

**1a Jornada Fundació PRESME: NOVES MIRADES EN SALUT MENTAL I  
APRENTATGE.**

**Les aportacions de la teoria de l'aferrament a la comprensió de les dificultats  
d'aprenentatge i comportament.**

**Bellaterra, 14 Nov. 2008**

**ATTACHMENT , BEHAVIOUR AND LEARNING**

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**Content outline.**

Interventions in education are largely a response to behaviour that causes concern or challenges the control of the teacher. Children's behaviour can be a communication about social and emotional experience affecting relationships and engagement in learning. This talk will briefly explore the Attachment issues relating to behaviour which can affect responses to the teacher and to the learning task and so inform our understanding, our educational interventions and enhance secure attachment and educational achievement.

**'Attachment, Behaviour and Learning'**

Education represents a marvellous opportunity for most pupils and can make a considerable contribution to the mental health and well being of the community. It is where the world of knowledge and opportunity is made accessible by interested and committed adults in a social setting which also enhances social integration and inclusion. It is an opportunity to experience and develop our capacities to feel that we belong, that we can make a contribution and that we can take responsibility and feel respected for doing so. Thankfully, most children experience this. However, there is a long history of concern about pupils who do not achieve in school and the risk factors associated with this are well known. Conflict in the family, abuse, criminality, drug and alcohol mis-use, mental ill-health, absent fathers and unresolved loss are linked to underachievement and behaviour problems. However, teacher perception and response to behaviour issues are at the heart of the discourse about emotional and behavioural difficulties in schools. Teachers are most likely to identify the pupils who cause most disruption and stress to their practice and well being. The group identified as most at risk are conduct disordered boys of

low socio-economic status and associated with vulnerable single parents and absent fathers. Naughty boys are noticed and the quiet girls, who may be the vulnerable single parents of the future can be overlooked.

The negative implications of failure to engage in school, are extensive and can lead to withdrawal, disaffection and social exclusion and exposure to risks of gang influence and possibly criminality. It is important to understand the factors that lead to this vulnerability in children and Attachment Theory clearly relates early experiences to later emotional and social well-being.

Extensive follow-up studies of the samples of cases observed and studied in the early Attachment research clearly indicated that 'quality of attachment was a predictor of behaviour in pre-school'.

There is ample evidence that Secure attachment is a factor linked to children's more successful engagement in school - in terms of :

social competence,

curiosity,

effective play and investigation,

sympathy towards others

and compliance with the teacher.

These behaviours derive from an experience of good enough early relationships, within which key basic needs for social and emotional development have been met. This is briefly summarised in the words of Kate Barrows (1984),

' ... the first gift from another person is the maternal gift of taking in his feelings, absorbing them, thinking about them and giving them back to him in a way he can accept' (p. 15).

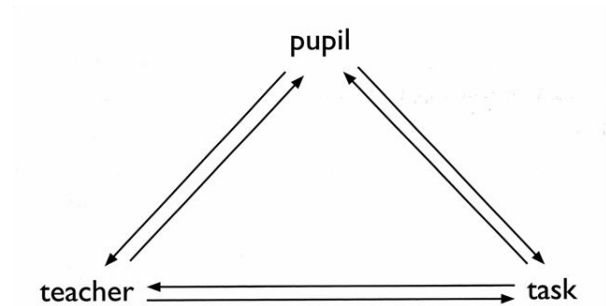
She describes how; the language of emotional states, self awareness and empathy for others - begins by ones own feelings and experiences being understood by another and that the infant derives sufficient confidence in the reliability of the secure base to explore the outside world.

Importantly, for exploration and learning, Emanuel (2000) points out how the experience of fears and uncertainty, being understood by another and transformed into words and thoughts, can become the basis of a mechanism for coping with the inevitable uncertainty and adversity encountered by us all in later years.

Such experiences have implications for the pupil's capacities to experience the unknown, explore what they don't know – the learning task - and to turn to others for support when challenged by the uncertainty of 'not knowing' – to engage with and learn from the teacher.

The learning triangle was constructed to summarise this triangular relationship dynamic between the pupil, the teacher and the learning task and helps us to recognise differing patterns of pupil response and engagement in the classroom and so to identify the possibilities for intervention.

### Learning Triangle associated with Secure Attachment Behaviour



**However**, adverse experience of early attachment not relieved by more positive relationships with others, is likely to have negative implications for communication, behaviour and learning and for self esteem, coping with adversity and expectations of adults.

As Juliet Hopkins writes,

'In homes where the baby finds no mutuality, where the parent's face does not reflect the baby's experience and where the child's spontaneous gesture is not recognized or appreciated, neither trust in others nor confidence in the self develop' (Hopkins 1990)

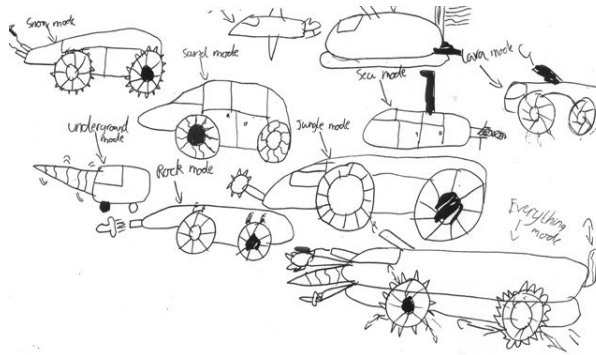
It is clear to anyone working in school that children respond in very diverse ways to what is expected of them in the classroom and clearly many factors influence and affect these responses, both temporary and long term. Research into the factors related to behaviour and achievement in school highlighted the links between adverse Attachment experience and responses to the teacher and to the learning task, and in particular ways.

Avoidant and Ambivalent patterns of attachment behaviour were linked to particular patterns of response to the teacher and to the learning task and with implications for learning.

Comments from the specialist teachers' involved with pupils whose experience reflected an **Avoidant** attachment, were dominated by the pupil's need to control proximity to the teacher. In relation to Avoidant behaviour, Main commented on proximity management as a way of maintaining psychological organisation, 'The infant cannot approach because of the parent's rejection and cannot withdraw because of its own attachment needs ...'(Main in Hopkins 1987). The pupil maintains a certain proximity to the teacher but rather than approach the teacher for help and support, remains focused on the task - as if the task was an emotional safety barrier protecting him from exposure to strong feelings about the relationship. They are reluctant to seek

support when challenged and instead can become self reliant but only able to learn what they can learn for themselves.

Such self reliance is demonstrated by this boy. He was 10 when referred because of very challenging behaviour which constantly interrupted the teacher in class. It seemed as if he could not bear to listen to her and instead needed to believe that he already knew what the teacher knew. In one to one sessions of educational psychotherapy, he wrote a story about a journey and I asked him what he would need to take with him to help if anything went wrong. He drew this picture which seemed to reflect his self reliance, his need to be able to cope with any challenge without help from another person – the vehicle that could meet any challenge.



Sroufe (1983) identified a 'strong underlying anger that he has not learned to direct at the source. Such feelings tend to be directed at objects and accompanied by acts of non-compliance'. Anger with the teacher is directed at others or into the task, inhibiting self expression and creativity. There is a tendency to prefer structured, concrete tasks for which there is a clear and unambiguous solution rather than a task which involves considering alternative ideas. Maths is often preferred to creative writing and board games, with rules and structured actions, can help in the expression of hostility as they 'kill you off'!

The patterns of behaviour identified in such clinic material were collated and recorded as profiles and summarised here.

### **The Learning profile of the Avoidant Sample.**

#### Approach to the classroom

- Apparent indifference to anxiety in a new situation – self reliance

### Response to the teacher

- Denial of need for support and help from the teacher
- Sensitivity to the proximity of the teacher

### Response to the task

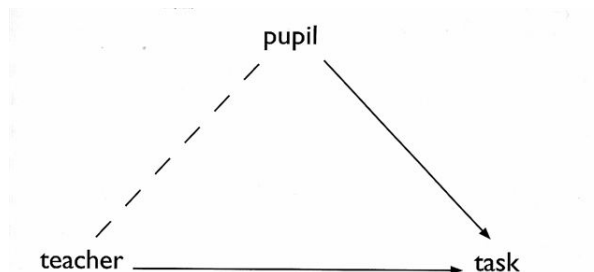
- Need to be autonomous and involved in the task, independent of the teacher
- Hostility felt towards the teacher is directed at others or the task

### Skills and difficulties

- Likely to be underachieving
- Limited use of language
- Limited use of creativity

This pattern of response can be summarized further by the triangle which indicates the focus of the pupil and the possible point of intervention.

### **Learning Triangle of Avoidant responses in the classroom.**



Focusing on engagement in a shared task enables the pupil to experience the interest and participation of the teacher without triggering anxieties about the relationship. Teachers using this model of understanding pupil behaviour and responses, have described the ways in which they have used the task to engage 'safely' with pupils (Geddes 2006). Teachers described how, over time, pupils were more able to take risks and became more expressive and creative. When liberated from the anxiety that the intensity of proximity can evoke, pupils seemed more able to accept the support and approval of the teacher and so begin to experience themselves differently

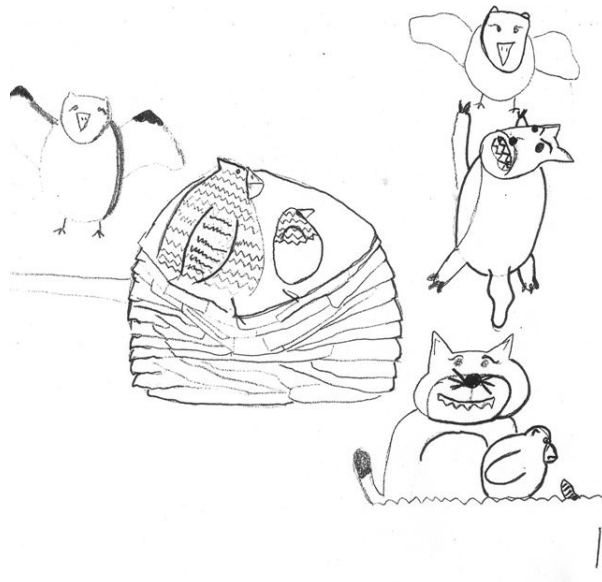
– an opportunity to change existing internal working models of themselves and their expectations of others.

The pattern of engagement shown by pupils demonstrating **Ambivalent** attachment behaviour was very different.

Behaviour seemed to reflect the child's need for constant and often physical contact in order to be assured of the attention of the adult. As Hopkins (1990) describes it, the 'real aim is not to cling but to be held without even needing to express a wish for it' – perhaps a longing – and a need - to be 'held in mind' by an attentive other.

The learning profile reflects the anxiety of the pupil whose fears are aroused by loss of teacher attention and so a rejection of the task as an intrusion into the relationship with the teacher. The pupil can redirect attention that the teacher focuses on the task, towards themselves by their apparent dependence and may try to take over the task rather than engage in it, as if they were the teacher! Identification with the adult is often a defense against feeling helpless and often such pupils can become very 'adultified' showing an apparently sophisticated use of language which seeks to dominate attention rather than share thinking and ideas. At the extreme end of this behaviour continuum, pupils can become school phobic as if attendance at school is a threat which triggers intense separation anxiety.

This is demonstrated by a girl of 11 who was about to face the transition from primary to secondary school and had become a non-attender.



She described the little bird who wanted the worm but was afraid to go out and get it in case she was attacked by the bird and said that if the baby bird left the nest, the mummy bird might be

attacked by another cat. Her separation anxiety was perhaps related to her mother's own fears of separation and autonomy, agrophobic feelings, that the outside world was a dangerous place to experience alone.

In the classroom this can be seen as a pre-occupation with the teacher and resistance to the task which to me symbolises the outside world. A sample of such cases reflected this profile of engagement and response.

### **The Resistant/Ambivalent profile in the classroom**

Stage 1. Approach to school/classroom

- high levels of anxiety and uncertainty (with school phobia at the extreme end of the continuum)

Stage 2. Response to the teacher

- need to hold onto the attention of the teacher
- apparent dependence on the teacher
- expressed hostility towards the teacher

Stage 3. Response to the task

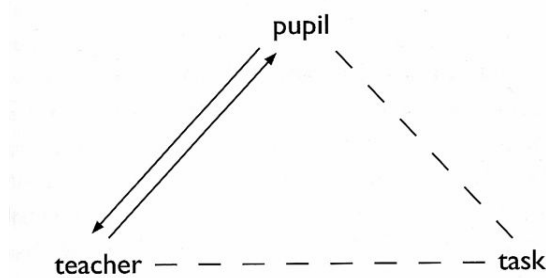
- difficulties in attempting task unsupported
- unable to attend to task because of concerns about loss of teacher attention

Stage 4. Skills and difficulties

- likely to be underachieving
- language may be well developed
- learning may be accompanied by hostility

and summarized by a triangle

### Learning Triangle associated with an Ambivalent Behaviour Pattern



Working with this dynamic in the classroom, teachers often reported feelings of irritation at the ceaseless demands of the pupil for their constant attention but when the pupil's behaviour was reframed as anxiety about being forgotten, teachers were able to respond with different techniques. Learning tasks were differentiated into small, independent steps and designed to minimize anxiety but encourage autonomy of thought. They described ideas to reassure the pupil of their attention without their constant presence and ways of permitting the pupil to take more appropriate responsibility rather than assume the teacher role. Such interventions enabled pupils to engage in the task for long enough to begin to experience some thought other than separation anxiety and so begin to experience autonomy and some self reliance – a mind of their own. Again, the pupil's experience and expectations begin to change when their real needs are understood and acknowledged in the daily work of learning in the classroom.

The most challenging behaviour in school, is often that experienced with pupils whose Attachment behaviour reflects **Dis-organised characteristics**. These children are often excluded from schools and find their way to small off site units or out of school altogether and into the relative 'protection' of peer groups and gangs. Such behaviours can reflect early unprocessed distress reflecting little capacity to cope with fear and uncertainty and so leads to acting out as a way of communicating experience. Boston and Szur (1903) comment,

'It makes a great deal more sense of much of the seemingly unreasonable or outrageous behaviour of many .. children if one bears in mind that they are often doing to others what they experienced as being done to them, both externally and internally' (p.3)

Memories of unprocessed experience do not remain in the past and may become actions in the here and now – **behaviour can be a communication about very early insecurity and unprocessed adverse experiences.**



Levels of stress determine the nervous system around which personality becomes organized and brain development can be affected. Reactive, fight/flight pathways in response to uncontained anxiety and unprocessed experience can dominate behaviour. Fear and uncertainty are unbearable and the most vulnerable children can seek to feel safer by evacuating their anxiety and fears into others and the community.

- The bully can be telling us about what it is like to be the frightened victim of another's brutality. Bullying may be about feeling afraid.
- The pupil who taunts others when they make a mistake may be telling us about what its like to feel humiliated and stupid
- A pupil can attack another pupil whose experiences are reminders of their own unprocessed distress
- The boy who tags his name all over the walls of the state may be struggling to find his own identity
- The hooded gangs who 'hang out' may need to belong to a peer group which colludes in denial of their feelings of fear, helplessness and vulnerability by acting out on others their own experiences of intimidation and violence
- And the sexually abused child may grow up to the perpetrator.
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Without a mechanism of talking and thinking to cope with anxiety, learned often in secure enough early childhood, the acting out goes on.

Common aspects of behaviour which are observed in the classroom were related to behaviour developed in response to the absence of the experience in infancy of a secure base in the face of extreme anxiety often resulting in:

- reactive behaviour associated with brain pathways hotwired for fight and flight and very easily triggered
- profound mistrust of others
- acting out of experience rather than communication by words or thought
- little self awareness or sensitivity to others
- hypervigilance
- sensitivity to denigration and humiliation and especially to failure within the learning task
- a need to take control in order to defend against overwhelming fears and uncertainties and an absence of a coping mechanism – defensive omnipotence

**Jim, aged 9**, demonstrated this in the classroom.

He was having a typically hard day. He sat at the table with a fixed and furious gaze. He muttered when the teacher spoke then stood up and moved restlessly about. When asked to return to his seat, he dragged the chair out noisily then banged it in again. When asked to return to the task he swept the sheet from the table, muttered offensively about the teacher and stormed out of the room, banging to door. He ignored anyone who tried to help him and disappeared out into the school field. Jim's mother was contacted but, as often happened, she was unable to come to a meeting. Vulnerable parents may also avoid the pain of confronting their difficulties.

***Such disorganized patterns of behaviour may reflect generations of unprocessed trauma and distress.***

In a later educational psychotherapy session, Jim ignored the task waiting on the table and sitting as near to the door as possible, began to throw the sponge ball at the wall. He said it must not touch the ground or it would explode. When I tried to talk with him he talked over me. As he rhythmically threw and caught the ball, he began to talk about how he entered his own world when he was worried and that he thought he had done that when he was about three, when he had been very frightened.

At the age of 3, after an infancy dominated by his mother's drug use, Jim was sent to live with his violent grandfather whilst his mother went into rehab. In the frightening absences of his mother during her drug taking episodes, and in the face of the fears of his grandfathers violence, Jim had developed his own strategies for survival – escape into his own world where he could control what happened. His determination to be in control at any cost was undermining attempts to help him to learn.

**Interventions.**

- Early intervention is clearly an important aspect of intervention and such vulnerable children are very easily identified in schools.
- When teachers understand such behaviour, not as mistrustful, abusive acts of defiance but as an expression of profound fear and helplessness then the school can respond with strategies other than punishment and exclusion and can think of ways of making pupils begin to feel safe and thought about.
- Safety is at the heart of intervention strategies and the building, the surroundings and levels of supervision are crucial in beginning the process of diminishing crippling anxieties.
- Non-reactive responses are essential in order to minimize the conditions in which reactivity is triggered and behaviour spirals quickly out of control. In well supervised, calm classrooms, with predictable routines and consistent discipline and responses such pupils can begin to experience the beginnings of feeling safe enough
- the school as the secure base (Geddes 2006).

- Tasks which are do-able, concrete and focus on hand-eye co-ordination can be calming when anxiety is aroused.
- The curriculum can provide opportunities to develop an understanding of self, time and distance, often disrupted by early unreliability and uncertainty.
- The metaphor in stories can begin the process of awareness and emotional literacy.
- High levels of supervision in areas outside of the classroom; in corridors, lunch rooms and in the playground can minimise uncertainties and hence reactivity.
- The sensitivity and understanding of Attachment processes is crucial to teacher responses to vulnerable children and an appreciation of their attachment significance can enhance their understanding and practice. Teacher training should reflect this.
- The support and supervision of teachers is a vital ingredient of enhancing the containing function of the school and so calls for shared thinking and understanding. Supervision also protects the teacher from the daily exposure to such lack of trust and unprocessed distress. Communication and collaboration increase the resilience potential of the staff group and strengthens the school as the secure base.
- Schools can - and they do, make very significant contributions to the experience of stability and consistency that can begin to make a difference to the sense of self for such profoundly vulnerable children. No wonder such pupils are often 'persistent attenders'. School may be their first experience of a safe place. The building can be their first experience of a safe container.

Early identification and implementation of the 'secure base' interventions is the beginnings of the possibilities for hopeful change for such vulnerable pupils.

### **Summary.**

This brief discussion of the insight afforded by Attachment Theory to an understanding of pupil behaviour and responses to the challenges implicit in learning, indicates the enormous potential in school systems which make significant contributions to enhancing the internal working model of vulnerable pupils whose early beginnings have been less than secure. It is predicated on an understanding of the dynamic linking relationships and engagement in learning in schools. In particular, the sensitivity of the teacher to the meaning of pupil's behaviour and responses enhances her role as the 'educational attachment figure'. Engagement in learning is a pathway to accessing opportunity. Accessing opportunity is a bridge to social inclusion involving engagement in relationships and involvement in work – the parameters of successful life proposed by Freud.

Heather Geddes

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