



*Extract from: Subscriber Bulletin No 51 September 2009*

## **Teenagers and Attachment Helping Adolescents Engage with Life and Learning**

**(Ed.) Andrea Perry, Worth Publishing, 2009**

This book was created in response to requests by teachers, SENCOs and therapists in secondary schools for information about attachment difficulty in teens – and more importantly how to respond to their needs in the school / educational setting. The book therefore sets out specifically and manifestly to offer insightful and pragmatic solutions to workers involved with supporting difficult teens – with the aim of keeping them in school. As such it is a welcome addition to the toolbox and thinking that is required by teachers and workers supporting teens in difficult situations in class, in school and beyond. Each of the chapter writers is an expert in their field, with backgrounds covering teaching and teaching support, adolescent psychotherapy and psychiatry, educational psychotherapy, special education needs, drama and art therapy and children's charitable work.

This book addresses attachment strain in troubled teenagers, particularly as it pertains to their response to formal education in the classroom. The basic plank which underpins all the chapters in the book is the insight that attachment theory can offer workers supporting these teens in school. Understanding why a teen behaves as they do in terms of their past experience, trauma and sometimes inadequate family backgrounds, and placing it within accepted psychotherapeutic attachment disorientation categories (in the book developed from classic attachment theory) helps workers plan to support these teens. Many disruptive children alienate those who might be their supporters. Key to obviating this alienation between teen and teacher is the premise that success comes when the workers can 'hold the child in mind' and see the root of their difficult behaviours, understand how the child deals with trauma - and respond courteously and appropriately in a way that helps contains the teen's anxiety.

Therefore, the chapters of the book move in a progression. Early chapters set out the parameters of attachment theory and categories of disorientation from 'the norm' of a securely attached person. With that in hand, the book then offers chapters which support – with composite case studies – teachers' efforts to 'hold the child in mind', support attachment disordered teens in school, give advice to teachers/support workers in understanding what they will themselves feel and react as they support difficult teenagers, and then move to looking at supporting adolescent refugees, terrorised and terrorist teens, finally looking to support teens moving on to university.

The editorial steer in the book is superb. 'Case notes' are shown in italics. A common diagram is used across chapters to explain the inter-subjective relation between the teen, adult worker supporting the teen and the educational task involved which has an

educational goal concomitant with that of healing the teen's distrust of adults The Learning Triangle – devised by Heather Geddes). Each chapter ends with a useful post-it note of bulleted points detailing the chapter's main objectives and work plans for the teen. These bulleted summaries will be useful for workers to pin into case notes for the 'real' teens with whom they work as aide-memoirs for new and healing ways of tackling intransigent teens.

Key to the rubric of the book is the premise that troubled teens don't respond to conventional lesson plans, and that workers supporting them have to think well outside the box of normal schoolwork. Art, drama, games that perhaps a younger child might play – all enhance the chance that a teen will respond to a worker's supportive challenge to task. And more – what is most at stake is workers knowing how to attune precisely to a teen's needs, understanding their needs, wherefrom the needs derive, and being able to COPE with the sheer depth of trauma many troubled teens in school have as part of their history.

Is the book of value to workers supporting looked after children? The adoption twist? Yes, remit of the book covers so many of the issues found in children who have come into care. Many of the case studies proffered in the case notes to each chapter are of children hurt by dysfunctional parenting. It's clear that the discussion of keeping such traumatised kids in school will be of value to foster carers, social workers, CAMHS workers, workers involved in Teams Around the Child, and also Connexions workers. Additionally, the book offers detailed insights into the work that can be done to help adolescent refugees (and shown how even the legal process of trying to find asylum in the UK can increase already high levels of anxiety). And the case work offered on how to deal with terrorised and terrorising teens offers a sympathetic way for workers supporting them to get behind the mask of terror worn by such kids – and see the hurt child underneath. This book offers a way of understanding the 'why' of these young people – and the possibility that there may be ways of reaching them by offering a new form of attachment security, within careful support and the worker becoming an attachment figure.

The final chapter looking at how young people with attachment issues deal with the change from school to university seems to sit in another world to the previous chapters, and at first sight looks out of place. But realistically, since so many young people are encouraged currently to enter higher education, it is right that educators in school and further education evaluate how to support the transfer of those kids who may derail – and understand how attachment disorientation may inform this.

My hopes for the impact of this book? I wish there had been a discussion in the book on how safe the methods of intervention by attachment process are for workers involved with dangerously hurt teens. I wish that there could be a follow up of success or not of the interventions suggested for the real life case studies that workers may do following this book.

But in wishing for this, I also know that if a hurt teen doesn't 'join mainstream society' after a worker has connected with them in a fundamental relational way at school....it still is the case that if a teen can feel even for a short-lived minute in time that someone believed in them, 'held them in mind', that WILL matter over the course of their lifetime.

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