

## Ambivalent Attachment Style

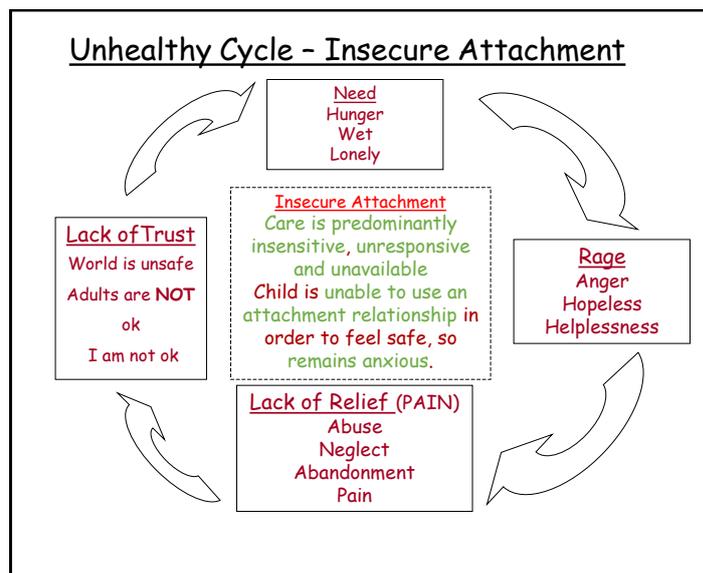
Sometimes caregivers are nurturing, attuned and respond effectively to their child's distress, while at other times they are intrusive, insensitive or emotionally unavailable. When care given alters between two very different responses, their children become confused and distrustful, not knowing what kind of treatment to expect.

When parents or early caregivers interact with their children in ways that are inconsistent and unpredictable the children may develop ambivalent attachment patterns and behaviours.

Children with ambivalent attachment patterns can appear attention-needing, and find it difficult to settle by themselves or with groups of children without trying to attract and maintain adult attention in order to feel safe. They will sometimes talk or ask questions excessively, or act as a 'clown' and might engage in more difficult behaviours as they strive to gain and then hold on to attention.

They find it difficult to concentrate on activities as they are concentrating on their need for adult attention. This behaviour can be misdiagnosed as ADHD.

With their intense need to gain attention so that they feel safe, these children and young people can experience high levels of anxiety which may impair their ability to attend to learning and comprehension of what they are being taught or asked to do.

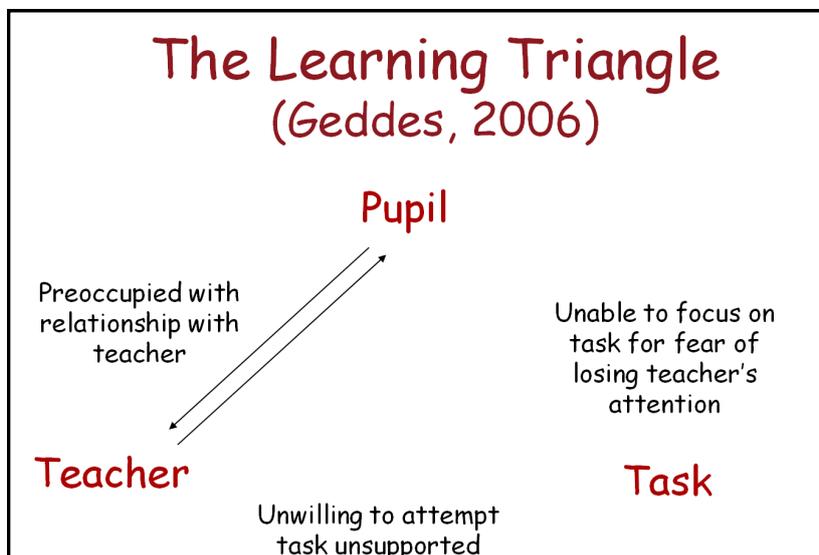


"Adults are unpredictable. I have to draw attention to myself to get you to notice me and to make sure I get my needs met, even if it's just some of them. I can't rely on you working out what I need and when. Sometimes you will feel like I'm in your face, but you've got to understand that I can't bear to be ignored-that terrifies me. I have worked out what I need to do to get what I think I need."

## How these children may present in class

- Can present as highly anxious children/young people.
- Can present as emotionally a lot younger than chronological age.
- May feel that adults are unpredictable and have to draw attention to themselves to get adults to notice them.
- Tend to make their presence known - fear of being forgotten.
- Are pre-occupied with relationships and are alert to the availability of others.
- Appear attention-needing and highly dependent.
- Can be overly focused on the relationship with the teacher or teaching assistant at the expense of learning.
- Those children who 'hang off an adult' at breaks/playtimes, call out, ask questions and elicit attention.
- Can find it difficult to settle by themselves or with groups of children/young people.
- Sometimes talk excessively, or act as a 'class clown' in order to maintain the focus of adult attention.
- Concentrating and focusing on task is difficult as they remain hyper-vigilant to what the adults are doing and are easily distracted.
- Generally poor understanding of cause and effect.
- Find it difficult to take responsibility for behaviour and learning.
- Can escalate confrontation in order to hold the attention of others.
- Can find it hard to maintain friendships and can be clingy and possessive.

We must be careful to understand that these children and young people are showing us what they need - attention, relationship and support in order to feel safe and to be able to learn and achieve in our schools. They are not merely attention seeking or trying to upset us personally.



Heather Geddes illustrated the relationships between an ambivalently attached child, teacher and task with this learning triangle.

## Shame

Also as a result of their inconsistent experiences of care when an infant these children often develop a poor sense of self and a negative self image which exhibits itself as poor self esteem in school.

These children expect to be "bad" people or not to be good at things and therefore often struggle to take risks in school. At times they will be looking out for evidence that their self image is true and prove to be very "hypersensitive" when even small things go wrong and outbursts may occur.

These outbursts occur due to the child experiencing very high levels of shame. Strong feelings of shame stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, causing a fight/flight/freeze reaction. Children / young people feel exposed and want to hide or react with rage, while feeling profoundly alienated from others. They may not be able to think or talk clearly and be consumed with self-loathing, which is made worse because they are unable to be rid of themselves.

A child's reaction in these circumstances tends to follow the pattern as illustrated by the Shield Against Shame.



These children and young people need specialised and different support to other young people to help them to begin to be more settled, behave more positively and be able to attend to learning within school. This is because many of the traditional or more behavioural strategies that teachers use to correct a child's behaviour often inadvertently serve as proof to the child that they are "bad" and may actually cause shame, anxiety and outbursts to escalate.

## How do we support ambivalently attached children and young people in school?

### Support the child to feel safe

It is important to recognise the fear and anxiety that lie beneath behaviour so that the child can be appropriately supported. Until children feel safe they will not be able to derive positive benefit from being in the educational environment. Clear structure, boundaries and routine in place, in a relaxing environment are best but this can be tricky in school. Adults also need to set the emotional tone, providing opportunities to co-regulate the child's escalating arousal. Support during times of transition during the school day is especially important as times of change will escalate anxiety and therefore the child's need for attention.

### Build a key relationship with the child

Children need relationships in order to feel safe and will greatly benefit from the allocation of a key person who gets to know and understand the child and begins engaging the child in the relationship, helping the child to feel safe enough to trust and respond. The key person will know the child well enough to notice distorted as well as direct requests for help and will be aware of conditions that might throw the child, stepping in early to prevent escalating arousal. This key relationship will support emotional regulation, and help the child when feelings of shame or anger threaten to overwhelm. The key person can also act as advocate or champion for the child.

### Support their emotional development

We need to meet the emotional needs of children when meeting social and learning needs. Children with attachment difficulties are likely to be emotionally immature and to have only fragile control of emotional arousal, whether caused by excitement or anxiety. We need to attune to the child to recognise and support feelings however these are displayed. When things get tricky we need to step in and provide co-regulation of emotion as required. Children will not learn to recognise their own or the feelings of others until they have experienced a sensitive, regulating relationship. Experience of emotional regulation comes before understanding.

### Provide empathy and discipline.

Empathy is an important precursor to discipline—we need to discipline with empathy and not anger. E.g. "I can see you are cross, he knocked down your tower." Learning to follow rules; to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour arises out of the experience of an empathic, attuned relationship and as the adult comforts and helps the child regulate the feelings of shame the child is learning what is socially acceptable.

Children will need limited and simplified choices/consequences, and help to understand cause and effect. We need to provide explicit rules with predictable, logical and consistent consequences for unacceptable behaviour, in a calm and non-confrontational way (Noticing and Wondering Aloud). The children will need support with their understanding of behaviour and its consequences and the impact of themselves on others and others on themselves. By providing an appropriate time for the child to feel in control, they will be supported to trust in and enjoy the adult being in charge.

## Insecure ambivalent profile

## Interventions

An Ambivalent Attachment pattern develops out of a relationship with a parent who is inconsistent and unpredictable. The students need lots of attention, support and nurturing whilst also being encouraged to cope with short periods without your constant attention.

- Tend to make their presence known with highly dependent, attention needing behaviours that can feel manipulative because they coerce the other to attend.
- Preoccupied with relationships, alert to the availability of others, and in constant need of reassurance.
- Will monopolise the teacher with constant need to share problems or gain reassurance. This can lead to inappropriate boundaries with teachers, with the student wanting to share personal information or be too close to the adult.
- Overly focused on the relationship with the teacher or teaching assistant at the expense of learning.
- Find it difficult to settle by themselves or with groups of students; unable to take independent action.
- Will not want to go out at unstructured times. Looks for reasons to stay with the teacher.
- Sometimes talk excessively, or act as 'class clown' in order to maintain the focus of adult attention. Skillful use of language to maintain teachers' attention.
- Concentrating and focusing on tasks is difficult as they remain hyper-vigilant to what the adults are doing and are easily distracted.
- Very focused on feelings.
- Find it difficult to attend to the rules and structure of the classroom.
- Find it difficult to follow rules and to learn from consequences.
- Rely on feelings rather than knowledge to guide their behaviour.
- Poor understanding of cause and effect. Find it difficult to take responsibility for behaviour and learning.
- Can escalate confrontation in order to hold the attention of others.
- Need to meet need for attention without overly reinforcing dependency. Student will need increased support, but with opportunities for small periods of independent working, which are gradually built up.
- Provide some empathic but clear boundaries which increase confidence when not getting attention and with frequent check in's so the student does not feel abandoned.
- Provide highly predictable, structured routines; use visual timetables; and don't reduce supports too quickly. Break the task into small manageable chunks.
- Differentiate tasks into small steps, and encourage turn-taking to help achieve some independence in activities.
- Gradually increase duration of independent tasks with a clear structure letting student know when adult will be back to check in with them. I.e. clear time frames.
- Schedule regular progress checks throughout the session and use a timer to help calm anxieties during short, timed independent tasks. Provide a visual reminder of when the adult will be coming back so reducing stress relating to this.
- Be dependable by coming back when agreed, or if that is not possible apologising and acknowledging how difficult that must have been.
- Provide special transitional objects to take place of teacher or significant adult for a short while. 'Please look after this for me until I come back'.
- Remind the child they are being 'held in mind' by making regular comments directed towards them whilst addressing the whole class.
- Encourage responsibility for tasks. Remember others can often find the child overbearing or bossy.
- Use stories around issues of separation, identity and independence.
- Allow the student to develop more independence slowly.
- Provide reliable and consistent adult support.
- Gradually increase separation.
- Support understanding of their behaviour and the predictable consequences. 'When I do this, this happens; when you do this, this happens'.
- Provide opportunities to develop peer relationship through small group work.
- Provision of a 'key adult' within school allows the child the opportunity to experience a relationship that challenges their expectation of their current internal working model.

Insecure ambivalent profile	Interventions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View the teacher as either all good or all bad, and may oscillate between these depending on their immediate feeling.</li> <li>• Find it hard to maintain friendships and can be clingy and possessive.</li> <li>• Highly anxious and oversensitive to signs of rejection.</li> <li>• Quick to become abusive or rude if they feel they are being ignored.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay special attention to transition times, plan and prepare for beginnings, separations and endings.</li> <li>• Support the anxiety of the unknown.</li> <li>• Support them in regulating strong emotions and in calming down so that they can learn how to calm themselves down.</li> <li>• Plan calming and regulating activities involving physical resistance and deep pressure touch to help ground them.</li> <li>• Build up frustration tolerance by not over helping, but acknowledge and empathise with anxiety and frustration.</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Expressed need	Hidden need
<p style="text-align: center;">I can't trust in your availability. I need you to attend to me</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">I will not show my need to separate and explore. I will pull you in and push you away. I need help to be apart and to feel secure that you will be there when needed.</p>

The strategies provided are mainly general strategies that can be used to support a child with an ambivalent attachment pattern in school by the staff around the child or even the whole school. There are also more specific strategies that can be put into place by the adults in the child's more immediate support network in school. These include the use of a specifically trained Key Adult, use of the PACE (Playful, Accepting, Curious and Empathic) approach, use of a Safe Place, Relationship Based Play (based on Theraplay principles).

Relationship is the key—so many interventions will need to centre around relationships and many lead to the allocation of a key adult.