

Attachment and Family Therapy

Attachment theory and family therapy have much in common and much to offer each other. Both approaches emphasise the significance of caregiving, communication and mutuality in family relationships. From the first moments, parents and children develop close and complex attachments that last a lifetime and these attachment relationships inevitably influence patterns within family systems. On the other hand, family systems and intergenerational patterns have a major influence on how attachment relationships are shaped. Given these obvious interactions it is surprising that attachment theory has had a limited influence on the practice of family therapy.

In this, the first of two special issues of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, we hope to make a contribution to closing the gap between attachment theory and family therapy. The articles in this first issue illustrate that not only is it possible to integrate attachment constructs into family therapy but also how attachment thinking can help us to understand difficult and bewildering cases and provide new directions in therapy. Primarily through the use of case studies, the articles in this issue demonstrate the value of attachment theory in creating explanations, reframes and narratives that make sense to families and that promote lasting change.

Attachment theory itself is not a method for doing therapy but it can lead to innovative approaches for addressing 'slow to respond' or 'stuck' relationships. Working from Bowlby's notion of therapy *in parallel*, Heather Chambers describes the practice of parallel attachment-based therapy for parents and children (aged between 4 and 12 years old). Using a one-way screen, the therapy incorporates the concept of 'supported looking' from the infant psychotherapy approach of 'watch wait and wonder' as well as narrative and experiential tasks. It has proven useful especially where the therapist chooses to focus on a distressed parent-child relationship that is not responding to therapy with the whole family. An illustrative case study describes therapy with an 'unwanted child' trapped in a distressed relationship with his mother.

One of the early attachment pioneers, Mary Main, described infants as having 'disorganised attachment' patterns where past trauma affected a parent's ability to care for her child. Paul Cammell uses Main's concept of disorganised attachment to explain the fearful, erratic and dramatic self-harming behaviour of an adolescent boy. In an intriguing case, Paul pieces together the evidence that

the disorganised behaviour derived from a family background of trauma in post-war Europe. The son did not have direct experience of trauma, but the effect was transmitted across the generations by 'frightened and frightening' parenting. Crisis intervention for mother and her adolescent son was based on a shared understanding of the impact of past trauma on their relationship and emotional interactions.

In contrast, Patricia Crittenden argues that children generally have 'self-organised' rather than disorganised responses to threat. In a key article, Crittenden provides an introduction to the Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM), which describes how children predict, prevent and respond to risk. Kasia Kozłowska uses the DMM to comprehend the strange behaviour of Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy abuse. In a fascinating case study, she explores how experiences of past danger had a dramatic impact on a mother's and father's appraisal of the health risks for one of their children. The parents believed they were desperately trying to protect their child against unrecognised dangers, but were in fact endangering her themselves.

In a second article, Kasia discusses the usefulness of an attachment perspective with an unresolved child protection case. The case involved the extremely difficult decision to restore a child to her family despite severe attachment problems and brain damage possibly caused by non-accidental injury. The source of the shaken baby abuse and the potential danger remained unclear, but Kasia argues that in deciding the 'least worst option' in complex abuse situations, the child's attachment needs become an important consideration.

Attachment thinking has made a major impact in the wider systems of health and welfare. It is difficult to believe that not very long ago children were routinely separated from their attachment figures with very little thought. In a wide-ranging interview, Graham Martin describes how James Robertson's moving film *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital* portrayed Laura's protest, despair and detachment when separated from her parents. It took campaigns and advocacy, but the care of children in hospitals has now changed profoundly. Parents are seen as essential resources for children in hospital, rather than as disruptive nuisances. Graham has maintained his attachment perspective in family therapy practice and more recently through his research into suicide prevention.

Stephen Allison

In the preparation of this Attachment special, I would like to acknowledge editors Hugh and Maureen Crago who have been a 'secure base and safe haven' for the issue. Alistair Campbell, Helen Pavlin and Joel Cullin contributed with careful and thoughtful editing of individual articles. My thanks to Southern Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service who have generously supported training in attachment-based therapy, and especially to Jackie Amos and Leigh Roeger for their advice and enthusiasm.

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Editors' Note: We asked Steve Allison to commission the articles for this issue, and a second special attachment issue, which we plan to publish in 2007. Steve encouraged the authors throughout, and in this he was enthusiastically supported by Kasia Kozłowska of Westmead. We are impressed by the original contribution made to the journal by the commissioned papers.

Success of our First Skill Building E-discussion

Nick Child, Lists Manager for the AFT discussion list, recently updated subscribers to the AFT list and also to the international list (AFT, *Family Process* and *ANZJFT*) with this message: 'It is astonishing how active and informed and focused and open and constructive their [first *ANZJFT* Skill Building] discussion has been. All the more amazing given that it is open to the public too, and it's about the difficult subject of treatments of serious anorexia!' Nick invites us to access the international discussion group and add some of our ANZ quality there, by sending an empty email to: MultiJFTForum-subscribe@googlegroups.com. The home page is at <http://groups.google.com/group/MultiJFTForum>. Join and Sign in to Google Groups to read and choose options there.

Catherine Sanders and Malcolm Robinson, in *Bower Place News* (an e-newsletter available to all who are interested) paid tribute to the *ANZJFT* e-discussion as well. Their *News* gave a brief overview of the Maudesley approach to treating anorexia, and a summary of the discussion so far. All those who are interested can access the review through the Bower Place website www.bowerplace.com.au and then click on *Bower Place News*. The next *ANZJFT* Skill Building discussion will focus on 'Engaging Families in Therapy'. If you want to be part of the lively crowd (over 140 people in the group) in future discussions, send a blank e-mail to ANZJFT-subscribe@googlegroups.com