

Attachment factsheet: Kinship carers



As a kinship carer, you have a unique opportunity to provide a safe and stable home environment for a child or young person in your care that meets their individual needs. You also have an ideal opportunity to further develop strong bonding relationships with your child, which can have a lasting and positive impact on their self-esteem, confidence, stress management, resilience and ability to form their own positive relationships as they grow and develop. This is often referred to as 'attachment'. This can be particularly important if the child you are caring for has experienced traumatic times before coming to live with you and is still trying to come to terms with these experiences as they try to get on with their lives.

What is attachment?

Children are born ready to form relationships with the people around them. These relationships help to shape health and happiness both now and in the future and are important for children as they grow and develop.

Attachment is the name for the process where children develop this relationship with their carers. Babies and children look for this relationship to give them safety and comfort. When children are upset they will look for comfort from the people they have this attachment relationship with.

A secure attachment relationship will help the child to manage their feelings by providing consistent emotional and physical care. This helps the child understand that they are cared for and understood, and will help them form safe and healthy future relationships.

Attachment and love are not the same thing. Attachment seeks to keep children close to a safe caregiver. Some parents may love their children but be unable to keep them safe, which can cause problems in the attachment process even when there is love between a parent and child.

Why does it matter?

The care that children get will affect the style of attachment they develop. This will go on to affect their behaviour and their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Secure attachment

Securely attached children are more likely to feel confident and safe. Through experiencing consistent emotional care they will also develop skills to manage their emotions, which include dealing with stress, controlling impulse and rage, coping with shame and being able to understand how others might be feeling.

Securely attached children also learn how to relate to others in a way that helps them to make positive relationships as they grow up.

Insecure attachment

There are different types of insecure attachment; disorganised, anxious and avoidant. These styles are developed by children as a way of coping where caregiving is inconsistent, or in the most severe cases neglectful, or in abusive home environments.ⁱ Disorganised attachment is associated with future problems and may be more common where children are forced to seek comfort and protection from the very person who frightens them.

Children with insecure attachment relationships are more likely to feel angry and lack confidence in themselves and the world around them. They may find it hard to deal with their emotions, managing stress and controlling impulses and rage, coping with shame and understanding how others might be feeling. Insecurely attached children may also experience relationship difficulties in adulthood.

Although insecure attachments may cause some barriers to children reaching their full potential, it is important to recognise that children who do have insecure attachments are still able to grow up and function well as adults.ⁱⁱ

It is also important to remember that children can form different types of attachments to different people. For example, they may have a secure attachment to their grandmother and an anxious attachment to their mother.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nurturing positive attachment

All children will benefit from positive relationships with their caregivers. There are simple ways you can support a secure attachment relationship to develop with the children in your care, both when things are going well and when things are difficult.

- **Play:** share fun activities together and share in your child's joy and happiness in your voice and movement. Some children need to learn how to play so take the lead, make faces, silly noises.
- **Show affection:** being close, cuddles, kisses and smiles all send the message to your child that you love them and enjoy being around them.
- **Listen to your child:** get down to their level and look directly at your child when you are speaking to them, show interest in what they are telling you.
- **Be consistent:** provide routines and set boundaries for your child so they know what is expected of them. If the rules are clear and make sense, it helps children feel secure in their relationship with you and in the world making sense.

- **Help your child with big feelings:** try naming feelings for younger children and match your tone of voice to how your child is feeling. This will help them recognise their emotions and lets them know you are listening to them. For older children, listen to them and try to interpret their behaviours to show you want to understand how they feel and what they are thinking.
- **Provide comfort:** use cuddles and physical touch to comfort children when they are upset. Show them that you are there to help them through difficult times, to help their feelings of security.
- **Celebrate the positives:** notice and comment on your child's positive qualities and behaviour.
- **Separate the child and the behaviour:** when your child's behaviour is challenging, think about the feelings and thoughts behind the behaviour. Some attachment behaviour used by children may work in getting them noticed, but can act as a barrier between them and their carers. This can prevent them getting the secure and loving relationship they desire.
- **Respond at the child's emotional age rather than their chronological one:** children and adolescents may not have developed the skills to manage situations they are faced with. Try to accept where your child is in their development and manage your expectations of their behaviour. Show that you accept them and are available to help them through by talking and physical comfort.^{iv}
- **Be thoughtful about transitions:** talk about significant life changes. Changes that affect where the child lives, the adults involved in their lives, or the school they go to are likely to disrupt attachment relationships that are meaningful for children.
- **Take care of yourself:** reflecting on your child's behaviour in order to help them understand their thoughts, feelings and needs can be exhausting and overwhelming. Make sure you take time to do something for yourself on a regular basis. It can take a long time and repeated experiences of consistent, loving care for a child to feel secure and safe.
- **Encourage children to make choices:** this increases their sense of independence. Have realistic expectations. Children who have insecure attachment may find it difficult to make choices and need you to do it for them. If they are old enough, talk this process through with them as it will help them develop problem-solving skills.
- **Take two steps forward, one step back:** often children who feel insecure but are beginning to build their confidence will get to a point where they feel they need to test out this new-found confidence and their behaviour will get worse, sometimes quite dramatically. Don't panic: it makes sense. Learning that difficult times can be dealt with and you can move on is a good lesson which builds resilience.

Caring for children with insecure attachment at different ages

Kinship care helpline: **08000 28 22 33**. Contact the Kinship Care helpline for support, information and advice.

The behaviour that children with insecure attachment might display at different ages will change. Some negative behaviour that children use may be a way of communicating their needs. So it is important when caring for children with insecure attachment to understand the feelings behind the behaviours. The box below shows some common behaviour at different ages from birth to 16 years old and gives some ideas of how you might respond to the behaviour to build a more secure attachment.

Supporting children with insecure attachment

Age	Normal development includes:	Insecure attachment may result in:	Resulting behaviour may include:	What you can do:
Birth to 1 year	Building a sense of security and trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delay in physical and emotional development Poor language development Insecurity Mistrust Unable to identify own needs and get them met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unresponsiveness Little movement or speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treat as a very young baby Give a great deal of attention and physical contact; rock in arms, play, sing and talk
Toddler (1 to 3 years)	Building sense of independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor physical development and coordination Delay in language development Lack of trust Unable to control anger and frustration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displaying baby behaviour; e.g. rocking, sucking, baby language Very clingy and dependent; following adults around all the time Stubborn, resistant to control, trying to 'parent' themselves Severe and persistent temper tantrums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept baby behaviour – try to establish balance between being safe on your lap and getting down and exploring Give attention and praise for positive behaviours including being able to accept help Provide emotional support during tantrums

Age	Normal development includes:	Insecure attachment may result in:	Resulting behaviour may include:	What you can do:
3 to 6 years	Finding out about yourself and the world around you	Poor physical development and coordination Delay in language development Feelings about being out of control; anger; aggression; inability to share Lack of control of bodily functions	Withdrawn behaviour Night-time terrors Feeling of being a 'bad boy/girl': guilt and shame Extreme clinginess Restless energy Aggression towards other children, animals, objects	Give a lot of individual attention – help the child to do things alongside you Talk through feelings of guilt and shame: what has happened was not their fault Use soothing bedtime routines, stories, bathtime, etc. to lessen bedtime fears Give attention and praise to positive behaviours and achievements
6 to 10 years	Gaining understanding and control of life outside the family	Being overwhelmed by sense of grief and loss Grieving takes energy and leaves little time for development of new skills Poor concentration at school Poor ability to make friends	Feelings of sadness, anger, guilt and depression Very bossy with other children or very withdrawn Poor performance at school Difficulty separating imaginary with real life	Don't expect them to be grateful Praise and encouragement for each new task learned, however small See imaginary tales for what they are – a wish for a happy ending ('mum's going to buy me a pony')

Age	Normal development includes:	Insecure attachment may result in:	Resulting behaviour may include:	What you can do:
10 to 16 years	Making sense of who you are and your place in the world	Insecurity Poor self-esteem Greater intensity of emotions Inability to make lasting friendships/relationships Identity confusion	Violence/aggression; 'shutting off' from adults Constant challenges to authority Inappropriate attention-seeking behaviour; e.g. stealing, sexually provocative Truancy Running away, both literally and emotionally, through excessive drinking or drugs	Set limits and explain reasons why Improve communication skills Tackle issues of sexuality and inform young people of risks Prepare for independence by teaching life skills

Children 1st also offers a training workshop to kinship carers entitled 'Challenging Behaviour' which aims to build kinship carers' confidence and knowledge in dealing with their children's behaviour.

ⁱ Perry B and Hambrick E. The neurosequential model of therapeutics. *Reclaiming children and youth* 2008; 17: (3).

ⁱⁱ Sroufe, LA. Attachment and development: a prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood. *Attachment and Human Development*. 2006; 7:4, 349–367

ⁱⁱⁱ Furnivall J. Attachment-informed practice with looked after children and young people. Insights, IRIS

^{iv} Perry B and Hambrick E. The neurosequential model of therapeutics. *Reclaiming children and youth* 2008; 17: (3).

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