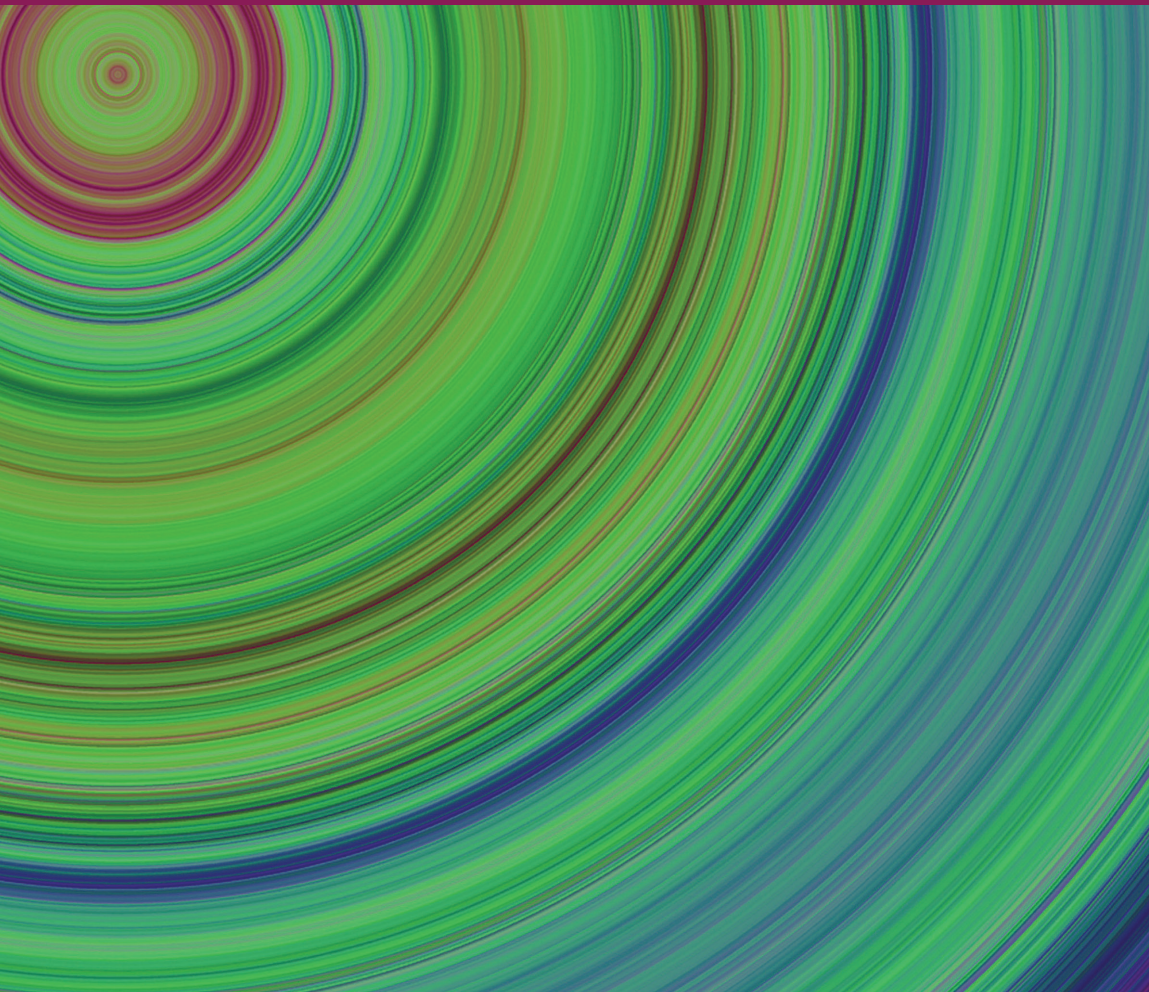


Places of Safety

How Attachment Shapes Our Parenting

Alix Hearn



Psychotherapy Matters



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For the four directions and the four elements, and for all the more-than-human beings.

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About the author

Alix Hearn, MA Child Psych, PgDip Supvn, UKCP, is an integrative child and adolescent psychotherapist, ecopsychotherapist, and clinical supervisor with fourteen years' experience of specialist working with children, young people, and families. She has worked within schools, specialist trauma and adoption teams, child and adolescent mental health services, residential children's homes, and private practice. In the last few years, Alix has focused more on her other first love of writing, and her chapter "Ecopsychotherapy with children and young people in mind: Attachment to place, nature, and landscape" in *One Tree, Many Branches: The Practice of Integrative Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, ed. by B. Merrick and D. Gammage, was published by Phoenix in 2024. Alix is currently working on a number of non-fiction and therapeutic books.

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Introduction

Something happens inside me when I walk. A rewilding.
My hair becomes thorn, and nettle, and dandelion. When
I'm with the sea, with the water, I am crab, and limpet, and moss.
I finally arrive at the edge. I can hear her before I can see her.
The sea-witches have returned—soaking one sock, one walking
boot, swallowed up. I, now too, am claimed.
Mortehoe, Devon 2019



If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents.
—John Bowlby¹

What is this book about?

Some of the material in this book may be familiar to you, and some of it may stir up difficult and painful feelings. I encourage you to take your time as you go through the chapters and notice how you feel in relation to the content. Many people become therapists because they have a keen awareness and sensitivity to the impact of trauma, ruptured attachments, and the need for repair and resolution. The book has been written with those who are parents or carers in mind. And for those who are interested in their own histories of being parented, especially if these have been particularly difficult. Or you might work with children already, or be interested in working with children in some capacity. I bring my own multiplicity of identities to this writing. I am both therapist and client, supervisor and supervisee, tutor and student. You may want to read from start to finish or dip into chapters that you feel drawn to.

I feel called to revisit these therapeutic principles that were taught in my own child psychotherapy training at Terapia in London, and subsequent therapeutic experiences. I still recall learning about attachment for the first time and how much this helped put some of my own personal and relational struggles within a framework that finally made sense. Consciously (and unconsciously), I have been motivated to write on this subject for its personal resonance as I have explored “ghosts” in my own family history; the impact of intergenerational trauma on attachments, and “broken” or disrupted attachments. It is my own regret that I did not ask my parents more about their relationships with their elders and their own experiences of parenting. I’m not sure any therapist-writer writes unless they too are in the process of exploration, understanding, and meaning-making. I hope some of these connections and reflections within will aid both your own personal and professional endeavours.

The book aims to explore further the nature of our attachment bonds with others, especially when there are challenging circumstances at play. It is one of the greatest myths in our Western society that we are separate and exist as individuals. Of course, we do, to some extent, but we are not born into individualism. Whether we like it or not, we are born into complex systemic constellations—dyads, triads, families, systems, communities, and cultures. Neuroscience and its relationship to psychotherapy provides us with a language around the vital need for connection to grow and thrive as thinking and feeling beings. Working with children, young people, parents, carers, and families (in all their differences and complexities) requires systemic thinking to provide safety nets, scaffolds, and collaboration.

With this in mind, let’s consider the theme of attachment. The words attached and attachment are weighted then. What image comes to your mind when you think of this? What does it mean to be attached? Is this experienced as a “good” or “bad” thing? In my experience, there can be much judgement and pathology around this—to be attached is to be dependent, reliant, stuck to. For others, it means closeness, proximity, and safety. What does it feel like to be attached to another? What does it feel like to not be attached? Whether we realise it or not, we will all have implicit and explicit thoughts and beliefs about what it means to be

attached to another or to something other. The work of psychotherapy is to uncover where some of these assumptions were born. How these beliefs affect our ways of being with others and ourselves. The work of attachment does not stop when we become parents, or grandparents, or move from one developmental transition to another. In fact, our attachments are highlighted and magnified at these most crucial and vulnerable times.

I will return to the earlier ideas of attachment rooted in our relationship to the environment. How the macro is also part of the micro, and how we cannot remove ourselves from the constant interplay between self-and-other/self-and-other-in-context. We all exist in relationship to other humans, and we all are ecologically situated. I have focused on aspects of attachment and parenting that I am particularly curious about and drawn to. It is sadly not within the scope and remit of this book to explore wider avenues and pathways with regard to parenting and attachment within different cultures and communities across the world. I hope to return to some of these explorations in future writing—especially in the context of what “home” means in a world of global instability and displacement. I would like to add that my intention is not to blame or shame individuals, parents/carers. Much therapeutic literature focuses on pathology and the impact of when things “go wrong”. I believe in the power of holding both hope and despair. I believe in the power of psychotherapy and making sense of our own histories. Can we all step into our capacity as elders, as ancestors, to those living and dead? Let us all bear witness. We are only okay if *all* of us are okay. The work continues.

Grief and gratitude walk together.

As an integrative child psychotherapist, my influences surrounding this book’s conception are many and varied. I look to ecopsychology to help guide my own way, and the interdependency and interconnect-edness between all beings, whether human or “more-than-human”.² The etymology of the word *eco*—from the Greek word *oikos*—meaning dwelling, homestead, place, inspires my thoughts on a home for all beings, and what a place of safety might mean.

Nature weaves throughout the book, providing a wraparound holding and containing environment. We will visit different “places” together.

Attachment and child mental health

When I was a trainee child psychotherapist, I was fortunate that my first clinical placement focused its lens on attachment within a multi-disciplinary Tier 2 Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) team. We were able to offer long-term work, systemic ways of thinking and working with families, and dyadic work between parents/carers where appropriate. There was an inherent understanding of the necessity of long-term therapeutic relating and support. We were encouraged to offer a rigorous approach involving assessment processes, parental consultations, and considered clinical thinking about clients. Looking back, this now seems rare, but it set a foundation for my own way of working and approach with clients.

Much has changed since I trained, and even though attachment underpins child-led therapy training, it seems harder to follow this thread through in practice. Ongoing themes I have noticed within the profession of child counselling and child psychotherapy over the past ten years include a conscious reduction in the number of sessions provided to child and adolescent clients. The focus being on reducing waiting lists and trying to see as many clients as possible, regardless of what the client actually needs. It's fair to say, in some cases, a conveyor belt of intervention. Some services which used to offer long-term work now only offer a small number of sessions to clients who are highly traumatised and with severe attachment needs. I don't agree with the assumption that "something is better than nothing". Clients are invited to engage in a therapeutic process, to start to form a therapeutic relationship, and then the therapist will leave after six sessions. Now what? The wider worlds of psychotherapy and counselling are becoming increasingly manualised, digitalised, and monetised. There is now more than ever a confusing and overwhelming array of "therapeutic" interventions advertised. All too often, I hear horror stories from children, young people, and their carers about the lack of care and compassion offered. It is no wonder that some people are losing trust and faith in reaching out for therapeutic support and its efficacy.

As opposed to adult work, the child client has little agency or power here. It feels like mental health professionals are also becoming part of the problem by not challenging assumptions and systemic

failures, or even creating new systems. Most importantly, advocating for clients and what they need. Many clients, following a brief intervention, get kicked back into the system for further support down the line. Their “symptoms” are still highly activated and alive. Mental health clinicians are making and perpetuating their own myths here. The symptom located in the child/young person is the problem, and therefore the child is the problem which needs fixing, curing, or improving in some way.

To be honest, I am tired of it.

Though I understand the need for attending to as many clients in need as possible, other systemic issues are being set up: trust and the building of attachment between client and therapist requires time, patience, and compassion. The work of child psychotherapy is about waiting, trusting, and fostering these qualities within the therapeutic relationship. Being reflective and encouraging reflexivity, not reactive. I think we are in danger of minimising what child counselling and child psychotherapy can do when there is not a fixed agenda or strict time limit to “make better” and reduce symptoms or challenging behaviours (which, of course, begs the question—challenging for whom?). We need a sea-change within child mental health. How professionals rigorously and thoughtfully formulate their approach to working with children, young people and families, and what this looks like in practice.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 sets the ground for the rest of the book, exploring the origins of attachment and its connections with feelings of physical and emotional safety. We will consider how attachment styles and the adult attachment interview aid the construction of internalised narratives. The importance of culture and contemporary thinking on attachment will be introduced. Finally, perinatal attachment and the ecology of becoming a parent are explored.

Chapter 2 focuses on recent and contemporary research from neuroscience and its links with the formation of attachment between parent and child. Areas explored include the neurobiological underpinnings of attachment, the making of a parental brain, and the imprint of epigenetics between parent–child attachment and future generations.

Chapter 3 reflects on wider influences on parent–child attachment formation. We will explore intergenerational and transgenerational concepts, including the nature of ghostly attachments and their impact upon current parent–child relating. We will explore the creation of family narratives and family scripts, and where some of these core beliefs might stem from.

Finally, we will consider how the capacity to mentalize is rooted in attachment relationships and helps us to understand others, and our own thoughts and feelings.

Chapter 4 extends the web of parent–child attachment relationships further, reflecting on the parent–child relationship in its ecological context. We will explore how attachment is connected to loss, weaving together themes of ecology, belonging, displacement, and relinquishment. This is held together against a backdrop of colonisation and the need for decolonisation.

How can we find our places of safety, of sanctuary, in a world which is inherently unsafe?

Clinical vignettes are fictionalised but based on my clinical experiences of working with children, young people and families.