



# Secure Base

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## SECURE BASE CHECKLIST

### INFANTS 0-18 MONTHS

Key tasks for the infant in this period include the development of selective and secure attachment relationships and the use of these secure base relationships to develop pleasure in exploration, play and learning.

The questions below therefore focus on the infant's capacity to seek comfort from specific caregivers when in need or distress, their capacity to accept comfort and their capacity to experience pleasure in exploration when their anxiety is recognised, understood and soothed. So the child's signs of activity and pleasure in play and exploration are as important as comfort seeking behaviours in assessing the quality of attachment relationships and the child's developmental progress.

This is a period of rapid change so attention needs to be paid to age appropriateness in each area e.g. selectivity of attachment, competence in communicating emotions. Even from birth infants are communicating their feelings in some form. But also from birth, there will be some differences in levels of sociability and activity due to differences in temperament. The range of normal development needs to be taken into account.

### Trust

Does the child:

- seek comfort when distressed (e.g. crying and gazing towards the caregiver)
- accept comfort when distressed (e.g. settling when picked up and cuddled)
- show some degree of preference for one or more caregiver (e.g. gaze / preferred for cuddles- develops during the first 8 months))
- target attachment behaviours at this caregiver/these caregivers (e.g. gaze, verbalisation when upset /happy – approach once mobile)
- protest at separation from specific caregivers (range of protest –depending on temperament / attachment pattern)
- settle / settle to play at reunion
- use a caregiver as a secure base for exploration (observable cycle of comfort and reassurance / exploration)
- show interest and pleasure in the environment (facially, sensory)
- enjoy playing jointly / independently with objects / toys
- 'take turns' with /'converse' with adults – initiating and responding to vocalising, facial movements (can start from soon after birth)

## Managing feelings

Does the child:

- show a full range of emotions, both positive and negative (e.g. smile, laugh, frown, rage, cry)
- communicate their needs (e.g. for proximity, food, play)
- react appropriately to sensory stimuli (e.g. show interest/react to light, sound, smell, touch, taste - but not panic or freeze)
- wait for attention / manage emotions– with help (e.g. voice of caregiver indicating food is on the way)
- sleep regularly and in a relaxed way (NB Sleep patterns will vary)
- seem comfortable in their body (e.g. able to relax and also enjoy being active)
- cope with being told 'no' (e.g. protest but not become overwhelmed)

## Self-esteem

Does the child:

- express pleasure at their achievements (e.g. shaking a rattle to make a noise, standing up on their own, building a tower)
- show interest and enthusiasm for interactive games like peek-a-boo (e.g. showing pleasure at success)
- approach new people /situations positively ( balancing curiosity, caution and pleasurable anticipation)
- cope with set-backs (e.g. when the rattle doesn't work, the brick tower falls over)

## Feeling effective

Does the child

- make choices (e.g. between foods, toys)
- assert him/herself (e.g. getting attention, feeding at his /her own pace)
- seem keen to try new things ( NB some variation in enjoying novelty due to differences in temperament)
- show focus and persistence in their play (e.g. sustained activity to complete task)
- co-operate with nappy changes, feeding, going to sleep (i.e. relaxing and accepting events with the reassurance of caregivers)
- play co-operatively ( e.g. turn taking / accepting support to hold the rattle, press the button to make a sound, can lead to co-operative play even in infancy)

## Sense of belonging

Does the child

- recognise family members (e.g. extend their recognition to family members other than caregivers)
- prefer family members and family friends (e.g. more likely to communicate with / accept cuddles from)
- enjoy family occasions (e.g. seem to fit in as part of the family - if supported / not overwhelmed)

## 18 MONTHS - 4 YEARS

Autonomy and dependency issues are particularly important in this period. Children will increasingly need to manage separations and the availability or otherwise of their caregivers as they first become more competent walkers and talkers and then become more sophisticated and independent in their play and relationships.

For 3-4 year olds it is the capacity to understand that other people have feelings and goals that are different from their own that is a key turning point developmentally. The child's emerging ability at this age to name and reflect on their own feelings, to be empathic about the feelings of others and to be able to take those feelings into account will be shaping the child's engagement not only with adult caregivers but also with the world of peer relationships.

Children who are insecure following insensitive parenting will suffer with difficulties in making sense of the thoughts and feelings of others, because they have not experienced carers who have fully tuned into and helped make sense of their feelings. For children who have experienced abuse and neglect, this lack of social or emotional intelligence may be accompanied by more deep-rooted fears that can lead to the formation of controlling strategies at this age.

The assessment should note the ways in which children are acknowledging or defending against painful feelings, which may lead to defiant aggression or withdrawal. Subsequent reviews of the child's progress can then be looking for signs of increasing trust, capacity to express feelings, pleasure in activities and increased confidence.

### Trust

Does the child

- seek comfort appropriately when stressed (e.g. signal their needs verbally or physically, rather than shut down on feelings; cling, demand and resist comfort; appear helpless; try to control others)
- accept comfort when stressed/ relax
- use a caregiver as a secure base for exploration ( i.e. after accepting reassurance or comfort, become able to explore and play)
- have a selective attachment to one or more caregiver
- protest at separation from caregivers
- settle to play at reunion after separation
- show interest and pleasure in the environment (enjoy the senses –bright colours, taste, touch)
- enjoy playing independently with toys
- use their mobility and language to explore, to have fun, to approach others, to learn

### Managing feelings

Does the child

- express a range of positive and negative feelings but not be overwhelmed by them (toddlers often swing between moods - but it is the degree that counts)
- name simple feelings
- use language to communicate needs, feelings, ideas and goals openly and accurately (language abilities will vary)
- ever pretend to feel what they are not feeling – seem false ( this can start as young as 18 months)

- understand that others have thoughts, feelings and goals that differ from their own
- show empathy for others
- show some understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (moral development)

### **Self-esteem**

Does the child

- enjoy play and activities
- take pleasure in doing something well
- enjoy praise
- cope with not being successful at a task / not winning sometimes
- cope with being told off without extreme reactions

### **Feeling effective**

Does the child:

- make simple choices
- show persistence in completing tasks
- co-operate and negotiate
- manage increased independence without excessive assertiveness/oppositional behaviour
- Enjoy /manage sleeping, eating, toileting appropriate to his/her age
- manage peer group relationships ( e.g. prosocial, increasingly co-operative, making and keeping friends)

### **Sense of belonging**

Does the child:

- recognise and show special interest in foster /adoptive family members
- have a sense of belonging to the foster /adoptive family
- enjoy family occasions
- have a sense of connection / belonging to the birth family
- react positively to contact with birth family members

## **MIDDLE CHILDHOOD 5-10 YEARS**

The tasks of this age period focus on managing the developing sense of self in the context of learning and following the social rules, especially within the peer group.. Thus self-esteem, self-efficacy and co-operation become important, though as ever within the context of an available secure base caregiver to whom a child can turn when the pressures of the playground or the classroom get too much. For fostered and adopted children, the expectation in school that they will be ready to learn may not be in keeping with their capacity to concentrate, to manage the challenge of new relationships and to cope with success and failure.

The importance of a sense of *belonging* and family membership in this age range will be marked, as children are learning how to place themselves in relation to other people within the family, in school, in activities and in society more generally. Fostered and adopted children in this age period are likely to be asking questions about their situation, and in particular why their family is different from other children.

## **Trust**

Does the child

- seek comfort / help from other people appropriately (when needed but not excessively- balancing dependency and autonomy)
- have a selective attachment to particular caregivers
- use a caregiver as a secure base i.e. seek comfort, have his anxiety reduced and then explore / learn/ play
- trust people outside the family appropriately e.g. teachers, activity leaders, peer group
- indiscriminately seek out /showing affection to others
- manage friendships with peers their own age successfully

## **Managing feelings**

Does the child

- show a full range of basic feelings appropriately for their age (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger) without being overwhelmed by them
- communicate their feelings accurately in ways that can get their needs met
- talk about / reflect on their feelings
- talk about / reflect on the feelings of other people.
- show empathy for other children
- show more complex emotions of guilt, shame or remorse – and the wish to make things better
- understand and accept the rules at home and at school
- have effective strategies for managing their feelings and behaviour?

## **Self-esteem**

Does the child

- have positive self-esteem – think he/she is good at some things and accept not being good at others
- respond positively to praise at home or at school
- take a pride in their appearance
- feel positive about their school performance
- get involved in organised activities or hobbies
- gain pleasure and satisfaction from activities
- cope with the stresses of competing with others, academically and socially
- cope with failure and disappointment
- cope with being told off i.e. not despairing, shutting down or becoming aggressive

## **Feeling effective**

Does the child

- make choices
- assert themselves appropriately
- feel effective and confident
- follow through and complete tasks
- look after their things appropriately

## **Sense of belonging**

Does the child

- seem comfortable spending time with the foster /adoptive family
- seem willing / happy to be involved in family events
- see themselves as part of the foster /adoptive family
- see themselves as part of /connected to the birth family (appropriate to placement type)
- talk about the birth family in a realistic and balanced way?
- tell a coherent story of their childhood and family life that makes sense to them and is realistic

## **ADOLESCENCE 11-18 YEARS**

In assessment it is helpful to separate early from late adolescence. In many ways the transition from 11-15 is as critical as the transitions of the early years as young people negotiate puberty and changing family and social expectations in the process of becoming young teenagers. Assessment should focus on the extent to which the child is secure and psychologically robust enough to manage this step forward towards adulthood without loss of self-esteem - a special risk at around 12-13 years old.

The external environment for fostered and adopted young adolescents becomes a source of exciting opportunities, but also challenges and risks, as they face expectations to achieve at school alongside the increasing importance of the peer group. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are significant here, but so also is the negotiation of identity and family membership.

Older adolescents, age 16-18, still need a secure base that provides emotional support with availability of attachment figures and a sense of belonging / family membership. The transition to adulthood will need a whole range of personal, cognitive and emotional skills and resources, as well as external supports from families, friends and, where necessary, professionals.

## **Trust**

Does the young person

- seek comfort / help from other people appropriately while also becoming increasingly independent
- have a selective attachment to particular caregiver
- use a caregiver (or other adult) as a secure base ( e.g. seek comfort, have his/her anxiety reduced and then be confident to explore and learn)
- trust people outside the family appropriately (e.g. teachers, activity leaders, peer groups)
- discriminate between familiar people and strangers in seeking out /showing affection to others

## **Managing feelings**

Does the young person

- express a range of feelings appropriately
- manage difficult feelings without being overwhelmed by them, or denying them
- manage feelings and relationships appropriately with their peer group

- have a close confiding relationship with at least one friend
- think about /reflect on their own feelings and behaviour
- think about /reflect on other people's feelings and behaviour
- have constructive strategies for managing their feelings and behaviour

### **Self-esteem**

Does the young person

- have positive self-esteem – think he/she is good at some things and accept that he/she cannot be good at everything
- engage in purposeful activity that can offer a sense of identity and self-esteem
- enjoy learning and /or new activities
- feel positively about their school performance
- get involved in organised activities or hobbies
- gain pleasure and satisfaction from activities
- manage the stresses of competing with others, academically and socially
- cope with failure and disappointment (i.e. can think it through, remain positive)
- cope with being told off (i.e. not despairing, shutting down or becoming aggressive)

### **Feeling effective**

Does the young person

- think through options and make appropriate choices
- feel competent to get their needs met
- assert themselves appropriately
- co-operate with parents and other authority figures
- co-operate with peers – friends and siblings

### **Sense of belonging**

Does the young person

- have at least one supportive family to belong to
- see themselves as part of the foster /adoptive family
- see themselves as connected to / part of the birth family ( appropriate to placement type)
- have a balanced sense of identity in relation to their peer group e.g. value their opinions but can be true to themselves