

Appendix 13 **Strategy Sheet: Attachment Disorders**

- ▶ Always be predictable, consistent and repetitive. Children with attachment disorder are very sensitive to changes in schedules, transitions, surprises and chaotic social situations. This will help the children to feel safe and secure, which in turn will reduce anxiety and fear.
- ▶ Model and teach appropriate social behaviours. One of the best ways to teach these children social skills is to model the behaviour and then narrate for the child what you are doing and why. Always be explicit and keep language clear, precise and simple. Remember – less is more regarding language.
- ▶ Avoid power struggles. When intervening, present yourself in a light and matter-of-fact style. This reduces the child's desire to control the situation. When possible use humour. If children can get an emotional response from you, they will feel as though they have hooked you into the struggle for power and they are winning. This will then lead to an escalation of the problem.
- ▶ Break assignments into manageable steps to help clarify complex, multi-step directions. This will ensure the child can understand each step as they proceed through the activity.
- ▶ Identify a place for the child to go to (time out) in order to regain composure during times of frustration and anxiety. Do this only if the child is capable of using this technique and there is an appropriate supervised location.
- ▶ If/when you observe a child beginning to display what for them are 'soothing' behaviours, e.g. rocking, head banging, biting, scratching or cutting themselves, ensure that you remove them from the public classroom context. These symptoms will generally increase during times of stress or threat.
- ▶ Do not show anger if the child fails to show remorse for hurting others (including animals, smaller children, peers, siblings). Remember that this is all part of the disorder and some of these behaviours may be a means of the child engaging you or others in conflict and gaining more control. State why the behaviours are wrong in a firm, precise and unemotional manner.
- ▶ Be available straight away to reconnect following a conflict. For children with insecure attachment and attachment disorders, conflict can be especially disturbing. After a conflict or tantrum where you've had to discipline the child, be ready to reconnect as soon as he or she is ready. This reinforces your consistency and support and will help the child develop a trust that you'll be there for them at all times and no matter how they 'behave'.
- ▶ Have realistic expectations and focus on making small steps forward and celebrate every sign of success.
- ▶ Stay patient. The process of change may not be a fast one and there will be difficulties along the way. But by remaining patient and focusing on small improvements it is possible to create an atmosphere of safety for the child.
- ▶ Always acknowledge and praise good decisions and good behaviour but be specific with the praise: 'You've been good today' will generally mean little to the child with an

attachment disorder whereas 'You have written that down beautifully. Your writing is very neat and clear and looks lovely' will mean a lot more.

- ▶ Use 'I' statements when administering consequences for poor behaviour and decisions, e.g. 'I'm disappointed you did that'.
- ▶ Remove yourself away from the child or situation. Award yourself time out if or when the stress levels become more extreme and ensure that back-up is available in the form of peer support and respite for yourself.
- ▶ Ensure an understanding of cause and effect by teaching about choices, i.e. 'You are choosing to distract others from their work'. This can then lead on to teaching about the distinction between helpful and unhelpful choices.
- ▶ Avoid using the words 'lying' or 'manipulating' with such children and replace these with 'con' or 'trick', e.g. you are trying to trick me into getting upset.
- ▶ Continually check that the child has and maintains a healthy lifestyle with a good diet, adequate sleep and appropriate levels of exercise.
- ▶ Use your peer support network and always ask for help. The child with an attachment disorder presents a significant and stressful challenge for all involved and this demands a multi-agency approach with parents/carers, teachers, TAs, clinicians and specialist staff all working together to identify what works for each individual. Such close liaison should also ensure that the child with an attachment disorder cannot manipulate the carers or play them off against one another, and ultimately this will aid inclusion and behaviour change.