



# BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

## WIDENING THE LENS: A CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE VIEW OF ATTACHMENT

Family holds a central place in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. From an very early age, many children are taught who they belong to, where they come from and how to behave within their kinship network.

The effects of colonisation have greatly impacted Aboriginal family life, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be overrepresented in child welfare systems around the country.

The desire to raise happy, confident children is universal. In child protection, the concept of 'attachment' is used as part of the assessment of safety and wellbeing within families. Attachment theory, however, has been criticised for its narrow cultural lens. Key elements of attachment theory are based on Western values and do not reflect cultural differences in child rearing practices, especially in collectivist cultures that value interdependency over independency.

### Things to consider

The three main hypotheses of attachment theory are:

- ✔ The caregiver who is sensitive to the child will achieve a secure attachment.
- ✔ Secure attachment results in social competence as a child and as an adult.
- ✔ Children who are securely attached use the primary caregiver as a secure base for exploring the external world<sup>1</sup>.

### Sensitivity

Sensitive responsiveness measures how accurately caregivers can understand emotional signals, and the time it takes to respond appropriately.

- > In many Western cultures, sensitive responsiveness is defined by a response to the physical expression of distress (like crying), whereas in many Aboriginal families distress is pre-empted and addressed before physical expressions are displayed.
- > In many Aboriginal families distress is responded to by many caregivers, not just the primary caregiver.

### The secure base

When a child forms a secure relationship with a key caregiver, they are considered to have a secure base. The secure base is used as a standard measure of attachment in a Western context.

Having a secure base means that a child has trust in the reliability and availability of their relationship with their caregivers. Attachment theory teaches that a child who has a secure base experiences reduced anxiety and feels safe exploring the world around them.

- > The expression of a secure base is influenced by the primary caregiver's preference for how their child should behave, which is influenced by culture.
- > Aboriginal children can have multiple caregivers whom they approach for security. Without proper understanding this could be misinterpreted as indiscriminate attachment;

where a child does not show stranger anxiety.

- > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, young and old, have had their sense of safety eroded by the impacts of colonisation, for example: the government policies resulting in the Stolen Generations. The intergenerational trauma experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families must be considered.

### Competence

Attachment theory posits that children with secure attachment have increased social and emotional competence. Signifiers of competence include exploration, autonomy and efficacy, self-expression and affect regulation, and sociability, and competence as an adult.

However, these definitions are from a Western cultural context. Competence can look different in non-western cultures:

- > 'Exploration' behaviours differ across cultures. In Western culture a securely attached child may show more exploratory behaviour, whereas in other cultures they may show more dependant behaviours. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities discourage exploration prior to the age of 2 years.
- > Self-expression and affect regulation are also culturally specific aspects of human behaviour. In cultures where social harmony is valued, the expression of negative affect is discouraged. There is a risk of this being misinterpreted as 'avoidant' attachment behaviour.
- > Sociability in some collectivist cultures is not expressed through interactions with strangers; this is discouraged.
- > Competence as an adult is defined differently across cultures; in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture it is most likely to be defined in terms of their group membership, and contribution to the community. It is likely to involve a level of interdependence rather than autonomy.

### Tips

- > "Non Aboriginal people cannot fully know an Aboriginal perspective, but we can seek to understand it more fully."<sup>2</sup>
- > Slow down. Take time to listen.
- > Listen with the goal of understanding.
- > Be curious. Ask questions.
- > Always work from the position that the family is the expert in their lives.
- > Be comfortable with discomfort. Learning new ways of understanding things can sometimes feel uneasy.
- > Seek consultation with Aboriginal professionals when working with families.
- > Finally, remember that all families are unique. The advice given here is general and may not be relevant for every family.

*Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.*

**Here to help!** Come and talk to us if you would like more practical ways you can be trauma informed. Contact your case manager to start the conversation.

Sources:

- > <sup>1</sup>Rothbaum et al, 2000 in Yeo 2003, p.296-297
- > <sup>2</sup>Ryan 2011, p.184
- > Ryan, F. (2011) Kanyininpa (Holding): a way of nurturing children in Aboriginal Australia. In Australian Social Work 64(2) 183-197.
- > Briskman, L. (2014) Social Work With Indigenous Communities: A Human Rights Perspective (2nd Ed.). The Federation Press.
- > Yeo, S.S. (2003) Bonding and attachment of Australian Aboriginal children. In Child Abuse Review 12 292-304.



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