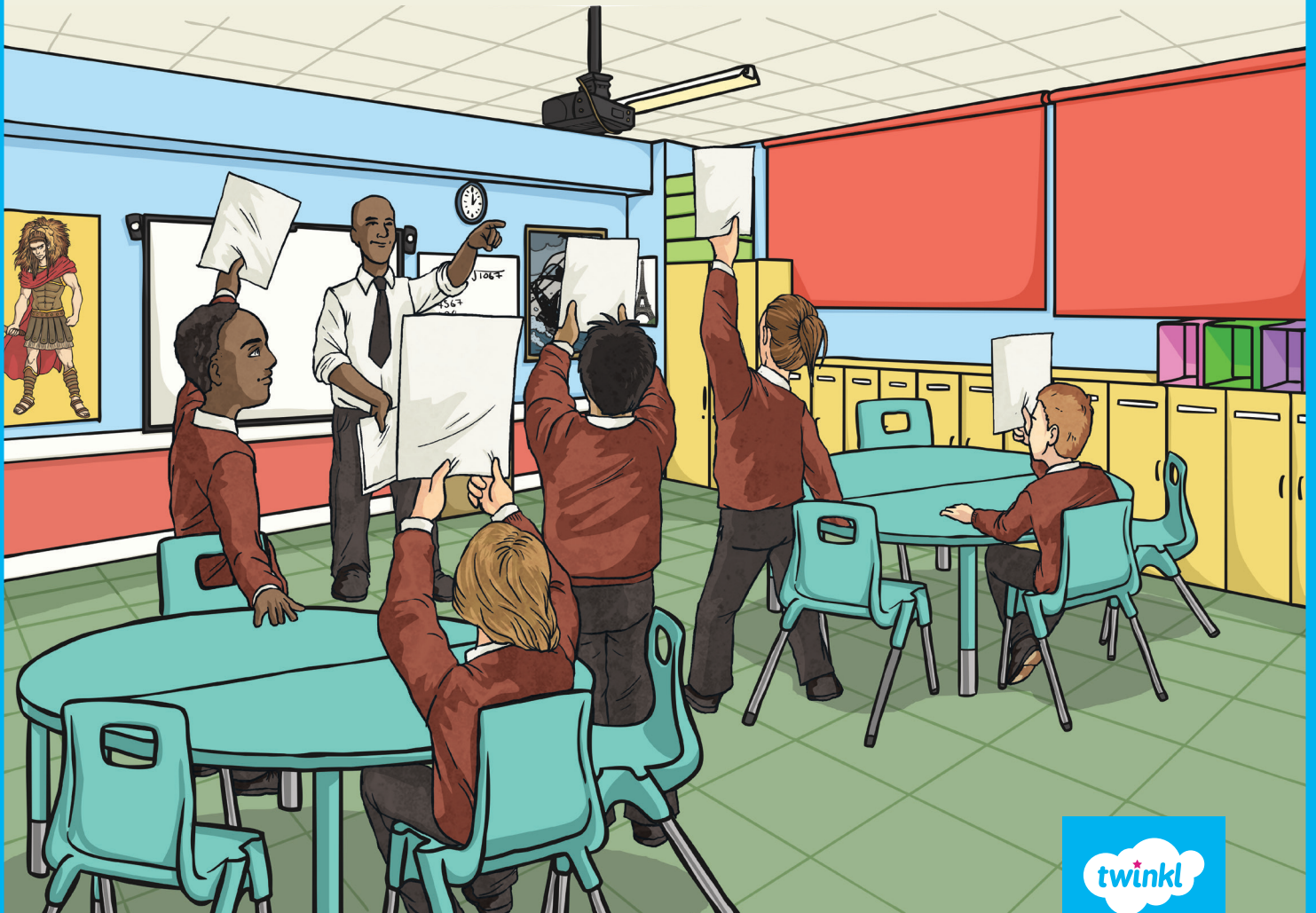


Barriers to Learning

Information on Attachment Disorder



What is Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)? Information for Teachers

As a teacher, you may well come across children who have a diagnosis of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), but what does that mean and how can you start to identify a child who may have this?

What is attachment and why is it important?

Attachment theory originates from the work of a psychiatrist called John Bowlby who, in 1958, suggested that having an absent mother has a significant negative effect on psychological development, not just in childhood, but throughout life. He also said that this could lead to an increase in poor behaviour, aggression, emotional deregulation, and depression.

Further studies found that chronic neglect or abuse at an early age could lead to Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) as a result of crucial early relationships are not properly formed. This chronic early mistreatment means a child does not have the chance to bond properly, or have a deep and safe relationship with one single care giver. This abuse or neglect often involves: physical or emotional abuse; a child being abandoned; a parent or carer who has a drug addiction; a frequent number of foster placements; or some kind of emotional trauma like separation from a primary care giver. It can also be the result of a mother suffering from post-natal depression and struggling to form deep attachments to her child.

What is it like to have reactive attachment disorder?

What children who have suffered early emotional mistreatment share is a deep mistrust of the world and a belief that adults in their life will not keep them safe. They then develop 'working models' of the world to protect themselves from hurt. This means that they may struggle to: develop relationships with others which allow them to trust; accept boundaries and discipline; develop empathy; develop 'cause and effect' thinking; develop self-control and a sense of responsibility. Children with Reactive Attachment Disorder see the world through a different lens and may possess the following beliefs about themselves:

- When I get attention from others, even if it is negative, it feels good.
- Whatever response I get from people makes me feel in control.
- I get more attention when I am making the teacher cross than when I am sitting quietly.
- Negative attention when I make the teacher cross is more exciting and stimulating than positive attention when I am behaving myself.
- The best way to get attention is to create a crisis; this means that I am the centre of attention and in control.
- I need to control my world, so if the teacher asks me to do something, I will do something different.
- Adults in my life don't respond to my needs, so I will not try or put any effort into what I am doing.
- I want to be your friend, but if I let you get close, I feel unsafe. I will respond by either saying unkind things or physically hurting you.
- My early experiences have created an internal working model of the world which includes relationships that mirror those early experiences and which are projected onto current relationships. This means that I cannot trust you and will break down the relationship I have with you.

Symptoms and indicators of Reactive Attachment Disorder

Not all children with Reactive Attachment Disorder behave in the same way and not every child who exhibits these behaviours has RAD, but here are some common behaviours and signs for you to look out for:

- aggressive and angry behaviours with little or no triggers;
- disproportionately demanding;
- difficult relationships with those closest to them;
- oppositional and defiant without seemingly valid cause;
- acute need to control other people, including peers (potential bullying), teachers and parents;
- inability to form trusting and close relationships and friendships;
- can be violent, deliberately hurtful and cruel;
- a pre-occupation with fire and arson;
- is manipulative and knows how to 'push buttons';
- acting out sexually, or using sex for manipulation;
- impulsive with little sense of cause and effect.

If you have any concerns about a child in your class, speak to the parents to get an understanding of the child and refer them to the SBST and DBST, who will be able to offer support and advice.

Top Tips

Managing Children with Reactive Attachment Disorder

As a teacher, you may well come across children who have a diagnosis of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). Here are 12 top tips for managing their behaviour in class:

1. **Keep your classroom orderly** with clear and consistent routines - this will stop the child from feeling unsafe and minimise disruptive behaviours.
2. Maintain **boundaries** at all times – be firm and consistent, and ensure that you keep your interactions with the child professional. Do not confuse the child with mixed messages.
3. The child may **not be able to recognise or work within usual social boundaries**. They may call you by your first name, make personal comments to embarrass you, or want to find out things about your personal life. The best response is to keep calm and **remind the child** about what is appropriate to ask and say.
4. Be **clear** and **direct** in your interactions with the child and always have **eye contact** – don't leave any room for ambiguity, as the child could use this to manipulate situations.
5. A child with RAD struggles to understand cause and effect, so you will need to **teach** them the **consequences of their actions**. Make sure that the child is aware of what the consequences of both poor and good behaviour are in advance and remind them on a regular basis. Remember to stick to them - say what you mean and mean what you say!
6. Be **specific** when giving **compliments** or **reprimands**. Instead of saying "good job", try saying "you drew a lovely picture" or "you haven't finished your work - you will have to stay in at break time to finish it."
7. **Time out** of a lesson does **not** work for a child with RAD; it just reinforces their sense of being in control. If a child needs to be removed from an activity, try using '**time in**' – this means moving the child next to you to observe the rest of the class for a while, then quietly ushering them to join in.
8. **Don't lose you temper** or allow the child to 'push your buttons'. They may be simply trying to get a reaction out of you, so the calmer you remain, the easier it will be for you to support and challenge their poor behaviour.
9. Children are often very **superficially charming** and seek your attention and affection. They may try to climb on your knee or snuggle up to you. Remind the child that you are the teacher and guide them back to their parent/carer for hugs, affection and emotional support.
10. Respond to the child in an emotionally attuned way and maintain **positive regard** – that means making the child aware that, even if their behaviour isn't acceptable, you still value them. Try to do this calmly and unemotionally at all times.
11. **Avoid prolonged periods of being alone** with a child with RAD; this could lead to allegations and safeguarding concerns by way of the child seeking attention and control. Always ask for a witness if you anticipate such a situation, such as when the pupil is asked to stay in over breaktime.
12. **Communicate** regularly with the parent or carer. Try to arrange face-to-face meetings with the parent/carer, and do so before a situation escalates. A child with RAD can often play the role of victim in a given situation in order to manipulate adults into disagreements. Avoid sending messages home with the child, or any kind of planner/record with notes in; these can easily be misplaced.

Attachment Disorder Checklist

The child...	Comment
is often angry and aggressive; ☐	
will deliberately hit, pinch or bite other children; ☐	
will say cruel and hurtful things to other children and adults; ☐	
is often argumentative over unimportant things; ☐	
is bossy; ☐	
is manipulative and likes to get his/her own way; ☐	
gets inappropriately angry when he/she doesn't get their own way; ☐	
finds it difficult to comply to set boundaries; ☐	
often needs to control others; ☐	
often needs to control the situation; ☐	
cannot tolerate external control or boundaries; ☐	
has a lack of remorse or conscience; ☐	
shows a lack of empathy; ☐	
is inappropriately clingy and demanding; ☐	
perceives himself or herself as a victim; ☐	

The child...**Comment**

will play adults off against one another;	☐	
does not show affection to their care giver;	☐	
will be indiscriminately and inappropriately affectionate to strangers;	☐	
lacks trust in adults such as parents and teachers;	☐	
has inappropriate emotional responses;	☐	
cannot relate his/her own emotions;	☐	
cannot maintain long term friendships;	☐	
will often lie;	☐	
blames others for his/her own mistakes;	☐	
perceives others as dangerous and unsafe.	☐	

