

Sharing the Learnings

Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services Newsletter
Strengths Based Practice for Children's Services in South Eastern Sydney



familiesNSW
supporting families to raise children



Issue 5 May 2008

Welcome to Issue 5 of 'Sharing the Learnings'

In October and November of 2007, participants in the professional development component of the project attended our third half-day training session. The focus was on attachment theory and the Circle of Security and how it relates to the early childhood setting. This issue of 'Sharing the Learnings' features articles reflecting the content of the training and providing some thought-provoking strategies to implement the concepts.

Your feedback:

Your feedback is important to us. Let us know what you have found useful about this newsletter and what you would like to see more of.

Staff changes

Since the last newsletter, Hala Doris has unfortunately moved on from her position at Lady Gowrie. The project thanks Hala for her hard work and her wealth of experience and knowledge in early childhood services. We welcome back Fay Hadley to the project who has agreed to take on a consultative role.

Upcoming conference

**Strengths Based Family Centred Practice:
Supporting change in children's services**

Friday 16 May 2008 9.00am – 4.30pm

The conference will include practical sessions that will support you in:

- Developing teams and promoting shared vision
- Incorporating attachment theory into day to day practice
- Building partnerships with families
- Aboriginal Children's Services

Registrations are now closed and we have a full house! Watch out for the next issue of Sharing the Learnings to hear all about the conference.

In this Issue:

**Attachment and the circle of security:
Reflections from the training**

**Being emotionally available to children in our services:
Reflecting on our practice**

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The 'Strengths Based Practice in Children's Services' project is a Families NSW initiative in the South East Sydney Region. The Benevolent Society, in partnership with Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Sydney is working collaboratively on this project to support children's services to incorporate a strengths based family centred approach into their day-to-day work.

Attachment and the Circle of Security

Attachment Styles

Secure Attachment –

- The secure child has learnt that his attachment needs will be met in a predictable straightforward way.
- Relationships are characterised by open expression of emotions and intimacy, which help the child manage distress.
- A secure child is able to explore their environment, knowing the carer will be available when and if needed.

As a result the child is emotionally regulated and better equipped to learn through exploration, play and social interaction

Insecure – Avoidant

- Children minimise or seem not to express their attachment needs.
- Communication with the caregiver is often mediated through exploration, attention to the external environment, or interaction via a toy.

Insecure – Ambivalent

- These children are overwhelmed by their emotions and seem unable to contain their attachment distress. When distressed these children are so preoccupied with their attachment needs they are unable to successfully explore the environment or engage in play.

The third half-day training session for those participating in the intensive professional development component of the project was held in October 2007. The focus was on applying attachment theory and the Circle of Security concepts to early childhood settings. Elaine Stoven-Bradford from The Benevolent Society's Partnerships in Early Childhood Program (Central Coast) led participants through some background theory and shared different ways of applying the concepts in our day-to-day work.

What is attachment theory and why is it important? John Bowlby was the first person to write about and describe attachment theory in the 1950s. He talked about attachment as the **bond** between infant and carer, he asserts that "Children have a primary and essential need to be in **relationship** with their caregivers" and that attachment is the social interaction, communication and intimacy of the relationship that is developed between the child and the caregiver. Bowlby states that **the foundations of our emotional security are laid down in infancy**. Attachment is something that affects all of us. According to Harrison (2003), research into attachment has shown that children have the potential to form many attachment relationships, and that each relationship can contribute to the child's growing sense of self (Howe's, 1999; Van IJzendoorn, Sagi, Lambermon, 1992).

In his writings about attachment theory John Bowlby described attachment as a "...lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). Bowlby shared the psychoanalytic view that early experiences in childhood have an important influence on development and behaviour later in life. Our early attachment styles are established in childhood through the infant/caregiver relationship.

In her 1970s research, psychologist Mary Ainsworth expanded greatly upon Bowlby's original work. Her groundbreaking "Strange Situation" study revealed the profound effects of attachment on behaviour. In the study, researchers observed children between the ages of 12 and 18 months as they responded to a situation in which they were briefly left alone and then reunited with their mothers (Ainsworth, 1978).

Based on the responses the researchers observed, Ainsworth described three major styles of attachment: **secure attachment**, **ambivalent-insecure attachment**, and **avoidant-insecure attachment**. Later, researchers Main and Solomon (1986) added a fourth attachment style called **disorganized-insecure attachment** based upon their own research. A number of studies since that time have supported Ainsworth's attachment styles and have indicated that attachment styles also have an impact on behaviours later in life. It is important to note that insecure attachment patterns do not mean children are at risk; they are organised patterns in the sense that they still give the child a relationship solution for distress. The children believe that their caregiver will protect them. In contrast disorganised attachment carries a risk for mental health problems because the children experience failed protection. The caregiver is thought to be experienced as frightening or frightened of the child and can no longer provide a relationship solution for the children to manage their distress.

Secure attachments are about having a good healthy relationship, a relationship whereby we feel secure, loved, encouraged, valued and supported. They are also reflected in a relationship where there is a great deal of trust, boundaries, expectations and routines. Like all good things, relationships take time to nurture and develop, so a relationship with a child who is new to your centre isn't going to be an instant sensation of love and trust for the child. It has to develop over time. However there are ways to use attachment theory in the everyday life of the centre to promote good healthy relationships with children and their families.

attachment

Key to the success of the child feeling safe, happy and secure ultimately comes down to how his/her needs are met by the carer and what happens when they are upset. A young child expresses distress through signalling behaviours such as crying, looking for adults, clinging to the parent or withdrawing. These behaviours are designed to elicit a response from the caregiver. How you respond to the child's distress will determine the levels of distress the child will feel. A positive and effective adult response to the child's signal will keep the distress levels within reasonable limits and represents the first level of self-regulation for the child. For example this could be as simple as acknowledging the child when they first come in to the centre, saying hello to the parent (this certainly diminishes any parent anxiety), having set routines when they come in, giving the child a cuddle when the parent leaves, finding a toy or activity that the child likes to do. It is the appropriateness of the interaction between child and caregiver and the response of the caregiver to the child that will have the biggest impact on the child. This is the first step to developing a positive relationship and a secure attachment style. It is worthwhile to remember that drop-offs in the morning are not only separations from parents but reunions with staff. A predictable reunion with you at the start of the day will have a positive impact on how children connect with you for the rest of the day (Dolby, 2007).

Meeting Children's needs

Children come to our services with an already established primary attachment pattern with their carer and need different things from us. Some children will need time to separate from their parent, others will need to be engaged in an activity quite quickly and others need to be able to be close to us until they feel safe again. Our role as early childhood educators is to support them to engage with the group and learn the social skills required to play and learn within a group setting. This means we need to:

- Respond to their emotional needs and follow their cues,
- Observe them to get an understanding of their attachment pattern and their needs, and
- Assist them to be part of the group.

Circle of Security

As early childhood professionals our goal is to create secure attachments with the children and their families accessing our services. To do this we need to provide a secure base to allow children to explore their environment but to also provide a safe haven to return to at times of distress. The Circle of Security (Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell) (2002) provides a framework for this.

The Circle of Security uses attachment theory to demonstrate that the behaviour of caregivers can have a positive influence on a child's exploration of their world. Williams (2005) says, "The Circle of Security reveals that a child's need to explore her world is promoted by the adult's ability to watch over her, to help her and to enjoy alongside her. At any time, the child may finish exploring and need to return to her 'safe haven' for reassurance and welcoming closeness. The timing of this will vary according to many factors including the child's age (a toddler may need to return much sooner than four-year-olds) or even such as a fall, a loud noise, hunger, tiredness or illness. The caregiver behaviours which will provide this safe haven include protecting, comforting, organizing the child's feelings and delighting in the child. The circle also labels the carers behaviours that are always desirable: being 'bigger, stronger, wiser and kind, whenever necessary following the child's need and whenever necessary taking charge." (p.20).

Attachment Styles (cont.)

Disorganised

- Children in a disorganised mode tend to appear that they are in a panic or disorientated in the caregiver's presence.
- As toddlers they are the most fearful and least able to manage separation.
- As preschoolers they tend to control the caregiver.

Children need carers who are emotionally available to them, to do this we need to:

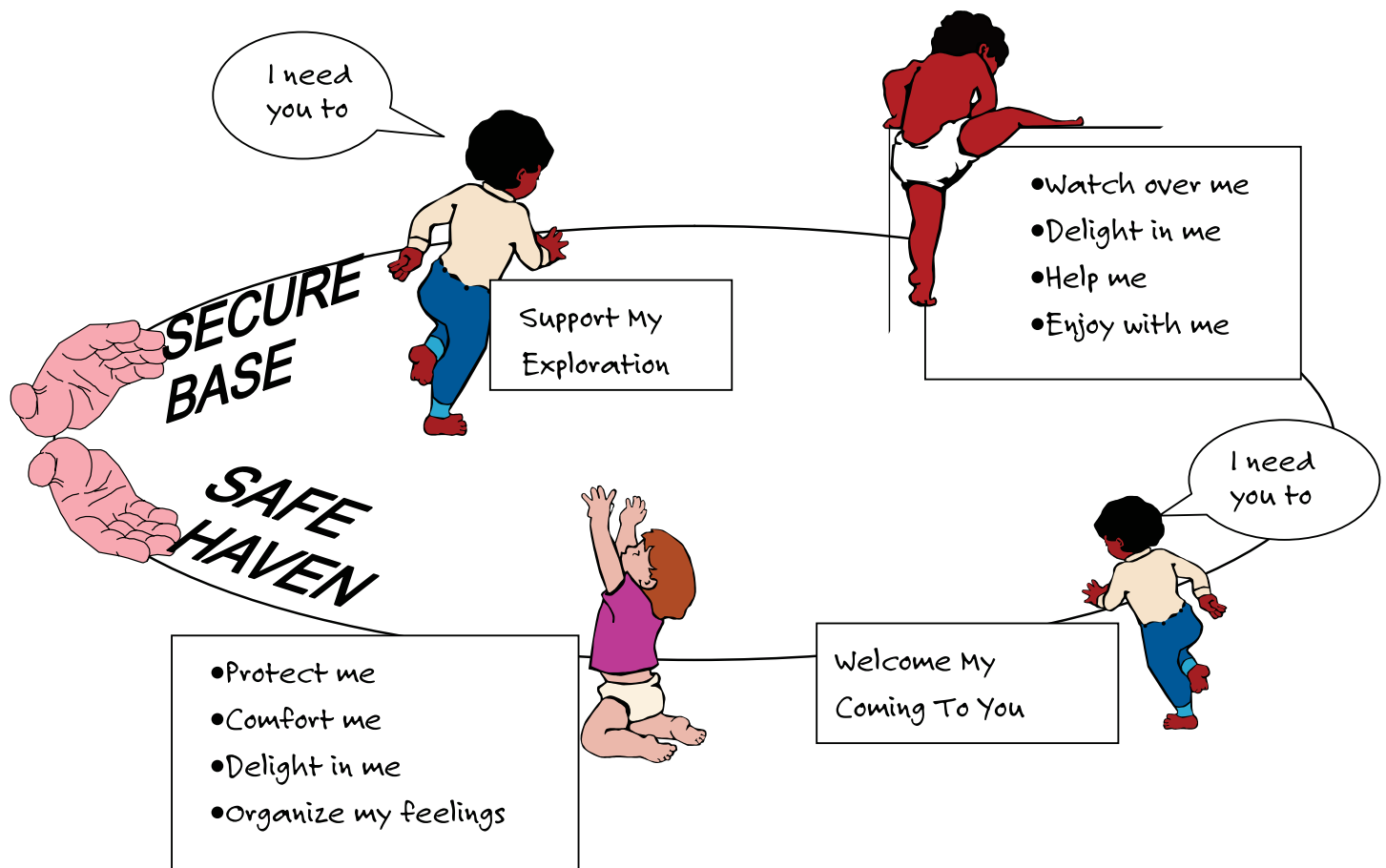
- Get down to the child's level
- Take time to listen, talk, comfort and guide
- Show empathy for his or her feelings
- Be predictable and consistent.



Attachment and the Circle of Security (cont.)

Circle of Security

Parent/caregiver attending to the child's needs



Always be: BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER and KIND
Whenever possible: Follow my child's lead
Whenever necessary: Take charge

Source: Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell (2002)

attachment

In practice, the circle of security makes attachment ideas accessible to parents and to professionals. The diagram shows a circle held between two hands: one supports the top half of the circle, representing the secure base that children need for play and exploration. Children's underlying needs for exploration are summarised in the box in the top half: *watch over me* (to see that I am safe); *delight in me* (so I can look into your face and see what I look like to you and find you are happy to be with me); *help me* (just enough so that I can do it by myself); and *enjoy with me* (join my interest). The bottom half of the circle depicts the safe haven that children return to after exploring long enough. Their underlying needs in relation to attachment are shown in the box in the bottom half: *protect me* (because I am feeling scared); *comfort me* (when I am upset); *delight in me* (found on both sides of the circle because it is so important to children); (help me to) *organise my feelings* (Dolby, 2007)

Early childhood professionals often support children's exploration but they are not available to support children's return. The Circle of Security helps you to be mindful of how children access you, both as a secure base for exploration and a safe haven for comfort. Children are constantly traveling around the Circle of security. They always need you but this will not be expressed in a clingy or demanding way unless they are afraid that you will not be available (Dolby, 2007)

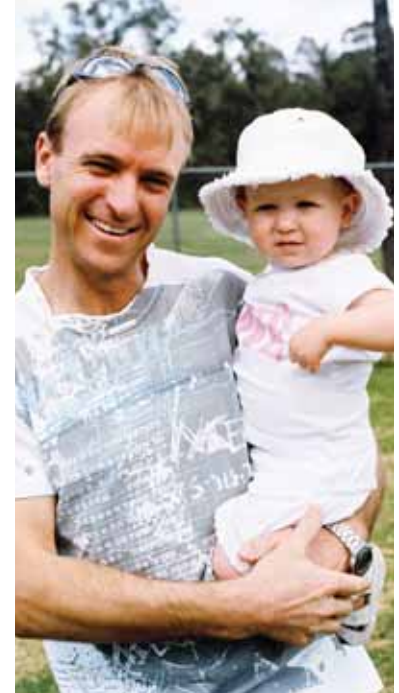
Identifying our 'shark music'

As early childhood professionals it is important to remember that we bring our own experiences to our relationships with children and families. Because of our own attachment history, some needs on the Circle will be more painful for us to respond to. At times, events, children or incidents can trigger an emotion in us. The way we see the situation will be impacted by this emotional response, this feeling is referred to as our 'shark music'. There will always be children and families that are easy to warm to and therefore easy to work with but there are also those children and families that are difficult for us to warm to and trigger our 'shark music'. It is important that we recognise this and take time to reflect on the feelings that these situations raise for us. Often having someone to talk this over with is useful, or using a reflective journal to record the feelings and to notice the way you respond in these situations is also useful. You can't stop your shark music; the important thing is to recognise it because then you can see whether you are really responding to what the children are doing or reacting to your own feelings. Once you recognise it you can avoid responding in a reactive or automatic way.

Putting it into practice:

Some simple ways to put attachment theory into day-to-day practice in your service include:

- Always be welcoming, loving and approachable
- Acknowledge children's needs and reassure parents that their child is safe and ok, with you
- Make the service open, friendly and transparent
- Be predictable, have set routines
- When required allow the child time to settle with an activity that they like to do
- Explain to the children what is going to happen now and next
- Always be encouraging, supportive, fair and protective.
- Be aware of the kinds of behaviours that trigger our 'Shark Music' and be proactive about getting support from other staff



Being emotionally available to children in our services

Questions to reflect on when we observe & interact with children

- How do the children come to you?
- Who are the frequent visitors and who generally depends on the adults in their environment or tend to socialise with you? (usually children who may always be seen to be inside when they are outside or always wanting to help you clean up or set up the beds)
- Which children will never come in?
- Which children come to you when they are distressed?
- Which children do not come to you when they are distressed?
- How do the children leave you to return to other play and further explore their environment?
- How do children socially engage in play with their peers? Do they sustain play with peers and do they form relationships with peers or are they on the outer circle of the group?
- During conflict situations, how do children manage conflict?
- Do they express feelings openly? Is their emotional response minimised or heightened? Are their emotions overly controlled or dismissed?
- How do they respond when something unexpected happens that they don't like e.g. losing a toy?

Secure, trusting relationships with staff provide children with the foundation for their successful exploration of the social and learning environment. Attachment theory gives us a basis for understanding the pre-existing models of attachment that children bring with them to early childhood settings and a framework for developing secure relationships. According to Harrison (2003) carers need to:

- Identify the child's model of attachment, by carefully observing the behaviours the child uses to manage stressful situations.
- Reflect on how they respond to the children's behaviours.
- Avoid reinforcing any existing insecurities
- Provide children with experiences of secure interactions (p.15)

Our role as early childhood educators

The overall goal for early childhood workers is to support the child's attachment needs and to provide a secure base from which the child is able to explore the social and physical environment. From a child's point of view, a secure base is a person whom they can go to for comfort and who makes them feel safe to play (Dolby, Warren, Mares (2001).

Our roles as early childhood educators and what we do is extremely important. We are experts in our own work with children and families ... we know children and we know how to manage group care situations of children... Children that we have in our services need our support. They need someone to watch over them, delight in them and keep them safe. Once that is fulfilled, children will explore their environment. Our roles do however extend beyond supporting children to explore, the challenge for us is to invite and encourage children to return to our secure base. As educators, we need to have an understanding of the different types of attachment patterns that the child brings to the early childhood setting in order to best support them and contribute to their emotional well being. According to Rolfe, "attachment theory allows us to pinpoint qualities in the caregiver-child relationship that are associated with the development of emotional health, empathy and optimism". She further adds that "there are also other important interpersonal relationships, those between professional and parents and between the professionals themselves" (2007, p.2) Quite simply this means that not only are our relationships with children important it is also important that we take the time to develop positive relationships with the adults in children's lives. (See issue 4 of 'Sharing the Learnings' for ways to develop relationships with families)

Early Childhood educators must make deliberate connections and interactions with children. Too often, childcare services staff are busy carrying out roles and responsibility that do not involve children (i.e. packing away, setting up, etc) and no one is available in the room to be with the children. This is often a time we see 'acting out' behaviours start to occur as a response to a child's attachment needs not being met. Staff need to be available to the child in a predictable manner, to accept, delight and watch over them. This is how we support and build children's strengths in themselves and their behaviours. Do you feel that some of your routine tasks mean that you and other staff are not available to the children? If so how are there ways you could you change these routines to allow staff to be present for the children? Eg. get the children to help set up the beds with you, make sure at least one staff member is available to the children at these busy routine times etc.

Attachment theory helps to explain how children's relationship history may affect their behavior under times of stress. Early childhood educators need to

emotional availability

observe children closely during separations, reunions and conflicts with peers identifying the patterns of behaviour. Harrison and Ungerer's (2000, 1999, and 1997) longitudinal study of children suggest that arrivals and departures in early childhood settings are important transition times that stress the attachment system. Therefore, they give us valuable information about the child's predominant model of attachment relationships. The key indicators are the degree of openness in the child's expression of emotions, and the effectiveness of adult support in the child's management of separation (Harrison, 2003 p. 6).

We need to accept that separation is stressful and make this known to the families and to the child in our services. We also need to remember the importance of the reunion with staff. We must support children to regulate and manage the distress themselves, through being reliable and present for them throughout the process of separation. One way to do this is to always have someone at a particular spot in your centre so that parents and children know where to go when they need help transitioning to the centre for the day.

We know that children learn and grow through the relationships that they develop with others. In a secure relationship, children appear to feel emotionally safe with staff. They are able to express both positive and negative emotions and share these openly with their carers. This allows us to form relationships easily with these children and their families. The secure base provided by staff supports children's independent sense of exploration of their social and physical environment.

Insecure children tend to be more dependent on the adults in their environment, but counter-intuitively dependency does not lead to close or effective relationships. Children with avoidant attachment patterns show their dependency needs indirectly, by interacting through toys, asking for help, or offering to help the adult e.g. setting up the beds or the lunch area. They maintain an almost vigilant awareness of staff, constantly monitoring their whereabouts or hovering nearby. If staff interpret what they see as 'attention



Team/Individual reflection questions:

- Are there children you work with that you don't have a relationship with?
- Think about or talk to a colleague about why this might be happening between you and this particular child?
- What are the child's qualities or behaviours that produce a reaction in you or create distance between you and the child?
- Is it about this child or something that the child triggers in you?
- Do these children have a relationship with any other worker?
- What things in your service support you developing relationships with the children you work with?
- What things in your service get in the way of you developing relationships with the children you work with?
- What is one thing you could do differently to help build these secure relationships?

emotional availability

seeking', they may be reinforcing an existing insecure pattern of ignoring and failing to meet the child's need. To build secure relationship, staff can support children by affirming their feelings and helping them understand and express their emotions. If we invest the time with these children and get them involved in our routine activities we are more likely to give them an experience that supports a secure attachment pattern developing between the caregiver and the child, so when we see the child hovering let them know we notice them, always go to the attachment side of the Circle first, and offer emotional contact, e.g. "I am pleased to see you", ahead of offering to connect around some functional activity, e.g. "I can see you want to help me set up the beds today, how about we start?"

Children with ambivalent attachment patterns show their dependency needs. They are impulsive, excitable, and demanding and require a lot of staff attention and support, or they are needy, anxious and easily distressed and expect the adults to help with any problems. If staff are inconsistent in their responses to these children's behaviour, they may be reinforcing an insecure pattern of unpredictable responses to the child's attachment needs. According to Harrison (2003) "to build secure relationships with ambivalent children, carers need to replace the unpredictability with consistent, caring interactions. These children need to be supported to manage their own feelings, and they need strategies that will enable them to be less overwhelmed by their own feelings" (p.16). This means we need to support these children by giving a clear invitation to join the group and offer clear guidance as to how they can do this and then support their choice and their participation, e.g. good morning Johnny we are doing some play dough would you like to join us, you could sit here, next to me or you could sit next to Freddy, we are making shapes...

Children with disorganised attachment patterns present the most challenging attachment behaviours because their mixed strategies (avoidant and ambivalent) can make it difficult for staff to feel they fully understand the child. The child may bring a controlling aspect to the interaction, which shuts out staff, or alternately, the child can be very quiet and may even go unnoticed. Howes (1999) states that "in order to construct a secure relationship with such children, carers need to be more sensitive to working towards developing positive relationships, sensitivity to individual needs and just 'being there' as a secure base for the child are the first steps" (Harrison, 2003, p.16). This means we need to be more than just present, we need to be emotionally available to these children. These children need to experience a high sense of protection from you. Often such children do not look to the "big people" to help them because they think that they will not know what to do either. They are in need of your "hands" on the circle.

The last word

All children have the right to feel emotionally safe and secure in their early childhood settings. The importance of trusting relationships with staff is emphasised in the Quality Improvements and Accreditation system (NCAC, 2005), and the NSW Curriculum Framework (2002). The challenge for staff is to understand the emotional content of each child's behaviour and to assess their own emotional responses to that behaviour. By reflecting on our interactions with children and adjusting our responses to their needs, we are able to help form secure and positive relationships with children and giving them an experience of having their attachment needs met.

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