



SECURE BASE DEVELOPMENTAL CHECKLIST

This checklist addresses the key indicators of secure attachment, across all five dimensions, for different age groups of children¹. It may be used in conjunction with the **Secure Base Interview**.

When there are negative responses, these need to be accompanied by a reflection on 'why?', for example, 'why is this baby not reacting to light or sound?', and also by a plan for capitalising on the strengths and repairing the difficulties.

0 - 6 months

- Does the child react appropriately (i.e. show interest/react but not panic or freeze) to light, sound, smell, touch, taste?
- Does the child show interest and pleasure in the environment?
- Does the child's face show a full range of emotions? Does the child frown, smile, laugh, rage, cry?
- Does/how does the child communicate their needs? For proximity? For food? For play?
- Does the child use a range of attachment behaviours to attract the caregiver's attention? Examples?
- Does the child accept affection/comfort? Can the child be soothed when upset/aroused?
- Is the child beginning to use the caregiver as a secure base for exploration?
- Does the child turn to/show interest in particular voices, faces, cuddles? If so who e.g. primary caregiver or older sister?
- Does the child vocalise?
- Can the child take turns with/converse with adults – initiating and responding to vocalising, facial movements?
- Does the child make choices/assert themselves?
- Is the child physically thriving and appropriately active?
- Is the child comfortable in their body - able to relax and also be active?
- Is the child sleeping regularly and in a relaxed way?
- Can the child wait – with help e.g. voice of caregiver?
- Is the child co-operating at least some of the time with nappy changes, feeding, going to sleep?
- What does the child do when stressed?
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships? (Start with 'I' statements, I am... Other people are...).

¹ We acknowledge the contribution of a range of authors who have developed similar questions (Vera Fahlberg and Kate Cairns), and also practitioners (such as Rachel Agnew, social worker with Norfolk Adoption and Family Finding Unit) whose assessment questions we found helpful.

In this age group the therapeutic parenting focus is on awakening or reawakening the child's drive/capacity for attachment building and exploration. This is best understood in the context of enabling the child to experience a rhythm to the day, in which equilibrium is restored after both routine (feeds, nappy changes) and unexpected (a dog barking, fireworks) disruptions. As these questions indicate, the child's use of their senses and comfort in their *body* provides a route to make contact with and soothe the young infant, but in asking these questions we are requiring caregivers to be *mind-minded* and tuned in to the infant's thinking and feeling so that the child begins to trust in the availability of a secure base.

6 months - 18 months

- Does the child show a clear preference for one or more attachment figures?
- Does the child target attachment behaviours at this/these attachment figures?
- Can the child use at least one attachment figure as a secure base for exploration?
- Can the child play independently and constructively?
- Does the child protest at separation from attachment figures?
- If so, how does the child protest at separation from attachment figures?
- Does this behaviour vary between attachment figures?
- Does the child settle to play at reunion?
- Is the child less keen on/wary of/frightened of being approached or held by a stranger?
- Does the child show a full range of feelings, both positive and negative?
- Is the child's vocalising becoming more recognisable as language/conversation? (e.g. some limited vocabulary, tone, intonation)
- Is the child comfortable in their body – able to relax or be active? Mostly regular in feeding and sleeping?
- Does the child seek/accept comfort when stressed?
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships?

During this period we are expecting to see some form of selective attachment and to be able to identify whether the attachment is more or less secure, using the patterns described earlier. The child's functioning and relationships need also to be understood in the context of the very first moves towards self-efficacy and autonomy, so play and exploration, and the early signs of communication and language readiness are important.

18 months - 3 years

- Can the child tolerate some gaps in caregiver availability?
- Does the child gain comfort from people (specific attachment figures?) rather than, or as well as objects (toys etc)?
- Is the child beginning to showing empathy (older end of this age range)?
- Can the child express a range of feelings but not be overwhelmed by them?
- Does the child use their mobility – to explore, to have fun, to approach, to learn?
- Can /does the child use language to communicate needs, feelings, ideas and goals openly and accurately? To ask questions, listen to the answers and learn?
- Can the child play let's pretend/ play symbolically? Engage in parallel play?
- Does the child ever pretend to feel what they are not feeling – seem false?
- Is the child managing increased independence without excessive assertiveness/oppositional behaviour?
- Is the child comfortable in his/her body, able to enjoy/manage sleeping, eating, toileting appropriate to his/her age?
- When stressed/anxious, does the child approach caregiver for help? (OR shut down on feelings; cling, demand and resist comfort; control others).
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships?

At this age, autonomy – dependency issues are particularly important and children will be needing to manage separations and the availability or otherwise of their attachment figures as they become more competent walkers and talkers. The family and the physical environment will be making a big difference, with some children being expected still to be babies while in other families much more self-reliance will be expected.

Caregivers can be encouraged to simply observe and gently comment on a child's play, thus giving powerful messages to the child both of their own competence and the parent's availability and interest in whatever they do.

3 - 4 years

- Can the child take the perspective of others? Understand that others have feelings, goals that differ from their own?
- Can the child name simple feelings?
- Can the child co-operate?
- Can the child successfully keep a secret? Tell a lie but accept being found out?
- How is the child managing peer group relationships? Balanced, prosocial, increasingly co-operative? Making and keeping friends?
- Can the child cope with not winning sometimes?
- When stressed/anxious, does the child approach caregiver for help? (OR shut down on feelings; cry, cling, demand but resist comfort; control others?).
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships?

If availability and the development of a secure base is a core task of infancy, it is mind-mindedness that is key to this crucial turning point developmentally and suggests the focus of therapeutic parenting. The child's capacity or lack of capacity at this age to reflect, to be empathic, to take the perspective of others, builds on the child's early experiences of being thought about in an attuned relationship and will be shaping the child's emergence into the world of peer relationships.

All insecure children will suffer to some extent with difficulties in making sense of the thoughts and feelings of others, but for disorganised children this lack of social or emotional intelligence will be accompanied by more deep-rooted fears that lead to the formation of controlling strategies at this age. The assessment needs to note the ways in which children are acknowledging or defending against painful feelings, which may then emerge as aggression or withdrawal. Parenting can be actively focused on a combination of promoting reflection and perspective taking and helping children to manage their feelings and behaviour in the light of this social and emotional education.

5 - 6 years

- Is the child managing the opportunities/pressures of school? Learning? Social relationships? Authority of teachers?
- Does the child have a conscience – show an understanding of and wish to abide by rules and expectations? Show shame, guilt wish to make reparation?
- Does the child cope reasonably well with being told off?
- Can the child say sorry and mean it?
- Does the child have positive self esteem – think he/she is 'good' at some things and accept that he/she cannot be good at everything?
- Does the child feel effective, able to assert themselves appropriately and make choices?
- Does the child look after things reasonably well?
- Does the child ask for help appropriately (sometimes but not excessively)?
- Does the child respond positively to praise? At home? At school?
- Does the child respect appropriate physical boundaries? With family members? With friends? With strangers?
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships?

Assessment of children during this transition period from home to school provides rich data which can indicate the likely nature of early years' experiences and also provide some hopeful or more worrying indicators of what is in store developmentally through the rest of middle childhood, depending on what kind of caregiving is available. The ways in which parent-child attachment relationships have shaped the mind and behaviour of the child will now emerge in the relationships with authority figures and peers. The expectation that children will be ready to learn may not be in keeping with the child's capacity to concentrate and manage the stress of relationships and of success and failure, academically and socially, without direct support. It is particularly challenging for a child who has not been reliably held in mind to cope with the demands of school, where a general lack of trust in the self or other people makes meeting a big group of children and adults an overwhelming experience.

Therapeutic caregiving must be targeted towards helping the child manage this tricky combination of stresses at home and school. This may need to include not only a focus on direct support for the child but also advocacy for the child with key people in a range of environments. A thoughtful and developmentally sensitive assessment can help predict what active help may be needed for each child to negotiate this transition successfully – enjoying the new school life rather than just surviving it.

7- 11 years

- Does the child like/feel proud of certain aspects of him or herself?
- Does the child understand and accept the rules at home? At school? Have strategies for managing their behaviour?
- Is the child happy to get involved in activities – organised activities or hobbies?
- Does the child have a balanced approach to friends – values friendship but can be true to himself?
- Does the child manage the stresses of competing with others, academically and socially?
- What might be the child's internal working model of self, others and relationships?

The tasks of this age period focus on managing the developing sense of self in the context of learning and following the social rules. Thus acceptance/self-esteem building and co-operation take centre stage in terms of parenting, though as ever within the context of an available secure base to which a child can retreat when the pressures of the playground or the classroom get too much. Assessing children of this age will require a degree of sensitivity to the real world pressures as well as the inner world meanings or difficulties for the particular child. A child of different ethnicity to the rest of the school community or a child with a physical or intellectual disability may find themselves under a range of pressures from adults and peers which would make even the most secure child angry or withdrawn. But it is likely to be necessary to recognise that the child's most usual defensive strategy – such as shutting down on their feelings when stressed – will be interacting with the pressures within and outside the family.

The necessary caregiving qualities will again be a mixture of sensitive availability to the child in the home and advocacy outside of it in order to ensure that external pressures are not preventing the child from becoming confident, competent and happy.

11 - 15 years

- Is the young person's thinking and behaviour reasonably flexible and adaptable to different situations?
- Can the young person express and manage difficult feelings appropriately?
- Can the young person accept and manage his or her changing body?
- Can the young person manage the changing expectations of school?
- Can the young person manage the changing expectations of the peer group?
- Is the young person's self esteem reasonably good (can he/she enjoy success and accept a degree of failure?).
- Can the young person co-operate with parents and other authority figures?
- Does the young person enjoy learning and /or activities?
- Is the young person able to be assertively his own person? (rather than being preoccupied with/going with whatever other people want?)

In many ways the transition from 11-15 is as critical as the transitions of the early years and this parallel is often noted by researchers and parents, given the shared tendency for young teenagers to at times be overwhelmed by strong feelings and to have outbursts which may be similar to 'tantrums'. Assessment with attachment in mind should focus on the extent to which the young person is secure and psychologically robust enough to weather this big step forward towards adulthood without loss of self esteem – a special risk at around 12-13 years old – and without being drawn into negative behaviour patterns that may in some cases start to write the young person's future life script e.g. via suspension from school, offending behaviour or early teenage parenthood. Young people in this age group may still be looking for a supportive permanent family, so assessments need to look very carefully at the young person's relationships and needs. Whether young people have been through multiple placements or have just arrived in care, a new attachment relationship in a new family should still be considered as an important opportunity, even where birth family ties are strong. The two are not mutually exclusive.

16 – 21 years

- Does the young person have at least one supportive family to belong to?
- Does the young person have a secure base – preferably an attachment relationship within a network of resources?
- Does the young person have a close confiding relationship with peers/friends?
Any relationship with friends?
- Is the young person engaged in purposeful activity that could offer identity and self-esteem – for example in education or at work or in fulfilling a role as a carer or parent?
- Does the young person feel competent e.g. to assert themselves appropriately, to try new things?
- Can the young person think about self and others, manage his or her own feelings and behaviour?
- Is the young person hopeful for the future?

In this age group the expression 'secure base' is used to include both the emotional support and availability of attachment figures *and* family membership. The transition to adulthood will need a whole range of personal skills and resources as well as external supports and resources that families, friends and, where necessary, agencies will provide.