

Implementing the Secure Base model in residential care for children and young people: a practice guide

Introduction

As described in the *Introduction to the Secure Base model* on this website, the Secure Base model builds on attachment theory to provide a positive framework for therapeutic caregiving. This model helps caregivers to help children and young people of all ages, often from backgrounds of abuse, neglect and loss, to move towards greater feelings of security and resilience. It is based on the core concept of providing a psychological secure base for exploration, which children and young people in care will need to help them to recover from previous adversity and trauma in order to fulfil their potential for learning and for enjoying positive relationships.

The focus in the model on the quality of day-to-day caregiving and the relationships between caregivers and young people makes it very relevant to residential care. The model focuses on the interactions that occur between caregivers and children on a day to day, minute by minute basis within a caregiving environment. But it also considers how those relationships can enable the child to develop competence and rewarding relationships in the outside world of school, peer group and community. This is a key goal for young people in residential care and moving on to adulthood.

Attachment theory itself has traditionally been understood as relating primarily to family relationships, but the increasing use of the theory for understanding as well as supporting children in other group contexts, such as schools, shows how valuable attachment theory and the concept of a secure base can be in the group context of residential care.

The caregiving cycle and the five dimensions that make up the Secure Base model are relevant for residential care, as they are for schools and families. This is also true of other resources such as the *Secure Base checklists* and the *Secure Base interviews for caregivers* and *for children and young people*, under *Resources*.

However, it is important to think about how Secure Base caregiving by individual and groups of staff members works in residential care, so a specific training programme, training guide are provided, also under *Resources*.

Implementation of the Secure Base model in residential care

The Secure Base model offers an attachment-based framework that can support therapeutic caregiving and children's healthy development in residential care. Young people coming into residential care are likely to have experienced a range of trauma, loss, and separation, so they will need targeted, sensitive support in their relationships with staff.

In residential care, staff are working as a team with individual young people and with the group. It is therefore necessary for care principles and caregiving approaches, such as the Secure Base model can offer, to be agreed in policy and implemented in consistent day-to-day practice. Local authorities placing young people with a particular care provider will also expect to see clarity about the theoretical and caregiving framework that is being offered, as will Ofsted. There will also be expectations in any placement plan that there is a good fit between the needs of the young person and the caregiving approach and resources available. Care providers will therefore need to define their caregiving approach and the young people who they feel most able to care for in a stable and successful placement that helps them to fulfil their potential.

A commitment to using the Secure Base model can work alongside other important areas of practice, and it's helpful for links to the Secure Base dimensions to be made. For example, undertaking life-story work with a young person needs a basis of availability and trust and through acceptance can build a child's self-esteem as well as promoting a sense of belonging and identity.

Ideas for implementation of the Secure Base model in a range of agencies have been set out in the *Secure Base implementation guide*(Under *Resources*) . Here some specific ideas are discussed in relation to residential care.

1. Incorporating the Secure Base model as part of the underpinning theoretical framework for delivering positive care and monitoring young people's progress.

Where there is a decision to use the Secure Base model as a framework, it is helpful for there to be an explicit commitment. This could include, for example, statements in policy documents and on websites as well as adopting some practice tools, as described below, to embed the Secure Base model in day-to-day care of young people.

2. Providing training for residential care staff on the Secure Base model

It would be expected that part of the induction of new staff would include an introduction to the Secure Base model alongside other key elements of the home's practice. This can then be followed up by a more detailed follow up training session once new staff are able to reflect on experiences of caring for young people using the model.

The one-day *Secure Base model training session for residential care* provides: an introduction to the context of attachment theory; an understanding of the impact of trauma, abuse, separation and loss on children; an explanation of the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving using the caregiving cycle and exploring each of the five dimensions as applied to the residential care setting. Participation is encouraged, with case examples and exercises included to help participants make connections with the experiences of young people in their care and their own day-to-day practice. This could be used with the case examples only as an introduction to new staff or with a mix of case examples and exercises for participants to reflect on young people already in their care.

The training session on the website has the PPTs with notes attached. This is accompanied by a *trainer guide* for the session, also with the PPTs and notes but as a Word file and with additional guidance. These documents are detailed so that this session could be delivered by a member of staff within the home or by an external trainer.

3. Using Secure Base model practice tools

A number of areas of residential care practice can benefit from using the Secure Base model to support positive relationships and to promote a young person's developmental progress and sense of well-being.

- **Assessment and care planning**

Tools from the website are available for assessing young people using the five Secure Base dimensions. The *Secure Base checklists* provide age related examples of behaviour that help to identify and understand how the child is functioning on each dimension.

Assessments may be undertaken prior to placement to check suitability of the placement for a particular child or soon after placement to identify strengths and difficulties and develop a care plan. The *Secure Base interview for caregivers* can offer further insights into how children are settling in and developing on the five dimensions, but also how staff interactions with children are working to provide caregiving on each dimension.

The process of assessment using the model can also assist in care planning and supporting a young person during a move. This might, for example, be a return home, a move to a relative, a foster carer or to supported lodgings. The dimensions can be used to assess the young person's needs from their new environment as well as to think about the match with new caregivers and the support the young person might need during and after the move.

It's an important principle for young people to be involved in assessments that staff undertake and are then using to develop care plans. There is a *Secure Base interview for children and young people* which can be used flexibly to provide a framework for a discussion and a basis for engaging a young person in reflecting on how they view, for example, their capacity to manage their emotions, as well as what they find helpful from adults.

- **Recording and reviewing**

Using an assessment and care plan, the model dimensions can be used as part of daily records and at regular review meetings to monitor the young person's progress over time.

Daily records would not need to address all five dimensions every day, but references to the dimensions in relation to particular incidents can provide a framework for making sense of a particular day's experience for a young person, perhaps who needs sensitivity in managing specific anxieties or, in contrast, finding the self-esteem and confidence to try new activities.

For a fuller periodic review it would be necessary to check how a young person is progressing on all five dimensions and which caregiving approaches may be making a difference. There is a *Secure Base progress record* template under *Resources*, which includes reflections on what caregiving approaches the young person has found helpful and suggests future directions. This simple template can be adapted for different review purposes.

- **Staff supervision and support**

If the Secure Base model is being used in assessment, care planning and reviewing young people, it will inevitably need to underpin staff supervision, both with individual staff and the staff group. Case discussion of young people, for example, can apply the Secure Base dimensions as a way of reflecting on young people's behaviour and interactions with staff and with each other. This discussion can highlight aspects of caregiving which may have or could in future support a young person's progress.

An important part of that discussion with staff, as individuals and as a group, will be around the emotional impact on staff of their caring roles: in supporting young people's positive feelings and behaviour, but also in listening to and helping them manage more negative feelings of distress and anger. This range of feelings is common in adolescence, but is likely to have become intensified and can become overwhelming for young people in care as a result of their experiences of trauma and loss.

In helping staff to manage their own emotional reactions so that they can stay available to support young people, it can be helpful to refer to the adapted version of the Secure Base model designed to support staff in agency teams *The Team as Secure Base*. The core principle here is that just as children need help to manage their anxiety in order to trust, manage their feelings, maintain their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and feel that they belong, so do adults in their work environments.

All work environments and teams can benefit from this awareness, but the work environment of a residential home for young people presents staff with a range of personal and professional challenges because of the importance of relationships in the outcomes for

young people. So when implementing the Secure Base model as a framework for thinking about what children need from relationships with staff, a parallel focus needs to be around what support staff need from relationships with supervisors and colleagues in order to provide those relationships with young people and find their work a positive and rewarding experience. Staff can use the Secure Base dimensions to reflect on how their team is working together and providing each other with available and sensitive support. In addition to the benefits to staff of working in a cohesive, supportive team, the trust, emotional regulation, consideration and co-operation that staff show for each other becomes a model for young people to learn from.

4. Communicating with other agencies

As mentioned above, outside agencies thinking of placing a young person need clarity about the theoretical and practical framework that a residential home offers, but this is just one of the benefits of a well-articulated approach. At all stages in a placement, it is helpful to have a shared language in which to discuss the young person's progress or to assess the needs of a young person in difficulties where the placement may be under stress. The Secure Base model is an accessible way of communicating both about what is on offer in a home and about the progress and needs of individual young people.

