



Hampshire
County Council

Virtual School

Adult relationships: strategies to help build adult relationships

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Adult relationships: support and interventions at school

Research suggests that care-experienced children often have difficulties forming relationships with adults. Sadly, some children spend their first months or years being told how bad they are. For others, though, their lack of worth may not actually be expressed in words but in actions or lack of action. Being beaten, punched, kicked, bitten or burnt is more than enough to demonstrate to anybody that they are unworthy of love or care. Having to find one's own food, being abandoned or living in squalor and excrement understandably will affect one's view of life. Even being placed for adoption as a baby can lead to profound feelings of worthlessness. When all of this is put into context, one can begin to see the dark cloud of shame under which these youngsters live. It is not surprising that many of these young people have difficulties trusting adults, which may lead to problems in their relationships with adults (Allen, 2008)¹. It must be pointed out that children and young people who have experienced complex trauma **misunderstand adults' intentions**. They may attribute hostility to a raised voice or a teacher pointing out a mistake and experience this as a form of attack or persecution. It may then take a while to establish a trusting relationship with the child or young person. Teachers may need to modify their interactions significantly until this trust is developed, **which will help reduce the anxiety or feelings of threat of the child/young person that can lead to altercations.**

Creating positive attachments with care-experienced children

Consistent with 'attachment theory', these vulnerable children and young people must form a close bond with one or two adults in the school context who can work with them on a daily basis – through normal daily interactions – using the following recommendations:

¹ This introduction has been reproduced from Allen (2008), 'attachment, developmental trauma and executive functioning in the school setting' (Family Futures, 2008)

- **long-haul relationships:** the emotional availability and consistency of significant adults in the school environment is important
- **support should not fall to one person only:** a core group of adults that the child regularly interacts with or can seek out when feeling anxious would be beneficial
- **to feel attended to:** children with insecure attachments are unlikely to feel as if adults have them or their needs in mind unless they have direct contact. The regular 'check-in' approach is useful at key times in the day. Some children/YP would benefit from transition objects with their key adults at school
- **projection:** children who have experienced significant trauma and broken attachment with key adults are often hypervigilant around adults as potential sources of threat, which also includes vulnerability, which is frightening to them. However, they are skilled at highlighting any vulnerability. For example, they may 'notice aloud' your laddered tights, scuffed shoes, and other aspects of yourself that you feel vulnerable about. These can be quite personal. However, the child may still comment on them. In doing this, the pupil is trying to get rid (unconsciously) of their own intense emotions, insecurities or feelings of shame. This is called projection.
When presented with this challenging behaviour the pupil needs you to react calmly and in a measured way and not with heat and emotion.

Six Rs by Professor Bruce Perry [Home \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](http://beaconhouse.org.uk)

Relationships: all relationships need to be based on trust, safety, empathy, attunement and predictability.

Relevance: activities need to be developmentally matched to a child's needs.

Repetitive: opportunities to experience new things over and over to grasp and thus form new neural pathways.

Rewarding: fun, enjoyable, lowering levels of stress and the promotion of mastery.

Rhythmic: strong, simple rhythms that are soothing to the limbic system.

Respectful: to the child and their experiences.

Language: adults need to be familiar with PACE approaches, empathic commentary and emotional coaching: [About DDP - DDP Network Emotion Coaching - United Kingdom \(emotioncoachinguk.com\)](http://www.emotioncoachinguk.com)

Playfulness: sharing positive emotions, using appropriate humour, reducing authority and promoting a sense of connection by showing an interest and defusing stressful demands with play and humour.

Acceptance: showing the child that you understand their difficulties and to safely explore and communicate his experiences, such as “I can hear you are angry about doing the ... but when we finish, we can do ...”

Curiosity: exploring the child’s inner thoughts and feelings without judgement to understand the reasons as to why they feel the way they do, such as “I’m wondering if you’re finding this work difficult”.

Empathy: to connect with the child’s emotional perspective by acknowledging and validating their feelings, such as “you were so excited to have another turn – it’s unfair that we ran out of time”.

The Family Futures Consortium focuses on the importance of how adults present regarding their use of language and tone of voice. The following has been reproduced with their kind permission (Allen, 2008).

Try to remember that a **defiant front** can be a desperate attempt to hide the **fear they are feeling**. Their cortisol and adrenaline levels may be incredibly high, and they may be fiddling through anxiety. Alternatively, they may seem to be **unaffected** because they have dissociated as a **survival strategy**. All this can be incredibly annoying and can lead to you experiencing frustration. While this is understandable, your calmness is more likely to help them see that their behaviour does not automatically lead to rejection or abuse as it did in the past. The pupil desperately needs to know that it is their actions you find unacceptable, not themselves. It is, therefore, vital that immediately after the reprimand, you let them know they are worthwhile and can, with support, do things differently (Allen, 2008 for Family Futures).

Verbally acknowledging their problems to them can validate their feelings. As these children may not have early self-regulation from their carers, they may be in a fight/flight state and be **hyper-vigilant and guarded and may not trust adults**. This can lead to control/power-seeking behaviours.

Being in control has been the child/young person's survival strategy in the past, and relinquishing this can make them feel very vulnerable. **They can only relinquish control when they have built up a positive and trusting relationship with the adult and can then gradually develop self-regulation skills through internalisation of the adult commentary. For example:**

- “I understand you find it very difficult to walk away when somebody is annoying you. Let's see if we can work out a way to help you do this.”
- “I'm really sad you didn't manage to control your anger. I can show you ways you can be angry in a safe way. Why don't you try ...? I know it's hard for you to know I like you when I have to tell you about some things you've been struggling with. Can we figure out ways I can make it easier for you to remember that I think you're a great pupil who sometimes struggles with ...?”

Adult scaffolded strategies to support emotional containment and a sense of belonging.

The following has been taken from Cocking and Georgiades' 'working with adopted and fostered children in education' (PAC, 2003) and reproduced with their permission.

Welcome and seating arrangements

When **welcoming a new pupil into the classroom, most teachers go out of their way to help them fit in as quickly as possible.** For pupils with attachment difficulties, some of the usual strategies may need to be modified:

Sitting the pupil at the front of the classroom, near a wall, is recommended, as this will help them **stay focused** instead of being distracted by their surroundings. They are also in a position to have more direct eye contact and non-verbal communication with the class teacher. If a pupil tries to monopolise the teacher's time with trivial questions, **clear boundaries** must be established.

The teacher should use an **empathic, however firm** tone and try to avoid sounding irritated or angry. For example, “Donna, I know you have questions to ask. Please make a note of them, and I will come to you when I am ready. I haven't forgotten you.”

It is also helpful for children to have **metaphorical escape routes, such as being able to see and easily access the exit.**

Support and consistency

The following interventions are adapted from Cocking and Georgiades' 'working with adopted and fostered children in education' (PAC, 2003) and reproduced with their kind permission.

The home-school partnership is essential for meeting these pupils' needs. This is known **as triangulation**. Communication between home and school should be carried out directly between the adults. **The child should never be used as an intermediary or to convey information to and from their carers. Information can become distorted and misinterpreted by the pupil, consciously or unconsciously, which can lead to a breakdown in communication and relations.**

It is important that all the adults involved with the pupil have regular **meetings to share fruitful strategies and to ensure they are using a consistent approach.**

Although lines of communication should remain open between home and school, **what happens at home, in terms of challenging behaviours, should be dealt with at home and what happens at school should be dealt with at school. A child should not have two loads of consequences.**

Contact with home is important. This could be achieved through permission to receive phone calls at lunchtime to remind them that they are loved and being thought about. There may be a need for other transitional object approaches with carers. **'The invisible string' by Patrice Karst has some lovely ideas to help care-experienced children feel connected to their carers at school.**

Be aware that the child may try to get you to reject them in some way. A child who has deep-rooted feelings of anger, low self-worth and fear may unconsciously project these feelings into the pupil-teacher relationship. These pupils can provoke very **negative reactions** in teachers and thus reinforce their own feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. This **transference** is very powerful. A space for the teacher to talk and recognise this process with other staff is helpful when trying to recognise and work with it.

Be aware of **short-term memory problems** due to the child's need to be hyper-vigilant in the past. Their failure to retain information should not be interpreted as defiance. They may need instructions or information repeated several times. Check that the pupil comprehends instructions and help them to stay emotionally connected with what is going on by repeating and reinforcing information rather than extending support time.

Staff changes can be a real source of anxiety for pupils with attachment difficulties. **They may experience all kinds of fantasies about what has happened to Miss/Sir or feel responsible in some way for the member of staff being off work.** Pupils with attachment difficulties are likely to need more **information and reassurance** than other pupils about staff changes in order to reduce their anxiety. Give the pupil as much notice as possible of forthcoming changes.

When pupils form attachments to the teacher, transition times such as moving from classroom to classroom, school to school or term breaks can evoke **unconscious feelings of abandonment.** The imminent loss involved in these situations triggers a

high level of anxiety and a number of the behaviours described earlier. Thought needs to be given to how such transitions take place to pre-empt and minimise this behaviour.

The end of the school year can be particularly distressing for these children as endings are often associated with loss and rejection, so this time needs to be handled particularly sensitively. The child/young person will need some kind of visual reminder of the special times they had in the previous year, such as photographs with their teacher and TA in differing contexts (school trips, the classroom, playground activities). The present class teacher/form tutor and learning support assistant (LSA) will need to talk to the child/young person and reinforce that they understand how hard this change is for them. They must also reinforce that they will still be around if they want to see them. It would be ideal if the TA could stay with the child when transitioning into the next class. It is also important that transition visits take place so the child can get to know the new teacher and new environment. **It may also be useful to write a therapeutic story for the child in preparation for the move and what will happen.**

Boundaries and Discipline

As an adult, it is the teacher's responsibility to understand that looked-after children often have a history of rejection and expect, and even provoke, further rejection from adults in their lives. It is, therefore, imperative to avoid getting into control battles and to be self-aware of how we react to and deal with the behaviour that manifests as a result of the pupil's background.

The following interventions have been reproduced with kind permission from Allen, M (2008) 'attachment, developmental trauma and executive functioning difficulties in the school setting' (family futures publication).

Reprimands: keeping the reprimand **succinct and focused** enables the pupil to recognise your awareness of the misdemeanour and their need to take **responsibility for their actions** whilst **minimising the possibility that shame** will lead to anger,

denial or dissociation. Don't expect them to be able to tell you why they have behaved the way they have; they may well be unable to answer you.

Try to **avoid long, drawn-out enquiries** to elicit the truth. **Do not** be tempted to **demand eye contact**. You may feel that a lack of eye contact demonstrates rudeness, but this can be incredibly difficult for a looked after child since it can replicate early experiences. In fact, they do not need to look at you to hear you. They may be sinking in shame and imagining and predicting consequences in their mind before you even start talking. They are probably very afraid.

The following suggestions have been adapted from Cocker and Georgiades' 'working with adopted and fostered children in Education' (2003) and reproduced with the permission of PAC.

Use of sanctions and consequences: there may be occasions when you need to think about how best to deal with a pupil's behaviour. Here, I suggest you tell the pupil that you are struggling to think about how you can best help them, that you will need some time to get it right and that you will let them know what will happen when you've figured it out. If applied sparingly, this strategy will allow you time to think and, perhaps, seek advice from colleagues.

These pupils need **immediate consequences for good and bad behaviour** so that they can learn to think about the choices they make. There should not be a countdown or warning such as "if you do that again". Consequences must occur **immediately and consistently** to create a feeling of security and predictability. These boundaries and consequences should be **presented with empathy and with as little anger as possible**. They should be presented as a choice the child has made rather than as a punishment. For example, "It's a shame you drew all over the wall with crayons. You can clean it off and come and join us again in the playground when you have finished."

As with a younger child learning the consequences of their actions, you may need to help them with the task. Give clear, consistent guidance and boundaries that support the pupil **in making choices and dealing with the consequences of these choices**.

This helps the pupil to think and take responsibility. For example, “Because you haven't done your homework, you will have to do it at break time. It must be difficult to miss break, but please feel free to join us in the playground once you have finished.”

It is important to remember that this pupil may be functioning at the emotional level of a much younger child. Do not assume that the pupil has **internalised the difference between right and wrong**. When you discuss a pupil's behaviour attempt to make possible links as to why they may feel the need to behave that way. However, do not allow these reasons to get in the way of setting appropriate boundaries and appropriate consequences for misbehaviour.

Encourage the pupil to think and understand the choices they have made with their behaviour. **Avoid getting into control battles** with these pupils. As well as offering choices which you determine, try to verbalise the pupil's needs. Give them lots of opportunities to practise/role-play appropriate behaviour. For example, “let's practise trusting someone else to take charge.”

Time-out: some find that using a time-out card is helpful when they feel their anxiety levels rising. Other pupils who have experienced neglect or abandonment find time-out very difficult. These pupils need to have their time-out from an activity or class in the presence of someone else, preferably in a quiet area of the classroom where they can see and hear you, and it may take the form of a **reflective space**.

Praise: pupils with attachment difficulties have a tendency to **self-sabotage**. They believe themselves to be worthless and find it difficult to cope with anything that contradicts this belief. Strategies such as behaviour charts or contracts can be tried but may not work as they provide the opportunity to self-sabotage. **Praising** the pupil for good work, personal organisation and generally good behaviour is very important. **However, it is most effective if done in a low-key manner**. Too much enthusiastic praise may create a desire to self-sabotage. It may be useful to link the praise to a small additional task, such as “Well done, now I wonder if you could ... as well?”

Public praise in school assemblies may be difficult for the looked-after child. This is best kept specific and short. Remember, children and young people who have been sexually abused may have very negative associations with praise, and phrases such as 'being a good girl' may trigger distressful memories.

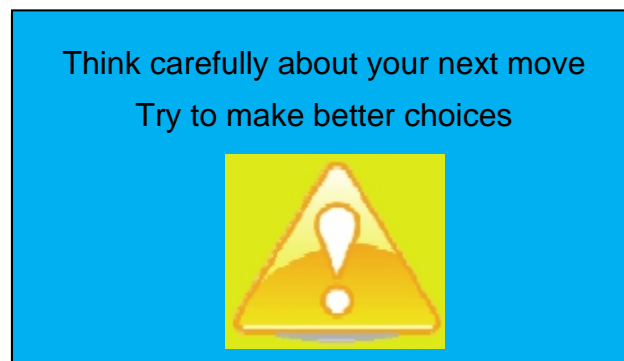
Do not insist on eye contact when through incidents. Pupils who have attachment difficulties find eye contact particularly threatening and anxiety-provoking. Comments such as "Look me in the eye so I know you are telling the truth" are not appropriate.

Use of Sanctions: care-experienced children can feel an overwhelming **sense of shame**. When they behave badly, they let themselves down as much as the adults around them. They fulfil their own expectations of themselves: they feel they are rubbish, and their rubbish behaviour is a self-fulfilling prophecy. **Preventing these pupils from participating in class rewards, school trips, or placing them in isolation adds to their feelings of rejection and shame and can inflame memories of their early trauma. If given three lives towards these, they may use all the lives.** They do not mean to, but they may be unable to control themselves, especially with the added pressure of desperately wanting to avoid rejection, but at the same time, subconsciously inviting it. For minor misdemeanours the question could be simply, "What could you have done differently?"

Practical suggestions

The following are practical ideas for teachers to draw on in helping children and young people develop more positive adult relationships.

As mentioned above, boundaries and consequences should be presented with empathy and as little anger as possible. They should be presented as a choice the child has made, not as a punishment. In order to help the child understand their actions and the consequences of their choices, give the pupil a chance to think and take responsibility. This could be done discretely by placing this card on the pupil's desk. It is necessary to explain the use of this card to pupils before it becomes a strategy in your classroom, and it is useful to invite them to talk to you after the lesson if they have received the card, but this is their choice.



Restorative approaches

Repair and rebuild relationships

For care-experienced children, the key is to consider what has been happening beneath the surface and what their behaviour is communicating. It is usually related in part to some aspect of their traumatic lived experiences (past and present, home and school-related). In light of this, it cannot be stressed enough that the resolution of conflicts will allow the teacher to focus on the real work of facilitating learning. It is about developing relationships of trust and respect.

Respect

Underpinning the relationships is, of course, **respect**. This is a dominant factor for young people and is depicted in much of the media with which they associate. Phrases about working being uncool seem tame to adults. However, for a 15-year-old boy who is labelled a swot, life can be intolerable. They can be bullied physically and emotionally. There are ways around this social exclusion for young people. They include adopting the style of one of the various trendy groups and taking on clothing and hairstyles of a particular group – usually with its related music. This becomes a source of conflict with school uniforms and codes of dress. Another way around it is to show elements of aggressive behaviour, often linked to an anti-authority image, which again will lead to conflict with the school. **Of course, all of this is related to a looked-after child's sense of self and fulfilling their need for a firm identity and affiliation to a group of people.**

The Tactics

Repairing relationships is not rocket science. Keep it simple and consistent. At the lowest level, the teacher would simply acknowledge the acceptance of the instruction given by something as simple as positive eye contact, a tap on the shoulder as you pass by, a nod or even a thumbs-up sign if the student is able to accept this acknowledgement publicly. The teacher may feel that a private word is better for more serious incidents. The closer this is to the incident, the better, though

sometimes it might be better to leave it until the end of the lesson if the student is still clearly showing signs of anger or upset. The danger here is that this may turn into a lecture. The best way to deal with it is to:

- keep it very short
- avoid reliving the incident
- give a brief reminder of the ground rule broken
- avoid discussion about rights and wrongs
- end by saying thank you for agreeing to abide by the ground rule or for anything the pupil displays that is a move towards making amends, and smile
- leave the meeting with a comment about something else, such as football or music.

Repairing damaged relationships with students

Gather all perspectives: gain a calm and objective description of the problem, including the **voice of the child, focusing** on the opportunities for reparation.

Spend time identifying the problem before embarking on the intervention.

One-to-one meeting: the process should begin with a one-to-one meeting with the pupil in question. This should be at a time when you are both calm and should not be aimed at apportioning blame. It should be a statement of the problem backed up with observations and references to school and classroom policies. The meeting should also take place away from opportunities for peer pressure. It is helpful to write a record of the meeting, not to form a contract, but simply as a record of the process and comments made.

Informal meeting: be prepared to speak to the pupil at a time other than the formal lesson situation or one-to-one meeting. Ideally, this could be at a lesson change (a brief but well-directed positive exchange can make great strides in relationship building).

Break and lunchtimes can also be excellent opportunities for similar conversations. The meeting should not be set up as “Come and see me at break” or “Report to me at the staffroom this lunchtime” Instead, try the less formal approach of chatting over lunch or being around at break time to again engage in a non-confrontational conversation. It can be a difficult step to take when you feel annoyed and even bitter towards a pupil because of their behaviour, but a simple gesture, some shared time and proactive planning can prove invaluable in repairing what can easily develop into a difficult time for both you and the pupil.

Key resource: ‘building a trauma-informed restorative school: skills and approaches’ by Jo Brummer