

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives

Attachment Difficulties in schools: What might happen, why and how to handle it

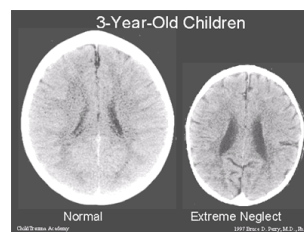
Children with attachment difficulties can need extra help in managing all aspects of school life and can add pressure to the busy lives of school staff. This tip sheet is a very brief summary of what school life with such children can mean and how to make life a little easier for them and you.

What 'attachment difficulties' means:

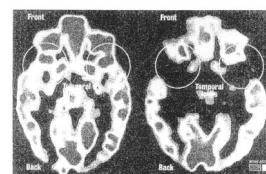
Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives are often said to have attachment difficulties. This means that their early, close relationship with their parents did not provide sufficient nurturing for social, emotional and intellectual development.

This is likely to have resulted in them feeling negative about themselves (though they may cover this with a mask of bravado), wary of others and pessimistic about the future. They may also have missed out on the development of crucial skills for life, particularly conscience development, social and friendship skills, and the ability to control their emotions and their impulsiveness. Sadly, it may make it particularly hard for them to trust in any new caring relationships.

Recent research has led to a greater understanding of how this early adversity affects brain development and therefore the brain abilities that a child has. Skills such as cause and effect thinking, logical and abstract thinking, anticipation skills, memory, impulse control and emotion regulation may be affected. Consequently, a child may be **unable** to do as you ask, rather than deliberately not doing so.



Effect of extreme deprivation



Healthy Child Neglected Child



Schools want children to:

- Achieve their best
- Work hard
- Concentrate
- Co-operate
- Respect teachers
- Be good to their peers

School priorities versus child's priorities

Children with attachment difficulties are coping with:

- Fear of rejection and abandonment
- A survival instinct to be in control
 - BUT a sense of helplessness
- Repeated losses, often sudden and unexpected
- A need to please but a need to pretend they don't care
- A mix of levels for each aspect of development
- Frequent overwhelming emotions - panic, rage, grief, excitement

Constantly checking their environment for danger and focussing on feeling safe rather than the le

What you might see in school

In the main, children tend to try to cope by using a variety of strategies; being over-anxious to please, acting out their chaotic feelings, or becoming very withdrawn. They may shift between strategies with startling rapidity or act in one way with some people and very differently with others, leading to confusion in staff. Some behaviours of particular concern to school staff are:

• Poor concentration

They may be scanning for danger, pre-occupied with worries, or lost in a flashback of previous abuse.

• Disruptive behaviour

They may be trying to control things, acting out their fear of you or the class, avoiding showing that work is difficult, trying to get you to send them out of the class or home, rejecting the class before you reject them.

• Constantly asking of "trivial" questions, Perfectionism

They may feel very frightened of getting it wrong, worried that you may then reject them.

• Difficulties coping with change

Their strong urge to control things will make any change difficult - tasks, teachers, venues etc. They may also be suspicious that the change is in some way aimed at them or caused by them - e.g. my teacher is off sick because they don't want to teach me.

• Ignoring instructions

Their ability to process and remember your words is limited. Anxiety and hypervigilance will further reduce these skills.

• In trouble at break time

Unstructured times with no adult to guide them will cause anxiety to rise, especially in large crowds.

• Creating chaos and mayhem

Their inside feelings may be being acted out. They may feel familiar with and safer in this atmosphere.

• Refusal to be helped

This may not fit with their sense of worth, their need for control or their mistrust of adults.

• Lying, stealing, fighting or hurting other children

Their conscience development is likely to be at a much younger stage than their chronological age. Such behaviour may also reflect their need for control.

• "Explosions" around certain work

It is clear when subjects such as maths and spelling are wrong. Fear of failure or heightened anxiety may have caused the child to lose control.

• Sudden rages, like "tantrums"

Feelings overwhelming them may make them react as a toddler might. Both the prolonged nature and the sudden end to these episodes can be unnerving.

• Difficult attitude in meetings with head teachers and authority, Defiance or refusing to do as told, Disrespect to teachers

Fuelled by their poor self-image, children may react with defiance and attitude when they feel disrespected or criticised. This is an effort to save face but their underlying feelings may be panic and fear of rejection.

• Class comedian

Some children try to be accepted in this way, even when it gets them into trouble. Regrettably they are sometimes unaware that others are laughing at them, not with them.

• Running away or hiding

A coping strategy for dealing with overwhelming feelings or fears; the fight, flight or freeze response. This can make cornering them dangerous!

• Behaviour suddenly deteriorates

Anxiety about or actual events in their world outside school may be problematic.



What schools can do

- Provide **calm, structured supervision** for these children as much as possible. Try to take control of the atmosphere of the class; you set the tone, not them. Think for the children where necessary.
- Support teachers who are dealing with them, giving them a place to let out their feelings!
- **"Think toddler"** - remember that these children are emotionally at a very young, toddler stage of emotional development. Respond gently and respectfully as you would to a child of 2 or 3.
- Remember **teaching, not punishing** - these children are often lacking skills, not disobeying. They need a different chance at the rules because they have had a different chance in life.
- Try to establish a strong relationship with the child - make time, keep your promises.
- Give **small amounts of attention frequently** to let the child know you are attending to them during lessons.
- Try to **show that you're listening** when the child is explaining to you - **validate their feelings** even when the story makes no sense to you.
- Have a scheme that allows the child some **space** when they need to cool down - they may need a person or an activity to help them achieve this - try physical exercise to burn off feelings
- Consider seating plans - next to wall, with nothing behind them, may **re-assure about danger**.
- **Explain** changes in routine or staffing.
- Think carefully about references to family - eg mothers' day cards, "your parents will be disappointed", charity work for "children less fortunate than us" - all uncomfortable for the child.
- Short term **choices and consequences**, not a long timescale of rewards, sanctions and threats.
- Use **creative arts**, at which many of these children excel, to give a voice of expression.

