

Attachment and trauma

FOR PROFESSIONALS

Attachment is an emotional bond between two people. When developed in early childhood, it is the basis for building emotional regulation, cognitive development, exploratory play, and pro-social behaviours.

To heal from trauma, kids in out-of-home care need supportive relationships. Building attachments is important, as they help kids to develop a strong sense of self.

Kids need consistent, reliable, and responsive caregiving to form positive attachments. They learn that caregivers will be available when needed, and that their behaviours can influence having their needs met.

Types of attachment

From approximately six months of age, kids begin to recognise how their caregivers respond to need and distress. They can then shape their behaviours accordingly.

Caregiver responses can result in four types of attachment:

- **Secure attachment** - develops when a caregiver is consistently available and provides responsive, attuned care. Kids with secure attachments learn to regulate distress, knowing that caregivers will provide help when needed.
- **Insecure avoidant attachment** - develops when caregivers respond to kids' needs and distress with conflict or rejection. Kids with avoidant attachment learn to hide their distress to remain close to their caregiver.
- **Insecure ambivalent attachment** - develops when caregivers provide inconsistent responses to kids' needs and distress. This results in kids displaying aggressive, challenging, or passive behaviour towards caregivers to obtain a response.
- **Disorganised attachment** - develops when caregivers provide inconsistent or unpredictable responses to kids' needs or distress. Kids with disorganised attachment are fearful of approaching caregivers as they are unable to predict the response.

While problematic, ambivalent and avoidant attachments still help kids meet their attachment needs.



There may be cultural differences in the way that attachment behaviours are viewed. For example, when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, consideration of multiple attachment relationships with extended family and kinship networks is vital.

Core characteristics of attachment

There are four core characteristics of attachment: proximity maintenance; safe haven; secure base; and separation distress. You can help carers to respond in ways that support each of these characteristics.

- **Proximity Maintenance** – kids have the desire to be close to those they are attached to. Carers should spend time with kids; notice signs of stress or anxiety; and suggest activities they can do together. When carers leave the house, they should let kids know where they are going and for how long. Carers can also ensure kids have calming strategies for the times they can't be close.
- **Safe Haven** – kids have the desire to return to their caregivers for safety or comfort in times of danger or threat. Carers should stay close to kids, especially in strange situations, and try to maintain a line of sight. They can also reassure kids that they will be there when needed, check in with them and make sure they feel safe.
- **Secure Base** - kids need to explore the world, knowing there is a secure base for them when required. Carers should provide positive feedback and attention to kids, using positive touch like hugs or pats on the back if appropriate. They should also help kids to name and recognise their emotions.
- **Separation distress** - kids experience anxiety when separated from their caregivers. Carers can develop brief goodbye rituals with kids, and practice short periods of separation. When carers leave the house, they should let kids know where they are going and for how long. They should be aware of their own emotions, staying calm to help kids coregulate.