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Research Snapshot No. 8

Improving attachment security in early childhood intervention: A framework from constructivist grounded theory.

What you need to know

Secure parent–child attachment is conducive to the aims of early childhood intervention which are to enhance the development, well-being, and participation of children with developmental delay or disability. A recent meta-analysis found that 42% of children with delay or disability had a secure attachment compared to 62% from a population sample. Best practice in ECI recommends the use of a Key Worker or a Primary Service Provider model where one professional engages with the child and family holistically in their natural environments. Given the close relationship between the service provider and the parent, they are therefore well-positioned to improve the attachment security of infants and children with delay or disability. There is emerging evidence however, that many ECI professionals have not received training in early attachment and as such, are not equipped to effectively support secure parent-child attachment.

What is this research about?

This study explored how ECI professionals could support the development of secure attachment in children with developmental delay or disability. Importantly this study aimed to explore possibilities within the context of the best practice in ECI in Australia.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology for this study as little is known of the research area. This exploratory form of research aims to develop a theory that is “grounded in real world data”. This methodology involves the participants in co-constructing the theory by tapping into their knowledge and experience to direct data collection and analysis. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three parents and 18 professionals. The professionals included 3 early childhood special educators, a maternal and child health nurse, a mothercraft nurse, 2 occupational therapists, 4 psychologists, 5 social workers and 2 speech pathologists. The professionals could also be grouped according to experience in the field. They included 5 ECI professionals, 4 intervention experts (experience with interventions/ tools targeting parent-child

relationships), 4 non-ECI professionals with attachment focus and 5 with expertise in various aspects of child development.

The research commenced with initial interviews with the 5 ECI professionals from an organisation that used a Key Worker approach and provided training in attachment. This was to enhance the likelihood of capturing effective practices. Data from these initial interviews was coded to identify major themes and guide further sampling (remaining participants). Most of the codes were identified in the first 5 interviews with theoretical saturation occurring by the 13th interview (ie. no new codes). Focussed coding resulted in linking of codes to conceptual categories. The first author then used diagramming and memoing to analyse the relationships between the categories, identify the primary themes, select the core category, and create the proposed framework.

What did the researchers find?

Seven conceptual categories were selected: (a) Importance; (b) Challenges; (c) The System; (d) The Key Worker; (e) Assessment; (f) Strategies; and (g) Outcomes. Two dominant themes were identified: the quality of the relationship between the ECI professional and the family and self-regulation. An attachment focused ECI framework is proposed, aligned with the ecological system model pictured below.

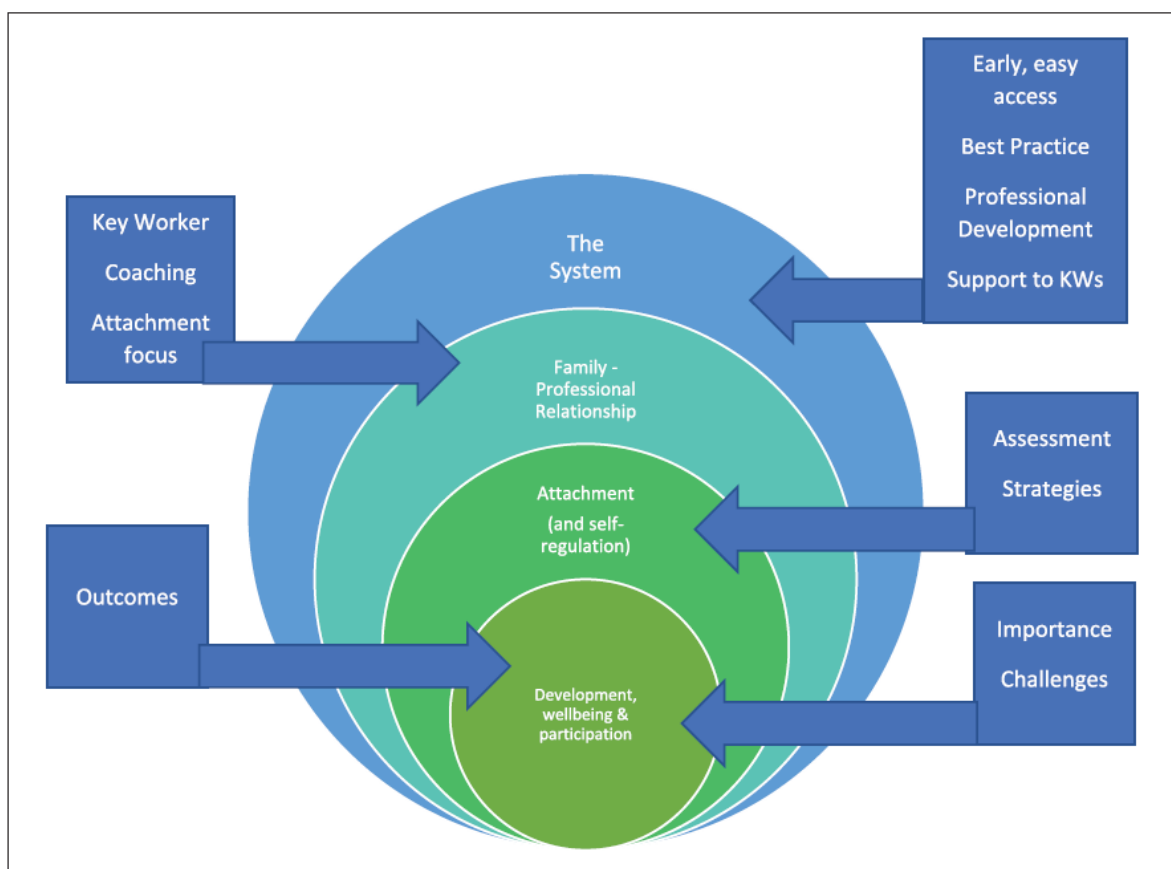


Figure 2. Attachment-Focused ECI Framework.
Note. ECI = early childhood intervention.

The category labelled “Strategies” largely provided the answer to the research question however the data also provided contextual considerations related to the system and the ECI professionals.

The key strategies identified were,

1. Talking about attachment with parents
2. Supporting parent-child communication
3. Helping the parent co-regulate
4. Using video to reflect
5. Focusing on positives
6. Creating enjoyable parent-child engagement
7. Using touch
8. Sensory or self-regulation strategies
9. Counselling

How can you use this research?

Interviews from this study emphasized the importance of secure attachment in children with developmental delay. Data also revealed that these children need considerable assistance, encouragement and repetition to learn; substantial assistance in developing self-regulation; and they have a sizeable likelihood of experiencing abuse and neglect. The conceptual framework provides clarity and guidance for ECI professionals across a range of disciplines on how to support parent-child attachment. The research affirms the current best practice approach in ECI and adds the focus of attachment security to this. With more ECI professionals having access to training using this conceptual framework, the outcomes of intervention can be enhanced. This will ultimately enhance the positive outcomes for children with developmental delay or disability linked to their development, well-being, and overall participation.

Where to from here:

- [Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Guidelines.](#)
- Attachment literature – [Alexander et.al. 2021](#)
- Assessment/ Intervention tools

[PICCOLO](#)

[Make the Connection](#)

[Parent-Child Mother-Goose](#)

[Tuning in to Kids](#)

[Parent Coaching literature](#)

- PRECI webinar with Stacey Alexander

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In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.