

# CHILD-CENTRED ATTACHMENT THERAPY

The ©AT Programme



Alexandra Maeja Raicar

with contributions by Pauline Sear and Maggie Gall

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## The CAT Programme

*Alexandra Maeja Raicar  
with contributions by Pauline Sear  
and Maggie Gall*

On behalf of the United Kingdom Council  
for Psychotherapy

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2009 by Karnac Books Ltd.

Published 2018 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 9781855755055 (pbk)

Edited, designed and produced by The Studio Publishing Services Ltd,  
[www.publishingservicesuk.co.uk](http://www.publishingservicesuk.co.uk)  
e-mail: [studio@publishingservicesuk.co.uk](mailto:studio@publishingservicesuk.co.uk)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Child-centred Attachment Therapy (CAT) was developed and piloted in Essex during 1995–1996 as a brief therapy programme. Its aim was to foster mutual attachment in adoptive families where placements of children were in jeopardy because of the child's failure to attach to her new carers, despite their apparent willingness to meet her needs. Over the past ten years CAT has been used independently with birth, extended, foster, adoptive and step-families.

The programme is based on attachment theory, derived from the work of the late Sir John Bowlby and his successors. I am indebted for the following concepts to: Vera Fahlberg: "Positive/negative interaction cycles" and fostering attachments; Selma Fraiberg: "Ghosts in the nursery" and attachment/child protection work; Charles Whitfield: "Inner child healing".

My grateful thanks to Clair Pyper, Children and Families Service, Essex County Council, for permission to reproduce here materials from earlier publications written during 1995–1997 for the CAT pilot project; and also to

- my three enthusiastic colleagues who helped to co-develop and pilot CAT at Southend Family Finders during 1995–1997, and

for their significant contributions to this book: Pauline Sear, Dr Maggie Gall and Margaret Saxby;

- our team leaders, Carol Collis and Di Hart, who allowed us time to test *ĈAT*;
- Tony Sharp, County Adoption Manager, Essex, for facilitating the pilot project and leading a County Focus Group of adoption practitioners to reflect on our learning;
- Lesley Smith, senior researcher, Essex Social Services, who evaluated the project;
- Mike Leadbetter, then Director of Social Services, Essex, for his encouragement.

I am grateful to Dr Hisako Watanabe and Dr Stella Acquarone for modelling family attachment work, and all the teachers and therapists and writers I have learned from over the years, unconsciously as well as consciously.

My thanks to the many, many children and families whose stories are shared anonymously here to help illustrate our learning from *ĈAT* work, and to all who have contributed to this book for sharing their thinking and experience and stories so openly and generously, especially “Rose”, “Gemma” and “Emily”; see also list of “Permissions”, below.

I thank Dr Stella Acquarone and Bernie Laschinger for their insightful supervision throughout, and colleagues who, despite their very busy schedules, took time to read and comment so helpfully on an earlier draft or parts of it: Angela Reynolds, Anne Wardrop, Bernie Laschinger, Colette Salkeld, Eve Menezes Cunningham, Franca Brenninkmeyer, Inger Gordon, Jasmine Shekleton, Maggie Rogers, Monica Duck, Richard Bowlby, Rosie Ingham, Sue Dromey, and Vivien Nice. Any errors or omissions remain my responsibility.

Grateful thanks to Eve Menezes Cunningham, for her invaluable support and ever helpful advice and comments; and finally, thank you to Christelle Yeyet-Jacquot and Pippa Weitz at Karnac for their editorial help, patience, and encouragement throughout this writing project, and to the copy-editor and the production team.

### *Permissions*

My special thanks for permission to include their own perspectives on *ĈAT* to: Angela Reynolds: “A clinician’s perspective” (in

Chapter Eight); Colette Salkeld: "A music therapist's perspective" (in Chapter Eight); Linda Fowler: "A fostering agency's perspective" (in Chapter Seven); Sir Richard Bowlby: "An attachment researcher's perspective" (in Chapter Eight).

*To Tim, Eve, and Alan, who have taught me about  
building healthy attachments;  
to Angela, Tony, Melita, Frank, Flora, and our parents  
for helping me to start this journey all those years ago;  
and to "Rose" and "Emily" whose family stories were the  
inspiration for The CAT Programme.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND MAIN CONTRIBUTORS

**Alexandra Maeja Raicar** is a UKCP registered psychoanalytic psychotherapist, parent/infant psychotherapist, life coach, NLP Master Practitioner, EFT and Emotrance practitioner, and a crystal therapist. Maeja has a BA (Hons) degree in English, an MSc in the Sociology of Health and Illness, and a CQSW. Her dissertation on her social work experience of adoption work with young birth mothers was published under the title of *Teenage Pregnancy: The Social Making and Unmaking of Mothers* (1984, Birmingham: Pepar Publications). Maeja has an Essex-based therapy and supervision practice and works part-time at the Post-Adoption Centre, London.

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health issues for Essex Social Services, and also for London Roehampton Hospital on the long-term effects on the family of psychiatric illness.

**Pauline Sear** worked in Social Services for twelve years, supporting struggling families, before co-developing The CAT Programme with Maeja Raicar, Maggie Gall and Margaret Saxby in the mid-1990s. Pauline trained in counselling and play therapy, and her contributions to CAT through play and family work have been invaluable in shaping the Programme.

## ABOUT CHILD-CENTRED ATTACHMENT THERAPY

Child-centred Attachment Therapy (CAT) is a brief, focused, family programme for children with attachment and related behavioural difficulties. These include children who, without therapeutic intervention, remain at risk of significant harm or family breakdown with multiple moves. In our experience over the past twelve years, we have found family attachment work to be very effective in helping troubled children.

CAT is a social work initiative that was developed during 1995–1997 and successfully piloted at a family-finding unit with a small number of struggling adoptive families. Our experience since then has shown that the programme can be effectively adapted to meet the needs of birth, extended, foster, and step-families, too, *where parents are committed enough to engage in such collaborative work with them and the identified child client.*

CAT was initially developed as post-placement support for very hurt children in adoptive or long-term foster families where disruption and further moves otherwise seemed likely. CAT has also been used very successfully in carrying out exploratory work, preparation, and support for children and birth families where reunification is being considered, as well as in “therapeutic assessments” for

Social Services and/or the Courts of placements at risk of breakdown, sibling and family attachments, and complex contact arrangements.

ⒸAT is a compassionate and cost-effective service in that it combines *assessment, treatment and support from the start, through working in partnership with the family*. We seek to empower troubled families by encouraging them to draw on their own creative resources in finding solutions to what they perceive to be the child's problems.

The success of The ⒸAT Programme, therefore, depends on the carers' commitment to the child, and their willingness to explore not only the context and triggers for the child's problematic behaviours, but what may be very difficult issues for themselves. These include family relationships, parenting styles, and their own childhood legacies of hurt and loss, which might be inhibiting their attachment to the child in the present, and, consequently, their ability to care for and protect him effectively.

ⒸAT is based on the premise that *a child who feels securely attached to her family is likely to be rewarding to care for and, therefore, well parented*. Sadly, the opposite is also true and the primary focus of the programme is, therefore, to foster mutual attachment between child and carer through identifying and correcting dysfunctional patterns of interaction.

Our experience shows that issues of *attachment, protection, separation, and loss* for both child and parent are crucial to such work. ⒸAT seeks to address these through discussion, play-work, family and inner child healing in a programme specially adapted to each family's needs. ⒸAT Programme therapists aim to model open communication and honest feedback in the sessions.

The initial contract is usually for eight two-hour sessions, weekly or fortnightly, of parent-child, family, individual, and couples work. This is then reviewed with the family to assess any future needs. Follow-up support is offered at three, seven, and twelve months afterwards.

Most importantly, ⒸAT *combines assessment and therapy in the one programme and so offers a secure base to families in crisis who need continuity and support in exploring, grieving, and changing their reality*.

## PREFACE

Maeja and her colleagues have written about the development of the CAT model of working with children with attachment difficulties. They describe, in a vivid and accessible manner, the complexities involved in supporting parents in their struggles to respond positively to the needs of children who have been traumatized by their early experiences.

After many years of working with a number of families with children who “act out” their hurt through difficult behaviours, the authors offer their insights to help both parents and professionals to understand and deal more effectively with such behaviours. The CAT therapists give an impressive account of their belief in a therapeutic approach that focuses on attachment and protection as prerequisites for promoting healthy relationships.

Through the descriptions of their work with a number of clients, the reader is encouraged to gain an insight into the complex challenges encountered by individuals, families, and professionals. Major strengths of the book are the authors’ clarity in describing the theoretical perspectives that underpin their model and their huge knowledge base of the issues directly related to children fostered or adopted through the “care” system.

In sharing their experiences, the authors' descriptions of their interventions convey a warm and empathic approach, demonstrating their ability to join together with families in order to bring about positive change.

I believe that this book will provide excellent learning material for parents and professionals alike. It highlights the need for both parents and children to be able to recognize, verbalize, process, and understand the unconscious feelings that are acted out in challenging behaviours. Only then can positive changes be achieved through the building of reciprocal and trusting relationships.

Monica Duck  
Director, Post-Adoption Centre  
London  
October 2007

*Calling Home*

The telephone rings.  
Our daughter on the line.  
I lift the receiver  
From its cradle,  
Check that she is fine,  
Pass her to her mother  
As before. No need to feed,  
No nappies to be changed,  
But she touches it  
Tenderly as skin.  
The cord stretches  
Umbilically.  
She listens, breaks  
Into that primal smile,  
Translates excited,  
Articulate words  
Into a gurgle  
Or a cry.

[Cunningham, 2006]



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## The long-term impact of attachment difficulties on families

### *Introduction: learning from family stories*

All carers and therapists—like the children, families and adults we work with—will have had to deal with key attachment, separation, and loss issues at some time or other in their lives. Many might have joined the caring professions in an unconscious attempt to rework their family scripts, heal from deep wounds of the past, or, as wounded healers, to try to understand or make reparation to others representing hurt children and other family figures from their childhood, as in “Emily’s story”, below.

It is likely that John Bowlby’s prodigious work, *Attachment, Separation and Loss*, was fuelled by his early life experiences. His sensitivity to the plight of young children separated from their parents, and his intuitive awareness of the importance of mourning, may have been deepened by his own unacknowledged loss at the age of four of his beloved nursemaid, Minnie, who had helped to care for him since birth.

Louis Cozolino (2006, p. 19) argues that therapeutic work *requires* the inclusion of our personal experience, which is just as

important as scientific evidence. As therapists, we learn all the time from our clients, and we are likely to be more affected by certain stories that echo our own family narratives. Such stories tend to inform our therapy practice, consciously or not, and add to a rich and inexhaustible source of learning about the human condition and our varying reactions to it.

And so it was that, through my gradual learning about “Rose’s story”, below, I, too, came to realize the importance of openly acknowledging and mourning family losses, and the corrosive life-long impact of family secrets on each and every member of that family. The power of this tragic story fuelled my own unconscious search for ways to help rebuild mother–child attachments.

\* \* \*

### *Rose’s story*

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a far-off land in Africa, there lived a young Indian, Tom, with his wife and their four small children. Tom’s mother had died in childbirth, and his father died when Tom was only twelve. An aunt in India grudgingly offered Tom a home until he was sixteen and thought to be old enough to make his own way in the world. Tom loved music and heard he could get a job as a pianist in Singapore, playing accompaniments to silent movies. So he worked in Singapore until “talking pictures” made him redundant there. Tom then travelled to be near relatives in a British colony in Africa, where he got a day job as a clerk and played music in the evenings.

Tom was now able to get married and start a family of his own at last. After living for several years in Africa, his young wife, Marie, longed to return to India and visit her family again. She was still grieving for their first-born daughter, Tina, who had been tragically killed in an accident. As an expatriate worker, Tom was allowed a paid passage back to India by ship once every five years, and eventually he and Marie thought they could afford to arrange a six-month holiday back home. The couple were so excited and busy preparing for weeks ahead that their two older children, Jenny and Peter, realized that this holiday would be different from the short trips the family sometimes took by railway to the coast.

After travelling by land and sea for almost two weeks, the family at last arrived at Marie's parents' home where they were all welcomed and the children made much of by relatives and friends. However, almost at once disaster struck. Marie suddenly became so dangerously ill that the doctors predicted she would soon die, and the children were gathered round her bed to say goodbye to her.

Jenny and Peter, only eight and five years old, were immediately sent away to live with different aunts, one in the north and one in the south, and so they could not meet. Three-year old Emily sensed that she, too, might be sent far away to live with strangers; she soon stopped walking and would only crawl, so that a worried Tom began to carry her around with him. The baby, Rose, was only seven months old and had fast become a great favourite with her grandparents, whom she learnt to call "Papa" and "Mama". Emily and Rose were no longer allowed to see their mother, since her illness was contagious and it was feared that they might contract it.

Miraculously, Marie did not die, but she remained too ill and weak for the remainder of their holiday even to play with her children, especially Rose. The baby no longer seemed to know who her Mama was and so avoided going to Marie, who felt very hurt by this rejection. However, Emily had learnt to stay by Marie's side, while Jenny and Peter were very glad to be brought back from their aunts to join their parents and little sisters again. The older children were now eager to return to their home in Africa.

The grandparents remained concerned that their daughter would not survive the long journey back, and they persuaded a reluctant Marie to leave Rose with them until she was strong enough again to carry her baby, already a year old. They reasoned that Tom could soon return to collect Rose, forgetting that he would not qualify for a paid passage to India for another five years.

No one knows how the parents explained this life-changing decision to the children, who never afterwards spoke about it, not even among themselves when grown up, until long after both Tom and Marie had died. Jenny loved her baby sister and did not understand why Rose was not returning with them to Africa. But she was shushed angrily by the adults whenever she tried to ask, and Jenny became afraid that she, too, might be left behind. She had not liked living with her aunt, who was very strict, while her cousins teased her for not speaking their language and for crying for her mother at night.

Peter remained silent about their leaving baby Rose behind. Being an only son, he was Marie's favourite and he had greatly missed being with his mother for so many months. However, Peter was a placid child and he had got on well with his caretaker aunt and cousins.

Little Emily may not have understood what was happening, except that she was back with her beloved mother, who could only carry one child at a time, and that would now be her. So Emily clung tightly to Marie and to Tom, afraid that she too might get left behind like Rose, who always got all the grandparents' and relatives' attention for being so cute.

And how could baby Rose understand that, in her need to survive the sudden separation from her mother at seven months old by forming strong attachments to her grandparents, and in later turning away from a convalescing Marie, she was co-creating a tragic new history for herself and her family: one of lifetime abandonment and disrupted relationships.

Theirs was a long and tragic story, with lasting impact on each family member, who remained indelibly scarred, not only by their sudden separation from, and loss of, baby Rose, but even more by the parents' inability ever to talk to the children truthfully about what had happened and why.

Five years later, when Tom obtained another paid passage by ship to travel back to India and reclaim his youngest daughter, the damage had already been done. He took with him Peter, now aged ten, as a companion for little Rose, but she was not used to sharing adult attention or treats. Jealous that their grandmother had begun to favour Peter, who was still a very placid child, Rose would tantrum and scratch and bite him. Her reputation as "a naughty child" preceded her return to Africa with Peter and Tom.

Marie soon began to dread Rose's rejoining their family. The little girl gradually became a scapegoat for the parents' early abandonment of her. Marie convinced herself that their "bad" little daughter was the reason that Tom became increasingly ill. He died when Rose was only twelve; this was another major and unacknowledged loss for her.

Neither Rose nor Marie trusted each other by then, or had any help to rebuild their long-disrupted attachment. Rose, at six years old, was expected simply to slot back into her birth family, who were by now complete strangers to her. Overnight, she lost her beloved grandparents, relatives, and friends, a country that had become home to her,

its culture and even its language, since Tom forbade her to speak it at all. He had become anxious that this little daughter was already behind in her schooling and would not learn to speak English correctly, which he knew to be essential from his experience of being a foreigner in a British colony.

Years later, on returning to live and work in India as a young adult, Rose must have unconsciously remembered her father's injunction to her as a child, for she never relearnt the mother tongue in which she had once been so fluent. Her now hesitant use of it and anglicized accent were a constant source of amusement to native speakers.

Growing up as a stranger to her own family, pretty little Rose sought comfort and attention from neighbours and family friends, who kept bringing round new clothes and gifts for her to her surprised and increasingly mortified parents. Naturally warm and nurturing, Marie felt branded as "a rejecting and abandoning mother". In turn, she projected all her bad feelings about herself and anger at what had happened on to this youngest daughter, who, not surprisingly, became more and more difficult for Marie to manage or love. Rose's constant lying was particularly hard for her mother to tolerate, given her own valuing of honesty. Their "negative interaction spiral" was never interrupted. Rose remained the bad, unwanted child and emotionally outside her family, even when living with them.

Marie became increasingly preoccupied with caring for Tom, whose health had greatly deteriorated. He died a few years later, leaving Peter, at sixteen, to provide for the family. Jenny had never forgiven her parents for their abandonment of baby Rose in India, and her unconscious blaming of Marie for this got in the way of their relationship from then on. After Tom died, Jenny left home to get married and she soon became pregnant and busy with her new family, determined never to abandon her own children.

Emily, at nine, had resented her little sister's return to the family and displacement of herself as the favoured youngest child, since Rose was cleverer and prettier, and much admired by relatives and family friends in Africa, too. Emily retreated into a world of books and only gradually became aware that Rose and their mother did not get on at all. Marie still favoured Emily, to whom she confided her distrust of the little girl, so sowing the seeds of lifelong conflict between the two sisters. Emily, like Peter, was too loyal to their beloved mother to realize that not all Marie told them about Rose was true.