

# Children With Attachment Difficulties: A Practical Approach

By Sue Johnson - foster carer

**Working and caring for children with an attachment disorder is very difficult and can often mean that these children are moved on repeatedly as carers and workers burn out.**

The approach we took for the children we have cared for was not to expect anything back from them. This is harder than it sounds - most of us need to feel needed and giving to these children is a natural reaction. When these children are unable to accept and return our feelings and emotions we feel that we have failed - this is exactly what these children are used to and they feel like they are back in control.

It is hard to continue to care on a day to day basis without feeling that these children are doing their best to upset the placement and us. If you can let these feelings go and remember that it is not personal to you, hopefully you will start to make a difference. At first, it is the adult working with these children that has to accept that this is a one way street and this may remain that way for a very, very long time.

Carers need a good support network and time out to recharge as a given, not as an extra. Ensure that you have time to talk, have space for yourself and your family. These children can demand a lot of us and our families.

These children need firm boundaries (to fight back at) and a consistent routine with very small achievable goals. All this needs to be done in a calm, caring atmosphere but with firm consequences. It feels like the children are using all their energy trying to break you down. You must stay strong, well centred and very consistent. If you make a rule you must be able to stick to it, at all times - try and keep rules simple and explain the point of them.

Your child may not be able to trust you, but they often find the comfort they need when given firm boundaries and consistent settings. Engage all other adults in their lives to continue and buy into the same pattern.

Our children may be unable to accept praise, so continue to praise, but put a small sting in the tail e.g. "you have done well this morning, but maybe tomorrow you could do well until after lunch" - with most other children this would not work - but this way it will allow the child to accept the praise without losing face or the control they so badly crave.

I cannot stress enough the need for routine (even in older children) as this helps provide the child's security - they can predict what is going to happen. Start with a set time for bedtime/ getting up.

We set a time for breakfast (including weekends) and sat the child at the same place with their own recognisable dish or placemat (this also gives the child a sense of belonging without any pressure) and also the start to a known structure. Our children will then not need to ask, as it is the same every day. They may try to upset the routine by quite simply saying I want to sit there, we would answer, "this is your place".

Carers need to observe these children closely. Watch for triggers to unwanted behaviours. Many of these children will want your attention when it is most difficult to give it e.g. when you are on the phone. They are fulfilling their own prophecy (nobody wants me, nobody wants to talk to me...) then they play up. Plan ahead if you are expecting a phone call, make a point of telling the child that you expect them to continue what they are doing and after you have finished your call go to them and give them your full attention. Do this even if they have played up while you have been on the phone (this will let them see, that you will see to their needs as well). Unexpected calls, make them as brief as possible and if your child plays up, hold their hand, smile at them but do not speak directly to them - this should show them that you care even if you are doing something else. Always explain your actions, if your child gets really difficult whilst you are on the phone - stop your call - explain firmly what you are going to do and tell your child what you expect of them - restart your call. This could take a long time, but the message will be reinforced each time. As times goes on you can relax the time you are on the phone but do not give up the attention.

These strategies can be used in most situations, our children need to know we care all the time but that there are times when we need to do other things.

All children are different and respond in different ways to the same situations this is no different to our unattached children. I can only tell you about our experiences and how we have used strategies (although at the time we may not have called them that) to enable our unattached children to make some progress and enjoy their time with us. I hope that in some small way this will give other carers some helpful ideas for the future and the knowledge that they are not on their own.

On a more positive note, a little response goes a long way and any progress is a fantastic success. Our children with attachment difficulties have a long and difficult road to adulthood and need all the help we can give them.

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