

## COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

# ATTACHMENT DISORDER

### What are attachment patterns?

Attachment patterns can occur when a young child is unable to bond with parents or caregivers. Attachments and relationships are extremely important in our lives. They have an impact on how we see ourselves, and how we develop relationships throughout our lives. They help us to maintain our emotional well-being.

There are different types of attachment patterns and different terms are used to describe them:

#### 1. Students who have insecure attachment patterns

These students feel insecure because they have not had the benefit of consistent parenting, or their parents/carers have been unable to give them the emotional support they need. They may react in one of two ways:

- i) appearing not to want much contact with others, avoiding being near staff and seeming indifferent to new situations
- ii) having mixed feelings towards adults, sometimes being over-dependent and demanding constant attention

Both groups of students may:

- have high levels of anxiety
- use a limited range of language
- lack creativity
- be in danger of underachievement

#### 2. Students who have disorganised attachment patterns

These students come from homes where there has not been an emotionally sensitive or safe environment in which they can flourish. They may:

- become more controlling as they become more anxious
- be unwilling to accept the authority of staff, or allow themselves to be taught
- have overwhelming feelings of fear when faced with uncertainty
- have difficulty with abstract ideas, and therefore underachieve.

#### 3. Separation anxiety

As well students who have been unable to become attached to their parents or caregivers, there are students who become too attached. This can lead to the following behaviours:

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- great distress when separated from loved ones, and fear that something will happen to them
- refusing to go to school or elsewhere because of fear of separation
- difficulty sleeping without the person to whom they are attached being near
- physical symptoms such as vomiting or headaches when separated, or in fear of being separated
- poor social skills within peer groups.

It is important to remember that these patterns may also be symptoms of other disorders and it is important to acknowledge differences in gender and cultures. Always refer to clinical intervention for formal diagnosis and further support.

#### Strategies for helping

Feeling emotionally safe in the classroom and being connected to a person is an important aspect of reducing anxiety for students with attachment patterns and a prerequisite to learning.

#### 1. The environment

- a timetable (visual or written) of what is happening each day
- a display board showing who is in, with pictures of staff whom the student can ask for help
- ensuring students have their own space within the classroom
- limiting demands on them when they are anxious, and breaking tasks down into small steps that they can manage independently
- making sure targets are achievable in order to reduce stress

#### 2. Relationships

- providing support when students are distressed by being near them and ready to help
- helping them to practise turn taking, build up social skills and experience positive interactions
- giving firm boundaries, while appreciating that those with attachment disorders may feel a sense of shame when they are told off
- if they are dependent on a particular person, giving them an object belonging to that person to hold until they return

#### 3. Therapeutic interventions

- seeing whether it is possible to provide art, music or play therapy, to give these students a way of expressing their anxieties
- seeking advice from outside agencies for further strategies, suggestions and support.

Some of these students may be fostered or have a difficult home life. It is important that school is a place that provides continuity and security. Staff working with them need to be resilient enough to offer a high level of emotional support and encouragement.