ATT*ACHMENT*
IN THE CLASSROOM

By
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Attachment theory has become an important psychological model for understanding adult to child relationships in schools. Historically it was Freud's psychoanalytical theory that focussed attention on how early experiences shaped adult personality. Freud's ideas influenced many, including John Bowlby (1990) who developed a theory of 'attachment'. Bowlby's ideas were significantly influenced by the work of Konrad Lorenz (2020) on imprinting and Harry Harlow (1974) on love and affection in monkeys. For school staff, understanding the link between attachment and learning can make sense of why relationships matter so much for all children.

Key point
Evolution has two needs:
survive & learn
<u>Attachment is essential for both</u>

The need to survive
Compared to many other animals human infants are born extremely dependent for survival on being cared for by adults. To develop to the point of being able to survive independently takes many years. The baby is born with innate patterns of behaviour that contribute towards their survival through attachment to an adult carer. Typically babies will smile during interactions, make noises, eg coos or laughs, they will generally look relaxed and interested. These behaviours increase the likelihood of the adult staying close - proximity helps their survival.

When a baby needs care and and is stressed they will cry, that is a call for help. To adults crying is distressful and motivates attention to stop it. So crying biologically supports survival.

Attachment to an adult = survival

Biological and cultural survival
As a species we do not only need care, that is food, warmth and shelter, biological needs, but also we need to learn a language, how to think and behave, that is our cultural needs. Through attaching to an adult the baby can have both these needs satisfied.

Baby survival strategies
The baby looks to their carer to learn about their environment. How the baby relates to the adult carer will be influenced by how the carer responds to the baby. The baby's brain has millions of neurones ready to be connected through experience. As neurones have the same experience repeated a neural pathway are formed, these become the default pathway. These are developed through repetitions of the same experience with the carer.

These strategies become engrained in the brain's neural network, they are developed through repetitions of the same experience with the carer. They shape later responses in interaction with adults outside of the family. Bowlby's term for such a cognitive framework was 'internal working model'. As Jacob-Thomson (2023, P.27) puts it:

> "Our working models are invisible glasses we wear each day that guide the way we perceive the world, ourselves and others".

Attachment styles
1). If a carer is sensitive, that is the baby does something and the carer does something in response, 'contingent responding'. The baby is learning that this is a safe place, the carer is trustworthy, "I will be cared for".

If the carer is not responsive the baby has two options:

2). They will cry, louder and louder. Even when the carer comes the baby continues crying, 'as if' they are unsure whether the carer will soon leave.

3). Alternatively the baby will turn in on themselves, reject help, and try to manage on their own.

Because these responses become ingrained, they will have implications as to how a child will respond to adults in school. For example, are they happy to be helped or do they reject support and become independent, but struggle to progress academically and socially.

The need to learn

So, in the first instance, children depend on adults for care, then they depend on adults to learn their culture - the language they will speak and the way of doing things. A child's home meets a child's biological needs and cultural needs. So learning is closely linked to the child's attachment experiences, they are not separate.

School staff are especially involved in teaching children their culture. So, it follows, that the nature of the relationship that exists between school staff and a child are important if learning is to take place. All staff, teachers and care staff especially, are important. Whether a child believes they are liked or not by the adult, and whether they believe they are trustworthy or not - really matters.

A child's early attachment experiences will determine how a child will respond, it is shaped by their earlier experiences. If they experience the teacher/support staff as caring and responsive, then those previous positive neural attachment pathways will be activated and leaning is likely to occur. Alternatively, the child may reject help/support or behave negatively on account of past experiences of not believing adults could be relied on. As a result they neither listen or engage/ participate fully, they lack confidence in the adult.

The danger is that children who have experienced poor attachment will behave 'as if' the present situation will follow the pattern of the past, trying to make this new experience fit their past understanding of how to relate to adults. It is not uncommon to hear staff comment about a child, 'it almost seems as if s/he doesn't want me to like them'. From an attachment perspective this may be so.

So children who start school with a positive attachment model are ready to trust adults and are ready to learn. Conversely there will be children who have very different models of interaction. This is especially true for children who have faced trauma, (physical, sexual or psychological) and lack the essential ingredient for learning, namely trust in adults.

Often in mainstream primary and secondary schools it is a minority who are continuously being sanctioned for behavioural problems. If the sanctions were an unwanted experience children and young people should work to avoid them. But they do not. Attachment theory can explain this. Having a negative relationship with school staff reflects the same experiences they have had in the past with adults. Experiences that are repeated become the norm. Having the same kind of relationship today as yesterday is almost reassuring. This is how the world is. So when children who are used to a negative relationship with their 'carers' are sanctioned in school, this is reinforces their view of the world. So instead of sanctions changing a child's behaviour they can, unwittingly,' maintain it.

Developing trust

Some children will need additional support to gradually learn to trust those adults who are supporting them. While there is no quick fix, there are ideas worth considering. Many of the following you will probably already know and are using already, which is as it should be, there may be some that are new or suggest new ideas.

Remember that for some children, letting you in, trusting you, is a huge step. So change may well be one step forward and two back, but even that is encouraging. It shows that change is possible. Remember change is likely to be in small steps, little by little.

Here are some ideas to develop relationships. The first is from a psychotherapist and the second from an experienced teacher/trainer.

PACE (Hughes, 2012).
This is an approach developed by Dan Hughes working with traumatised children. PACE stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy. These promote the experience of safety and trust in children with adults. A brief account of each follows.

Playfulness
The aim of playfulness is for the child to experience being with an an adult in can unconditional way. "I like being with you because I like being with you". The adult shows an interest and is curious about the child's behaviours. Any reprimands are done in a light tone, as when a child needs reminding about correct classroom behaviour.

Acceptance
When a child feels unconditional acceptance they know that the adult understands and has connected with how they are feeling. There is no judgement, the child is accepted and valued the way they are.

Curiosity
The aim is to show the child that you are genuinely interested in understanding them. Show you are curious by not asking "why' they have done something, but instead say, " "Is it ok if I share my idea of what is going on for you? I might be wrong but these are my ideas." or "What do you think was going on?",

Empathy
When you show empathy you are letting the child know that their feelings are really important. When they face difficulties you are telling them that you are there to support them.

For Hughes, acceptance and empathy are Emotional A&E. They are at the heart of the child starting to feel safe at school, which reduces conflict, stress and withdrawal. These are essential for learning to take place.

The second useful resource for developing a good relationship comes from the ideas of Rob Plevin (2017). Evidence shows that the more learners feel that they belong/connect to school, the less likely are they to have SEMH issues (Arslan, 2019). So what exactly is involved in 'belonging'. For Goodenow and Grady (1993) it involves learners feeling accepted and respected. They feel included in activities and supported in times of difficulty. Plevin's model provides us, or reminds us, of those core skills that are involved in relationship building with learners.

Show you care
Acts of Random Kindness
Offer support
Give them responsibilities
Lend them something special
Have high expectations/confidence in them

Communicate often
Give them choices
Ask for advice
Use written notes for home
Is there a skill they could teach others?
Discover their interests
Relate tasks to their interests
Give sincere compliments

In conclusion, attachment difficulties interfere with normal development, and plays a central role in hindering successful learning. Relationships need to be at the heart of every whole school policy to support learning and child development.

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