

## Brain development and the impact of transitions

Information taken from “Understanding Transitions in the Early Years – Supporting Change through Attachment and Resilience”, Anne O’Connor, 2018.

“It is important to remember that, in the early years of a child’s life, the higher rational brain is still very undeveloped and it is the lower brain that is “in the driving seat” (Sunderland, 2006). This means that the primitive impulses and alarm systems of the lower brain will be constantly triggered – and quickly becomes overwhelming – because the higher brain isn’t developed enough yet to help them use reason and rational thought to soothe these powerful emotions and feelings of threat.”

“Knowing about the alarm systems lodged deep in the lower brain is very helpful for us as practitioners. We need to understand the emotions and feelings of babies and young children experiencing something they perceive as a threat to their survival ... The alarm systems can kick in at the slightest thing – the brain is fundamentally reacting to the perceived threat and isn’t able to rationalise whether the threat is real.”

**“It is the warm, affectionate, loving responses from a recognised attachment figure that soothe the overwhelming fear of abandonment or threat...”**

**Bowlby stresses the importance of secondary attachment figures. The one thing that most effectively soothes the distress of separation from the primary attachment figure is the responsive presence and affectionate, caring attentions of another familiar carer.”**

“The separation distress system in a young child is hypersensitive – it has to stay constantly on the alert for the threat of abandonment. Over time, the repetition of loving and predictable responses will build strong connections in the brain so that it becomes less sensitive.

**This early instinctive separation anxiety, however, can last until a child is well over the age of five years old (Sunderland 2006). This is exactly the time period we are concerned with as early years practitioners trying to understand the impact of transitions.”**

“Margot Sunderland reminds us that it is not over-dramatic to talk of the “pain” of separation. She writes that ‘When a child is suffering because of the absence of a parent, the same parts of the brain are activated as when she is feeling physical pain’ (Sunderland, 2006)

Sunderland points out that as a society we are perhaps more ready to recognise and comfort a child’s physical pain than we are the emotional pain of separation. We also have a tendency to underestimate the impact of stress on a child’s brain – and ultimately, on their physical and emotional well-being.”

“When the brain perceives a threat, it triggers reactions in the body prepare us to ‘fight, flight or freeze’ – the three actions for which we are instinctively primed in times of physical threat.” As a result children “might:

**fight** – with prolonged crying and resistance, aggressive or challenging behaviour;

**take flight** – by running from the situation, either literally in the sense that they try to run home, or emotionally by resisting attention from unfamiliar people; or

**freeze** – by being physically withdrawn, staying in the same place, not moving or moving very slowly, as well as shutting down emotionally.”

**As practitioners we might see these kinds of behaviours quite frequently, but how often do we trace them back to the child’s response to the ‘threat’ of being away from home?”**