Sink or swim? The role of attachment between parents and service providers

ASID Conference 2013

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Starting point........

- Playgroup experience – weekly groups, then development of once a month group
- Opportunity and privilege to advocate for parents
- Dependency?
- Focus on each family as an individual family
An emotional tie

Significant research has been conducted around attachment theories and the impact that early attachments have on the developing confidence and autonomy of children.

While there is limited research around attachment of adults, there are a number of characteristics of attachment theories which can be applied to parent and service provider relationships.
‘Although not the only possible theory of attachment, Bowlby’s theory is the pre-eminent formulation, the approach that has maintained a relatively continuous framework even though alterations have occurred’ (Mercer 2011, p. 25).

According to Bowlby, there are four distinguishing characteristics of attachment – Proximity Maintenance, Safe Haven, Secure Base, Separation Anxiety. The latter three are significant characteristics we believe are applicable to the parent / service provider relationship.
Does it relate to adults?

- ‘Bowlby not only suggested that the psychotherapist can become an attachment figure for the client, but also thought it was important for the therapist to become a reliable and trustworthy companion in the patient’s exploration of his or her experiences’ (Levy, et al. 2010, p. 193).

- ‘Additionally, Bowlby discussed patients turning to the therapist as a safe haven for comfort and support in times of distress’ (Levy, et al. 2010, p. 193).
Other research around attachment and adults?

- ‘Although Bowlby was primarily focused on understanding the nature of the infant-caregiver relationship, he believed that attachment characterised human experience from “the cradle to the grave”’ (Fraley, 2010, p. 3)
- Therapist / client relationships
- Hazan & Shaver – romantic relationships
- Confirmation from Circle of Security founders that they are not aware of any research available about how COS can be applied to adult relationships (Davies 2013)
Bowlby's research provided a foundation for the work of Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell around The Circle of Security Project.

While this theory has not been written for adult relationships, the principles are certainly applicable to the relationships between parents of children with disabilities and some service providers.

The principles of these theories will be explored with specific links to the importance of secure relationships between parents of children with disabilities and service providers.
‘COS helps you to look beneath children’s behaviour to discover the genuine relationship needs’ (Dolby 2007, p. 1)

Sometimes when (children) feel overwhelmed, they need help because they cannot manage their feelings on their own. They may need ‘the support of an emotionally available adult’ (Dolby 2007, p. 3)
CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS

Support My Exploration

Welcome My Coming To You

I need you to...

I need you to...

Always: be BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER, and KIND.
Whenever possible: follow my child's need.
Whenever necessary: take charge.

• Watch over me
• Delight in me
• Help me
• Enjoy with me

• Protect me
• Comfort me
• Delight in me
• Organize my feelings

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WHO DO YOU FEEL PROVIDES YOU WITH THIS SECURE BASE?
‘When children feel safe, secure and supported, they grow in confidence to explore and learn’ (DEEWR 2009, p. 20)
Initially, strong and positive relationships must be developed between parents and service providers.

Is this always easy?

‘Relational practices are behaviours associated with relationship building and effective help giving (Dunst et al, 2007). These are interpersonal behaviours that are typically associated with good clinical practice, for example, active listening, compassion, and warmth (Espe-Sherwinndt, 2008)’

(Ziviani, Feeney, Path & Khan 2011, p. 366)
‘To provide family-centered services, providers must understand and respect the role of parents as decision-makers, recognize different perspectives, and understand the impact of different values and philosophies on the collaborative process (Beckman, 1996; Dinnebeil, Hale, & Rule, 2000; Swick, 2004). The literature suggests that this is often a complex and sometimes burdensome responsibility for service providers and parents alike. Service providers often feel anxious about this role. Most professionals have learned to function individually to address the needs of the children with whom they work, but have not necessarily learned how to collaborate and work as partners with families (Applequist & Bailey, 2000; Barnwell, 2001; Blue-Banning et al., 2004)’ (Davenia 2006, p. 265).
Fialka (2001) offered several reasons that contributed to challenging experiences with establishing partnerships between families and other professionals:

- the dimension of choice as a barrier to collaborative relationships.
- the nature of the circumstances force an immediate intimacy that is perhaps "Too close for comfort." She cites that most relationships evolve gradually over time (Johnson, 2005).
- discrepancies between family-centered philosophies and the actual experiences of childcentered practices (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Minke & Scott, 1995; Park & Turnbull, 2003).
Parent perspective?

- ‘Over time, the mothers lost the motivation to establish meaningful relationships because they were certain that the providers would change again’ (Davenia, 2006, p. 276).

- ‘It is an unfortunate irony that in order to graduate from many teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers must master a professional lexicon that ultimately creates significant barriers to being effective in their professions’ (Davern 1996, p. 63)
Parents also mentioned interactions that they viewed as evidence of an "expert syndrome." In these cases, parents felt that the attitude coming from staff was, "You couldn't possibly know what you're talking about." One parent described a critical distinction between those personnel who talk with parents as opposed to those who talk at them (Davenia, 2006).
Secure attachment

- While research is all about children, consider these:
  - Secure attachment and adaptive functioning are promoted by someone who is emotionally available and appropriately responsive
  - Secure attachment forms the basis for psychological well-being

(Degotardi & Pearson 2009)
Decades of university-based research have confirmed that secure individuals exhibit increased empathy, greater self-esteem, better relationships, and an increased capacity to handle emotions more effectively when compared with those who are not secure.

‘Bowlby and Ainsworth, argued that all people, be they infants or elders, seek to establish an affective tie, or attachment, with a specific other to meet needs for physical and psychological security (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall 1978; Bowlby 1988)’ (Obegi 2008, p. 431)

‘Consistency is so important. When you know someone you can build trust, push boundaries, and you know they (service provider) will push and challenge you to be able to advocate for your child’ (Parent comment 2013)
‘Attachment, once formed, is a stable feature of a relationship, but the sense of security in that relationship is susceptible to shifts in response to changing interpersonal circumstances or life stressors. Optimally, over the course of repeated interactions with an attachment figure, and inner sense of confidence in the protective abilities of the attachment figure is encoded and enables exploration, a dynamic commonly referred to as using the attachment figure as a secure base (Ainsworth, 1967)’. (Obegi 2008, p. 434)
While Bowlby did focus his research on infants, and identified attachment is most crucial in the early years of life, he also claimed it ‘is active across the lifespan and is manifest in thoughts and behaviours related to proximity seeking in times of need’ (Obegi 2008 (b), p. 18)

Bowlby also believed the natural goal of attachment is to increase ‘felt security’ (one’s own sense of security) – the ideas that ‘one can confidently explore the environment and engage in social and nonsocial tasks and activities without fear of damage’ (Obegi 2008 (b), p.20)

‘It is having someone to catch you when you fall, to give you reassurance, to get support. It helps you to grow and expand. Transition can occur naturally without feeling you are being pushed when you are not ready’ (Parent comment 2013)
Bowlby strongly rejected any notions that equated attachment with dependency. ‘Someone being there for you is not dependency – it is enabling’ (Parent comment 2013)

He believed that ‘Secure attachment provides a foundation for personal growth and mature autonomy’ (Shaver & Mikulincer, in Obegi 2008 (b), p. 21)

Attachment figure availability plays an important role in ‘maintaining emotional stability and adjustment’ (Shaver & Mikulincer, in Obegi 2008 (b), p. 32)
‘It’s like not being able to swim being thrown in the ocean alone. That’s not a ‘natural transition’ for parents – it’s lonely and scary.

(Being supported) is like learning how to swim! Initially you hold on, then you let go a little, and before you know it, you are swimming’ (Parent comment 2013)
‘According to Bowlby (1980, 1988), attachment insecurities are risk factors that reduce resilience in times of stress and contribute to emotional problems and poor adjustment. Anxious attachment encourages distress intensification and an uncontrollable stream of negative memories, thoughts, and emotions, which in turn interferes with cognitive organisation’ (Shaver & Mikulincer, in Obegi 2008 (b), p. 35)

Constancy, availability, sensitivity and responsiveness are what allow for the establishment of a secure base (Farber, et al. 1995 in Obegi 2008 (b))
‘Interactions with security-enhancing attachment figures also strengthen a person’s authentically positive sense of self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver 2003). That is, secure individuals generally feel safe and protected and perceive themselves as valuable, lovable, and special, thanks to being valued, loved, and regarded as special by caring relationship partners. Research consistently shows that more secure individuals have higher self-esteem (e.g. Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991; Mickelson et al, 1997), and view themselves as more competent and efficacious (e.g. Cooper et al, 1998)’ (Shaver & Mikulincer, in Obegi 2008 (b), p. 33)

‘There is consistent support of a strong relationship between help-giving practices, and parents’ reported empowerment and control over important aspects of their lives’ (Dempsey & Keen, 2008, p. 50)
‘I distinctly remember not wanting to be a burden to the services that helped me. I cannot tell you the number of times I have been in tears by being treated like someone that doesn’t matter. There is always so much on my plate that to know and feel like I am supported in some areas is so vital. Becoming dependant ...? Well there was times when things seemed uncertain when I probably did require a bit more help, did I want to take advantage of that absolutely NOT. It’s such an out in space feeling to have your child not fit in and be just one of the crowd, and to have little idea of how to help him and where to go. Finding support was a blessing, as I have been to paediatricians and places where I was just looked at like a less than human species. I found that an appointment that should have been about my child became about my inability to advocate for him. I constantly blamed myself for everything he wasn’t doing, and then people started to say well, no we can help you with that and people started to look at his delays for what they were. I absolutely know that it was because people came with me to appointments, and not only spoke the language but had respect for the field they were in hence their opinions were seldom questioned, did I depend on that help initially yes... is my son where he is today because of that care and understanding? Absolutely! ............
The beginning of my journey was horrible with lots of tears and self esteem kicking, it grew into laughs, a brand new beautiful preschool, transitioning onto an early intervention preschool, friendships a sense of greater belonging and less blame (and only the big appointments needing someone to come with me to advocate for my loss of words.) There is no way on this Earth that I could have gotten by without the support I have received. Honestly I think the word there is transition, because we parents transition much the same as our kids, its an emotional ride. I'm so grateful that you showed me how I could do what I needed to do when I really didn't know that I could do it, and you waited around helping me when I couldn't' (Parent comment 2013)
Where to from here?

Responding to individual families

- support
- patience
- respect
- honesty
- flexibility
- understanding
THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE OUR THOUGHTS....

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