

What is attachment?



A guide for early years workers on using attachment ideas in their day to day practice



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Introduction

Who is the booklet for?

The booklet is for early years workers working with young children under five - be it in a nursery, hospital, community or family setting.

What does the booklet cover?

If you already work with young children under five, you will have definitely come across the ideas of attachment during your training. What might not be so clear is how you can best use the learning behind attachment ideas in your daily work.

This booklet explains in simple terms:

- what exactly an 'attachment informed' approach to childcare is;
- how you can use attachment ideas in your practice to support positive relationships with the children in your care;
- what you should look out for if you are concerned about a child's attachment style in your setting; and
- how you can support parents and carers to develop healthy and strong attachment relationships with their young children.

Contents

What exactly is attachment, and why is it important?	4
How are attachment ideas relevant to nursery workers and other early years workers?	5
The things young children will do to try to form an attachment.....	6
Ways you can use attachment ideas with babies under one in your care	7
What happens when babies become toddlers?.....	12
Ways you can use attachment ideas to help toddlers in your care	14
Signs that primary caregivers might need help in their attachment relationship with their young child	17
What to do if you're concerned	19

What exactly is attachment, and why is it important?

From the moment of birth, babies rely on forming bonds or 'attachments' to the people around them in order to survive and feel safe and protected in the world. Instinctively, babies will seek out closeness with a familiar (and consistently available) person who can provide them with protection and comfort when they are feeling frightened or vulnerable.

The main thinking behind these attachment ideas is that it is important for a baby or young child to have this closeness to a caregiver from early in their life. This helps them to feel secure, and develop in a healthy way, both physically and emotionally.



How are attachment ideas relevant to nursery workers and other early years workers?

Importantly, this idea is not just relevant to parents, but also to other care givers, including **early years workers**. Research shows that children can benefit from a network of attachment relationships and these include familiar people such as grandparents and nursery teachers. See our poster on '*Supporting your baby's relationships with others*'.



The things young children will do to try to form an attachment

Young children under five seem to be born with an inbuilt instinct to seek out and form attachments with the caregivers around them to help receive comfort and protection. They might do this by behaving in a certain way i.e; by crying, suckling, smiling, or clinging to the person caring for them.

These actions are designed to make the caregiver react, so they will feel drawn to respond to the baby and invest in them physically and emotionally. For instance, these actions may prompt caregivers to comfort, feed, or attend to their baby's other needs.

Children who experience this are likely to grow up feeling safe, secure, and happy to explore and emotionally develop. This way, they will also view the world as a 'good' place.

The quality of the bond between caregivers and young children can differ from family to family. It can also be influenced by the parent or carer's past experiences, their living conditions, how the family gets along as a whole, and the mother's birth experience.

Ways you can use attachment ideas with babies under one in your care

Stay alert to what the baby might be signaling

When looking after a baby, it is helpful to regularly wonder about what their different communications might be saying as you go through the day.

So whilst there are many manual tasks involved in looking after babies, such as changing, feeding, and washing them, and these can take up much of your attention - it's important to shift your focus and tune into the baby's feelings while you're performing these actions. To help with this, try to keep your mind open and be curious about how they might be feeling and viewing the world. This is known as 'mentalizing', and should help you to get a clearer idea of what their needs might be.

When the babies specific need becomes clear, try to respond to it quickly. If you do, you are more likely to form more a successful attachment with the baby.

Make sure the baby knows that if they have a need, it will always be met

It's not just important for a baby to have his or her needs responded to. It's also important for the baby to trust their caregiver and know that, if and when they have a need and try to communicate to you, they will get a response.

This knowledge will help babies develop a sense of security. They'll feel confident in the fact that, should they encounter a problem, they will get help. They will then be able to think of the world as something that has been made safe by their caregivers, a place in which they can feel free to explore, learn and be themselves.

A baby who is secure would feel that they are able share their joy or distress with you. They should feel that they can "ask" for help, and that they can rely on you to help them understand the confusion of the outside world better. A secure baby will also have been made to feel safe enough to say "no" to something.

Ultimately, if a baby knows their needs will be met, they are more likely to be 'securely attached'.

Be aware that similar actions can mean different things at different times

It can take time to get to understand a baby's different signals. Sometimes a baby can perform a similar action, but it can mean different things in different circumstances.

For instance, you might think that a 'bouncing' action generally signals that the baby is happy and excited, because normally the baby might bounce up and down in anticipation when waiting for a delicious spoonful of food.

But if they are made to wait a long time for the food because it is too hot, they might still bounce, but the bouncing action might change slightly, becoming faster, and start to signal frustration instead. If you look closely you might see that it starts to include signs of discomfort like twisting, flopping forward or moaning.



When a baby signals discomfort, use simple words and actions to explain the situation, and help them learn not to fear it in the future

Once you start to recognise a baby's signs of discomfort, and understand what makes them upset, you can use words to help them start to fear the 'negative' situation less.

You can 'label' their problem with a word that they will soon begin to recognise. For instance, if you know that a baby often reacts badly when they are forced to wait for food that is too hot, you could introduce to them the idea that something can be "too hot". For example, making an exaggerated blowing sound or gesture, and repeating the word: "hot". In time, a baby should start to understand what 'hot' means, and that when food is 'too hot' they have to wait.



Likewise, if a baby is startled by a loud noise, you can give them a soothing hug whilst using words to comfort and explain. For instance, you might say: "Oh that was a loud noise! It gave you a shock! It's ok, you're safe, I am here, it was just the wind blowing the door shut! See - here is the door and it went BANG!"

This does several important things, it explains what happened, whilst helping regulate the infant's shock by offering physical comfort and safety. Also, by using the word 'noise', or labelling their feeling as 'shock/ fright' will teach them the words that match their feelings, or the cause of their fear.

Acting in this way will help them to fear the same situation less the next time it happens, and they'll also feel that you have recognised their discomfort and are there to help.

Encourage the baby to make noises to show what they like or dislike

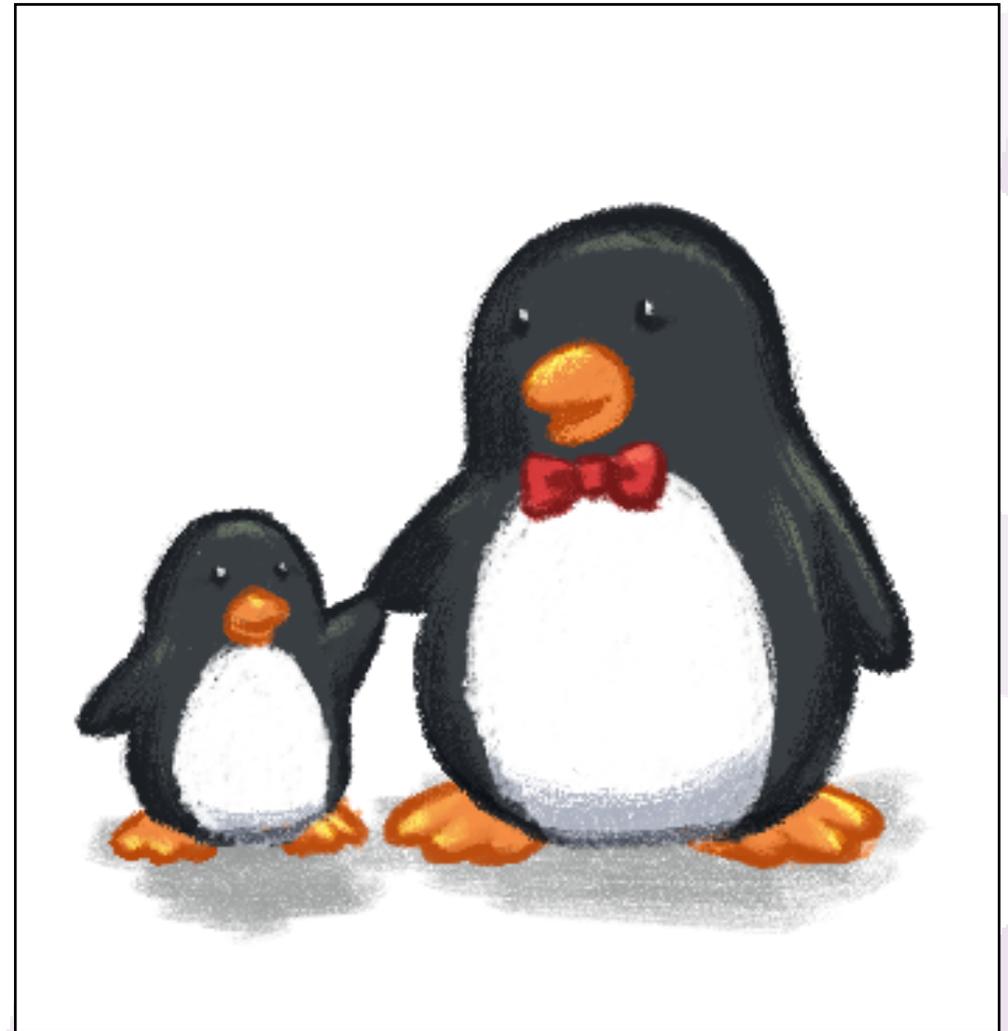
To help you and baby discover what they like and feel, it can be useful to encourage them to make a verbal sound in order to voice out loud how they feel about something. You can do this by repeating any sounds they do make, even if they are simple "oohs" or "aahs". If they then begin to do this themselves automatically, in the long term it will be helpful for your communication.

What happens when babies become toddlers?

As babies become toddlers and develop the physical ability to move away from caregivers, they are faced with a crucial dilemma. On the one hand, they have new and exciting abilities. They can get an interesting toy across the room, move to where their sibling or friend is, or follow their caregiver to the bathroom. But on the other – they may suddenly find themselves too far from the important adults in their life and feel separated and lost.

As their ability to explore progresses, their need for attachment does not diminish, but it often takes different forms. A toddler may wander off and then return with an appetite for a hug and a kiss from a parent or caregiver. They may go off to play in a corner, but at the same time, exchange looks with their caregiver so they can connect emotionally with them from a distance. This is called 'refuelling' because it is this emotional connection that then enables the baby to carry on with his or her independent play and exploration.

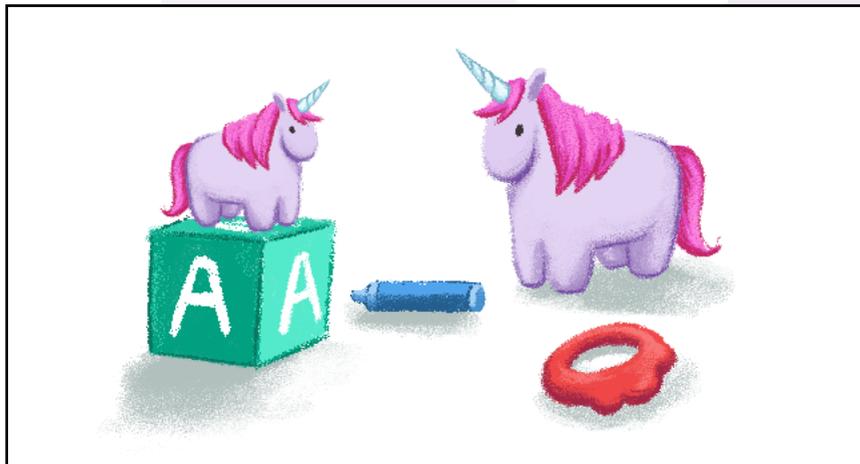
As with babies, it's important to keep thinking about the thoughts and feelings of a toddler or under five, and to view the world from their perspective - in order to get a clearer picture of their needs.



Ways you can use attachment ideas to help toddlers in your care

Allow them some independence but stay in sight

You can support the toddler's newfound independence and wish to separate from you by letting them wander off to another part of the room - but remaining interested and available for when they need you. You can also play games with the child that are a variation on this theme of separation, such as peekaboo.



Use words to soothe their fears and find out what their needs are

If you're confused about what a child's thinking or feeling, it might help to say it out loud so they can respond in a way that could help you understand better. Research tells us that this is even more powerful if it is said in the first person (the child's voice).

For instance, to find out whether the child has a basic need, you could say out loud, "I'm feeling a bit hungry. When is lunch coming?"

If you think it's likely to be an emotional need you could voice what you think the concern might be, whilst soothing their fears about it at the same time. For instance, if you thought the child might be missing their parent you could say, "I'm feeling a bit sad as I'm missing my Mum. Don't worry Fred, Mummy's gone to work but like every day, she will come back to pick you up after you have had your tea."

While doing this you could leave conversational gaps in between questions and use exaggerated facial expressions to show them that you understand where they are coming from and are interested in their feelings.

Let them know you will be there to help when they struggle with a new activity

Young children are more able to learn a skill or master a new activity if they know they will receive help if it gets a little tricky. If they know this, then they are more able to accept some frustration if the activity they are involved in become challenging.

For instance, if a child is playing with a shape sorter toy and the square block still won't fit in the round hole after many tries, they could become overwhelmed by the failure. But if they know they can ask for help – perhaps by just passing the block to you and signalling, "Can you help me find the square hole?" they are less likely to collapse in disappointment and give up entirely. If children feel that they are able to ask for help when learning and mastering new tasks, this will help them develop successful learning relationships later on.



Signs that primary caregivers might need help in their attachment relationship with their young child

Sometimes you might notice that a particular child in your setting shows signs that there might be difficulties developing in the caregiver-child's attachment relationship. Concerning signs to look out for include:

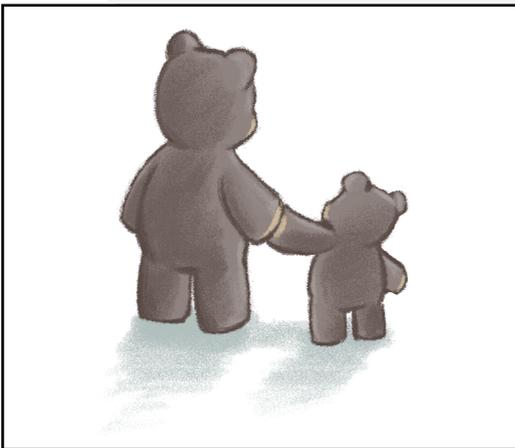
1. when young children cry inconsolably for prolonged periods, and cannot be comforted
2. when young children freeze, or become almost unresponsive
3. when young children preference for a stranger over their primary caregiver
4. when young children don't turn to their primary caregiver for comfort, or to check in with them when dealing with an unfamiliar situation
5. when young children actively turn their heads away to avoid making eye contact with their primary caregiver.

The type of attachment relationship a child has with their parent or carer will be determined by a range of things, such as the parent or caregiver's expectations, past experiences, living conditions, baby's temperament and more.

It could also be dependent on their parent or carers state of mind in pregnancy and around the time of birth.

If a parent or carer has experienced mental ill health early on or been emotionally detached from the child early on, the child may have developed an insecure attachment with them, because they experienced the parent as emotionally absent, unresponsive, and not consistent.

A child's attachment to parents and caregivers is built up over time, and each relationship is unique. Therefore it can be useful for you to stay tuned into different attachment related behaviours of the young children in your setting, so you are best placed to support the caregiver-child relationship.



What to do if you're concerned

Discuss your concerns with your colleagues – it can help to get a variety of perspectives and it may help you feel more supported.

Find a quiet time to talk with the parents or primary caregivers. Reassure them that being a parent or carer can be tough and everyone struggles at times. Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling and any difficulties in their lives that they might need help with.

Put into practice the ideas in this booklet while you are with the parent or carer and their young child. For example, be attentive to the child, say out loud what you think they might be feeling, and respond quickly to their needs. By doing this, you are 'modelling' how to develop healthy relationships.

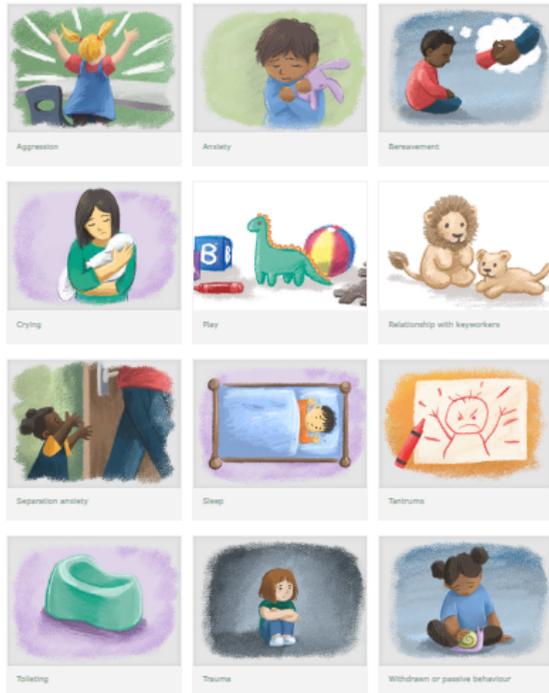
The family may benefit from additional support. This could be from their GP or health visitor, or a referral to a specialist parent-infant relationship service. Find out what support is available in your area and talk this through with the family.

Where can I find advice and guidance?

Common difficulties in the early years
www.annafreud.org/eycd



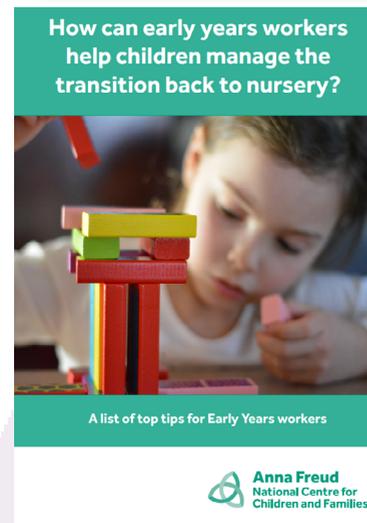
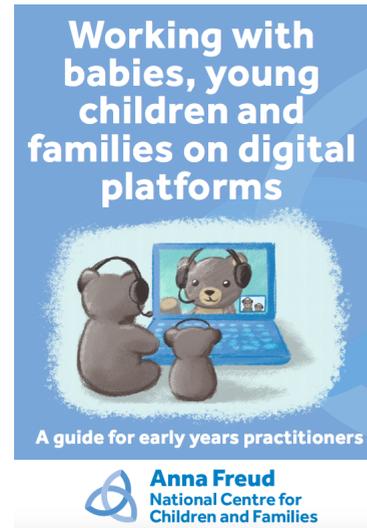
Includes advice and guidance on:



- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Bereavement
- Crying
- Play
- Relationship with keyworkers
- Separation anxiety
- Sleep
- Tantrums
- Toileting
- Trauma
- Withdrawn behaviour



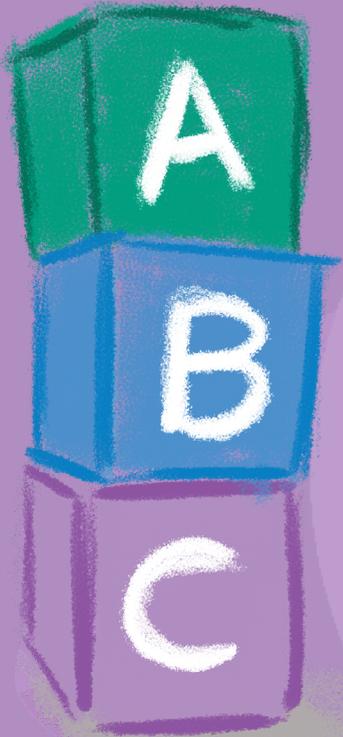
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Download them free from:
www.annafreud.org/eyresources



Early Years in Mind



Early Years in Mind is a free learning network for early years staff and practitioners hosted by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

To join the Early Years in Mind learning network, please visit www.annafreud.org/eyim.

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