

How Attachment Shapes Family Relationships

A guide for practitioners

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The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) is a specialist centre of excellence for advanced training and practice providing tertiary level support to the mental health and family support field. Our work is grounded in the experience of training practitioners and supporting couples. TCCR aims to provide the services that support couples, strengthen families and safeguard children. The work is geared to improving the quality of adult couple relationships, preventing family breakdown, supporting positive parenting and thereby promoting healthy development in children.

Its main objectives are:

- To supply specialist therapeutic services to couples and individuals experiencing difficulties in their relationships.
- To provide training and consultancy on delivering, developing and managing services for parents and families.
- To undertake research that contributes to the understanding of couple and family relationships and how best they might be improved.

TCCR, founded in 1948, believes in the importance of the therapeutic relationship and its ability to enhance and heal the lives of adults and children. In setting up TCCR 60 years ago, the founders proposed the following guiding tenet-

“Nothing effective can be done to or for people, only with them”.

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Why is attachment important?

Families come in all shapes and sizes. If you've read this once, you've read it many times! Diversity defies us to make generalisations about how families operate because there are so many different types of family. If I use my family experience to make sense of yours I will most likely make assumptions that have no bearing on your experience and vice versa. So what can I draw on to make sense of what goes on in your family (and you in mine)? And is there anything we both can use to make sense of what happens in other families?

The answer to this last question is 'yes' (you'll be relieved to hear!), and it is the concept of attachment. You will be very familiar with this concept, though you may not know it. It applies to all family relationships, whatever their form and cultural context. It has an empirical basis, coming out of the detailed study of relationships over decades of

research in many different countries. And because family dynamics are shaped by relationships it provides an ideal framework for understanding family process. Examining what takes place within families through the lens of attachment promises an evidence-based perspective on the relationship processes that define family life. How exciting is that?!

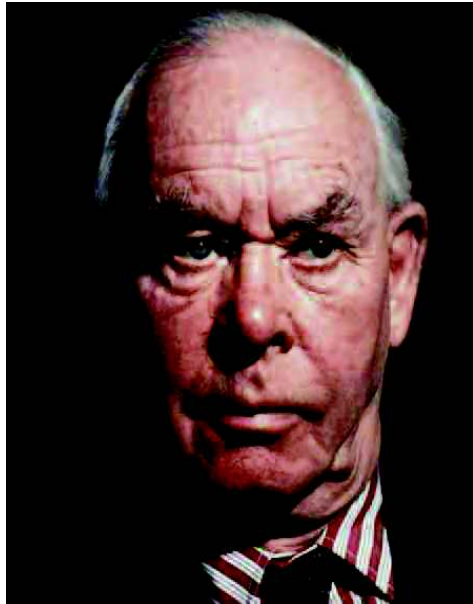
This booklet will introduce you to the concept of attachment, and to the main approaches that have been used for assessing the quality of attachment in families. It will summarise ways in which attachment affects how adults bring up their children. Most importantly, it will consider how you, as a family practitioner, might apply the concept in your work with those undergoing family change. Don't be put off by thinking that attachment theory is all about putting people into boxes, and sticking a 'problem' label on some of them. Yes, there are ways of assessing attachment security – and we shall be looking at some of them – but attachment is not a measure of personality. It is a concept that sheds light on how people respond to stressful situations, and an approach that takes into account how important the relationship environment is to shaping those responses.



What is attachment?

'Attachment' is a word that has wide colloquial usage. It can describe the sentiment that binds us to our children, our parents, our lovers, our friends, our pets, and even the ornaments and objects that we consider important to us. In this pamphlet it is used in a precise way that is defined by attachment theory and applied only to relationships between people.

The architect of attachment theory was John Bowlby (1907-1990), a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose commitment to providing a scientific basis for therapeutic practice led him to move beyond the circle of his colleagues in the psychoanalytic community to learn also from ethologists, anthropologists, systems theorists and behavioural psychologists. His three seminal volumes contain the theory that formed his lifetime project.



The scientific method that Bowlby believed in above all others was that of observation. Following his appointment as Deputy Director of the Tavistock Clinic he recruited James-Robertson, a boilerman working at Anna Freud's

residential nursery in Hampstead, to assist in the study of the effects of separation on young children. The films produced in the 1950s by the Robertsons (James's wife Joyce joining him in this project) made a huge impact. They influenced policies and practices in hospitals and other residential institutions, changing the rules so that, whenever possible, children were not separated from their parents. His collaboration with Mary Ainsworth, an American anthropologist and co-architect of attachment theory, encouraged research based on closely observed mother-infant relationships to inform our understanding of child development.



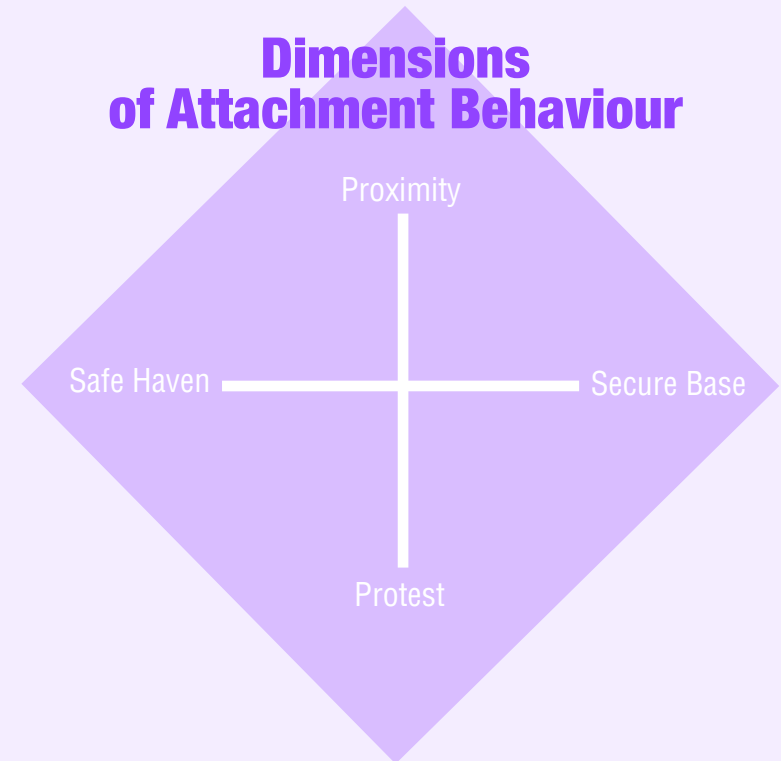
A still from 'A two year old goes to hospital'

Basing his ideas on observation, Bowlby proposed that **attachment behaviour** was an innate system switched on by threat. Threat drove children (and indeed adults, though this was not Bowlby's primary concern) towards those they could trust for protection and comfort. Physical closeness, and the quality of the response received from (usually) a mother, were seen as the key mechanisms for reducing fear and anxiety in young children. By assuaging such painful feelings mothers enable the attachment system to be switched off. Repeated experiences of a parent figure being available in this way establishes an emotional bond between them, which is described (from the infant's perspective) as **attachment**. Secure attachment to parent figures in the early years of life lay the foundations for resilience in later life. Older children, and adults, are then able to draw on their own resources when facing stressful situations (what Bowlby described as secure **internal working models** of self and others), as well as feeling confident about turning to others for help.

Four behavioural tests that establish the nature and quality of a child's attachment:

- Seeking physical closeness with the attachment figure (proximity)
- Showing distress and upset when separated from her or him (protest)
- Turning to that person for comfort when feeling threatened (safe haven)
- Using that person to provide the confidence to venture out and explore (secure base)

Dimensions of Attachment Behaviour



Bowlby's theory was initially controversial, and remains so in those quarters where he is believed to have argued that women should stay at home to bring up their children rather than going out to work. This portrayal of attachment theory distorts Bowlby's ideas, and those of other attachment pioneers who have followed him. Yet the message that the foundations of adult security are laid in childhood, and especially in the first two to three years of life, remains a challenging one for today's parents and those who work with them. ²

Does attachment show in behaviour?

Mary Ainsworth was responsible for introducing the term 'secure base' into the language of attachment theory. She and her colleagues provided arresting visual evidence of how infants between 12 and 18 months of age used their mothers as a secure base to explore the world around them. Through the **Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)**³ she and her co-researchers observed how this age group of children behaved when they were separated from their mothers (their primary caregiver in all cases) and left in a room on their own or with a stranger, and how they behaved when their mothers returned.

In around two thirds of the infants they observed the response to being separated from and reunited with mother was predictable. They were distressed and cried when she left the room, and they went to her and were readily comforted by her on her return. Their ability to protest at being separated, and their relief on being reunited, indicated the strength of their attachment, as did their attempts to be physically close to her when distressed. Furthermore, their capacity to enjoy exploring and playing when she was present in the room were also signs of **secure attachment**. The remaining third of the infants showed behaviour described as **insecure attachment**. **Insecure attachment** was of two main kinds: **avoidant**, and

anxious-ambivalent. Faced with the anxiety of being separated from mother some infants appeared unconcerned and precociously self-reliant. They were described as **avoidantly attached**. They would occupy themselves with the toys in the room and appear to show little interest in their mother's comings and goings, maybe looking up to check on what was happening, but making few if any demands on her or the stranger for comfort or reassurance. While they appeared calm on the surface, their body responses (for example, heart rate and cortisol levels) told a different story. Their agitation was evident in their body if not in their behaviour.

In contrast, those infants who were **anxious-ambivalently** attached protested a great deal when their mothers left the room. While they demanded to be picked up and cuddled on her return this did not seem to comfort or placate them. Clinging tightly to their mother they also showed more aggressive behaviour, like poking her or pushing her away.

There were also a few infants who reacted in bizarre and sometimes disturbing ways to parental separation and reunion, as if paralysed by their anxiety. It was as if the person they might turn to for comfort was also the person from whom they needed protection, leaving them in a collapsed state. This **disorganised** attachment (disorganised in the sense that these infants had no strategy for dealing with their anxiety, such as going to mother) has been linked with abusive parenting.

Zizzi, an attractive young woman, established an immediate appearance of intimacy with people she met for the first time. Her relationships with men quickly became sexual, and she would then become possessive and jealous of them. She had a series of such relationships, all of which ended when the men in her life rejected her, extricating themselves, as they would say, from her clutches. Piotr was different. A big bear of a man who normally kept himself to himself, he was attracted by Zizzi's liveliness and emotional intensity. More important, he wasn't put off by her tendency to blow hot and cold. He provided a rock that she could cling to and batter, while she provided the excitement and spontaneity that he had missed out on and craved.

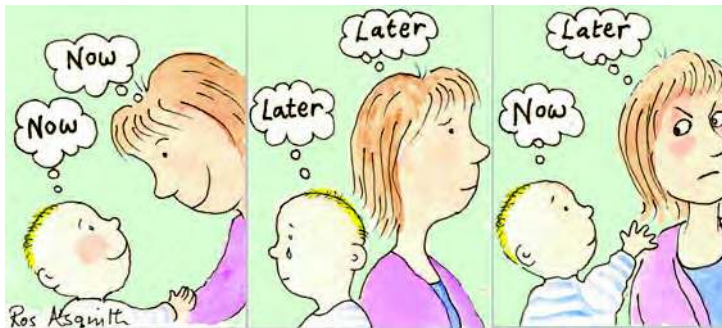
It is important remember that patterns of attachment are not measures of personality. They are more fluid than that, and vitally affected by relationships. The Strange Situation Procedure has shown that the same infant who behaves in ways that indicate insecure attachment with one parent can also behave in ways that indicate secure attachment with the other.

Although attachment classifications are usually applied to the infant being observed, it is more accurate to regard them as a classification of relationships – for this is what Ainsworth and her colleagues were observing. In the best of all worlds a secure parent is available and responsive to their infant who, in turn, is confident about approaching the parent for comfort and support. When there is less confidence and trust, both parent and infant may hold back from each other, down-playing their feelings and attempting to distract themselves and each other from anxiety about potential rejection. Alternatively, an infant may turn up the emotional volume, crying and clinging to mother as if that is the only way to get her attention, while simultaneously refusing to be comforted when that attention is secured. Both of them can behave as if they

are in a push-pull kind of dance, one pushing away if the other pulls in and then reversing the roles.

It takes only a small step of imagination to see that patterns of relating in childhood can be repeated in adult relationships. For adults, as for children, the perception of threat may activate attachment anxieties and result in patterns of behaviour that are not only mutually reassuring but also avoidant, clinging, role reversing and controlling. It takes very little to resurrect the ghosts of insecure childhood attachment in adult relationships.

One important difference between attachment in adult relationships and attachment in childhood is that, for the adults, there must be a capacity to move in and out of care-giving and care-receiving roles for the relationship to work well. It is this two-way process that has informed thinking about what secure attachment looks like in adult relationships.⁴ Even when attachment is insecure, adults may use each other to replay attachment patterns from childhood in an attempt to rework and overcome anxieties associated with relationship intimacy.



Can attachment influence how we communicate?

Once we have language there are ways other than how we behave to convey our needs, feelings and fears. Language can also convey whether or not we feel it is safe to entrust ourselves to others, for as we grow older it is primarily through language that we represent our experiences and show our feelings.

Developmental psychologists have constructed interviews designed to evoke attachment anxieties that become apparent through how people talk about family experiences. The most well-known is the **Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)**.⁵ This semi-structured interview asks about a person's relationship with their parents and other important figures in their lives during childhood, and about any separations, losses and traumas they might have experienced. What is understood to be important is not what happened to them in the past but how they process and talk about that experience in the

present. Those who are able to speak coherently about their experience in ways that brings it to life, but who can also reflect on what's happened to them and show they have established their own perspective on it are likely to be rated as securely attached. Those who have trouble doing this, whose accounts either lack depth, detail and feeling, or are confusingly entangled and sometimes angrily involved, are likely to be rated as **insecurely attached** either in a **dismissing** or **preoccupied** way. Occasionally, accounts of loss or trauma will be interrupted by speech patterns that suggest there is something **unresolved or disorganised** from the past that has intruded into their memories, perhaps giving the listener the impression that what happened twenty years ago may have occurred only yesterday.

This approach to classifying attachment security has been applied to current adult relationships as well as past family relationships.⁶

Patterns of attachment

Infant behaviour (SSP) *

- Secure
- Avoidant
- Resistant / Ambivalent
- Disorganised / Disoriented
- Cannot Classify

Ainsworth, M et al (1978)

Patterns of Attachment. A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation Erlbaum.

Adult representation (AAI) *

- Secure / Autonomous
- Dismissing
- Preoccupied
- Unresolved / Disorganised
- Cannot Classify

George, C et al (1985)

The Adult Attachment Interview. Unpublished manuscript. University of California (Berkeley)

* (SSP) - Strange Situation Procedure

* (AAI) Adult Attachment Interview

Relationship questionnaire

Secure: "It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me."

Insecure dismissing: "I am comfortable without close emotional relationships.

It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me."

Insecure fearful: "I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others."

Insecure preoccupied: "I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others they are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them."

While developmental psychologists have tended to use observation and interviews for capturing patterns of attachment, social psychologists have favoured questionnaires to access attachment styles. Most of these questionnaires are too long for practitioners to use in their work with families. An exception is the Relationship Questionnaire, an early measure of adult attachment that has the virtue of being brief as well as conveying something about a person's attach-

ment style. This can be useful for providing a psychological profile of service users. It subdivides dismissing attachment (dismissing is the adjective used to describe the attachment style of adults most closely resembling the avoidant behaviour of infants) into a fearful category, the key differentiating feature being that dismissing attachment is linked with high self-regard and a low regard for others, whereas fearful attachment is linked with the reverse.

How does attachment affect parenting?

Although the relationship between attachment security and parenting style is more rule of thumb than exact science, there is a connection between the two. As one might expect, secure adult attachment is associated with authoritative parenting in which clear boundaries are set for children in ways that take account of their age-related needs and abilities. It is also linked with flexibility and adaptability, and a give-and-take in relationships that is founded on values of mutual respect.

Insecure attachment can impact on parenting in a number of ways. As we have seen, avoidant attachment in childhood is linked with parental models that are rejecting, neglectful, sometimes pressuring to achieve and occasionally denigrating. On the AAI this would show up as dismissing attachment in the parent. Overt expressions of affection are discouraged and self-reliance is over-valued. These models may translate into controlling or neglectful parenting styles in adulthood.

Anxious ambivalent attachment in childhood is associated with inconsistent, ineffective, unbounded, and sometimes over-involved or role-reversing parental models. On the AAI this would show up as preoccupied attachment in the parent. In contrast to dismissing attachment patterns, feelings may be passionately expressed between family members, but their relationships and emotional states may be very entangled with each other and volatile. Insecure preoccupied attachment may translate into over-permissive styles of parenting, ineffectiveness in setting boundaries, an inconsistency and unpredictability of approach, and sometimes a reversal of generational responsibilities that leaves children look-

ing after their parents rather than the other way round.

Disorganised attachment in childhood can result in controlling behaviour in adults. Adults with this attachment pattern can be very fragile and they may try to hold themselves together by controlling others. If they are parents, they may over-react to or dissociate from their children when they feel overwhelmed or threatened.

Gerard and Toni struggled to work together as parents. Gerard had been brought up to believe that children should be seen and not heard. He repeated his father's mantra that to spare the rod was to spoil the child. Toni, in contrast, thought that children should be given free range to express their feelings and roam where they wanted to. As their children got older she found it increasingly difficult to say 'no' to them, even when she was unhappy about their behaviour. Yet she didn't want to become like her mother and threaten them with 'wait 'til your father gets home'. So she opted out of disciplining them, and then felt helpless when they would say to their father 'Mum lets us do this, why won't you?' Needless to say, this caused arguments between Gerard and Toni.

This may translate into controlling or disorientating parental behaviour, perhaps triggered by specific events that have a traumatic personal resonance for the parents. Given that frightened (as well as frightening) parents contribute to the origin of disorganised attachment in children, it is highly likely that this may show itself in parents through heightened states of anxiety and a general sense of feeling chronically overwhelmed.

The impact of adult attachment on children is not just via the direct route of parenting styles. We now know there are other factors that have an indirect effect. Important amongst these is the adult couple. The way partners work together as parents has a profound influence on children. Evidence of the positive effects of collaborative co-parenting first emerged from studies of the impact of divorce on children,⁷ and was then found to apply just as strongly for intact families.⁸ A number of surveys have recently shown how sensitive children are to their parents getting on well (and how insensitive their parents can be about this). A recent study showed 70% of children and 30% of parents agreeing to the statement 'parents getting on well is one of the most important factors in raising happy children'.

4 Parenting Styles

1 Authoritative
optimally responsive and demanding.

2 Authoritarian
unresponsive and highly demanding.

3 Permissive/indulgent
more responsive than demanding.

4 Uninvolved/neglectful
unresponsive and undemanding.

Baumrind, D. (1991) The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11: 56-95.

Adults whose childhood experiences have left them feeling secure in relation to attachment are more likely than others to forge secure partnerships. Sometimes a secure adult partnership helps parents to overcome the effects of insecure attachment in their childhood. When parents are getting on, they are not only more likely to be competent in their individual roles as parents but also to offer a cooperative adult relationship model to their children that can be deeply reassuring and containing. This applies not only when parents are living together but also when they have separated from each other yet can work well together for their children. Then their children are protected from any conflict between the adults spilling over into how they behave as parents, and from the fear that they are somehow responsible for their parents arguing. There is some evidence to suggest that the attachment security of fathers may be more important than that of mothers in providing protection against conflict between the parents adversely affecting the attachment security of children

Are there implications for family support?

The significance of attachment patterns:

Repeated experiences of how others respond to our need for attachment shape the assumptions we make about ourselves and those around us. These assumptions pattern the way we relate to others, and particularly to those whom we turn to when feeling frightened, anxious or upset. We, as practitioners, are potential attachment figures for those we try to help, and so we must not be surprised that the encounters we have with them will be infused with their attachment histories and experiences. As quasi parents we will be rather like the stranger in the Strange Situation Procedure, exposed to and affected by the attachment behaviour of those we meet in the course of our work. More than that, there will be unconscious pressures on us to behave in ways that match with their early experiences and the expectations they have about us as potential attachment figures. So, behind the bid for help there may be covert pressures to turn us into rejecting figures, or figures who reverse the roles so that we become the ones cared for. Some clients may even put subtle pressures on us to meet their unconscious expectations that we will be inconsistent and unreliable in our dealings with them. We will be perceived and related to not only as the people we are but also as fragments of the people who provided care in their pasts, because these are their **internal working models**. Such pressures will be compounded by those coming from our own attachment histories, playing into or challenging the assumptions we make about those whom we try to help.

Are there implications for family support?

The model of a safe haven: When parents and other family members feel threatened or upset they usually turn to those whom they believe will offer comfort and support. Sometimes they may have difficulty doing this. We, as practitioners, need to be able to identify the key relationships that might provide this help, rather than feel we have to do it all ourselves. Offering help to one family member without taking account of what's happening with other people inside and outside the family runs the risk of setting up competing or alternative safe havens. Instead we should be trying to identify and build on the resources families already have but may need encouragement to use.

Marita's tale of loss and rejection at first made me feel very sorry for her, and I really wanted to support her in turning her life around. But the more I tried to help, the more she seemed to need from me. Soon she was phoning me at different times of the day, and I began to dread her calls. I began to stall, and to ask people to say I was unavailable. When she found out my home number I had to tell her not to call me there and to go through the office if she needed to reach me. 'You're like all the rest', she said, 'you don't care what happens to me'.

'You're the boss', says Jim, 'so tell me what to do'. 'What's the problem?', I ask. 'My wife thinks I should have a vasectomy now we've two kids, and what she says usually goes!'. 'What do you think?', I ask. 'I dunno', says Jim, 'I'm not afraid of the op, but there's something holding me back.' 'Fine', I say, 'why don't we start by looking at that?'

The concept of a secure base: Bowlby's image of a young child playing close to her mother, and through her reassuring presence gaining confidence to explore further afield, provides a good image for the therapeutic process. We, as practitioners, have the potential to create a secure base from which family members can explore what's happening to them and experiment with new ways of doing things. The emphasis is on facilitating exploration rather than providing explanations.

John spoke with a kind of rational detachment of how he had managed the ending of his marriage fifteen years earlier. He hadn't seen his son since that time, he said, because he knew it would only upset him. Much better to make a clean break and let him grow up unencumbered by the things his parents had been through. When asked how losing contact with his son had affected him, John faltered and then broke down in tears. 'It haunts me every day', he said. 'It's as if I have two ghosts, one is the ghost of the son I have lost, the other is the ghost of my own father whom I never met. He left home when I was just five'.

Soona and Ahmed arrived, for the second time very late for their appointment. 'What do you want to ask us?', demanded Soona. 'Nothing specific', I answered, feeling a bit taken aback by the aggression in her question, 'just how are you both?'. Soona embarked on a long account of how she'd waited hours before receiving attention at the ante-natal clinic, how many things she had to do at home, and that her work kept ringing her up despite being on maternity leave. And there was Ahmed who needed looking after. 'This appointment must feel like just one more thing you have to do', I said (because this was the way it was beginning to feel for me). Soona softened. 'You know, I feel such an invalid being pregnant, and nobody really helps'. I asked what it had been like for her when she was kept waiting at the hospital, knowing how I had felt about them being late for two appointments – as if I didn't matter. 'I was cross', she said. 'I don't like being a patient. I'm used to being able to look after myself'. I said. 'Can you allow Ahmed to look after you a bit more? You can't expect to manage on your own when you have a young baby, and now may be a good time to rethink how you share the load.'

Separation and loss: Attachment theory has highlighted the traumatic potential of experiences of separation and loss in childhood and adult life. The pain of separation and the grief of loss can be buried in the core of a person's life if there have been insufficient opportunities to grieve. Loss may result not only from events like bereavement or divorce but also from breaches of trust and confidence, ranging from an abusive relationship to a broken promise. It is for this reason that we as practitioners must be sensitive to our comings and goings with individuals and families. Taking unexpected breaks, leaving without warning and making promises that can't be fulfilled will reinforce any negative experiences of separation and loss that families might have experienced. Putting this positively, by providing a predictable and trustworthy relationship practitioners create the conditions in which confidences can be disclosed and past traumas revisited and reworked.

Working with feelings: Secure attachment provides a relationship environment in which feelings can be discovered, affirmed and regulated. This is as true for adults as it is for children. A useful focus for family support interventions is on how events make people feel. Accessing and highlighting the feelings of those who are prone to down-playing if not denying them can be very therapeutic. So, too, can acknowledging and containing the feelings of those who tend to exaggerate them. Engaging with the emotional lives of others requires us as practitioners to be emotionally aware of how we are feeling, and to be capable of using that experience to imagine how they might be feeling. This is the true meaning of empathy.

Carmella and Clint returned to couple therapy having missed their previous session. Carmella blamed him for arranging a work commitment that prevented them keeping their earlier appointment. Clint explained how he had had no choice because something unexpected had come up at work. They got into an argument about how he could have arranged things better if their relationship was important to him. Their therapist reminded them that on the last occasion they had met Carmella had spoken movingly about a pregnancy she had terminated, and how upset they had both been about that. She wondered if the argument was easier to have than sharing the feelings of loss they had both sustained.

Responsiveness and recovery:

Attachment research has alerted us to how much we can learn from observing behaviour in understanding an infant's communication. Adults also communicate through how they behave, especially when they cannot find the words to convey what they mean. But more often than not, adults rely on language for communication. When decoding what someone is saying, how language is used may be as important as what they say. Often the message is missed or misheard. Mistakes are inevitable. But with continued interest and commitment they can be recovered from, and the process of recovery might itself help someone let go of the illusion of perfection in order to have something that is good enough.

Sonja described in great detail how insensitive her partner was with their child, punctuating every statement with the question 'don't you agree?'. Her worker increasingly found she wasn't agreeing. When she suggested that some of the things Sonja described might be seen in other ways the response she received was one of disappointment and upset, as if she had missed the point. The next time she called Sonja was out, and when she called back later she found her at home trying to manage a fretful infant. She referred to their previous meeting and wondered if Sonja had felt disappointed with her for not picking up enough of what she was feeling. Sonja replied by saying how difficult she found it when her baby cried, wondering what she was doing wrong. Her worker commented that perhaps she was being hard on herself, and that it took time to learn to be a parent.

Where do you come in?

If attachment teaches us anything it is that we develop through our relationships with others. Development is a two-way process. Children grow their parents up as much as parents grow their children up. As with parenting, so, too, with family support: the helping relationship is shaped by all those involved. It is important to be aware of how the attachment experiences of family members may affect us, and how susceptible we might be to patterning our relationships with them in ways that reflect the problems they are grappling with. It is equally important

to be aware of how our own attachment experiences contribute to how we relate to them, so that we can reflect on why we are doing things in the ways that we do. In making sense of attachment encounters we will need our own 'secure base' from which to think about our experience and explore how best to proceed. Supervision, training and personal therapy can all help with this, and enable us to draw on our own experience in fruitful and creative ways. For it is through reflective practice that we encourage reflective parenting.

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