

The 29th Annual John Bowlby Memorial Conference

PSYCHOTHERAPY, ATTACHMENT AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

**DISABILITY
PSYCHOTHERAPY
IS IMPORTANT,
IT MATTERS,
AND THERAPISTS
SHOULD KNOW
MORE ABOUT IT.**

Saturday 10th October 2026 | 10:00am - 5:00pm

Speakers: Dr Valerie Sinason, Tamsin Cottis, Dr Allan Skelly, Mark Linington, Dr Lisa Greenspan, Dr Georgina Parkes, Dr. Eimir McGrath, and Dr Angelina Veiga.

Chaired by David O'Driscoll

IPD



THE BOWLBY CENTRE

ABOUT

The Bowlby Centre's 29th Annual John Bowlby Memorial Conference is the first event to explore how attachment-based psychoanalytical psychotherapy can support people with learning disabilities.

This conference reflects an ongoing commitment to learning from and thinking alongside groups who have historically been underrepresented in psychotherapy, as we explore how attachment theory can be brought into dialogue with the realities of lived and relational experiences.

Attachment theory is widely used in research and underpins many approaches to trauma-informed care. Yet it remains less widely applied in clinical work for those with learning disabilities. However, many of the pioneers of disability psychotherapy have been deeply influenced by attachment theory and trauma-informed approaches.

In partnership with International Psychotherapy and Disability (IPD), the conference brings together clinicians, researchers, and practitioners working at the intersection of psychotherapy and intellectual disability. Through a combination of presentations and workshops, our international speakers will draw on clinical experience, theory, and research to explore how therapeutic thinking can be both grounded and creatively extended in this field.

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This conference is open to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of learning disability through a relational and attachment-informed lens. We aim to bring together people who work with or support people with learning disabilities and psychotherapists who may not have previously considered working with this client group.

We would particularly encourage you to join us if you do not already work directly with people with intellectual disabilities. Learning from the day can enrich clinical practice and deepen our understanding of attachment across a wider range of human experiences.

WHY ATTEND IF YOU DO NOT WORK WITH PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

You do not need to work directly with people with learning disabilities to benefit from this conference. Thinking about psychotherapy in the context of learning disability invites us to question some of our assumptions about communication, dependency, autonomy, development and what it means to be in a therapeutic relationship. These questions are relevant to all psychotherapists. The day offers an opportunity to encounter different perspectives, learn from clinical practice and consider how attachment theory can deepen our understanding of emotional and relational experience across a much wider range of human lives.

WHAT DOES ATTACHMENT THEORY HAVE TO OFFER?

People with Learning disabilities are more likely to depend on others for significant periods, and sometimes for much of their lives. As a society, we struggle to think about disability, dependency and the complex relationships that develop around care. Attachment theory provides a valuable language for thinking about safety, regulation and contexts where relationships may be fragile, disrupted, or shaped by long-standing systemic and social factors.

The conference will consider how attachment-informed thinking can be used clinically in ways that remain sensitive to difference, avoiding assumptions about developmental norms while holding onto the importance of relational safety and continuity. It will also explore how therapists can think about containment, consistency and responsiveness when traditional talking therapy frameworks may need to be adapted.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INTERNATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND DISABILITY

They champion the right of disabled individuals to access high-quality mental healthcare and provides a support forum for clinicians.



Date: Saturday 10th October 2026

Time: 10.00 – 5.00 (UK Time)

Location: Online Via Zoom

Cost: £125 for non-Bowlby Centre members

Discounted Price for Bowlby Centre Members and Students

Book Here: <https://thebowlbycentre.org.uk/cpd/>

ORDER OF EVENTS

SATURDAY 11TH OCTOBER 2025 | 10:00AM – 5:00PM UK TIME

10.00-10.20 Dr David O'Driscoll – Welcome & History of subject

10.20-11.15 Dr Valerie Sinason – Love in a cold climate. Love as a four letter word in psychotherapy

Break

11.25-12.20 Tamsin Cottis – Together, We Can Find a Way Through – Relationship and Play at the Heart of Integrative Child Psychotherapy with Children who have SEND

Break

12.25-13.10 Workshop – Choice of Four:
Dr Joy Gravestock, Dr Eimir McGrath, Dr Lisa Greenspan, Dr Georgina Parkes

Lunch

13.50-14.45 Mark Linnington – The Dream of the Clever Baby: the relational significance of intelligence in psychotherapy with people with intellectual disabilities

Break

14.50-15.45 Dr Alan Skelly – Assessing Emotional Development before Talking Attachment: Experience from an Attachment-based intervention for people with learning disabilities who have been described as “challenging

Break

15.55-16.40 Workshop – Choice of Four:
Dr Eimir McGrath, Dr Georgina Parkes, Dr Angelina Veiga, Dr Lisa Greenspan

16:40-17.00 – Chair's closing remarks and thank you

SPEAKERS

Together, We Can Find a Way Through – Relationship and Play at the Heart of Integrative Child Psychotherapy with Children who have SEND.

Speaker: **Tamsin Cottis** MA UKCP Integrative Child Psychotherapist/Co-Founder of Respond

This talk will draw on my experiences as a child psychotherapist in primary schools and private practice. I will show how play-based therapy can support a child with intellectual disabilities and/or other learning needs, to process trauma, and to express and share their feelings. Using clinical examples, and referring also to the work of clinicians such as DWW Winnicott, Anne Alvarez, Margot Sunderland and Valerie Sinason, I will highlight how this therapeutic approach can help a child to build a more positive relationship with themselves and with others.

Assessing Emotional Development before Talking Attachment: Experience from an Attachment-based intervention for people with learning disabilities who have been described as “challenging”.

Speaker: **Dr Allan Skelly** Consultant Clinical Psychologist

This talk will demonstrate how standardised assessment of emotional development, instead of intellectual ability or skills development, allows for attachment-based intervention for parents and paid carers that recognises the level of emotional maturity of the person.

Themes of the talk are 1) the tendency to over-estimation in adults with ID, 2) defining emotional development in a phase model, 3) the four tasks of emotionally secure caregiving, and 4) outcomes of this brief intervention. The talk will also contrast the approach with the dominant approach, Positive Behaviour Support, arguing that the emotional development / attachment-based approach is more efficient, requires no additional skills training for carers, and permanently alters the view of the person to be more accurate and compassionate to their situation

SPEAKERS

The Dream of the Clever Baby: the relational significance of intelligence in psychotherapy with people with intellectual disabilities.

Speaker: **Mark Lingington** UKCP Registered Attachment-based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist and Supervisor and CEO at CDS UK (Clinic for Dissociative Studies).

Psychotherapy is a process, which if it goes well enough, develops the intelligence of both parties. In 1923, Sándor Ferenczi, wrote a short piece entitled '*The Dream of the 'Clever Baby'*'. Taking this as a starting point, I will explore the significance of intelligence, including the different forms in which one can be intelligent in relationships. This includes in the first attachment relationship, and how this can contribute to the shaping of internal working models with regard to the significance of intelligence, and the meaning of intelligence and being intelligent in the psychotherapeutic relationship. I will consider the recovery and development of potential intelligence in attachment-based psychotherapy with people with intellectual disabilities through processes of relational recognition and engagement

WORKSHOP

Case Study Workshop: Mirroring Structural Layers Across a Human Life.

Speaker: **Dr Lisa Greenspan** DPsyCh CoP

Working with learning disabled people provides the therapist an opportunity for learning, in the deepening of therapeutic skills and building experience of the interaction between the social unconscious, attachment processes and systemic dynamics.

In this workshop we will be drawing from, and applying, ideas of leading contributors to the field, while looking together at an anonymised case study of an autistic learning disabled person taken from our specialist community-based third-sector practice. Rather than viewing the learning disabled person's history solely as an personal narrative, the workshop explores the individual history as expressions of wider systemic processes. The aim is to identify how these processes are reproduced over their life across services and relationships, and to consider how this understanding can inform formulation in the therapeutic relationship and bolster relational communication throughout the person's system, to benefit the therapeutic relationship.

Particular attention will be given to conceptualising the endogenous factors surrounding an individual and of the ways these shape, contain and echo the communication of personal experience, asking the questions of how to catalyse meaningful systemic change?

Creating a therapeutic environment with people with challenging behaviour. How can Attachment theory help?

Speaker: **Dr Georgina Parkes** Consultant Psychiatrist in Intellectual Disability, CNWL

In this workshop we brainstorm ideas and solutions which have worked for participants in the past. We will look at attachment theory and the importance of safety to create a secure base. What practically might this mean?

I have worked in inpatient settings for many years until August 2026 and can talk through how I helped to achieve an outstanding CQC rating. What are the practical steps needed to create a therapeutic environment? How can we translate this into the community and people's homes?

WORKSHOP

Thresholds, PiggyLizzy and Me. A case study focusing on intersubjectivity, therapeutic attachment and trauma in Disability Psychotherapy.

Speaker: **Dr. Eimir McGrath** PhD, MIAHIP (Supervisor), ICP Reg. Consultant Psychotherapist

The fundamental component of any psychotherapeutic intervention is the interpersonal relationship that grows between therapist and client. Talking therapies that focus on the spoken word as the primary means of creating connection are often inadequate for those whose lived experience precludes the use of spoken language, whether due to intellectual disability and/or complex trauma.

Working at a pre-symbolic level brings about a connection that happens in the subliminal aspects of the embodied mind. This work is dependent upon the therapist's awareness of the early attachment patterns of relationship and the creation of an intersubjectivity that allows for safety, growth, and healing. 'PiggyLizzy' showed me how intersubjectivity and the development of a therapeutic attachment enabled her to cross thresholds into a more integrated way of being in the world.

WORKSHOP

Disability Psychotherapy: Live supervision.

Speaker: **Dr Angelina Veiga** Consultant child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist, adult psychotherapist, disability psychotherapist, researcher, clinical supervisor, international lecturer and tutor.

For many of us, our work as Disability Psychotherapists begins long before our formal psychotherapy trainings, occurring instead in our earliest work experiences. These early experiences profoundly shape the clinicians we later become. In this workshop, using a live supervision approach, Angelina will weave together the fundamental concepts of disability psychotherapy as part of a commentary on Nadia's work as a teaching assistant in a special school. The focus on the relational experience between the student and his teacher shapes the attachment dynamic which happens in the space beyond words as a communication of shared feeling. It is, in its essence, a profoundly creative act. Participants will gain an understanding of the emotional experience of working with disability beyond the consulting room, and are invited to offer their own commentary on the experience of witnessing the material during the workshop.

Being Here, Being Me, Being Together With You: A long-term music attachment and relationship-based music therapy with an adopted girl with significant multiple learning difficulties.

Speaker: **Dr Joy Gravestock**, Music therapist

In this workshop, we shall learn from a long-term music therapy with an adopted child who has Downs syndrome and associated learning difficulties and is mostly non-verbal. There will be video recordings shared of sessions between Joy and the client. Joy asserts that all adopted children retain an internal, embodied, unconscious memory of their early felt sense of being relinquished and their attachment and separation trauma. It had been thought that adopted children, but especially those with significant intellectual impairment, could not really know about such early life experience. Joy argues that it is our wish to believe these adoptees are not-knowing because it is too painful to acknowledge both the pain involved in the birth of a disabled child, and subsequent removal for adoption. Defence mechanisms come into play in the face of realities of unconscious embodied memory of adoptees internalised truth.

As a music therapist specialising in adoption/learning disability (and a current APL trainee at The Bowlby Centre), Joy works relationally within needs-led free musical improvisations where attachment material is revealed. She draws heavily on the work of Winnicott and Stern suggesting that their concepts of holding and attunement are applicable to musical relational experiences. Her theoretical approach is described as a contemporary psychoanalytic, relational, attachment and trauma informed, music therapy. She concludes that engaging in necessarily long-term therapeutic relationships is essential in order for adoptees with learning disabilities to be enabled first to express their trauma, and have it held and witnessed, before embarking on new relational ways of relating which sustain their adoptive placements

CHAIR: DAVID O'DRISCOLL

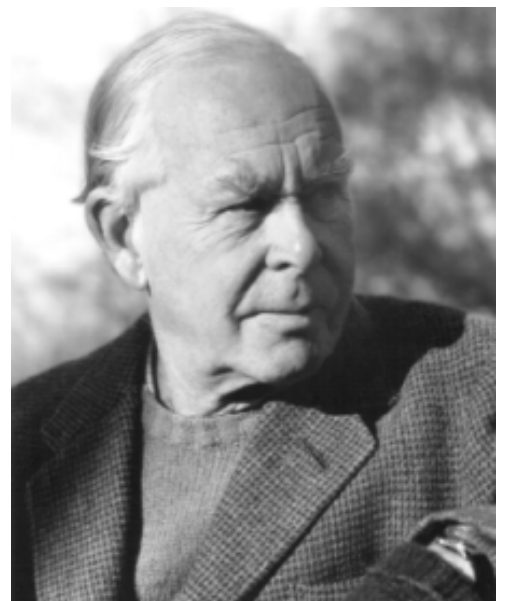


David works as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist for Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust. This involves individual and group work with service users with a learning disability as well as training and consultancy to staff teams. He worked as a NHS Historical Worker in Hertfordshire in 2001 and 2006. He is also a Research Fellow at Centre for Learning Disability Research, Hertfordshire University. From 2003 David was a director for the charity, Respond. He was a conveyor for the learning disability section of the Association for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the National Health Service (APP), founder member and former chair of the Institute of Disability and Psychotherapy (IPD).



THE BOWLBY CENTRE

Since 1976 The Bowlby Centre has developed as an organisation committed to the practice of attachment-based psychoanalytic psychotherapy. As a registered charity it trains attachment-based psychoanalytic psychotherapists, offers related CPD short courses and delivers a low-cost psychotherapy service to those most frequently excluded from long term psychotherapy.



WE LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU THERE

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