



# **ATTACHMENT**

## Reintegreat School Toolkit

### Supporting Children with Attachment Needs

#### Understanding Attachment

Attachment refers to the way children form emotional bonds with caregivers. These early relationships shape how children view themselves, others, and the world. A secure attachment helps children feel safe and confident, while insecure or disrupted attachment can lead to difficulties in trust, behaviour, and learning.

There are **four key attachment styles**, each with different presentations and needs:

##### 1. Secure Attachment

Children with secure attachment trust that adults will meet their needs.

They are more likely to:

- Self-regulate effectively.
- Learn quickly and persist with tasks.
- Build strong social networks.
- Show distress when separated from caregivers but compose themselves knowing they will return.

##### 2. Insecure–Avoidant Attachment

Children who appear self-reliant and emotionally distant.

Characteristics:

- Appear settled or happy on the surface, but experience **high anxiety**.
- Rarely seek adult help or comfort, even when distressed.
- Withdrawn, with little emotional engagement with peers or adults.
- Prefer activities over relationships.
- Have a strong need for choice and control.

##### 3. Insecure–Ambivalent Attachment

Children who are anxious, clingy, and unsure of their own self-worth.

Characteristics:

- Physically cling to adults.
- Struggle to focus on academic tasks.
- Seek constant attention from adults.

- Struggle to understand cause and effect, making rewards/consequences ineffective.
- Appear independent at times, but can have sudden, intense emotional outbursts.

#### 4. Disorganised/Controlling Attachment

Children who show contradictory behaviours — both controlling and withdrawn.

Characteristics:

- Seek to control peers and adults.
- May mask anxiety with aggression, manipulation, or “knowing everything.”
- Hyper-vigilant, monitoring others closely.
- Resist support from adults.
- Can be compliant initially with new adults but then reject them.
- Struggle with friendships and often display disruptive or overwhelming behaviours.

#### Supporting Strategies

##### Building Trust & Relationships

- Allocate a **trusted adult** to check in daily (e.g. meet & greet at the start of the day, check-ins at key times).
- Repair relationships quickly if ruptures occur.
- Never make promises you can't keep.
- Use **transition objects** (e.g. leaving a pen or small item with a child if stepping away briefly).
- Use humour or distraction when the child becomes dysregulated.

##### Communication

- Validate feelings using empathetic language:  
*“I can see you're upset... I'd feel the same if that happened to me.”*
- Keep feedback simple, clear, and non-shaming.
- Avoid public correction – speak privately.
- Give simple, specific instructions.
- Be calm, low-key, and consistent.

##### Classroom Approaches

- Predictability is key – use **visual timetables** and pre-warn about changes.
- Allow time for **brain breaks** and repetitive, calming activities.
- Use physical activities to help regulate emotions before learning.
- Avoid loss of playtime as a consequence – physical play is important for regulation.
- Support transitions carefully (new class, new adults, new routines).

- Ensure consistent routines, boundaries, and expectations across all staff.
- Avoid escalating power struggles – offer **structured choices** (e.g. “You can write three sentences or draw a picture with 10 words”).

## Emotional Development

- Encourage recognition of self and others’ emotions through games, mirrors, and labelling feelings.
- Use modelling: *“I feel happy – look at my smile.”*
- Use sensory play and rhythm-based activities to soothe anxiety.
- Play turn-taking and memory games to strengthen social and cognitive skills.
- Model empathy and encourage them to show it toward others.

## Reducing Hyper-vigilance & Anxiety

- Provide clear information about visitors or changes in the day.
- Seat children where they can see doors/exits if this helps them feel safe.
- Offer an agreed “safe space” or regulation activity when emotions overwhelm.
- Always provide an **exit strategy** if they are in an unfamiliar setting.
- Plan beginnings, separations, and endings carefully.

## Key Principles

- **Consistency, reliability, and boundaries** reduce anxiety and build trust.
- **Time-in, not time-out** – children need connection when distressed.
- Use **positive reinforcement** but keep praise genuine and low-key.
- Recognise that behaviour is communication of need, not simply defiance.
- Encourage independence gradually, but step in when control overwhelms them.

## Useful Resources

- [Beacon School Support – Attachment Advice](#)
- Sec-Ed: Practical Advice for Attachment in Classrooms
- [Healthy Young Minds NHS](#)
- [Mental Health Connect](#)

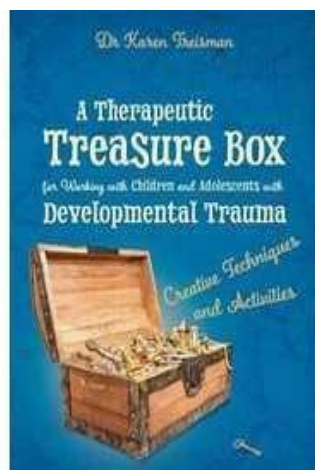
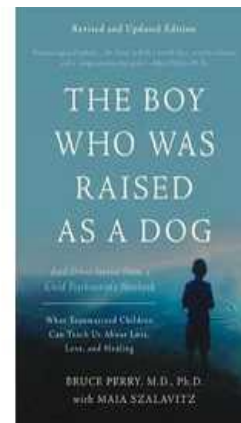
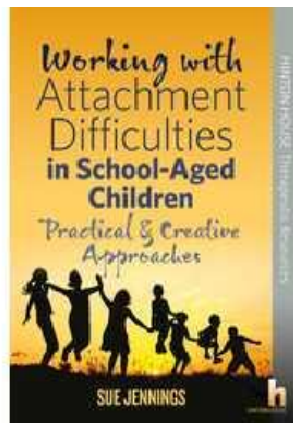
## Key Takeaway

Attachment difficulties can affect trust, learning, and relationships.

A consistent, calm, and connected approach with trusted adults is essential.

Predictability, empathy, and repair of relationships are more effective than punishment.

## Book Recommendations



Working with Attachment  
Difficulties in School – Aged  
Children - Sue Jennings

The Boy Who Was Raised  
as a Dog – Bruce Perry

A Therapeutic Treasure –  
Dr Karen Treisman