



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- Withdrawn, with little emotional engagement with peers or adults.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Children who show contradictory behaviours — both controlling and withdrawn.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.

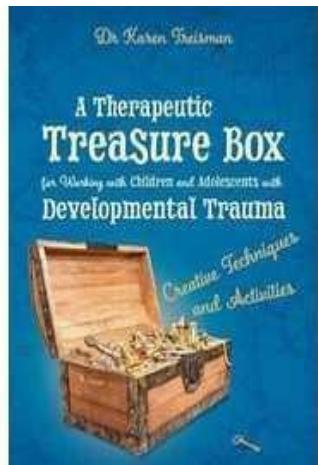
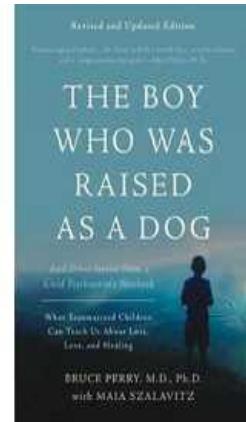
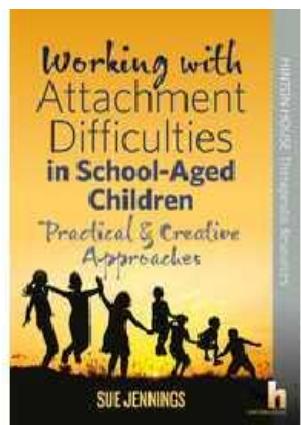
Useful Resources

- [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