



Leila comments 'silly mummy' after her mother bangs her foot, and they share a laugh with the understanding that the accident is not serious.

Later, Leila asks her mother to read her a book, but is content to postpone it while they tidy up the room together first.

## PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# A sense of security

Young children can cope with minor stresses and anxieties if they feel secure in their relationship with their carer, as **Anne O'Connor** explains

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Leila and mum are together at home. Mum bangs her foot and Leila responds by calling her a 'silly mummy' when she sees that mum is OK. They both laugh together about it.

When a young child is securely attached, they can begin to appreciate that their caregivers can have feelings and needs of their own. As Leila is quickly reassured that mum is OK, she is able to respond in an affectionate, jokey way that is appropriate to the situation and which she will have experienced herself in other contexts.

Then Leila wants mum to read her a book. But mum insists that they tidy up first. Leila is able to accept this and begins to tidy up. She is secure enough

to be able to accept that sometimes what she wants has to be negotiated and deferred for a while. There is evidence in this sequence of the real partnership that can begin to develop when secure attachment is established.

**Leila is a good example of a child who has a secure attachment to her caregiver.**

This happens when a child has a safe, affectionate and predictable emotional bond with their attachment figures. The special features of these relationships, whether primary or secondary, are sensitivity, affection and responsiveness.

Secure attachments provide a safe base for a child, reducing fearfulness and stress while building confidence and self-esteem. Leila has learned, through countless positive experiences, that her mother can be relied upon to meet her needs.

Very importantly, this secure feeling has also helped her to develop effective 'stress regulation' which means she doesn't need to overreact to small stresses, such as not getting what she wants and having to tidy up first.

When a child doesn't have enough of these positive experiences, they will have been overloaded with stress chemicals and the alarm systems in their lower brain will be overactive. This means they are likely to overreact to minor stressors and not be able to regulate easily, in the way Leila does.

**2 A less secure child is a more fearful child, although the fear may be expressed in different ways.**

Some children may find it hard to empathise and recognise that their carers have feelings and can be hurt. Because they are fearful that their own needs may not be met, they shut down their reactions and avoid having to connect with the pain of others.

If this had been the case for Leila, she would probably not have appeared to register that her mum had hurt her foot. Her brain will have registered it, however, and will be flooding with stress chemicals as she struggles to contain her fears for herself – and possibly for her mother.

On the other hand, for some children, insecure attachments may make them hypersensitive and full of fear when they see others experience pain. This is particularly true if it happens to be someone they depend on for their own well-being, whether or not they can be relied on. If Leila's mum is hurt, this might pose a threat to her own survival.

For Leila this might have meant that she became upset when her mother hurt herself, and possibly angry. She certainly wouldn't have been able to respond affectionately. The root of all this anxiety is ultimately the fear for our own survival.

Stress response systems in the brain of a child with healthy attachments work effectively to stop them having to react to minor stresses, keeping them calm and relaxed. They don't need to 'sweat the small stuff', because they are confident their survival is not at risk.

The brain of an insecurely attached child has repeatedly been flooded with cortisol (a stress chemical), so their threshold for coping with stress is lower. Children with disordered attachment might even become so stressed that they seek to mock or increase the pain of the other person, as a way of dealing with their own intense feelings. This is often misunderstood as heartlessness or a need to 'kick someone when they are down'.

**3 Just as importantly for Leila, she has also learned that a secure attachment cannot be broken – by the mood of the adult, for**

**example, or when a carer does not do exactly as she wants.**

It is crucial that a child learns that even when there is conflict or disapproval (which is inevitable in family life), the relationship can be restored. This is fundamental to secure attachments and is the key to future secure relationships, enabling a child to grow up with emotional security and self-confidence. This has been described as the 'disruption and repair' cycle.

Sue Gerhardt describes this in *Why Love Matters* as being 'at the heart of the attachment between parent and child and the core of emotional security and self-confidence. It is a repair system that is set up in a child's early life and is established by the age of one year.' Put simply, it means that a child is secure in the knowledge that, no matter what, they are intrinsically loveable.

**4 A child's need for a secure attachment has important implications for us as practitioners.**

Children in our care need to know that their needs will be met and we will not leave them stuck in stressful feelings, unable to turn off the high levels of cortisol flooding their brains.

Strong secondary attachments to caregivers outside the home help maintain a child's sense of security, allowing them to explore and experiment, both physically and emotionally. Learning to negotiate and accept compromises is easier when the adult is someone who can be trusted to



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters – How affection shapes a baby's brain*. Routledge
- Margot Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting*. Dorling Kindersley
- Maria Robinson, *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity*. Open University Press
- The Nursery World series on attachment, by Anne O'Connor, is available in our archive at [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Attachment in Practice'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

respond consistently with sensitivity and understanding.

It is important that behaviour policies and routines incorporate opportunities for 'repair' so a child continues to feel loved and cared for and knows this is not conditional on their 'good' behaviour. This is why some behaviour strategies such as 'time out' and 'the naughty step' need to be viewed with caution, as they can reinforce negative feelings the child already has about themselves. Even more worrying is the possibility that rather than being a calming strategy, these actually increase the stress levels of the child and leave them feeling isolated and alone with their scary feelings.

We need to think about how we can best help a child in that situation to know that it is only the behaviour that is unwanted. We might think that is what we are saying to the child, but our actions and interactions may be giving a very different message, particularly if they already have a poor sense of self-worth.

As key carers, we need to know our children really well and build up strong relationships. We want all our children to have the emotional security and resilience of a child like Leila. ■



## LINKS TO THE EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **UC 1.3** Keeping Safe
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment