Understanding Attachment Theory, Emotional Availability and Application in Early Childhood Settings

A practical resource for staff working in early childhood education and development programs based on research and findings of 15 years of action research work undertaken at Gowrie SA Child Centre within the Children's Programs and in the "Through the Looking Glass" project.

Author: Yasmin Harman-Smith PhD, University of Adelaide
Published by Lady Gowrie Child Centre (SA)

Gowrie
South Australia

Attachment and what it means for early childhood educators

This resource will discuss attachment, as described by Attachment Theory, and its importance in early childhood. The resource will focus on the formation of relationships between people; specifically, between children and the adults who care for and educate them. The resource also discusses the ways educators can integrate aspects of attachment theory and use self reflection to enhance their relationships with children in their care, in order to help children feel emotionally secure, provide optimal developmental opportunities for children, and cultivate a harmonious working environment.

The Importance of Attachment

Attachment, first described by Bowlby (1977a, 1977b, 1986, 1988b), is a term that describes the bond that is formed between people as a result of their interactions. In a way, attachments might be thought of as the glue that holds people together in social units. Social units can range from the closest family units (e.g. bonds connecting parents and their children) to broader organisational units (e.g. bonds connecting co-workers).

Child-adult relationships differ from adult-adult relationships in the reciprocity of adult relationships. These bonds influence the way people feel about others, the sorts of ways in which they behave around others and the way in which they think about others. Simply put, attachments shape the way in which people behave within relationships. For that reason, attachment might be argued to form the basis of the social world, a social world that begins in infancy.

Although attachment was first described by Bowlby in relation to child-mother interactions, later research has found that it plays a key role in early childhood education settings. In fact, recent large-scale research has found that between educational staff and children the types of interactions that form healthy attachments are also vital to children's later educational outcomes (Melhuish, Phan, et al., 2008; Melhuish, Sylva, et al., 2008; Shriver, 2006).

For this reason according to Cooper, Hoffman and Powell (2009) "all children want to feel safe and secure", therefore it is important for early childhood educators to understand the basis of attachment and be able to assess their own interactions with children in their care to provide the best possible environment for children.

Attachment: Relationships and Relating

Patterns of attachment can have positive or negative effects on our daily interactions with others. Reflecting upon our relationships, we can all identify those we enjoy and others that we might find challenging or unpleasant. Fortunately, relationships can change.

The method for changing relationships is through changing interactions. The link between social experiences and attachments is bi-directional. That is, attachments and interactions each affect the other. Each interaction is effected by the bond that people already share and in turn the interaction has an effect on the attachment. Thus, changing interactions is the way in which relationships can be changed.

For that reason, attachments are fluid and constantly changing rather than fixed and inflexible. Good relationships can sour, just as poor relationships can improve. Educators who are positive, consistent, and responsive in their interactions with children provide a basis for the development of stable secure attachments.

Although each person experiences numerous attachments throughout life, arguably the first attachments between an infant and his/her caregiver are the most influential in that they have the ability to shape the child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. It is these early attachments that Bowlby first discussed and on which much research focuses.

Early attachments affect not only the way children relate to their parents or caregiver, but it also affects how children feel about themselves and how freely they are able to learn about the world.

Following is a more detailed look at each of these domains:

- Building relationships;
- Developing a sense of self; and
- Cognitive development.

Interactions Build Relationships

The fluid nature of attachments means that each person bears some responsibility for the quality of his/her relationships with others. Through people's actions and reactions they are able to change the nature of their relationships with others. When working in a relationship we find challenging it is important to remember that:

- the relationship influences our behaviour
- behaviour can affect the relationship
- the relationship can improve
- we are able to influence the relationship

As educators working with young children, who are less capable of managing their own behaviour than an adult, the responsibility for the quality of that relationship falls to the adult. While the child's temperament, behaviour and style of relating can certainly challenge our expectations, relationship, and the way the educator might feel toward the child, it is the educator who shapes the relationships with the children in his/her care. Educators of young children will have the best possible impact on children in their care if they are able to keep in mind that, although it is not easy, it is always possible for educators working with children who exhibit difficult behaviours to improve a challenging relationship.

The following example is intended to illustrate the way in which relationships can form. The example presents a situation along with possible resulting relationships that might develop as a result of differing approaches to interaction.

The situation:

A baby who is difficult to settle and cries much of the time.

The interaction:

The educator feels stress and agitation whenever the baby cries. Often, the educator tries, in vain, to soothe the child by rocking, feeding, doing everything and anything they can think of, all the while feeling tense and distressed.

The educator thinks that the problem is the baby's temperament because nothing else seems to be wrong. In other words, the educator thinks that the cause of the problem is something about the child.

Resulting relationship:

Over time, the educator might come to view the child as a 'difficult' baby. This can lead to the educator blaming the child's early temperament for a later poor relationship with the child. By viewing the problem as something about the child, it is difficult to affect any change. The child will continue crying and the educator will continue feeling out of control and distressed.

Alternative way of interacting:

Despite the fact that this is a difficult situation, it is neither the child nor the educator's fault. Some babies cry more than others, despite there being no medical problem or other apparent reason. It may be that these babies are finding it harder to adjust to being in an early childhood setting.

Another way of viewing the problem is as one of relating. That is, thinking of the situation as a problem in relating or as something about the situation.

If, instead, the educator were to consider how the crying impacts them, what they think and how they feel, the educator can influence how they react to the child and, in turn, build a more positive relationship and view of the child. If each time the child cries, the educator were to stop and think about how the child's cry is making them feel, they would then be able to begin to change the way in which they react to the situation. The educator might think to themself (or even say out loud):

"I feel like I have no control over the situation and I am feeling increasingly agitated/angry/distressed. There doesn't seem to be any obvious reason that the baby is upset (isn't cold, wet, hungry, etc). The baby is feeling something I cannot fix, but she still needs me to be there for her during this difficult time. The cry is horrible to listen to but the baby has no other way of expressing how she is feeling. While my best efforts (cuddling, rocking, singing, etc) may not make the crying stop right away, it will teach her that I am here for her in her time of need (even when it is hard for me)".

Accepting that this is a difficult emotion for the educator to manage and taking time to calm themself before attempting to calm the child will help the educator get through those challenging interactions feeling much better about themself and about the child. In fact, the educator's calm presence may help to soothe the child more quickly.

Alternative resulting relationship:

The child feels loved and supported and, in time, they will learn that the educator is someone that they can go to when they have feelings they cannot manage on their own. The educator's changed thoughts about the child's crying, and what it might signal, will likely result in the educator developing a more positive self image, in which they see themselves as a capable and loving person who, despite not always being able to fix children's feelings, is always able to support them through those feelings.

Attachments form over time in response to interaction regardless of whether people intend them to form or not. Although people are able to choose the manner in which they interact with others, interactions between people are often too quick and automatic to be thought through. Therefore, spending time reflecting on past interactions can help us be better prepared to handle challenging future interactions.

Children form attachments with the adults who are caring for them through regular day-to-day activities and routines and by experiencing their caregiver's responses through those routines – such as feeding, bathing, dressing, playing, and so on. When a child cries and an educator attends or doesn't attend to their need, an attachment is forming. The educator and child are learning about each other and about themselves. While the educator might be learning about what helps the child settle or about what signals hunger in the child, the child is learning that the educator is someone they can turn to when in need and a person on whom they can depend.

As children grow they look to those people on whom they have learned to depend for guidance and support. Later in life, children who have had positive early relationship experiences will have learned that people close to them can be trusted, that they can turn to others for support in times of need, and that it is good to relate to other people in mutually beneficial ways. Children who have experienced positive interactions with educators are likely to be more socially competent,

develop a high sense of self esteem, and develop the capacity to regulate their own emotions and behaviours; traits that can help them thrive in later school settings and also in adult relationships.

Developing a Sense of Self and Others

Aside from learning about other people, children's earliest interactions with other people are important for their sense of self. Interactions with other people teach children about themselves. Children with a history of positive, consistent, and predictable interactions with others form a positive internal working model – a model that tells them about themselves and about what to expect from their interactions with others. That is, children gain a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and confidence from warm and caring interactions and they expect that others will behave in these ways toward them.

In contrast, children who experience negative or unpredictable interactions with those who care for them begin to form a negative view of themselves and come to expect negative interactions with others - termed a negative internal model. These children may not learn that they are valuable, good, and loved, nor will they learn that people can be warm, caring and trustworthy.

The following example is intended to illustrate the way in which children can form an internal working model based on the ways in which adults react to them and interact with them. The example presents a situation in which an adult responds in differing ways and two possible outcomes for the child's sense of self. Note that while a single interaction is not enough to instil a sense of self in a child, an accumulation of a particular type of interaction will create a sense of self over time.

The situation:

A child, Ben, lashes out hitting another child, Tim. Tim interrupted Ben's play by accidentally stepping on his sandcastle.

Educator reaction:

The educator steps in and tells Ben that Tim stepped on the sandcastle by accident and that we do not hit people. The educator explains that Ben hurt Tim and that made Tim feel sad. The educator then comforts Tim.

What the children learned:

Ben has learned that he was wrong. He has also learned that what Tim did was OK despite the fact that it upset him. Subsequently he has learned that his feelings are not as important as Tim's feelings. Ben has not learned an alternative, more socially acceptable, way of expressing his anger.

Tim has learned that when he is hurt, he can turn to the important adults in his life to comfort him. Tim may not have learned how to resolve conflict on his own. It is also unlikely that Tim has learned to take into consideration the feelings of other children in his environment.

Alternative educator reaction:

The educator steps in and says "It looks like the two of you might need some help here, can I help you?" The educator gives both boys the opportunity to communicate how they feel (and if necessary the educator might help the boys express their feelings or the course of events depending on the age and verbal ability of the children).

The educator can then reframe or summarise the event for both children. "Ben, you were angry that Tim stepped on your sandcastle. That is understandable; I would be upset too if someone knocked over my sandcastle. It seems that Tim stepped on the sandcastle by accident because he did not see it. What do you think would help you both feel better?"

The educator gives the children the opportunity to resolve the conflict with the educator offering suggestions if need be. "Perhaps everyone would feel better if we work together to fix the problem." The educator asks the children how they might handle a similar situation in the future. "Accidents often happen, especially when there are so many children playing in one place. What do you think you might do next time someone upsets or hurts you by accident?"

The educator gives the children an opportunity to come up with their own ideas about how to handle future conflict. "Perhaps next time before we get really angry at each other we could say STOP and then try and work it out together; or you might ask an adult to help if you are really upset."

The educator leaves the boys to continue playing and makes a final comment on how well they have fixed the problem. "I'm so pleased you were able to sort this out. I bet you both feel much better now as well."

What the children learned:

The interaction between educator and children has taught the boys a number of things about themselves as well as about social interaction. Firstly, the boys have learned a strategy of communicating, negotiating and problem solving. Secondly, they have learned that, even when they do not behave optimally, people care about them and are willing and able to help them (Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell, 2000 termed this the circle of repair). Thirdly, they have learned that they are capable communicators and that people understand them.

The children have also learned that, with the support of others, they are able to mend disruptions to their relationships. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for their sense of self, both boys have learned that their feelings are valid and matter to others. Knowing that how they feel matters to other people and teaches them that they are important people in the eyes of those around them. Although this type of interaction takes more time and more thought on the part of the educator, the outcomes are better for all involved. This includes the educator who is providing the children with better ways of relating to each other and this should be reflected in their behaviour over time.

Attachment and Cognitive Development

Aside from the importance of children's early interactions for their social development and self concept, early attachments between children and their caregivers are pivotal for children's cognitive development. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the types of interactions children experience help wire their brains and optimal early experience can promote lifelong learning (Nelson, 2011). Secondly, children's attachments to caring and warm adults help them feel secure and safe in their environment and when children feel safe and secure they are able to devote their time and energies to learning (Bowlby, 1988b).

Children and adults have limited cognitive resources – the brain can only focus on one thing at a time. While reading this, for example, you will not be able to simultaneously sing your favourite song. In the same way, a child who is afraid or uncertain will use all of his/her cognitive resources trying to cope with that stress. Even in the most interesting environment, full of learning opportunities, a child who does not feel safe, secure and confident will not be able to take advantage

"Primary Caregiving facilitates the mental health and wellbeing of infants and children in care because it creates an optimal environment in which children are able to form secure attachments" Gowrie SA, 2011

Download Gowrie SA's Primary Caregiving resource in this series www.gowriesa.org.au

"Concepts of Primary Caregiving and Structures that Support Implementation in Early Childhood Settings"

of these opportunities. In contrast, a child who feels safe and protected will, in the same environment, be able to interact with the environment, talk to and learn from adults, interact with other children, play and so on. Bowlby referred to this as important adults providing a secure base for children (note: although Bowlby discussed this with reference to the child's parents, the concept applies to any adult providing care or education).

> "[A child's important adults provide] a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened (1988a, p. 11)."

A child feeling safe to play and explore are important attachment outcomes. Play and exploration are vital for children's early learning. Most everything children do in their early years is play. As such, children's play is the cornerstone of learning and it is evident in all forms of play, ranging from kicking and hitting at a mobile or toy as an infant (and as a result learning about action and reaction) to more complex make-believe cooperative play between children (learning about negotiation and problem solving).

A Closer Look at Attachment Theory

So far we have discussed the importance of attachment for children's development of relationships, sense of self, and cognition. This has highlighted the importance of the nature of interactions between children and the adults who are responsible for their care and education. Warm, caring interactions build sound relationships, help children develop a positive internal working model and provide a secure base for children to allow them to explore their worlds and learn through play. While it sounds relatively simple to be warm and caring in order to improve our relationships, this can be challenging because people are not all the same. We all come from different backgrounds, have different experiences and view the world in different ways. Each of us has a set of experiences that has shaped us and the way we relate to other people.

The way in which adults respond to children is influenced by their own experiences of growing up. Adults vary in the degree to which they find particular behaviours challenging to deal with. Some adults might

find it difficult to provide discipline and others might find it difficult to provide comfort. The experiences we have as children shape our internal working models of how to relate to people and what to expect from people. For example, an adult who was not shown a great deal of compassion or empathy as a child and was helped to cope physically but not emotionally may find it difficult to respond empathically to children who are upset.

Behaviour in children that adults find particularly challenging to cope with is, therefore, less a reflection of the severity of the behaviour and more a reflection of the adult's internal working model. Although educators might have the best intentions to build secure relationships with children, the educator's interactions with children will be influenced by their own upbringing, how they feel, and what they think.

Just as the internal working models of educators vary, so do those of children. Therefore, the same interactions with different children can result in entirely different outcomes. For this reason, educators need to tailor their interactions with each child. In order to tailor interactions to suit different children, educators need to be able to evaluate their interactions with children as well as the children's attachment needs.

Attachment theory provides educators with a frame of reference from which to evaluate their relationships with children and children's attachment needs. By examining children's attachment behaviours we are able to get a sense of how they feel. Empathising with how children feel can help educators begin to change their interactions with children in order to help them feel safe and secure more readily. In addition to evaluating how children might be feeling, it is also important for educators to think about their interactions with children and how the educator's behaviour and feelings impact on those interactions and, in turn, on children.

Attachment theory talks about children's attachments as either secure or insecure (Ainsworth, 1964; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Children may experience different patterns of attachments to different people throughout their childhood. Children's developmental outcomes depend not on their attachment at any one point in time, but rather on how well adults are able to help them develop secure attachments or to move from an insecure attachment to a secure attachment.

While there are clinical tools that can be used to assess attachment, the types of 'behaviours' assessed by these can also be observed in regular daily interactions.

Although it is important for educators to be able to identify children's attachments in an educational setting - so that they are able to encourage and support the development of secure child-educator attachments - it must be noted that the role of educators is not to assess or diagnose children's attachment. Instead, educators should assess how children are coping in the educational setting. Assessing attachment *'behaviours'* can aid educators in finding ways to help children feel safe and secure so they can make the most of the educational setting.

Attachment Behaviours

Children's behaviour shows us how children feel. Children who feel good and safe act out or exhibit challenging behaviour less frequently. What we might think of as 'naughty behaviour' is actually an expression of a child who is not coping well in the environment (Dolby, 2007). From an attachment perspective, secure attachment behaviours indicate that children feel safe. In contrast, insecure attachment behaviours indicate that children do not feel safe. Children who feel a secure attachment to the adults in their environment can be seen:

- expressing emotion freely
- moving confidently around the environment and away from their important adults (distance and length of time away from adult is dependent on age of the child)
- engaged in play and exploration

In an educational environment, securely attached children depend on educators to support them when necessary. Depending on the age of the child these behaviours can look very different. In essence, these children play, explore and communicate their needs clearly.

Educators working with these children are likely to enjoy their interactions with the children. Children who do not yet feel safe and secure in their environment can be seen:

- clinging to adults or avoiding close contact with adults
- distressed or overwhelmed by their emotions or showing restricted expression of emotions
- not engaging with the environment – limiting play and exploration
- acting as independent children who do not need to access their educators for support or reassurance when in need

- acting as though they need to control or take care of their caregivers

Educators working with children who have not yet developed a secure attachment may find these interactions challenging. The attachment behaviours of children who are not yet securely attached will demand more time and energy on the part of the educator. Perhaps not surprisingly, educators working within an attachment framework note that their working days become easier once they have developed secure attachments with the children in their care (Harman-Smith, 2011).

Getting to Know Children and Families

Developing attachments is essentially about getting to know a person. People who know us and understand us are able to anticipate our needs, feelings and reactions to situations and in turn we are able to anticipate their reactions to us. In other words, as people get to know each other, each becomes predictable to the other. Predictability helps us cope with the world.

When we know what to expect, the world is less daunting and challenging. In a new situation or in a situation where we do not know what to expect, we all experience a sense of the unknown – a nervous or anxious feeling. Children feel this too. Making the transition to an early childhood setting is less stress inducing for children if something in the environment reminds them of home. This is best achieved when educators get to know children and their families, and attempt to fit into the child's understanding of the world (as opposed to expecting the child to try to fit in with the educator's view of the world).

An educator who feels familiar, even though they might be completely new to the child, will help the child feel at ease. Therefore, in the context of early childhood education, educators need to get to know the important people in children's lives (usually the child's parents). Building secure attachments with children is easiest when educator's interactions resemble those of the adults to whom they are already securely attached. Children come into an early educational setting with a set of experiences that have taught them what to expect from people (internal working model).

While the relationships with educators will add to and enrich children's experience base, educators will most easily form attachments when they are able to adapt

their interactions so that they feel familiar for children. In situations where children, for whatever reason, have not developed a secure attachment within their family, it may take more time and be more difficult for educators in an early childhood setting to help the child develop a secure attachment. In situations where children's early experiences have not been conducive to developing a secure attachment, positive experiences in an early childhood setting and collaboration between educators and families can help children begin to feel secure and, in turn, develop better models of relating to others.

Developing and nurturing attachments with children will be influenced by children's age and background.

In order to begin to connect with infants, new adults can adapt their interactions to resemble those the infant is already familiar with. This might mean learning about how their families feed them, change them, and play with them, whether the infant has a comfort item and so on. In getting to know children, educators might discuss with parents what they expect from their child in terms of toileting, eating, and behaviour. Educators might also find out about the children's favourite activities, favourite people and so on. In essence, anything that enhances an educator's knowledge of a child will help the educator connect with that child and begin to form a mutually rewarding relationship.

In situations where children are very distressed by the new environment it might be that the environment is completely different from anything they have encountered before. For example, a child who comes from a cultural and language background that differs greatly from that of the educator will likely feel out of place and lost. If the educator is able to learn about the child's background and find a way to feel familiar for the child, the child will adapt more quickly and easily to the new environment. This might be as simple as learning a few words in the child's language or learning about the child's routines at home and emulating aspects of these in the early childhood education setting.

Getting to know the families of children is vital to getting to know children. Aside from learning about the child, getting to know families adds to how the child feels about the new people and environment. This is because shared interactions, between children, the environment and caregivers teach children about the world. When children are exploring a new object, place or person they look to their parents for clues as to whether it is safe, scary, fun, etc. (Hobson, 2004). A

child who sees his/her parents interacting in a carefree and easy way with new adults will see that this is a safe person whom they can interact with freely.

In addition to helping the educator learn about a child, warm, caring and non-judgemental interactions between educators and the children's parents also help parents feel better about leaving their children in the care of another adult. A parent who experiences an educator who is interested in their child feels that their child is important to the educator. It is difficult for many parents to give their precious children over to a person who does not know the child and who might not understand the child's needs.

Parents can worry that their children might not be able to be comforted when distressed, that their children might feel scared, lost, or unloved in the parent's absence. This is distressing for parents. Educators who genuinely care about the children in their care, and communicate this to parents by taking a real interest in them and their child, make the separation between parent and child considerably less stressful.

Nurturing Attachments

Attachments are nurtured through daily interactions. Relationships need attention and care, just as a living thing needs continuing care to thrive. Nurturing relationships is about responding consistently, predictably, and calmly to all manner of situations. Although children who generally feel happy and safe will mostly behave in socially acceptable ways, children's learning also includes, at times, socially undesirable behaviour.

Behaving in undesirable ways is an important part of the learning process. Making mistakes, taking wrong turns, trial and error, are all part of learning for both children and adults. The role of adults is to make that learning journey easier for children. Educators can do this by responding calmly, consistently and predictably when children make a 'social' mistake. Calm, kind, consistent and predictable interactions with educators, help children learn what is expected of them and the boundaries of their environments. Different environments require different types of behaviour and children need to learn an enormous amount about the social world. Just as we would not scold a child for stumbling and falling over while he or she is still practicing walking, we should not scold a child for stumbling while still practicing socialising.

In addition to teaching children about the environment and ways of behaving within the environment, educators who are calm, kind and available to connect emotionally with children are able to help children organise their feelings (Cooper, et al., 2000).

An adult who is available to connect emotionally with children is able to recognise a child's emotions and respond in kind with an appropriate emotion (e.g. empathy, joy, excitement, etc.). By being emotionally available to children, educators are able to help children organise their feelings. Emotional availability begins with being sensitive and responsive to children's emotional needs rather than isolating ourselves from children's emotions.

Being open to children's emotions is the first step to empathising with children. Educators who are emotionally available are able to engage with children on an emotional level and thereby help them learn to cope with challenging emotions. Children who are able to process their feelings and move on from them are then able to learn something from the challenging situation. In contrast, a child who becomes increasingly worked up about a situation, and who does not have a calm and consistent adult to help organise their feelings will not have the cognitive resources to do any learning at that time. Dealing with their overwhelming emotions will take up all of their energy.

Interpreting Children's Behaviour in Terms of their Needs

When we think about children's behaviour as learning about the world, or as expressing a need we are then able to respond in a way that has a real and lasting impact on the child and the child's future behaviour. In a way, children's behaviour can be thought of as the tip of an iceberg, the behaviour is what we see on the surface of the water and the need is not so easily seen as it is hidden under the water. Scolding children, setting strict boundaries without considering children's needs or ignoring behaviour when children behave in a way that makes us feel angry, uncomfortable or agitated, does not help children learn nor does it make it less likely that we will see that behaviour again.

If, however, educators respond to the child's need, rather than the behaviour, the educator can teach the child alternative ways of expressing that need.

"Experiences in early learning environments lay the foundations for future education, relationships and wellbeing. Early childhood settings that work within multi-disciplinary teams are uniquely positioned to assist in optimising the mental health and wellbeing of children and families" Gowrie SA, 2011

Download Gowrie SA's Multi-disciplinary Teams resource in this series www.gowriesa.org.au
"Establishing and Maintaining Multi-disciplinary Teams in Early Childhood Settings"

Responding to needs also helps to reduce future instances of undesirable behaviour. Children express a variety of needs that might be seen as behaving badly (Dolby, 2007).

When we reframe these behaviours in terms of needs children are transformed from challenging people into people that we can empathise with, understand and nurture.

The following is an example of how behaviours can help children adapt to the situation/environment.

Undesirable Behaviour	Expression of need
Attention seeking – perhaps seen as destructive or irritating in the eyes of an adult.	Need for connection – brings adults closer to the child. If adults seek out children more often they make themselves approachable and teach children that they can seek out the adult when they feel they need to connect with someone.
Out of control behaviour – behaviour that poses a threat to the child or other people in the environment	Need help coping with the environment. Extreme behaviour is often a sign of children who are having a great deal of difficulty expressing themselves. Sometimes this can be the result of being overwhelmed in an environment with many other children. Other times it might be because the child is having trouble regulating their emotions. In these situations adults need to be bigger, stronger, wise and kind (Cooper, et al, 1998). In extreme cases where educators working together with families have not been able to help children manage in the environment, the support of a professional working together with educators and the child's family might be required to implement systems to support the child.
Excessive crying – perhaps viewed as needy, put on, or exaggerated	Need to feel safe and nurtured – feeling lost, scared, unable to cope. Crying uncontrollably is not something anyone likes doing. It is something people do when they are completely overwhelmed with emotion. Helping children feel safe to express their emotions and vulnerability, can help children adapt to the situation/environment.
Clinginess – perhaps viewed as needy, shy, or demanding	Need to feel safe to explore and know that they will be welcomed upon return – clinging to adults is a sign that children do not feel safe to leave the adult. They are uncertain about whether they will be able to return to the adult or whether the adult will be able to comfort them if they become upset while away from the adult. These children have not yet formed a secure attachment. They do not yet know that the adult will welcome them back, help them organise their feelings, support their exploration.

While these are examples of common behaviours, behaviour in response to any situation can be reframed in terms of need. Open and non-judgemental discussion with colleagues and parents about a child's challenging behaviour can help educators identify and address the child's need.

Educators are best able to impact children's behaviour when they work collaboratively with families in order to avoid confusing children with conflicting messages.

Educators might say "When (child) does X, I do not know what is happening for her. I want to help her make the most of her time here. What do you think she might need that she is not getting?" Children whose needs are addressed will feel understood. This not only helps children, but it also helps educators improve working conditions by reducing work related stress.

Facing the same battles every day with a child that is presenting challenging behaviours reduces educators enjoyment of their day and it takes away from their time and ability to interact positively with other children in their care. Resolving children's unmet needs is in the best interest of everyone in the child's environment.

Developmental Differences in Attachment Behaviours

Although the need for attachment to people remains constant throughout the lifespan, the way in which attachment needs are expressed changes and evolves over time. The earliest need for connection with other people can be seen in babies when they coo or smile at an adult (Bowlby, 1977a). Adults instinctually reciprocate these behaviours and in this way, infants begin to form connections with those people in their immediate environment. As children develop, they begin to express their attachment needs in a myriad of ways.

Older infants point to things that interest them, or follow an adults point or gaze. This shared focus of attention connects people to each other (Hobson, Patrick, Crandell, García Pérez, & Lee, 2004). Older children use language to communicate to us about themselves. Children want adults to take an interest in them – they tell adults about what they have been doing or about something that has captured their interest. Through interactions children seek to connect and share their worlds. Adults exhibit the same attachment behaviours – sharing stories about their experiences with others – seeking understanding, comfort, or protection.

As children become more able to move about their environments they follow their instincts to explore the world and then return to their secure base. This is illustrated by Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell in what they term the Circle of Security (1998). The diagram on the following page illustrates the way children use an adult who is bigger, stronger, wiser and kind to explore their worlds.

Children who do not explore their environments may not feel safe and protected. The role of adults in children's exploration and play should be supportive rather than directive or intrusive. Bowlby aptly summarised that the role of the adult is "one of being available, ready to respond when called upon to encourage and perhaps assist, but to intervene only when clearly necessary" (1988a, p. 11).

Adults can best encourage play and exploration by ensuring children feel safe to move about and explore, knowing that a parent or educator will be available to them upon their return.

In addition to being a secure base for children adults can provide stimulating environments to which children will be naturally drawn to play and learn.

Situational Influences on Attachment Behaviours

Before children become securely attached to a new important adult (for example an early childhood educator), they will likely express a range of insecure attachment behaviours. However, children who are usually securely attached to their important adults can also exhibit insecure attachments at times.

This is because attachments are fluid and open to change. Changes in circumstances for children or adults can influence attachments and attachment behaviours at any given time. A number of situational factors can have an impact on how children feel and consequently, the attachment behaviours they display. For instance, a child who is ill will not explore and play as independently as they might when well. Examples of situations in which children might exhibit insecure attachment:
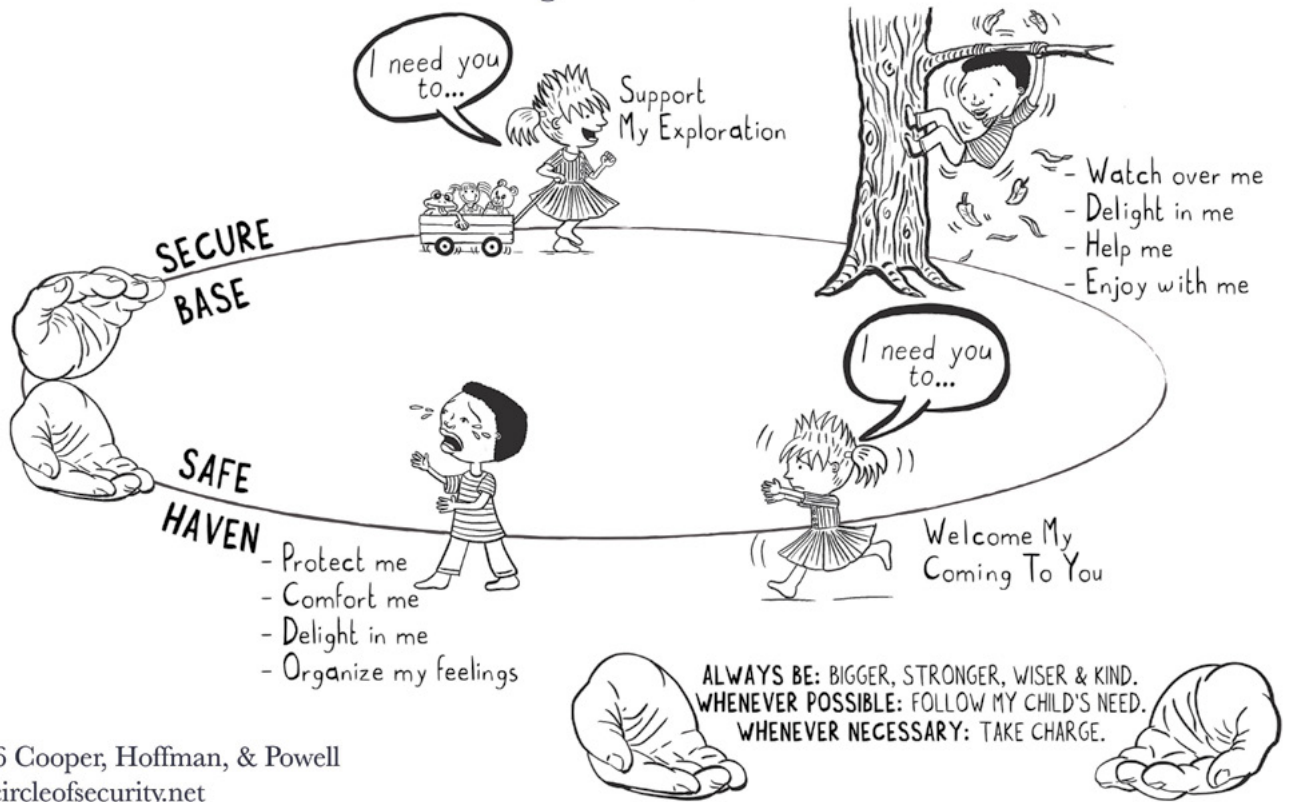
Big things
- new sibling
- change in family situation
- death of someone close to the child
- death of a pet
- moving house

Little things
- feeling unwell
- bad night's sleep
- absence of an attachment item
- dealing with something the child dislikes (e.g. having to wear a hat to play outside)

Circle of Security®
Parent Attending To The Child's Needs

©2016 Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell
www.circleofsecurity.net

Key Points Addressed in this Resource

- Secure attachments between children and educators in an early childhood setting are important for children to feel safe and confident in the environment.

- Consistent, predictable, caring, and supportive interactions help children develop positive internal working models about themselves and others.

- Children who feel secure, protected and understood are free to develop and learn.

- Children build relationships with educators most readily when educators and families work in partnership to support the development of children's secure attachments in an early childhood setting.

- Relationships with educators enrich children's experience base.

- Challenging behaviour is an expression of children's unmet needs. When these behaviours are reframed as needs, educators are better able to help children by addressing these needs. Addressing children's needs also helps educators teach children more socially acceptable ways of expressing needs.

- Children who feel secure, whose needs are met and who have mutually enjoyable relationships with educators present with fewer challenging behaviours – building secure attachments has real benefits for educators by reducing work related stress.

- When a challenging behaviour overwhelms an educator, the educator should work together with families and other staff to identify children's unmet needs and work to resolve these needs.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. (1964). Patterns of attachment behavior shown by the infant in interaction with his mother. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly: Journal of Developmental Psychology, 10(1), 51-58.

- Ainsworth, M. D., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. Child Development, 41(1), 49-67. doi: 10.2307/1127388

- Bowlby, J. (1977a). The making and breaking of affectional bonds: I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. British Journal of Psychiatry, 130, 201-210. doi: 10.1192/bjp.130.3.201

- Bowlby, J. (1977b). The making and breaking of affectional bonds: II. Some principles of psychotherapy. British Journal of Psychiatry, 130, 421-431. doi: 10.1192/bjp.130.5.421

- Bowlby, J. (1986). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. In P. Buckley (Ed.), Essential papers on object relations. (pp. 153-199). New York, NY US: New York University Press.

- Bowlby, J. (1988a). A secure base: Clinical applicaitons of attachment theory. London: Routledge.

- Bowlby, J. (1988b). A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development. New York, NY US: Basic Books.

- Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Marvin, R. S., & Powell, B. (1998). Cirle of Security.

- Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Marvin, R. S., & Powell, B. (2000). Cirlce of Repair Retrieved 8 May 2011, from http://www.circleofsecurity.net/assets/forms_pdf/COS_chart%20cirlceofrepair.pdf

- Dolby, R. (2007). The Circle of Security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships. In E. C. A. Inc. (Ed.), (Vol. 4). Canberra: Goanna.

- Harman-Smith, Y. (2011). [Interviews with primary care givers working in the Through the Looking glass project].

- Hobson, P. (2004). Cradle of thought: Exploring the Origins of Thinking. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hobson, P., Patrick, M. P. H., Crandell, L. E., García Pérez, R. M., & Lee, A. (2004). Maternal sensitivity and infant triadic communication. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 45(3), 470-480. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00238.x

- Melhuish, E. C., Phan, M. B., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2008). Effects of the home learning environment and preschool center experience upon literacy and numeracy development in early primary school. Journal of Social Issues, 64(1), 95-114. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00550.x

- Melhuish, E. C., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Phan, M. B., et al. (2008). Preschool influences on mathematics achievement. Science, 321(5893), 1161-1162. doi: 10.1126/science.1158808

- Nelson, C. A., III. (2011). Neural development and lifelong plasticity. In D. P. Keating (Ed.), Nature and nurture in early child development. (pp. 45-69). New York, NY US: Cambridge University Press.

- Shriver, E. K. (2006). The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD): Findings for Children up to Age 4 1/2 Years Retrieved 8 May, 2011, from http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/seccyd_06.pdf

There are two additional resource modules available in this series which can also be downloaded from www.gowriesa.org.au

- *Concepts of primary caregiving and structures that support implementation in early childhood settings*

- *Establishing and maintaining multi-disciplinary teams in early childhood settings*

For more information, contact Gowrie SA on 08 8234 5219 or email train@gowriesa.org.au