The attachment needs of older and socially excluded young people:
report of an invited seminar held at NCB on 27 September 2010

Aim

The aim of the seminar was to bring policy-makers, attachment experts and practitioners together to consider how an awareness of attachment needs could be applied within policy and practice for older and socially excluded young people.

Summary of presentations

The presentations are available in full in Appendix 1.

Chris Taylor, author of *A Practical Guide to Caring for Children and Teenagers with Attachment Difficulties,* began by giving an overview of attachment theory. Whether a child has a care-giver who is responsive to their needs in infancy will determine the nature of their 'internal working model' and their relationship with the world over time. There are 4 types of attachment style: secure; anxious-avoidant; anxious-ambivalent and disorganised. Disorganised attachment arises when the child fears the care-giver. In adolescence, the child needs to move away from the family to explore adult identities and to form group attachments. Those with an insecure attachment style are at greater risk of a range of poor outcomes, including offending, mental ill-health and educational underperformance. Interventions need to be based on an understanding of attachment styles and the need to provide a secure base.

Sharon Giblin and Alison Walker talked about the relevance of attachment theory to youth offending, and the work of the Engage Service in Staffordshire. We know that young people who offend are more likely to have a range of damaging experiences in childhood and may have insecure attachment as a result. This has considerable implications for their behaviour, including oppositional behaviour, increased violence and the absence of guilt. These are unconscious processes, not choices, but the youth justice system expects all young people to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Health and the social care systems may also fail to take account of the problem, locating it with the child rather than in the context of relationships. Services could be more effective if they understood attachment difficulties and responded differently, focusing interventions on the factors that would give the child positive attachment experiences.

Jim Rose, author of *Working with Young People in Secure Accommodation* and *How Nurture Protects Children*, talked about the relevance of attachment theory to secure care settings. Whatever the type, all secure settings share the anxiety of caring for troubled young people on a daily basis. The fear of isolation v. the fear of attack are common anxieties for both staff and young people. There is also the opportunity, however, to use that experience to help the young people to develop. To do that, the adults should demonstrate that they are thinking about their needs as individuals. For this to happen, staff need to be trained in the necessary skills but it must also be supported by a policy framework that creates the right conditions. 'Secure care' has the potential to be just that – to make

young people feel safe and cared for. A nurturing approach is needed, based on six key principles which are set out in Jim's presentation.

David Shemmings, co-author of *Understanding Disorganised Attachment*, talked specifically about disorganised attachment. It is particularly important that children's social workers understand and recognise this because of its correlation with child maltreatment. If children fear the care-giver, then they will display disorganised attachment behaviour. More is now known about the effect of stress on brain development and executive function i.e. the ability to regulate behaviour. The brain has a degree of plasticity, however, and people can be taught to develop a capacity to reflect and therefore to regulate their responses. David is involved in the ADAM project, working in a number of local authorities to train social workers to assess and work with disorganised attachment.

Key points from discussions

Small groups and plenary discussions considered how far attachment theory could be used in practice. The key points were:

- **The value of attachment theory** in understanding children's and young people's behaviour. Unless attachment issues are made sense of, problems will persist as the child moves through services but many do not know how to recognise attachment difficulties or how to respond. Particularly for young people with disorganised attachment, they may not have the capacity to control their behaviour or to understand others' thoughts and feelings.

- **Young people's victimhood** is rarely recognised and we punish them for the adaptive behaviours that they use to try to survive negative experiences, such as maltreatment and loss/ bereavement. There is a general belief, shared by the media, policy makers and practitioners that children are fully capable of making informed and moral choices and the focus of intervention is therefore on risk assessment/ management rather than tackling underlying causes.

- **Capacity for change/development.** There is a danger of 'writing off' young people with attachment disorders because of their origin in early childhood but there is growing evidence that therapeutic intervention continues to be possible. If the young person lacks a 'secure base' however, interventions are unlikely to be effective. It is also important to get the timing right and not expect the young person to be open to intervention when their life is in chaos.

- **Lack of training.** There is a lack of training on child development in the curriculum for teachers, social workers, and even nursery nurses. Staff need training so that they can recognise attachment patterns and the impact on children's behaviour of insecure/ disorganised attachment. Staff also need to understand the impact of their own behaviour on children.

- **Organisational context.** Training will not make a difference, however, unless the organisational context supports an attachment based approach. This is not the case at the moment, and some organisations/ systems can actively make attachment difficulties worse. For example, the youth justice system is based on the notion that young people are in control of their behaviour and should express remorse, particularly in emerging restorative justice models. Young people with disorganised attachment behaviour may be incapable of conforming to this, resulting in further

punishment. Other organisations are driven by bureaucracy which fails to recognise the need for time to build the necessary relationships with young people.

- **Supervision.** There is a lack of individual/ clinical supervision in some settings, including education, and no concept that it is needed by staff if they are to understand and work with young people effectively. Management and leadership are also crucial to support the staff working with these children

- The issue of **group attachment** needs to be understood, particularly in group settings. This is not just in relation to the young people but the whole organisation and its aims (stated and unstated).

Ideas for developing attachment theory in practice

- **Assessment.** We need better tools for the assessment of attachment disorders that can elicit information about the quality of relationships within the home. Current assessment models tend to be too superficial.

- **Putting relationships at the heart of practice**. Services should examine how conducive their arrangements are to working with attachment needs and adapt them as necessary. For example, the Blueprint project for a Child-centred Care System recommended that one person should be nominated to stay with the child throughout their time in (and beyond?) public care. Some mentoring schemes also aim to provide this continuity of relationship. These relationships should continue when the child is 'well' not just when they are in need of an intervention or service because the young person needs to feel valued and held in mind. Effective interventions should involve a contract with an individual rather than with a group, organisation or practice.

- **Specific services** designed to provide a safe place, foster relationships and look at the whole child e.g. nurture groups in schools, including secondary schools. There is also scope for innovative methods, such as video work with staff, parents and young people, to help identify the triggers to challenging behaviour and work on collaborative solutions.

- **Focus on the transitions** that children have to make e.g. primary to secondary school ; transitions within the care system; moves within the secure estate. These will be particularly problematic for those with attachment difficulties, as will attempts to reintegrate young people from small structured units (e.g. PRUs) back into mainstream.

- **Impact of gender in attachment** (both for young people and their attachment figures) needs to be given more consideration. Most assessment tools and interventions are gender neutral and things get missed. There is also a lack of pro-social male role models – particularly in education.

- **Training and presentations on attachment theory** for a variety of groups, at all levels e.g. behaviour & attendance partnerships; the YJB. The aim would be to achieve an attitude change 'virally' amongst workers. BUT it was felt particularly important to target heads of service and senior policy makers, possibly through a national conference because front-line staff cannot achieve change if the context does not support it.

- **Identify key outcomes** that would demonstrate that an attachment based approach can effect change. This is not necessarily through a crude approach to 'what works' but a more qualitative analysis that can identify changes in the child's well-being that may lead to behavioural change. There need to be longitudinal studies to capture change over time. The introduction of 'payment by results' could encourage a simplistic/ short-term approach

- **The importance of early intervention must not be lost,** but coupled with the idea of a 'safety net' for those who have attachment disorders.

- **The youth justice system may require particular attention** because some of its underlying assumptions are harmful to young people with attachment disorders e.g. 'determined disruptives' are moved regularly with in the secure estate, National Standards emphasise compliance.

- It would be useful to target specific attention on **young people with disorganised attachment**, as opposed to other types of insecure attachment, because these young people are the most likely to present a challenge to services: they are the young epeople that no-one knows what to do with. Guidance on good practice with such young people would be particulalry useful.

What next?

Seminar participants were keen to keep the issue alive and to find opportunities to raise the profile of the unmet attachment needs of older and socially excluded children.

- An attendance list was circulated to participants so that informal contact could be maintained

- A report of the seminar will be disseminated, including copies of the presentations

- Participants will send in relevant references/ information on resources for circulation

Di Hart, Principal Officer, Youth Justice and Welfare, October 2010.

Appendix 1: Participant list

Participants – NCB Attachment Seminar 27th Sept 2010	
Name	**Organisation**
Alison Walker	Engage Service
Alyson Baston	Behaviour Support Team, Wigan
Andrew Winton	Youth Work Manager, LB Havering
Bob Reitemeier	YJB and Children's Society
Chris Taylor	Attachment Network
Claire Cameron	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Dave Pendle	Foyer Federation
David Shemmings	University of Kent
Di Hart	NCB
Emma Julien	YJB
Enid Hendry	NSPCC
Fiona Burton	Portsmouth CC
Gail McManus	Behaviour Support Team, Wigan
Isobel Graham	Cumbria Children's Services
Jacqui Newvell	NCB
Jane Sarmezey	Educational Psychologist, Norfolk
Jenny Clifton	Office of the Children's Commissioner
Jim Rose	Responsive Solutions
Jonathan Stanley	NCB
Kate Thomas	NCB
Kerry Baker	University of Oxford
Laura Smith	NCB
Lisa Payne	NCB
Lorraine Khan	SCMH
Lucia Winters	NCB
Mark Burrows	DfE
Martin Haskayne	Behaviour Support Team, Wigan
Nicola Blake	Richmond Looked After Children Team
Pam Hibbert	Bradley Expert Group - Secretary
Paul Mitchell	Prison Service - Hindley
Rosemarie Roberts	S. London Foundation Trust
Sharon Giblin	Engage Service
Shelagh Bainbridge	Cumbria Children's Services
Sheryl Burton	NCB
Simon Bounds	YJB
Will McMahon	Crime and Justice Studies, Kings College London

Appendix 2: Further reading

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