

Who cares? The emotional needs of young children

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This section looks at early emotional needs. It describes how some children may respond if these are not met, outlining patterns which are often observed in looked-after children.

How you are cared for in the first weeks and months of life affects the way you come to care about yourself for the rest of your life. It is not the only factor that influences how each and every one of us develops, but it is always significant.

A baby cries for his mother, for food or warmth. At first the baby isn't sure if mum will come, but she does, and when this is repeated an endless number of times, the baby builds up a picture in his mind of a mother who feeds him, looks after him, tries to understand him and keep him warm both physically and emotionally. The baby gradually builds up a resilient picture in his mind that if mum isn't here, she is just over there.

When mother can be confidently expected to come back soon, waiting isn't too difficult and the baby has a reassuring experience that mum can be depended upon and that painful feelings can be managed without becoming absolutely overwhelming.

But what happens if the baby's experience is not like this but is full of adverse experiences, with need and vulnerabilities remaining unmet? Instead of a helpful and soothing mum, the baby encounters somebody out of touch with her infant's state of mind or even worse, responds to the baby in a way that is abusive or neglectful.

The answer then to 'who cares?' is 'no one' or 'my mum but only some of the time' – and the children struggle to have a consistent and reliable view of their place in the family – and in the wider world.

How children respond

By not caring and withdrawing

Another possible answer to 'who cares?' might be 'well I don't' as the child switches off his desire for contact and tries to avoid all feelings of disappointment, loss, anger or frustration by not caring. The problem with this defence seems to be that when a child switches off one bit of himself, a lot of other parts get switched off too, a capacity to learn, to make connections and link experiences – or to learn from experience in a thoughtful way that means anxieties can be coped with.

For those young children who have no confidence in the reliability of their parents or carers, depending on another person, or trusting in them, is felt to be downright threatening.

By pushing boundaries

Some of these children feel compelled to test the boundaries, as if driven by a conviction that all good things come to an end and it is better to meet that end sooner rather than later. The pain, or anxiety of waiting for good things to collapse, is unbearable for these children. This partly explains why some children can appear to be their own 'worst enemy' and place such a pressure on those looking after them.

By demanding total attention and possession

To feel uncared for is a devastating experience of loss. For many young children, one way of avoiding these feelings of loss, is to imagine that one can have everything. So as to stop thinking about the possibility of being dropped again, one 'solution' is to imagine complete possession of the parent, or foster carer, or even teacher at school or school friends. The level of attention that some fostered or adopted children need in order to feel convinced that they are wanted and to feel held together is sometimes on the brink of what is actually compatible with ordinary family life.

By pushing away intimacy

Furthermore, when attention does come it can sometimes provoke terrible feelings of resentment at just how deprived the child was in the first place. Then an experience of being close to another, which perhaps the child has actually wanted, feels too much and the child pushes the adult away because of the original pain of being so deprived. Some young children can become confused about what they actually want to completely possess. They may become remarkably materialistic; hoping for the perfect toy or football card or pair of trainers – as if having one of these things would transform their lives and take away all feelings of loss and longing. The satisfaction of getting what they want is usually very short-lived, however, and disappointment is soon felt once again.

'It kind of messed up my whole basis for relationships with others because I moved so many times and had so many relationships with so many people – some good, some bad – and now I can't trust people at that kind of deep, deep level... it's like that link is missing out of your life and ... if you want it back you have to work hard for it.'

By becoming aggressive

The question 'who cares?' also raises another very important issue. Often children who don't have anyone to love, and who are not securely loved by their caregiver, find it more difficult than other children to control their aggressive feelings. Instead of feeling that a very difficult situation can be coped with, thought about and withstood, they may respond more with a 'flight or fight' response. These children, who didn't experience being soothed or reassured in their early months of life, don't have in their mind a good-enough parent who they want to please, and so they have fewer reasons to show restraint – a sort of 'why should I?' feeling – when faced with a hostile or aggressive challenge from another child or adult.

Bibliography

Hunter, M. (2001) *Psychotherapy with young people in care: lost and found*. London, Routledge.

This book, by a child psychotherapist, discusses many of these issues. It has many poignant case histories and examples, and discusses some of the thinking behind the author's offer of help to these three children.

Because of all the things that I have been through I found [it] very hard to trust [my foster carer]. Though she was doing everything she could for me I just found it hard to trust her. So I couldn't just allow her in and that would make her, us, have arguments constantly

Edna

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