



# Survival of the nurtured

Teaching students with reactive attachment disorder

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the child who is  
not embraced by  
the village will  
burn it down to  
feel its warmth

-african proverb

# Attachment is...



- Attachment is a type of behaviour displayed by children to draw their primary caregiver towards them at moments of need or distress. Bio-behavioural feedback system.
- Children whose caregivers respond sensitively to their needs at times of distress and fear in infancy and early childhood develop secure attachments to them.
- Early attachment relations are crucial for later social relationships and for the development of capacities for emotional and stress regulation, and learning.
- Children and young people who have had insecure attachments are more likely to struggle in these areas and to have emotional, behavioural and cognitive difficulties.

# Reactive attachment disorder (RAD)



*RAD is a deficit in the child's capacity to manage how they feel.*

- I do ***relationships and conflict poorly*** because my social, emotional and behavioural skills are ineffective in my interactions with others. It is the frequency, duration and intensity of my difficulties in many settings, that sets me apart.
- I am not happy!
- ***Why am I like this?*** My need for comfort, nurturing and connection as a baby/young child were not met. My world is or has been, one of neglect, fear and hurt. As a result, I cannot articulate my feelings and thoughts.
- I threaten, I throw tantrums, I am aggressive, I am demanding of your attention, I am manipulative, charming and angry . ***Behaving like this is the only way I can control relationships.***

*It is not our place to diagnose but to understand.*

*Attachment style is based on the experience of care received.*

## Styles of attachment



- **Secure** – “I feel safe and loved” The adults in my world are nurturing, respond quickly and calmly when I am upset, fill my basic needs, they interact warmly and are joyful about me. I trust them.
- **Avoidant** – “I feel detached” The adults in my world are indifferent about me. They give me very little emotional support so I rely on myself and ignore other people. I prefer to be on my own.
- **Ambivalent** – “I feel misunderstood” The adults in my world love me one minute and hate me the next. I throw a wobbly to get what I want. I am clingy, demanding and needy.
- **Disorganised** – “I feel frightened all the time” The adults in my world are scary and mean. I live in fear and I worry all the time.
- Attachment styles are dynamic (changing) across people and time.

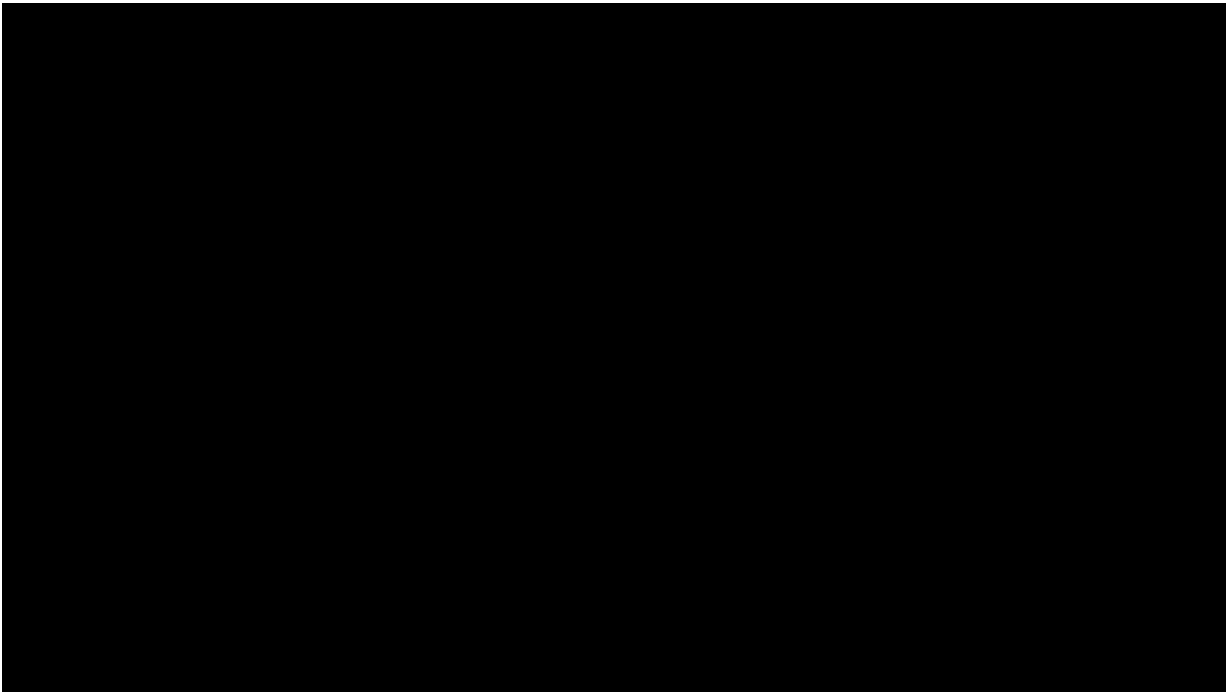
*An attachment style is not a diagnosis.*

## Being an SEL coach



- Not all children with trauma and attachment difficulties are the same.
- Providing “felt safety” – trust is the foundation of their readiness.
- Social emotional learning (SEL) skills are first learnt experientially – from their interaction with you (implicitly).
- Laying the foundation for other opportunities for learning SEL skills in more traditional ways (explicitly).

# Video



## Be present: See me



- When all relationships are a source of threat (disorganised - labile).
- Being present physically – Actions speak louder than words.
- Being present mentally – Mindfulness and metacognition of teachers.
- Small gestures and acknowledgements.



## Listen: Hear me



- When rejecting everyone at first seems like the safest option (avoidant - coercive).
- Every interaction is a fact finding mission to discredit you – proceed with caution.
- We learn to listen by being listened to – non-verbal gestures to communicate that you are interested in what is being said.
- Differ conversations when you can listen best – and actually come through on this.
- Hold back the impulse to speak and teach.

## Reflect

### Understand me



- When you are anticipating to be misunderstood or unfairly treated / rejected (anxious ambivalent).
- Speech and language issues – impact on communicating perspective.
- “So let me make sure I understand this correctly, ...”; “You did...then...happened... and then...”
- Emotion neutral - No judgements or corrections – most children are anticipating you are doing this.
- Try to use as much of their “language” as possible.

# Validate

## Accept me



- When you feel accepted by the teacher (even though you don't condone the behaviour).
- Providing context to what happened – the behaviours made sense in the context of how the student was feeling and thinking at the time.
- Best guess from what you know of the student – proceed tentatively.
- Helping the student move from “I am bad” to “I did something bad” – options for reparation.
- Meaningful consequences. Options for repairing relationships; supporting the safety of the school community and demonstrating prosocial behaviour / SEL skills.

## Final thoughts



- Understand the vulnerabilities of your students and their social connectedness: every interaction matters and every student is different in what they can tolerate.
- All learning occurs within significant relationships- trust, safety and belonging.
- SEL skills are learnt both explicitly and implicitly. Opportunities for implicit learning occur incidentally in daily conversations and interactions.
- ***Every relationship is built on rupture and repair – so don't give up!***
- It takes a village.



**Thank you for being here.**