

BUILDING THE BONDS OF ATTACHMENT

Betty J.B. Brouwer

A number of changes and developments have been taking place at Salem as a result of the visioning that Salem's board and staff have been engaged in over the last couple of years. As a result Salem has begun developing a *Building Healthy Attachments* program. The intent of this program is to reach out to those struggling with attachment related issues, e.g. foster families, adoptive parents and adoptees, or those dealing with trauma.

Attachment occurs in relationship. It is a learned way of relating to others. Our initial attachments serve as a template or foundation for future patterns of relating to others. The ability of the parent and child to form a secure and healthy attachment influences how the child then navigates other relationships in life. Children who have had traumatic experiences, who have experienced loss, abuse, neglect or relinquishment and adoption may be hampered in their abilities to form healthy attachments.

Although the attachment template is forged at a very early age the exciting prospect about working in the area of facilitating healthy attachments is the possibility and potential of hope: the ability for change and resiliency. Altering those first templates that were forged on mistrust, fear, and/or neglect is possible. Hope is always present and it is that hope that helps a person persevere despite the tragedies, hurts and suffering within the world, within families, and within children.

The following case study illustrates the attachment struggle and the healing that can come when a healthy attachment is achieved.

Anna* is a nine year old girl who has been living in a kinship care arrangement (extended family member) for the last 4 years. In her short life Anna has lived in a variety

of different family arrangements, experiencing neglect in her early years and the loss of both her parents as they were either unable or chose not to be involved in her life.

Anna, although academically capable, had difficulties in school. Completing work, getting along with other children, and simply coping with the routine of the day proved to be very challenging for Anna. At Salem our work involved both Anna and her kinship care provider as we focused on issues related to attachment, helping Anna cope with the loss of family and her sense of self-worth.

Anna is making positive gains in her school setting, socially and at home. Since Anna's kinship provider has been caring for Anna consistently over the past years and the courts have now finally given full legal custodial rights to Anna's kinship provider, Anna has been able to move forward and make gains. Once she was able to fully realize that she would not be leaving her current home she was in a secure enough environment for her to begin to explore more fully a wide range of memories, emotions, and current experiences that could be potentially frightening, shameful,

and therefore had been habitually avoided or denied. Anna continues to experience ups and downs, although more ups than downs as she grows in security in the stability of her current situation. She is making up for lost experiences that she needed as a child to develop a secure and healthy attachment.

And hope, always present, continues to grow. In fact Anna and her kinship care provider drew a picture depicting this hope. Anna, describing the picture, said, "This is the hope and it is getting bigger (compared to an earlier picture where the hope was quite small). It is going to keep getting bigger and bigger." When the question was posed as to what is allowing the hope to grow, Anna immediately responded, "Because I know I will always have a place to live with someone who cares for me." This sense of security, the growing healthy attachment, will provide Anna with a solid base from which to continue to grow and develop. Anna will likely have to grapple with questions about her family situation as she matures, but she has the security of a home that is for always and in which she is unconditionally loved and accepted.



*Betty J.B. Brouwer, M.Sc., brings together over 15 years of experience working with children, adolescents, and their families, receiving art and play therapy training as well as the ongoing experience she acquires in parenting her own children. Betty has completed the advanced level (level 3) training with Dr. Daniel Hughes, a leading specialist from Maine, USA, in the field of Attachment. Betty is part of CO-Place, a group of senior therapists from Ancaster to Cobourg, who work in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, and who meet regularly for peer supervision and consultation. Betty is available to discuss any questions you may have, and is available to explore how Salem can work with you and your specific situation. Salem also has available a DVD titled: *Building the Bonds of Attachment*, by Dr. Daniel Hughes. If you are interested in borrowing this DVD please contact the Salem office.*

* not her real name