

ATTACHMENT AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN ADOPTION

1. WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

TRANSCRIPT OF ATTACHMENT THEORY AUDIO

BAAF's John Simmons, Professor June Thorburn and adopter Fiona talk about how disrupted attachment can affect adopted children.

[Intro Music]

Fiona

The attachment stuff is difficult to encapsulate in a succinct sentence. But essentially he has difficulty with relationships and the one he has most difficulty with, obviously, is with me.

John Simmons

Children are born into the world with a strong expectation of other people being there and other people being responsive and sensitive to them and their needs.

June Thorburn

These children do feel a great sense of loss, so you can't ever deny the trauma of loss.

John Simmons

I am John Simmons, Director of Policy Research and Development at the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. The issue for children in adoption... well there are a series of things about attachment. One of the things is that children who have been separated from their birth parents will often have been separated in very upsetting circumstances at a time when the attachment system is forming itself in a very significant way. So their experience of that will matter very much indeed. The second thing about it is that they are separated because of abuse and neglect. So you've got that compounding the issues for the child, so that attachment system is one part of it, but the child is also having to deal with very significant amounts of stress, with nobody to turn to and then they are separated as well.

So typically the child will go into a foster care placement where the foster carers are expected to become the child's temporary carers and what you would expect is that the child will give out signals, that 'I have separated from my birth parents but I expect you to be my primary care taker, are you my parent?' But it's only a temporary arrangement. When the permanence plan is made and if its adoption, then whatever the child has established with their foster carer's is going to be disrupted again and one of the things that the adopters will need to be helped to think about is how to manage that transition from the child's relationship and its attachment to their temporary foster carers because that will undoubtedly be experienced by the child as a significant separation with all the profound feelings of loss and upset and distress. So it's really important that adopters talk to the social worker, the child's social work-

er, to the adoption social worker, to the foster carer about how to manage that transition in a way which is child centred and helps them, so that they begin the process of building another relationship and another attachment relationship with the child which is intended to last for the rest of the child's life.

[Music]

June Thorburn

My name is June Thorburn and I am an emeritus professor of social work at the University of East Anglia. What children have suffered is the loss of someone they have loved and often it's the loss of a more ambivalent relationship which is often more complex than if a child is truly loved and their parents die in a car accident. It's easier to get over that because they know they were loved. Even tiny kids know whether they are loved or not, whereas this ambivalent love, this on and off love is difficult. They might have lived for quite a long time with their birth families under adverse circumstances but it's never totally adverse. They can have lived with a parent who loves them and they want to go on being loved but also who neglects them and that makes it very difficult for some of these children to give up on the past and they are always hankering for what their birth parents show they could give them and always in the end fail to give them.

[Music]

Fiona

My name is Fiona and I adopted my son about 3 years ago. Peter has a diagnosed attachment disorder and that way that it presents itself in the early days, he would significantly want to sabotage our relationship and I think that's borne out of a fear of attaching because the last time he tried to do that with his birth mother, his needs were not met. So obviously in his mind, he has gone off and he looks after himself and he is his own entity. That means that his eye contact is quite poor, his ability to have what I call a 'Ping pong' conversation is hardly there and he still really struggles with that and it's just this general 'hooking into humanity' and just generally being part of life and being able to interact with other humans. I know that sounds really severe but the way he gets through all of that is that he is very charming and engaging, but everything is on his terms. So for example, his needing me around whilst he gets ready for bed is probably one, because he feels very isolated and lonely but at the same time it's a control thing. He doesn't want me to lead my own life or be a bit separate from him. I have to do what he wants to do. And so Peter is happiest when he is completely in control and the controlling elements of him are exhausting. At times when things get really difficult, I make him call me Captain Mummy, and although it sounds like I am the control freak, he needs that to know who is in charge and that will help him to feel safer. I actually sought out attachment therapy and it is subtle, but over time it has really worked, and over time it's been a combination of music and play therapy and it has really helped and is also quite fun and it doesn't feel like therapy so he's had quite a good time with that.

[Outro Music]