

A quick guide to supporting a child with an insecure

AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT PATTERN



Child's Internal Working Model*

"I'm NOT okay/You're okay"



Main Aim

To be seen & heard; attract & maintain connection/attention/attunement to get needs met



Caregiver Relationship**

Caregiver responds to child inconsistently, sometimes available and responsive, and other times frustrated by their needs, resulting in child not being able to rely on them



Child's Presentation

Attention-needing, connection-seeking wanting lots of comfort; needs adult to feel safe; can act as class 'clown'; reacts with high emotion & often angry, challenging & controlling behaviour, talkative/boisterous, overly affectionate; competitive & wants to be first

Supporting a child with ambivalent attachment in your work

A child with an insecure ambivalent attachment pattern seeks to get their needs met by keeping adults close and constantly engaged, often doing whatever it takes through expressing clowning, challenging or overly affectionate attachment behaviours. They need attachment figures to act as a secure base, regulating their anxious and fearful behaviour, with predictable routines, firm boundaries and structure. As always, playful, accepting, curious, empathic responses (Dan Hughes PACE model) will build a trusting relationship, as will attending to relational ruptures as they happen from a regulated, calm state.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: Do you often feel overwhelmed, engulfed, frustrated, exhausted, controlled by or overly controlling of this child, or alternatively that you are the only one to really understand them? This may be a result of entering into an attachment dance that repeats the child's experience of their primary caregiver. Engaging in reflective practice is essential when supporting children with attachment difficulties

* A child's internal working model is a complex interplay of mental representations of self, others and the world and therefore this description is simplistic, aiming only to provide practitioners with a sense of the child's overall attempt to maintain a cohesive narrative. For further reading, see seminal works of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, and contemporary research & theories of Crittenden, Schore, Hughes & Golding, amongst others.

Developments in neuroscience (Perry, Siegal) and polyvagal theory (Porges) can further inform our understanding of children.

** It is important to maintain a non-blaming stance in recognition of the likelihood of caregivers own experiences of trauma, adversity and attachment difficulties. The nesting doll icon acknowledges the intergenerational patterns often present in relationships.

