



We talked to **Edwina Grant**, Chair of Scottish Attachment In Action, to find out about the work of the organisation

# The importance of attachment

## Can you tell me who you are?

I am Chair of Scottish Attachment In Action (SAIA for short) and I also work independently as a Chartered Psychologist and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) Practitioner, Consultant and Trainer. DDP is an Attachment Focused Family Therapy originated by Dan Hughes. But that's another story as we are here to talk about SAIA.

## Who are Scottish Attachment In Action?

SAIA started out in 2006 as an interest and campaigning group bringing together parents, carers and practitioners who wanted to ensure Scottish legislation, policy and practice reflected the core importance of the early years for building the bonds of secure attachment relationships, and of the

potential impact of abuse and neglect on every aspect of a child's future development.

We constituted in 2009 becoming a membership organisation that individuals and organisations could join. We began to offer network seminars and an annual conference 'open to all'. Our 'open to all' ethos — parents, carers and practitioners — is fundamental to everything we did and do; we are the only organisation in Scotland whose core purpose is attachment into action.

SAIA became a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2015 with a continuing passion to make sure that everyone understands the fundamental importance of attachment relationships, not only in the early years, but throughout life. We are a small charity with a big heart!

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### Do you think attachment theory into action is relevant beyond the early years?

Absolutely! Our needs for comfort and protection do not disappear as we reach adulthood. Most of us have special people we turn to at moments of need — friends, partners or family members. Often such relationships are mutually supportive, we are attachment figures for each other. The dominant narrative within the UK, however, tends to privilege the individual over the group and values independence over interdependence. This can leave people lonely and disconnected particularly at times of crisis. Attachment theory can help us recognise the importance of community and connection and the negative consequences for individuals and groups when these are lacking. SAIA would want to promote societal and professional systems and structures that support the development of community and connection.

Cultural differences, life events, mental health issues, physical or intellectual difficulties may increase the vulnerability and neediness of any of us, and this might make us more dependent on the emotional or physical support of those we trust, whether on a permanent or temporary basis. SAIA would challenge assumptions that seeking help and connection in these circumstances somehow diminishes our worth.

For many of us as we reach older age, increased physical frailty or cognitive decline will shift our relationships with our own children, and a reversal of roles can take place where we find ourselves seeking comfort, care and protection from the same individuals we once cradled and soothed as infants.

Once again, the importance of very basic rhythms of life, consistency of relationship and soothing sensory experiences become key in ensuring quality of life. There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that attachment-informed practice can have a similar transformational impact on the care of vulnerable adults and elderly people, whether within families or in professional settings, that it has had on our parenting and professional practice with children.

### What of education?

The strongest influences on our children and young people, other than their families, come from the various educational environments they experience. From nursery to further education children are introduced to systems, structures and processes that powerfully affect their everyday lives and development.

Educational organisations that recognise that learning is relational - we learn best from people we like and respect - and promote emotional health, also support effective learning for all. Indeed, for some children school is the safe base when home is not. As children progress through the educational system they move through environments that inevitably become increasingly less attachment-promoting. In nurseries children have their own key workers and within primary schools most of their time is still spent with a single teacher albeit in a much larger group.

Once a young person moves to secondary school, however, they are likely to have a timetable that involves multiple

changes of teachers, peers and places throughout their school day. In further and higher education, most learning takes place either alone through self-study or in large classes. Effectively children and young people become progressively less known and recognised as individuals.

Many of these structural differences are the inevitable outcome of the different curricular demands at different stages of children's education. An understanding of attachment theory has, however, allowed many schools to introduce processes, systems and structures that promote the importance of relationships and help teachers notice and recognise distress even when it is expressed through difficult behaviour. Such attachment-promoting schools provide an environment where children who have experienced adversity or trauma can be supported to recover, but also where typically developing children are more likely to flourish and enjoy their learning and relationships. SAIA's view would be that developing an educational system where such attachment informed practice would be the norm, would massively benefit all children.

### What of the world of work?

As adults, many of us spend a huge proportion of our lives in work settings. We recognise that our emotional health and wellbeing can be profoundly affected by the way our working lives are structured and how well we are managed. Perhaps inevitably, authority structures and colleague relationships can mirror family experiences of rebelling against parents or being nurtured by them, as well as rivalry with siblings or enjoyment of the camaraderie and excitement shared with them.

Where the importance of supportive relationships within organisations is recognised, not only can this create greater productivity and less absences but also provides an emotionally healthy environment for all. An audit culture, short term or zero hour contracts, punitive targets, reputational anxieties and an increased focus on the digital sphere, have all contributed to an environment in which work organisations have become less safe and containing places, where relationships can be fractious rather than team-oriented. Where organisations have focused on creating a relational culture with processes and procedures that are congruent with this approach then employees are happier, staff retention improves, and the primary task of the organisation is achieved.

The basic responsibility of the caring industries is to provide care, support or help for people in some kind of need that is delivered through relationships with others. Yet even in these settings there can be little focus on the needs of workers for consistency, supportive relationships and emotional safety. SAIA would support, as the norm, creating organisations that are attachment informed which will have benefits for employers and employees.

### And what of attachment to place?

We tend to think of attachment as only relevant in personal relationships yet there is a growing literature about the importance of attachment to place. Similar factors influence our attachments to places as they do to people. The places

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we become attached to have been those where we have consistently experienced safety or comfort - this may be a house we have lived in or a school we attended. It may equally, however, be a place in the community where we could retreat when we're sad or distressed and find soothing - a religious building, a library, a favourite outdoor space or the gym. Many of these places have the enduring quality of personal attachments - even when we have not visited them for a long time they have meaning. Many of us gain great pleasure from visiting childhood haunts many years later and are outraged if we discover they have disappeared or changed. This attachment to place underpins some of the campaigns to preserve buildings, outdoor places or institutions that are under threat because of new priorities or changing policies. Sometimes such closures can have powerful effects for individuals. Adults who grew up in children's homes, for example, whose sense of their own narrative is already compromised, may find it particularly difficult if their childhood homes have disappeared without trace - some even begin to doubt their own memories and experiences.

Creative use of digital archiving and social media can help preserve attachment to place even when original buildings or places have disappeared or changed beyond recognition. Maybe we need to consider the potentially lethal implications of our collective failure to provide the political, social and emotional environment where individuals, groups and communities can feel included and experience positive attachment relationships. Human beings are social animals with a powerful drive to connect to others and feel a sense of belonging. If these opportunities do not exist within our families or communities and no compensatory or healing experiences are available, then the hurt and excluded will find each other and may find their sense of connection or belonging in their shared rage or pain. In many cases this will fuel positive social change and the creation of communities of interest, but it may also have destructive consequences.

Gangs create strong bonds and give their members an illusory sense of safety and comfort. The genius of the Violence Reduction Unit's approach to Glasgow's gangs was that it recognised this function and worked to provide alternative more prosocial ways for young gang members

to feel connected and to belong. Using an attachment perspective may help us to understand both the resurgence of terrorism and the poison of racism.

At Scottish Attachment In Action we want to encourage exploration, debate and challenge. We hope that our members and any other individuals and organisations interested in attachment will join in this discussion. Let us push at the boundaries! What would an attachment-informed prison system look like, or an immigration service that recognised the meaning and importance of relationship for individuals, communities and society at large? How would attachment-minded politicians frame policy and law? It is our contention that any service, profession, community or business that involves connection with people would benefit from underpinning their work with an attachment informed approach.

### What is SAIA doing about everything you speak about?

Our aim is to make sure that everyone understands the fundamental importance of attachment relationships throughout life by:

- Providing training and consultancy in attachment and trauma to practitioners, parents and carers
- Providing information through social media, conferences, events, newsletters and educational resources

Working collaboratively with others to identify and promote best practice, and the 'how' - the practical way in which an understanding of attachment into action can be helpful to professionals, parents and carers, day to day.

Finally, as I said before, we are a small charity with a big heart. We rely on membership fees and our training to stay 'alive and kicking', but more importantly membership enables us all to support each other, to learn from each other, and to have a voice. Please join us if you can either by membership and/or by connecting with us - write a blog, do an audio or video pod. Our membership is open to all - parents, carers and practitioners.

• **Check out the resources and training on the SAIA website, [www.saia.org.uk](http://www.saia.org.uk)**