

Supporting Transition to a New Family - An Attachment and Trauma-Based Approach

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Developmental trauma as a framework

Potential Issues

- Fragile sense of safety and reliance on adults
- Child easily triggered into survival state (fight, flight, freeze) and into earlier ways of relating when stressed (self-sufficiency, presenting as if fine, dysregulating)
- Miscueing, hiding fear, trying to fit in and please adults
- Compromised sense of time and ability to process information (also age related development)
- Uncertainty likely to be filled by child's fantasy and anxiety
- Fragmented sense of history and sense that no one holds all the pieces – easier to block off difficult issues than to integrate
- Ending contact with birth family members, confusion and grief
- Attachments up to adult figure come before new sibling attachments. If more than one child moving, current sibling bond may undermine formation of reliance on new parent
- All of above increase with length of exposure to trauma and number of moves

Implications

- Promote development of attachment and reliance on adults even in short-term placements
- Close observation of what excites, dysregulates, calms
- Focus on child's 'felt sense' of safety. Assume fear underlies many behaviours
- Introduce attachment forming interventions early
- Introduce idea of new parents only once they are ready to meet child
- Repeat information simply with visual cues
- Provide non-verbal sensory continuity across contexts
- Child's history as 'dictionary' to help understand behaviour. Detailed and personalised, how the child shows stress, seeks comfort, specific details of events and people
- Joint sessions to provide connecting experiences as well as exploring difficult themes with main attachment figure alongside. Start while in foster placement, and continue across introductions and after family move
- Adult time for discussion essential – increase capacity of adults to bear inevitable distress and mediate process on behalf of child
- Mark passage of time via non-verbal rituals
- Timings to follow needs of child rather than rigid and adult led

Goals

- Child to form a strong attachment to their permanent family. Encouraged by:
- Adult able to interpret child's cues accurately (such as being aware of miscueing) and respond to unmet need under the behaviour
- New family able to understand, withstand and grow through challenges – to 'keep going'
- Draw upon understanding of impact of child's early experiences to make sense of behaviour and remain empathic, accepting, curious and playful
- Expect and make sense of rejections and personal attacks within developmental trauma context
- Shared moments of connection, belonging
- Adult quickly initiates repair of relationship after ruptures in attunement
- Adult increasingly able to support child's capacity to regulate via co-regulation
- Child turns to adult for comfort when distressed
- Child takes risk of sharing fear and confusion



All adults involved to share approach

Pattern of Sessions

- Attachment forming work and training with foster carers as early as possible
- Joint sessions with foster carer and child initially based on Theraplay. Start building a repertoire of sensory non-verbal experiences that can be continued into the new context
- Adult meetings to agree and plan transition work. Form relationship with adopters early and discuss child's history in detail, predicting and rehearsing potential issues
- Begin transition work with child using stories, miniature figures, puppets, everyday examples with carer alongside. Start introductions as soon as possible after having told the child. Begin co-creating a narrative together. Use child's experiences and contributions to develop an emotionally coherent story. Build in gaps to allow child to process. Include time markers such as a treasure box in sessions
- Sessions across the introductions: with the foster carer and child after the child has met the new parents to allow child and foster carer to take stock. Joint session with adopters, foster carers and child designed in such a way as to keep the intensity as low as possible. Repeat familiar games in circle rather than pairs, use opportunity to give important messages 'we are going to show all the games we play and the special ways you need to be looked after'
- Adults write a therapeutic story for child and new parent shares
- After transition a few joint sessions with child and new parents
- Some contact to be maintained with foster carer if possible



Theraplay® and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy

The overall aim is for the adults to mediate the emotional intensity for the child rather than the child having to manage alone, to help process trauma rather than re-enact it. Both Theraplay and DDP centrally involve the main carer and combining them brings many opportunities for moment to moment connection with the child alongside addressing difficult feelings and building a narrative.

Theraplay Based on healthy parent-infant relationships: Structure, Engagement, Nurture, Challenge. 'Here and Now' connection and regulation
www.theraplay.org

DDP Attachment and trauma focused: Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy. Difficult themes woven into conversation, co-create emotionally coherent narrative
www.dyadicdevelopmentalpsychotherapy.org

References
Booth, P & Jernberg, A (2010) Theraplay: Helping Parents and Children Build Better Relationships Through Attachment Based Play. 3rd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
Golding, KS & Hughes, DA (2012) Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child. Jessica Kingsley