

Attachment problems in children and young people

Information for the public

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About this information

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services.

This information explains the advice about attachment problems in children that is set out in NICE guideline NG26.

Who should read it?

This has been written for children or young people who are in care, or are likely to go into care. This could be fostering or a care home. It is also for children who have been adopted. This document is written for older children, but their parents and [carers](#) should read it too so that they know what NICE has said. Younger children can go through it with their carers to help them. There is a separate section for carers about support for them at the end.

What is attachment?

The feelings or bonds that you have with your family or carers when you are young or growing up help you feel safe, secure and loved. These feelings are known as 'attachment'.

If you don't get the care you need when you are young it can cause problems with how you feel about yourself, and sometimes how you behave when you are growing up. You may feel angry, sad

or scared, and it may be harder to make friends or to do well at school. You may get into trouble because of how you behave.

This can be more of a problem for children who are in care or who have been fostered or adopted.

It is really important that anyone in care or going into care knows they are safe, secure and looked after.

NICE has written this guide so that children and young people get the help they need to build good relationships with the people who are caring for them. These carers could be family, like parents (birth or adopted), grandparents or aunts or uncles. Or they could be foster parents, family friends or guardians.

Anyone who needs help because they don't feel safe and secure should be able to get it. It doesn't matter where you are living, or who you are living with.

If there are any words or parts of this guide that you don't understand, you can ask your carer or someone in your support team to explain them to you. You can also check at the end to see explanations for some of the words used.

Your support team

Different people who are good at giving different sorts of help and support may be involved in looking after you. These people might be health, education or social care workers or specialists, or teachers.

Working with you

Your support team should talk with you about how you get on with your carer. They should explain any support you're offered so that you can decide together what is best for you.

They will also try and keep where you are living (called [your placement](#), if it's away from your original home) from changing, and other things too like where you go to school.

Your carer might be involved in helping to make decisions too, depending on how old you are. There is also a [list of questions](#) you can use to help you talk with your support team.

Some types of help described here may not be right for you. If you think the help that you are offered isn't right for you, or wasn't what you were expecting, you should talk to your support team.

Helping you to feel safe, secure and loved

Going into care or moving between placements can be a difficult and confusing time, but there are things that should happen that can help make it easier, like:

- planning well ahead so that you and your carers are ready for the change and know what is happening and why (but if you need to be taken into care quickly this might not be possible)
- making sure you and your carers can get to know each other before you go to live with them
- making sure you can ask all the questions you need to and that you make your own choices whenever this is OK
- knowing how you can get help and support if you need it, which might be:
 - a care worker coming to visit you and your carer to talk about how things are going
 - giving you the chance to talk to a therapist (someone who can help you talk about how you feel and why)
 - helping your carer help you, like teaching them ways how they can make you feel safer and more secure at home
- keeping the same key worker for the whole time you are in care.

All about who you can live with, and where you lived before

If you are going into care, you might be able to live with a relative or friend. This is called kinship placement, and can be done if it's safe and will work best for you.

If you have brothers or sisters also going into care or already in care, you'll be kept together if that can be done.

If you are in care and your placement does not work out, your support team can help you stay in touch with your old carer when you move to your new placement. They will only do this if you want to though, and if everyone agrees to it.

Your support team will also make sure you don't feel cut off from the people and places from your life before you went into care. They can help you stay in touch and give you information about them.

What happens if there are problems?

If you're having problems getting on with your carers, or you don't feel like you're settling in to your new home or placement, your health or social care worker will want to find out why so they can help. You may be given some questions to answer about your home life, and your care workers will visit you where you are living. This is called an assessment. They might ask about:

- how everyone feels
- what has happened in the past (like any other placements where you have lived, how well they worked and if any problems came up before)
- what you think about your home life with your carer
- how well you are getting on at school
- any other important things, such as how healthy everyone is.

What help can I get?

If you are having problems, there are things that your carers can be shown to help you. These could be:

- making sure they know how to care for you properly
- helping them understand the way you feel, and how that affects what you do
- teaching them how to help you feel more safe and secure
- showing them how to help you with schoolwork.

Your health or social worker can also:

- help you understand how you feel and why
- help you know how to cope with your feelings better

- encourage you to get involved with activities, like sports clubs or hobby groups, to help make you feel happier and more settled.

You can get help in different ways, such as on the phone, in groups or with therapists.

The types of help and support you get will depend on how old you are. If you're not sure why you have or haven't been offered a type of support, you should talk about this with your health or social worker.

Medicine

You shouldn't be given medicine just for attachment problems. If you are offered a medicine, you and your carer should talk to your health or social worker about what it's for.

Treating other problems

Sometimes you might have other problems that are linked to problems with attachment, like [depression](#). Your health or social care worker can help you get help for these too.

Sadly, some children and young people going into care may have been through very frightening times. They may have been treated very badly themselves or have had to leave their own country because it is very dangerous. Because of this, some children may have a condition called [PTSD](#).

If you have PTSD you should be offered help for it, which may include a type of talking therapy called [cognitive behavioural therapy](#). Some people call this therapy CBT for short.

Your school

Your school can also help in lots of ways:

- teachers and other staff should know what attachment difficulties are, and how they can help
- your [designated teacher](#) should know you are in care, and if you have attachment difficulties
- you should have a special person you can go to for help and support (this person is called a key person)
- you should have a say in whereabouts you will get any help given while at school
- you should have a [safe place](#) to go to in your school.

Sometimes, you might have to change where you are living. If this happens, your care team and teachers at school will try and make sure you can carry on going to the same school. If this can't be done, then the move should be planned as far ahead as possible to try and make it easier, and to make sure that everyone knows what is happening and when.

If you're a carer

What you can do for your child

Be sensitive. Bear in mind that the child you are looking after:

- may have difficulty managing their emotions
- may be afraid of getting close to anyone
- may feel unsafe and alone
- may be traumatised by their experiences
- needs to be in a loving relationship.

Learn to understand when your child is upset and what their behaviour means. Remember, the way your child behaves may be related to their experiences. If you feel like this is difficult for you, talk to your health or social care worker as they can arrange training and support to help.

Remember to respond positively to your child to make them feel supported and secure. Explain what's going on when any changes or help and support are offered, so they don't feel like things are happening without them knowing.

If they're adopted or in care, remember your child may want to stay in contact with, or make contact with, their original family or birth parents and they will need your support to do this.

Make sure you're ready to form a loving relationship. Think about the future, and whether you're prepared to commit to your child's care in the long term.

The help you should get

You should be offered training if you want it to prepare you for the challenges of looking after your child. For example, how to respond to challenging behaviour and how to stop arguments. You should also get ongoing help and support over the phone or in person, with extra support if things

get difficult. For example, you might be referred to a specialist service that can help with [video feedback](#). Or, you and your child could have therapy together.

Questions to ask about attachment

These questions may help you discuss attachment problems or the support you have been offered with your care team.

Finding out about attachment problems

- Can you tell me more about attachment problems? How do they begin?
- Why do you think I have/my child has attachment problems?
- Can attachment problems be made better with medicine?

Types of support

- Can you tell me why you have offered me this support?
- How will it help?
- Who will be working with me?
- What if I decide I don't want to have a certain type of support?
- Can you tell me more about how schools are involved?
- Is there some other information (like a leaflet, DVD or a website I can go to) about the support that I can have?

Terms explained

Carer

A carer in this guideline means someone who looks after a child or young person in their care. This could be a parent (birth or adoptive), foster parent, close relative, special carer or guardian.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (sometimes called CBT) is a type of therapy in which you are encouraged to talk about how you think and behave with a therapist. The therapist helps you understand what is making you feel or do things in a certain way, and will help you to try and think in different ways to help make you feel better. CBT is a type of [psychotherapy](#).

Depression

Depression is feeling sad, lonely, down, anxious or stressed for longer periods of time so that affects your everyday life.

Designated teacher

The designated teacher in a school will know about the children in that school who are in care, and if any of them have attachment problems. They will also know all the important details of who to contact (parents, carers, social care professionals).

Key worker

This is a person in school (sometimes called an advocate) who a child or young person can go to for help and support who will back them up, and who will put their views and wishes across to health and social care professionals.

Placement

A placement is the name for where a child or young person lives when they are in care. This could be with friends or relatives, foster parents, or in a children's home.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (often called PTSD) is a problem caused by a person having very stressful, frightening or distressing things happen to them. This could be violence, abuse, robbery or a bad accident. It can also happen when someone sees distressing things around them, like people being killed in a war, even if they aren't hurt themselves. The person with PTSD may have nightmares, feel scared and tense all the time, or keep re-living what happened.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a type of therapy where you talk about how you feel either with a therapist on your own, or sometimes with a group of people who feel the same way or are in the same situation so you can share your experiences.

Safe place

A safe place in school is a special quiet room or area where a child or young person can go when they feel scared, worried or upset.

Video feedback

Video feedback is where a carer and child or young person are recorded interacting together on video. The social care professional then watches it back with the carer and sometimes the child or young person too. This helps the carer can see how they react and behave with the child or young person, and the social care professional can give help on how to change any behaviour that could cause problems.

Sources of advice and support

- Adoption UK, 0844 848 7900
www.adoptionuk.org
- Childline, 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk
- Info4carekids
www.Info4carekids.org.uk
- The Fostering Network, 020 7401 9582
www.fostering.net
- The Who Cares? Trust, young people in care and care leavers advice line 020 7017 8901 between 10:30am and 3:00pm, Monday to Friday, or email advice@thewhocarestrust.org.uk
www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk
- YoungMinds, parent helpline 0808 802 5544
www.youngminds.org.uk

You can also go to [NHS Choices](#) for more information.

NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

Other NICE guidance

- [Looked-after children and young people](#) (2010) NICE guideline PH28
- [Child maltreatment: when to suspect maltreatment in under 16s](#) (2009) NICE guideline CG89

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Accreditation

