



School and Classroom Strategies: Attachment

This Quick Fact Sheet contains strategies designed to address potential symptoms of disrupted attachment and should be used in consultation and collaboration with your school's mental health personnel or as part of a larger intervention approach. These pages contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of disrupted attachment in the classroom. Strategies should always be individualized and implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances. Additionally, this information should never be used to formulate a diagnosis. Mental health diagnoses should be made only by a trained mental health professional after a thorough evaluation.

If you notice a significant change in mood or behavior in any child that lasts for more than a week, share your observations with the child's parent and/or guardian and with your school's mental health support team

General Information for Working with Students with Disrupted Attachments

- Children with attachment related issues may have had experiences that taught them that the world will not understand their needs nor keep them physically or emotionally safe. Many have learned, therefore, that they must assume *absolute* control if they are to survive. Relinquishing that control creates a debilitating level of anxiety for these students that has a dramatic impact on their ability to function at school, as it is not possible for them to simultaneously direct their efforts toward self-protection and toward learning. One key to working with students with attachment related issues is to provide the student with choice and a sense of control, though within the limits set by the adults in charge (freedom within limits).
- While many students with disrupted attachments interpret the world as unable to keep them safe, some unconsciously assume that the world's inability to take care of them actually indicates that they are not worth being taken care of. These students may try to create experiences that "prove" these beliefs to be true. In some of these instances, students will try to recreate experiences of abuse and neglect or abandonment by others by eliciting reactions of anger, hate, or intolerance. If they are successful in facilitating adult anger, abusive behavior or abandonment, the student's view of themselves as "un-lovable" will be affirmed. School and classroom efforts to reshape the child's sense of trust in people must be guided by calmness, curiosity, and empathy as well as refusal to get pulled into the child's unconscious efforts to have people reject them.

Strategies for Attachment Related Social Difficulties

- Model healthy social relationships
- Teach the student positive ways to interact with others (social skills)
- Provide opportunity for the student to work with peers who will model appropriate social skills
- Interact often with the student to monitor his/her social interactions
- Reinforce the student for demonstrating positive, appropriate social skills
- Help the student to recognize inappropriate social interactions (i.e. bring attention to inappropriate comments when they occur, stop an activity when inappropriate social interactions happen)
- Address inappropriate social interactions privately with the student rather than in front of his/her peers
- Communicate your concerns regarding the student's social difficulties with the family, other school staff, etc.



Strategies for Attachment Related Behavior Problems

- Intervene early and intensively
- Make time to spend talking and listening to the student
- Be empathic and nurturing; be attuned to their response to your nurturance and respond accordingly (i.e. if student becomes anxious in response to you putting your hand on their shoulder, try a high five instead)
- Learn as much as you can about attachment and attachment related problems; these children can be very challenging, and the more you understand them, the more effective and committed you may be in your relationship with them
- Take the time to understand the motivation underlying the student' behavior; consult with your school's special education staff or behavioral specialists about conducting a functional behavior analysis if the underlying motivation is not apparent
- Interact with these students based on their emotional age; some of these children and adolescents may be "stuck" in a younger age of emotional development and do not have the skills to "act their age"
- Students with attachment related concerns are often confused about what behaviors and emotions are appropriate; model healthy and appropriate behavior and emotions at all times
- Be consistent, repetitive, and predictable
- Provide the student with ample opportunities to make genuine choices in order to promote his/her need for control; allow freedom, but within limits set by the adults in charge
- Provide concrete, specific and authentic praise; be aware that too much praise may be met with skepticism and mistrust
- Provide some rewards that are not contingent upon the student accomplishing anything
- Respond consistently and calmly to unacceptable behavior; approach the student with a "matter of fact" voice
- Discipline students with natural/logical consequences; avoid consequences that perpetuate the student's negative sense of self
- Do not give second or third chances to a student who is misbehaving; instead explain "I see that you are not ready to do ___" and then provide a logical consequence
- Use humor to deflect provocative behavior
- When the student misbehaves, do not ask "did you...", "why did you..." what did you..." questions
- If a student misbehaves, try saying "I see you need help with ___"; this strategy helps to promote self-reflective capacity
- If the student behaves in a way that elicits anger in you, label the behavior and tell the student how you feel about their behavior; show a mild degree of anger for 30 seconds (less if they cannot tolerate 30 seconds), then change the tone of your voice to one of assurance and acceptance; this will help the child to develop a capacity for healthy shame, to see emotions match with a proper affect, and to see that you are not going to hurt or leave them because of their behavior
- If student demonstrates poor physical boundaries or indiscriminate sociability (i.e. hugging someone who enters the classroom) avoid lecturing them; rather provide a gentle suggestion for appropriate boundaries "why don't you shake the principal's hand when she joins us"
- Have patience and understanding and remember that the student is acting from a place of fear and a true belief of worthlessness and un-loveability; each time they are successful in driving people away by their behavior, their worldview of themselves is only further entrenched
- Be sure to seek personal support from others when dealing with attachment related behaviors; these behaviors are likely to evoke a range of emotions in school staff
- Partner with parents/guardians and mental health related professionals when working with students with attachment related behaviors; without strong partnership, efforts by these children to "split" (pitting one adult against the other) may be successful and intervention attempts sabotaged