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Introduction

All children of all ages need to feel secure in their relationships with the adults who look after them. A secure base is at the heart of any successful family environment. It is provided through a loving relationship with caregivers who offer the child sensitive care and protection, but also a reliable base from which to explore and enjoy their world. Thus a secure base relationship promotes not only a sense of security, but also confidence, competence and resilience.

Secure Base – a framework for caregiving

Since 2000, the authors, Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek of the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia, have been developing and applying to fostering and adoption practice a framework for caregiving: the **Secure Base** model. The model is founded on key theories and research about child development and family relationships – and also on what we have learned from child placement research. All children need sensitive caregiving, but children who come into foster and adoptive families are likely to have experienced backgrounds of abuse and neglect, as well as separation and loss, and need a special kind of therapeutic caregiving.

The Secure Base model has its roots in theory and research on attachment, but also on resilience. The goal of the model is to provide sensitive caregiving that develops secure close relationships. These relationships help children to recover from previous harmful experiences in close relationships. This enables them to feel competent to face future challenges successfully and to fulfil their potential. Resilience is associated with a sense of security, self-esteem, self-efficacy, a capacity to reflect on feelings, and hopefulness for the future – all key characteristics of secure attachment. Resilience, like security, can be promoted in the context of a sensitive and responsive

caregiving environment. It is this positive, strengths-based approach to family relationships that is at the heart of this model of caregiving.

Secure Base can be used in a number of different areas of professional practice with children and families. But it is particularly valuable in family placement, where children can experience sensitive and available care that provides the foundation of secure attachment relationships, builds resilience and enables children to thrive in their families, peer groups, education and communities.

The model brings together five dimensions of caregiving. These five dimensions interact with each other to create a secure base for the child. The first four dimensions of caregiving – *availability, sensitivity, acceptance* and *co-operation* – come from the work of one of the earliest attachment researchers, Mary Ainsworth (1971, 1978). She found in her study of infants that these four caregiving dimensions were associated with secure attachment. The fifth dimension, *family membership*, has been added to the model because of its significance for all children, but especially for children separated from their families of origin and developing new family memberships in their foster and adoptive families. The family membership dimension focuses on the child's need for a sense of belonging in their new family that still takes account of their connection with their birth family.

Research at the University of East Anglia (for example, Beek and Schofield, 2004, Schofield and Beek, 2009) extended the application of Ainsworth's dimensions from infancy through childhood to adolescence, suggesting that, although these dimensions may be expressed differently at different ages, they perform the same function for the child. For example, in both infancy and adolescence the availability of a caregiver is necessary to build trust.

As well as extending the age range, the research suggested that there were some specific developmental benefits to each dimension of caregiving, and that these could become a focus for assessing children's development and progress, which in turn would inform the support needed for the caregivers.

The publication by BAAF of the *Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption* (Schofield and Beek, 2006) set out the five caregiving dimensions in some detail. It also offered practitioners and caregivers an account of attachment patterns from infancy to adolescence, with an emphasis on what children with insecure attachments bring to their placements and what they might therefore need from caregivers. It highlighted both the challenges and the rewards that caregivers will find as they help children to feel more secure. The book provided ideas about applications of attachment principles and Secure Base to assessing and placing children; recruiting and preparing new foster carers and adopters; managing children's behaviour difficulties; and contact.

In 2007, the Government policy document, *Care Matters*, described Secure Base as helping to promote confidence and competence in children and it was recommended for training and supporting foster carers. In 2008, the model provided a foundation for a Good Practice Guide, *Achieving*

Permanence in Foster Care, and a website was developed to provide downloadable materials (www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase). In 2009, Secure Base was incorporated in *Skills to Foster*, the training programme for new carers developed by the Fostering Network.

This practice guide has been developed to bring together both explanatory material about Secure Base and the range of resources that are available to help social workers put it into practice. A separate volume for foster carers and adopters is also available.

International developments

From 2006 Secure Base also started to be adopted by fostering teams in Norway, translated as *Trygg Base*. It was then included, as in the UK, as part of the Norwegian national training programme for new foster carers and has been used regularly in practice since.

The continuing international interest in the application of attachment theory to family placement practice led to the *Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption* being translated into French (2011) and Italian (2013).

Using Secure Base in practice

As this practice guide will show, there are many areas of social work practice in child placement that can benefit from this systematic way of thinking about, describing and assessing key qualities of caregiving and key dimensions of child development.

Examples provided in this guide are:

- assessing prospective foster carers and adopters;
- assessing the capacity of caregivers to provide a secure base for children in their care;
- supporting caregivers; and
- assessing and reviewing the child's development and progress.

These elements of practice can be brought together to inform other areas of practice; for example, the assessment of caregivers and children using Secure Base dimensions can inform matching. It can also inform the assessment of the support that a placement might need to succeed.

The focus here is on practical everyday parenting and on working collaboratively with foster carers and adoptive parents to maximise their capacity to care effectively for children from backgrounds of abuse and neglect.