

Routinely used interventions to improve attachment in infants and young children: a national survey and two systematic reviews

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Plain English summary

Improving attachment in infants and young children

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Plain English summary

Attachment refers to an infant's natural instinct to seek comfort from their main carers. There are four ways in which infants show attachment ('attachment patterns'). These are known as secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant and disorganised. Secure attachment usually occurs with consistent and responsive parenting/caregiving and is linked with positive social and emotional child development. Inconsistent, neglectful or abusive parenting/caregiving can lead to problems with attachment, including disorganised attachment, and is linked to poorer outcomes. Parenting support, education and therapies help parents improve infant attachment and their child's outcomes.

We surveyed UK services to see what they offered families with attachment problems. A total of 734 UK services responded. This identified 10 therapies or support packages most commonly offered to parents. We checked what research had been done on these. We found very little. We found 61 studies of support packages with quite good evidence, but these were generally not ones offered by UK services.

We also looked in detail at research for all types of support/therapies to improve attachment. We looked for the best research (called 'randomised controlled trials'); 26 studies had tested therapies to see if they improved secure attachment and 20 had tested whether or not they improved (i.e. reduced) disorganised attachment. We found that these therapies or support packages are good at increasing secure attachment and improving disorganised attachment. Mostly they did this by helping parents/caregivers improve caregiving and particularly how sensitive and responsive they are to their child and their needs.

Currently, practice is not following research, and research is not being done to properly evaluate current practice. We need to improve the evidence and the way it links to practice, including how those organising and paying for services are made aware of up-to-date research to make sure that the best treatments are available. High-quality training for staff is also important.

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