

# Is Attachment Theory and the concept of a 'Secure Base' relevant to supporting women during the process of resettlement?

Observations from The Women's Turnaround Project, Cardiff

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## Abstract

The Women's Turnaround Project (TWTP) provides female offenders and those at risk of offending with a gateway to multi-service support on a voluntary basis. Each client is allocated a key worker to facilitate support in a wide variety of areas. The purpose of this research was threefold:

- To explore attachment to parents during childhood and adolescence in the clients engaging with TWTP: Was a 'secure base' lacking in childhood/adolescence and prior to intervention?
- To examine whether attachment needs are addressed by TWTP: Does the key worker and client relationship provide a 'secure base' for female offenders during the resettlement process? If so, how is this achieved and what are the difficulties faced?
- To highlight good practice and make suggestions to improve future practice for TWTP, the Probation Service and other agencies working with women during the resettlement process.

## Findings

- Nine clients and six key workers were interviewed.
- Six clients appeared to describe a lack of a secure base during childhood and all nine seemed to describe a lack of a secure base as adults. All nine clients appeared to be seeking a secure base through their referral to TWTP and all appeared to have found one in their key workers.
- All six of the key workers interviewed understood to a greater or lesser degree the effect of childhood experiences on their clients' self-esteem and ability to trust.
- All six key workers recognised their role in providing a secure base and assisting the women in internalising this by increasing their self-esteem and empowerment. This they appeared to be achieving in large part through their personal characteristics of emotional warmth and friendliness but also through the voluntary and indefinite nature of the intervention.
- Preserving small caseloads, sensitively maintaining professional boundaries and managing transfer of cases has served to sustain the project's integrity and ability to support their clients with their attachment needs.

## Recommendations

- Further research would be valuable in examining whether addressing attachment needs decreases the risk of re-offending for those women engaging with TWTP.
- Also useful would be a comparison study between those women working with TWTP and those subject to Probation Service supervision only, with regards their relationships with their key workers and Offender Managers (OMs).
- Further research focusing on the effect of never having or indeed losing a secure base on offending behaviour for women would also be helpful.
- Key workers and senior staff members should be introduced to the concepts of Attachment Theory and in particular the 'Secure Base' and the 'Therapeutic Alliance' to improve their understanding of their clients and the role they can play in supporting them.
- Future recruitment should focus on the personal characteristics of potential staff members as well as on previous experience and training.
- Care must be taken to continue to keep caseload levels low. The need to transfer cases should be minimised and — when unavoidable — managed sensitively with consideration given to the client's attachment needs and the problems transfer could cause.
- TWTP should continue to remain a voluntary service providing support indefinitely. Secure funding should be provided.
- Agencies and projects looking to follow TWTP into providing holistic support to women at risk of offending should revisit Attachment Theory and consider the key worker (or OM) role in terms of a secure base from which their clients can address their more practical needs in an effort to avoid re-offending.
- The development of Case Management teams for women offenders only is recommended. OMs in these teams should be able to maintain a reduced caseload to allow for appropriate relationships to be developed between OMs and female offenders.