

A Mixed-Methods Design and Implementation Study of ‘the Attach Project’: An Attachment-Based Educational Intervention for Looked after Children in Northern Ireland

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Abstract : ‘The Attach Project’ (TAP), is an educational intervention aimed at improving educational and socio-emotional outcomes for children who are looked after. TAP is underpinned by Attachment Theory and is adapted from Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), which is a treatment for children and young people impacted by complex trauma and disorders of attachment. TAP has been implemented in primary schools in Northern Ireland throughout the 2018/19 academic year. During this time, a design and implementation study has been conducted to assess the promise of effectiveness for the future dissemination and ‘scaling-up’ of the programme for a larger, randomised control trial. TAP has been designed specifically for implementation in a school setting and is comprised of a whole school element and a more individualised Key Adult-Key Child pairing. This design and implementation study utilises a mixed-methods research design consisting of quantitative, qualitative, and observational measures with stakeholder input and involvement being considered an integral component. The use of quantitative measures, such as self-report questionnaires prior to and eight months following the implementation of TAP, enabled the analysis of the strengths and direction of relations between the various components of the programme, as well as the influence of implementation factors. The use of qualitative measures, incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups, enabled the assessment of implementation factors, identification of implementation barriers, and potential methods of addressing these issues. Observational measures facilitated the continual development and improvement of ‘TAP training’ for school staff. Preliminary findings have provided evidence of promise for the effectiveness of TAP and indicate the potential benefits of introducing this type of attachment-based intervention across other educational settings. This type of intervention could benefit not only children who are looked after but all children who may be impacted by complex trauma or disorders of attachment. Furthermore, findings from this study demonstrate that it is possible for children to form a secondary attachment relationship with a significant adult in school. However, various implementation factors which should be addressed were identified throughout the study, such as the necessity of protected time being introduced to facilitate the development of a positive Key Adult- Key Child relationship. Furthermore, additional ‘re-cap’ training is required in future dissemination of the programme, to maximise ‘attachment friendly practice’ in the whole staff team. Qualitative findings have also indicated that there is a general opinion across school staff that this type of Key Adult- Key Child pairing could be more effective if it was introduced as soon as children begin primary school. This research has provided ample evidence for the need to introduce relationally based interventions in schools, to help to ensure that children who are looked after, or who are impacted by complex trauma or disorders of attachment, can thrive in the school environment. In addition, this research has facilitated the identification of important implementation factors and barriers to implementation, which can be addressed prior to the ‘scaling-up’ of TAP for a robust, randomised controlled trial.

Keywords : attachment, complex trauma, educational interventions, implementation

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