



We interviewed 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!

Can you explain why attachment is so important?

Many of your readers will know that John Bowlby, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, was the originator of Attachment Theory in the 1950s. It has become one of the dominant theories of child development. Bowlby defined attachment as a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings'* and this connectedness starts at birth.

Babies are born relational (in fact, they are, of course, in the main, conceived relationally!). From when they are born, they have unfolding behaviours - attachment-seeking behaviours - to keep parents/carers close - crying, clinging, imitation and smiling. These behaviours are designed to ensure that the baby's needs for survival (feed me!) and safety (protect me!) comfort (cuddle me!) and joy (play with me!) are met. Attachment is a process. When a baby needs something, she feels stressed and signals her discomfort (help me!) through, for example, crying, seeking to have her needs met. A parent or parenting figure 'tunes in' (attunes) to their baby's unique cries and signals for different needs and strives to meet the needs in a loving, sensitive, empathetic and timely way. In doing this 'dance of attunement' the parent is also what is called co-regulating the stress the baby is feeling by providing comfort. The developing baby learns 'I can ask for what I need and when I do someone will be there to help me'. This co-regulation in infancy leads to managing to self-regulate in later childhood and adulthood - to be in charge of our own emotional thermostats - particularly to manage stress in life in general.

The ongoing attachment process, in the first few years of life, is really important in shaping how our brains, our bodies, our emotions, our sense of self, and our sense of relationships, all grow and develop through childhood and into adulthood. All children need to feel loved and special and this sense of self comes through a relationship with at least one parenting adult who thinks their baby, their child, is the 'best thing since sliced bread' (not all the time, it's hard to feel this when your baby is screaming her head off and you don't know how to comfort her!)

When it's written down this attachment process sounds easy but as any parent will tell you it is most certainly not! There is no such thing as a perfect parent! Twenty to thirty percent of attunement can lead to secure attachment if parents repair the ruptures that occur between them and their children.

We mis-attune regularly for many reasons. A parent who is distressed due to, for example, life's busyness, lack of support, being discriminated against, mental health issues, poverty, living with violence, may find it more difficult to tune-in. Babies are born with different temperaments so some are easier to tune in to and comfort than others; babies born with additional needs may not 'signal' what they need. Parents who have not had healthy parenting themselves may struggle as they haven't had sufficient experiences when they were children of being attuned to, loved and special.

It's important to say that babies and young children can develop relationships with other affectionate and responsive attachment figures (a childminder, a keyworker in nursery, a grandparent). These relationships can promote self-esteem in children and be a protective factor for mental health in the future.

I am of the view that all parents (or 99.99%) want to love and care for their children and that all parents need support to do so - a partner and/or family and/or friends. Some parents are going to need more support than others. I am of the view that we need, as a society and in professional practice, to value parenting and get much better at understanding how to support parenting/child relationships.

What of attachment beyond the early years?

The cascading negative impact of adverse childhood experiences throughout life is now widely recognised, but we need to avoid a fatalistic pessimism about this. The emerging evidence of the positive effects of using attachment focused parenting and attachment focused therapeutic approaches to support the recovery of traumatised children and young people, offers hope for adults who still carry the emotional and social burdens of unbearable childhood pain.

Our needs for relationships - love, 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. 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. Attachment theory can help us recognise the importance of community and connection and the negative consequences for individuals and groups when these are lacking. It can help us create societal and professional systems and structures that support the development of this type of community and connection.

What is SAIA doing about everything you've spoken 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.

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, 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.

*Bowlby J. 1969 *Attachment. Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Loss.* New York: Basic Books

Check out our resources and training on our website.
Visit: www.saia.org.uk

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