Behaviour – How to get a grip on attachment theory

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Behaviour issues caused by trauma are more common than you may think – but a new project is developing strategies to help

Fresh from teacher training and on the supply circuit, I spent some time in a Reception classroom where I discovered that size is no predictor of the severity of behaviour problems. Faced with a tiny boy who spat, shouted and, at the age of 5, knew more swear words than I did, I was baffled, panicked and eventually angry.

Then, at lunchtime, his personal teaching assistant returned from training and my miniature Mr Hyde was suddenly transformed into an altogether calmer Dr Jekyll, visibly relaxing after a hug and some soothing words from the saintly Mrs M. At the time, I assumed his poor behaviour was entirely down to something I had done wrong. But I later learned that this student was suffering from attachment issues.

Dr Maggie Atkinson, the children's commissioner for England, believes that "every teacher in every school" should be aware of attachment theory and tailor their practice accordingly. But I wonder how many of us do. In fact, I wonder how many of us are really clear about what attachment theory is. I certainly wasn't able to spot the signs when they were right in front of me.

Be aware of the basics

British psychologist John Bowlby first articulated attachment theory (in the terms we now understand it) in the mid-20th century. It is an attempt to explain how the relationship between a child and its parents, particularly the mother, influences development.

Bowlby believed that in the early years of life, a child will form an attachment with a single primary care-giving figure and that this relationship will be a prototype for all future relationships. He argued that should an attachment fail to form during this period, or be disrupted, then a number of consequences would follow, including behaviour problems and reduced ability to learn.

Teachers should be aware of the implications of this theory. But how prevalent is the problem and how do you identify it? The majority of parent-child relationships appear to be strong, after all.

Fortunately, identifying children with attachment issues is possible.

Schools may already be aware of circumstances that could affect attachment. If not, resilience is often a key factor: a child who gives up at the first sign of failure may be lacking the secure base required to try again.

And more children may be suffering from these issues than you expect. A key study on attachment, conducted by Christi and David Bergin in 2009, estimates that up to a third of all children have an insecure attachment to at least one caregiver. A 2004 study from Scotland, meanwhile, posits that almost all children will have experienced trauma of some kind by the end of their primary years.

But just being aware of attachment theory is not enough: teachers need to use it to inform how they teach and form relationships with students. So where to begin? The Attachment Aware Schools project brings together university-based researchers and local practitioners in Somerset to provide training on bringing ideas about attachment into classrooms.

In 2013 and 2014, the project's organisers ran a pilot study in 11 schools and colleges, with each committing to a programme of training in areas such as trauma and its implications for learning. Each institution devised its own whole-school approaches to being "attachment aware" with the help of a consultant.

The initial results were excellent, with all participants reporting that they had found the process useful and that it had had a big impact on learning.

Dr Janet Rose of Bath Spa University is part of the research group leading the programme. She explains: "Attachment theory is already well recognised in areas such as clinical psychology, health and social care.

"The preliminary evidence from our pilot study shows that attachment-based practice in schools can have a positive impact on academic performance, reduction in behavioural incidents and improvements in pupil and staff well-being."

Putting theory into practice

So far, so good. But what does attachment theory look like in practice? And what new strategies are emerging? One example is the use of "emotion coaching". Originating in the US and historically used in helping parents to relate to their children, it involves recognising, naming and validating the feelings and emotions that may cause disruptive behaviour rather than dismissing them.

In particular, there is an emphasis on changing the language used to deal with poor behaviour, enabling children to understand and manage their feelings more successfully.

For example, parents would be advised to say: "I'm sorry you're feeling so angry and I'd like to talk to you more about it, but I still need you to stop throwing things" (instead of: "It's very silly to throw things so stop it right now!"). It is a strategy that has been embraced by many of the pilot

schools in the Attachment Aware scheme, and Ed Harker, headteacher of St Saviours CEVC Nursery and Infant School in Bath, has already seen positive results.

“We have found that children with attachment disorders have responded really well,” he explains. “And on a practical level, attachment theory has changed the specific language we use with all the children.”

The Attachment Aware project and its pilot schools offer further specific ways of bringing attachment into an educational setting, from appointing an attachment leader to using nurture groups to help children process their feelings better.

Harker says that the interventions at St Saviours – such as a “nurture” space for children to use at lunchtime – have had a school-wide impact. “There is a better emotional intelligence within the school team now and a raised awareness of attachment needs,” he says. “It gives you the understanding you need to adapt your provision and ensure that potentially vulnerable children are helped to thrive.”

Fighting the fear

But it is not just about interventions, according to Dr Rose. What can also be effective in schools, she believes, is the modelling of attachment. “Most teachers are likely to encounter insecurely attached and traumatised children in their classrooms,” she says. “A warm, supportive teacher can actually promote attachment relationships.”

Roger Catchpole, a consultant for children’s mental health charity YoungMinds, agrees: “There is strong evidence for the protective power of one important adult in a child’s life who can provide them with unconditional positive regard. This is often found in school.” He points out that this does not have to be a teacher and could equally be a teaching assistant or other member of support staff.

The Attachment Aware project also recommends assigning “key adults” to needy children. These are trained adults within the school who take a particular interest in a child, supporting their emotional development and reducing their anxiety. And although “unconditional positive regard” may seem to suggest overlooking or indulging poor behaviour, it is more about giving children a sense that they are liked and cared for in spite of their behaviour.

This may make some teachers feel uncomfortable, particularly considering that adults are often advised to keep a careful distance from students for child protection and authority. But as Harker says, if attachments are “appropriate” and “secure” there is nothing to fear.

Fear is perhaps as important a factor as ignorance in stopping attachment theory being more widely implemented in schools. We have become so guarded when it comes to children and so concerned with data that we can forget about the importance of relationships in teaching. For those children lucky enough to get a great start in life, this is damaging. But for those with attachment issues it can be nothing short of destructive.

Kate Townshend is a teacher at a primary school in Gloucestershire

References

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