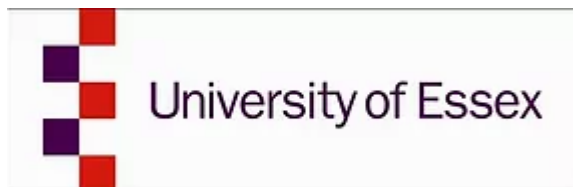
http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/online/inge_origins.pdf



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Understanding Attachment Links Page



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Thank You!

The Understanding Attachment Team would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has put their effort, knowledge, time and money into this project and allowed us to start the process of helping those who need it most.

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Thank you to our contributors from the South East Essex Fostering Community without who these pages would have been totally blank!

And a massive thank you to Beka, Dean, Deb and Jordan for sharing their amazing experiences with us and the whole community.

If you would like to contact the U/A Team then please fill in the contact form below or email us at contact@understandingattachment.org.uk

