

Difficulties in Black Carers Forming Attachments with Black Children

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Attachment is essential for all children. When a child has a strong, stable and healthy attachment to his parent or caregiver, it allows him to develop emotionally building both trust in others and reliance on himself. Without attachment to a continuously present, nurturing adult, a child's core self is damaged, and the child is unable to fully develop emotionally and psychologically. For the most part, these children will grow up to be parents whose own needs overshadow their ability to support and nurture their own birth children or foster children.

Many first or second generation black foster carers who care for black children have come from families where they have had poor attachments to their primary caregivers often being raised by extended family and not receiving the opportunity to form close, loving attachments, therefore finding it difficult to unconditionally give something to which they have little to no experience of receiving.

One particularly useful theoretical framework for considering the forces that maintain continuities or achieve discontinuities in children's internal worlds has been attachment theory (Ainsworth *et al*, 1978 Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Crittenden, 1995; Main, 1995). According to attachment theory, children will have formed internal working models, mental representations of themselves, others and the relationships between them (George, 1996; Howe *et al.*, 1999). They will bring these into the new set of relationships in the foster home - relationships not only with the adult carers, but also with the other children in the home, the extended family, the neighbours, the teachers at the new school and so on.

Given the histories of many black children, it is likely that these internal working models will reflect their adverse relationship experiences. Working models are likely to derive from experiences of anxiety about their own lovability, which the child will have needed to defend against.

The insecure attachment histories of black children will produce particular patterns of relating, based on beliefs and expectations of the lack of availability of sensitive care from others (George, 1996; Howe *et al*, 1999). Being placed in a family where the adult carer has had attachment difficulties of their own as a child usually further compounds the attachment difficulties of the black fostered child.

Black children who have experienced consistent patterns of rejection may have learned to hyper-activate their attachment behaviours and demonstrate an ambivalent/resistant attachment pattern. Life in the foster home for such troubled children may be experienced as an opportunity to revise these negative internal working models or as confirmation of them. They are unlikely to have experienced the secure base effect in infancy and early childhood that would free them to explore, to learn and to make the most of life's opportunities at home and at school (Bowlby, 1969, 1988).

Their capacity to develop rewarding relationships, even when these are offered, will depend on a multitude of factors. How have they coped with the adversities in their lives to date? Have there been protective factors in previous environments which have left them with a raised self-esteem or some capacity to accept and reciprocate care? Perhaps there is a special relative or a specially committed social worker. Do they have a sense of humour, a capacity to share a joke, to see the funny side of things? Have they been intelligent enough or focused enough to earn success at school, in spite of everything?