

What is Attachment Disorder?

Attachment disorder (AD) arises when a child under the age of three suffers an early life trauma like abuse, separation from a parent, or illness. They miss out on the love, comfort and nurturing that they need, and fail to form normal loving relationships with their primary carers. This in turn can delay their cognitive and social development, affecting their behaviours and their ability to form relationships later in life.

AD is just one strand of Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD), which covers all issues and developmental problems resulting from early life trauma, including attachment disorder.

There can be an assumption that AD is only associated with adopted children or children in care. While there is a strong correlation, many other children without this background are affected.

Children with attachment disorders are often misdiagnosed as many of the characteristics are also seen in conditions like autism, ODD and ADHD.

The long-term impact is hard to predict as children have different levels of resilience to trauma in the womb or neglect after birth. However, the overall prognosis is good; children can fully recover from AD with the correct care and attention.

Signs of Attachment Disorder

Children who have experienced early trauma develop strategies or behaviours to help them to survive. These may include:

- Lack of expectation of care and comfort, known as the inhibited form of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)
- Inappropriately affectionate and familiar towards strangers, known as the disinhibited form of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)
- Become distressed when separated from carer but also resist contact when the carer returns. Known as anxious-ambivalent attachment.
- Poor eye contact.
- Difficulty showing affection. An aversion to touch and physical affection.
- Overly demanding or clingy.
- Lack of cause/effect thinking.
- Problems controlling and expressing anger, sometimes violent.
- A need to be in control.
- Erratic eating habits.
- Failure to show remorse or regret after behaving badly.
- Abnormally sociable or superficially charming.
- Tell lies or steal
- Ask persistent nonsense questions or incessant chatter
- Pseudo maturity
- Low self-esteem