



BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

WHY CHILDREN BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY WITH DIFFERENT CARERS

EXPLAINING ATTACHMENT STRATEGIES

All of us are born with the survival instinct to draw people we see as 'carers' towards us when we are frightened, stressed, feel unwell or are under threat. For children, this instinct is expressed through their behaviours and called 'attachment strategies'. But depending on **who** the carer is and what **environment** the child is in, the child may use different strategies to communicate how they are feeling.

Multiple carers, different strategies

Children can have multiple carers at the same time in their lives. For example, a child may be able to turn to their Mum, Dad, Aunt, Uncle, teacher and cousin. All these carers are different and will respond differently when the child seeks them out for comfort or protection. How the individual carer responds, and how well they help the child to feel calm and safe, teaches the child whether the attachment strategy they used worked or not. If it worked, the child will continue to use the same strategy with that carer. If it didn't, it tells the child to try something different with that carer to let them know what they need.

An example

Take this example.

A child 'signals' to their Aunt that they feel distressed by crying and running to them with their arms outstretched. Aunt responds with warmth and confidence, and the child feels comforted and protected from what upset them. The child then knows this strategy works for Aunt and will use it again.

The same child uses the same strategy with their Uncle, but the Uncle becomes stressed and worried in seeing the child cry. This reaction makes the child feel even more distressed and leaves them trying to process their emotions on their own. Through this experience, the child learns that when they cry, their Uncle doesn't know how to respond to their needs and therefore can't help them to feel comforted and safe. So, instead of adopting similar strategies used with their Aunt, the child will try other strategies to signal to their Uncle, such as sitting on their own without crying and rocking themselves side-to-side.

How you can help

Whether you are Aunt, Uncle or any other carer, understanding the children in your life use behaviour to communicate with you is important. So too is realising how a child communicates with you may be different to how they communicate with others and being able to recognise these can help you better understand and therefore help the child work through their emotions.

To help do this, ask yourself the following questions:

- ❓ How does the child in my care signal to me when they are in need or feeling distressed? What behaviours do they show?
- ❓ How do I respond to them through my words, facial expressions and tone of voice?
- ❓ Does the child use the same or different behaviours with other people, and what might I learn from that?

Attachment strategies are **very complex**, particularly for children who have a history of developmental trauma. Carers are encouraged to seek **professional help** to understand their child's attachment strategies with a suitably trained professional.



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

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK). (2015). *Children's Attachment: Attachment in Children and Young People Who Are Adopted from Care, in Care or at High Risk of Going into Care*. London: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (UK).
- > Source images: Freepik.com (Freepik, Brgfx)



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