

Understanding Attachment



When you try to approach a subject as important as attachment in order to make it more accessible for our community in South East Essex, it is a daunting task. There is no doubt that for young people who can't stay with their birth families foster care and adoption is a massive life changing experience that will have deep and long-lasting effects on their lives.

This doesn't take into account what they have already experienced, which is often serious and damaging. This is why we have sought to do it as a community with the voices of those young people who have experienced the care system being 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 move them forward to be able to develop as safely as possible.

Everyone recognises that close loving relationships are key to a healthy and happy young person. Attachment Theory developed by John Bowlby in the late sixties and early seventies offers a framework for those who want to use it in order to understand the power of relationships. When a young person is in crisis, they often behave in ways incomprehensible to many adults.

This project is trying to get at that mystery and support foster carers in our 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 in order to be able to move forward in their lives.

Welcome to Understanding Attachment.



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What is Attachment?

Attachment in terms of foster care is a concept that is very difficult to describe easily. At its most basic it is the idea that if a child of any age doesn't feel that they have someone who cares for them and loves them they grow up on their own emotionally.

In serious cases this can even effect how their bodies grow and develop. Being loved and cared for at all stages of childhood is essential in the process to becoming a balanced adult human being. Sadly, this isn't what is available to all young people. Many children come into the care system lacking or having lost their initial childhood attachment and then need their trust rebuilt.

The first person to narrow the concept down and make it something to study was a man called John Bowlby who was a British psychologist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst, notable for his interest in child development and for his pioneering 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 adults was taken up by many other academics and professionals working with young people, like social workers and foster carers.

When a 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. This makes life very hard for the foster carer who wants to do the best for the young people they become responsible for - who are very often already struggling with how to treat other people well.

Dean Trotter is a specialist foster carer.

Question: What is attachment in foster care?

Dean answer: *"I think it's how we relate to each other but not in the moment. So talking about long term and how you build rapport in relationships. I think it's not built up over a week or a month but over a longer period of time and it deepens the more your relationship goes on - if you allow it to."*



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“It’s a two way thing because I could attach to you and you to me and to Deb, but it’s really difficult if one person resists that. So if one person really wants and tries to offer attachment to another person and the other person doesn’t respond to that then that’s more difficult.”

“In a fostering relationship we understand that’s sometimes difficult for young people because they have had poor experiences with attachment. I’ve had better experiences and what tends to happen is it becomes a point of trust. Because your first thing is, “Do I trust this person? Am I ok getting attached to them? Or will they let me down?” Because you are taking a gamble. We are here and we are established, you are the person that comes in and you are the person that’s got to think, “Ok are these people ok to trust or not?” If you work out that you can trust us that’s when attachment can build.”



See this film at:

<https://vimeo.com/336120102>

It is also difficult for those young people who have experienced this lack of connection and often blame themselves for not being good enough to love. When fostering is successful it is because of the ability of the foster carer to convince the young person that they can trust their carers and feel attached to them.

John Bowlby described attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” It focuses on relationships and bonds between people, especially long-term relationships, like parent and child. He was really interested in understanding things like separation anxiety and distress that children often show when their mum or dad is out of sight.



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

Question: What is attachment in foster care?

Deborah answer: *“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.*

Attachment in fostering is a really crucial part of the relationship because it is about how the child, no matter how old they are, attaches with the foster carer. It can be the difference between a foster placement working and not. How that young person connects and how comfortable they feel with their foster carer. 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.

Especially with teenagers we have found that 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.”



See this film at:

<https://vimeo.com/334849229>



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Initially, it was thought attachment was just about who feeds the child but John Bowlby quickly realised this was far too simple a solution 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 and better.

It isn't just hunger it is a real anxiety that has been created in the baby or child. It makes sense at primal level – if a child was being watched and looked after properly it must have a greater chance of staying alive. It isn't just the adults that are working to help a child survive and grow – even babies know they have to play their part in this process of natural selection.

However, if babies don't get the right responses unfortunately this often means they don't have a secure base for them to learn and explore the world.

Attachment Advice and Information for Young People

The Understanding Attachment website contains interviews with young people who have been through the care system themselves. If you would like to share their experiences you can see them at www.understandingattachment.org.uk

Or click on their photos to go directly to the page:



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Why is it important to understand attachment?

Attachment to those who care for you is an essential part to feeling safe and happy. Children need to have experienced healthy emotional bonds with the people who look after them, whether they are their birth family. 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 the young person is able to try to give these new people a chance to see if it could work in the future because there is a real and serious reason why they have been taken from your original families that they might not be fully aware of or have been able to accept. It is always a good idea to encourage a young person to ask if they are confused or want reassurance. If they don't get the answers they can understand or need, they should be encouraged 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 they will have been given a support team that is there to help them and the people who are there to take care of them. Each professional 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 the young person's point of view as well as explaining what they can do for them clearly. If a child or young person feels that they aren't doing that, they can talk to your teachers or their carers directly. 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 so that they can decide with that support what is best for them.



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Many young people who are fostered may have where they are living changed for numerous reasons. Living away from a young person's original home is called a placement. Constant changes of where they are living isn't ideal and is something that the adults who are looking after that young person should try to make sure happens as little as possible. Young people who are moved regularly become less and less trusting and find it hard to connect to their new carers. The people looking after these young people should do all they can to not make this difficult and confusing time worse by keeping them informed and letting them know what is going to happen and when. They should also be told about who can support you during these times.

Feeling lost and angry is difficult and normal in these circumstances. Encouraging young people to be respectful to their foster carers and those looking after them is obviously a good idea as it will help in starting the attachment process. However, if they don'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.

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

Online Attachment Advice and Information for Adults

The Understanding Attachment website contains interviews with adults who are experienced foster carers. If you would like to share their experiences you can see them at www.understandingattachment.org.uk



Or click on Dean or Deborah's photo to go directly to the page.



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Why is it important to understand attachment?

Attachment is crucial for a child or young person to develop to their full potential. The young person that carers are being asked to look after has most likely had too many experiences of the adults in their families not being able to put their needs first. The tragedy is that the child and young person will have tried to find ways to put that right or even worse think that this was what they deserved. Many young people who have been abused blame themselves for not being lovable enough and will try more and more extreme ways to change that. When a new set of people take over this care the young people will not always be happy to start again.

If the carer is related or has known the young person for some time, the likelihood much of the process of learning to live together is much faster. As a kinship carer, they have a unique opportunity to provide a safe and stable home environment for a child or young person in their care that meets their individual needs. They also have an ideal opportunity to further develop strong bonding relationships with that child, which can have a lasting and positive impact on their self-esteem, confidence, stress management, resilience and ability to form their own positive relationships as they grow and develop. This is what is referred to as 'attachment'. This can be particularly important if the child they are caring for has experienced traumatic times and is still trying to come to terms with these experiences as they try to get on with their lives.

Many carers will not have this luxury and will often be meeting the young person for the first time when the young person is being expected to respect a massive change in their lives. The carer is meeting largely an unknown person and taking them into their homes, where they will be expected to get along 24:7. It is essential to acknowledge how difficult this situation is for both of you and to take it one step at a time to get to know each other. Young people who have grown up without feeling attached to their families can often find it difficult to behave well and let their anger get the better of them. Everyone is unique and will have developed their own individual coping mechanisms that may be alien to most people. Carers are also unique and there may be personality clashes but with a sensible caring approach most of this can be overcome with reasonable expectations and listening to the young person



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wherever possible.

Trust is something that takes time to build within any relationship. It takes good communication and experience. As the adult in the relationship, the carer must be the patient one, although boundaries are essential and cannot be ignored. The carer must try to put themselves in young person's shoes and work out what approach would help them understand and trust the people who are caring for them, even if they are relatively new. This is a big ask when a young person first meets their carers or goes to live with them. It is also worth being well prepared for the questions that may come from the young person about why they have been taken from their original families. It is likely that even if the young person has been given this information, they have been unable to accept or understand the reasons why. Carers will need to offer constant reassurance and if necessary, seek help from social workers in order to make sure the message the young person is receiving is the same from all the people looking after them. If a young person asks questions, that means they are trying to engage and wherever possible they should receive honest answers.

It is also helpful to realise that young people need to know about who is now in charge of their lives and how that is structured. Carers need to have a good understanding of how the support team around the young person functions and make sure that they share this information with the young person in their homes. If the carer, with this team, can convince the young person that they are part of the decision-making process in a meaningful way this is a good basis to build a positive attachment to the carer. Unfortunately, in many cases the young person will have had this removal from their previous lives imposed upon them and will see the carer as part of the system that has done this to them. It is also possible that the young person may have been expected to move multiple times. Constant changes of where they are living isn't helpful in building attachment for obvious reasons and is something that ideally shouldn't happen.

Young people feeling lost and angry is to be expected. This may mean initially they behave awkwardly or even badly. They may reject carers attempts to be kind or offer support. Carers need to try to get young people to understand and communicate what they feel the need or if that fails, try to work it out from learning about the unique individual they are looking after. In order to do



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that they need to know as much as possible about what that young person may have experienced both in their original homes and in the care system.

If you are interested in some of the ideas that have been discussed here, please do look at some suggested reading to learn more. This is a guide written by a group of people who have had direct experience of the care system who know there is always more to learn about attachment, especially where young people in care are concerned.

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 Croxford:

“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.”



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Advice from Jordan Doyle:

“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 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 Trotter:

“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.”



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“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.”

“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 Trotter:

“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.”



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What is the South East Essex Fostering Network?

After the success of the What's Happening to Me? pilot www.whtm.org.uk that brought together 50 people who have direct experience of the care system, who either have expert experience or work with children in care, to be part of a steering group for the project where the main aim was to give young people entering the care system a better idea of what was going to happen to their lives.

We had a great response to this Lottery funded project and most of those contributors that took part wanted to continue supporting the South East Essex community to enable more foster carers to maintain longer and more successful placements with the young people they look after.

Currently, the figures for placement breakdown for teenagers in SE Essex is very high and the community that supported the building of WHTM? identified this as an area that would like to be able to work together to find local solutions to a serious problem. They believed this will enable more people to fulfil their potential as foster carers, as well as helping those young people who need solid foster care placements.

The South East Essex Fostering Network aim by continuing this model of learning in a community, with those in care and those people who have been in care to find a way to address the breakdown in teenage foster care placements and that with less failed placements this also will increase retention of foster carers. 50% of teenage foster placements breakdown (Social Care Institute for Excellence).

There is an approximate deficit of 9000 foster carers in the UK (Fostering Network). It is much rarer for those 12+ to be adopted, and therefore, making sure that foster carers are given every opportunity to understand the young people they look after from those who really know seems a sensible way forward. With the establishment of the South East Essex Fostering Community Group, we believe that regularly putting those that care with those that experience that care will allow us to identify a targeted and insightful information source to cut down on the number of teenage foster placements



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that break down.

Our approach values the experience of children that have grown up in care and specialist foster carers and utilises both to guide the content of our self-help pack, finding ways to understand the importance of attachment, what it looks like when children and young people are in crisis and to explain why attachment is hard to build and why it often breaks down. We aim to improve the resilience of foster carers in South East Essex and by doing so build up the resilience of foster placements that might otherwise be lost. We will build a space for those experienced foster carers to be able to pass on their best practice to those that are earlier on in their fostering journey.

If you would like to join us please email us at seefn@blade-education.org.uk

Attachment Research

<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>

Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption by Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek Coraam BAAF 2018
[ISBN 978-1-910039-68-7](#)

Howe, D. (2011) Attachments Across the Lifecourse: A Brief Introduction – Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (which comes very highly recommended).

Howe, D (2005) Child Abuse and Neglect; Attachment, Development and Intervention – Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan is also very useful for foster carers who are working with children who have been abused (as most children in care are).

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



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

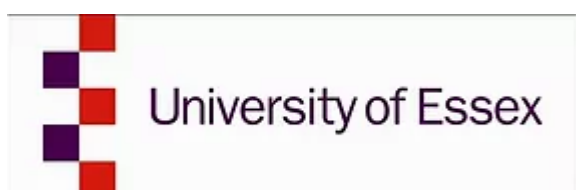
<https://positivepsychology.com/attachment-theory/>

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

If anyone has any other research they would like to include here please do contact Beth Hooper at:

SEEFN@blade-education.org.uk

Understanding Attachment Links



Aspirations Fostering

putting children's aspirations first



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About the Understanding Attachment Project

The project website is at: www.understandingattachment.org.uk

According to the Social Care Institute for Excellence, 50% of teenage foster placements break down which leads to vulnerable young people finding themselves in multiple new homes. This lack of stability can have a serious effect on their education, ability to form friendships and overall mental health. Blade Education in partnership with the South East Essex Fostering Community are working together to investigate how better understanding of attachment could help to reduce placement breakdown and improve outcomes for looked after children.



The Understanding Attachment Project will build on the pioneering work of the What's Happening to Me? Project www.whtm.org.uk that brought together those who have direct experience of the care system, either with experience of being fostered, or work with children in care, to enable more successful placements with the young people and empower more people to fulfil their potential as foster carers. We aim by continuing this model of learning in and with the SE Essex Fostering Community to find a way to begin to address the breakdown in teenage foster care placements and that with less failed placements increase retention of foster carers. We also aim to improve the resilience of foster carers in South East Essex by building a group for those experienced foster carers to be able to pass on their best practice to those that are earlier on in their fostering journey.

This project will provide carers and cared for children with information and experiences from those who have been through the care system to help cut the number of teenage foster placements that break down. Understanding Attachment has received funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to make this idea a reality.



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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.

We would like to thank players of the National Lottery for their continued support for the welfare of the country through all of the good causes funded by the National Lottery Funds. Without Lottery Players this project would not have been possible.

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

