

SENSORY ATTACHMENT INTERVENTION

www.sensoryattachmentintervention.com



SAI CONFERENCE

22ND & 23RD JUNE 2026

*A Celebration of Collaboration, Innovative Thinking
and Working Interventions*

MALONE HOUSE

BELFAST

NORTHERN IRELAND

£300 (INCLUDES LUNCH)



Sensory Attachment Intervention was developed by **Éadaoin Bhreathnach**, Occupational Therapist in the early 1990's when Statutory Agencies began to refer their most challenging cases (children and adults), who either struggled with or resisted all interventions. She observed they shared common traits such as a heightened and a persistent sense of fear, a sensitised or dulled response to sensory experiences, and had difficulty engaging with others. She knew from her Sensory Integration training that regulation of arousal states is imperative before the individual can engage in tasks or with others. Her training in Attachment (DMM) also informed her how individuals are disposed to behave when their core fears are activated. Clinical observations led to a new awareness of how trauma impacts sensory processing and the co-regulation process. This led to changes in her clinical intervention.

Sensory Attachment Intervention (SAI) is an integrative approach treating children and adults who have suffered abuse or severe neglect. Negative early experiences significantly impair one's ability to cope with stress, leading to a tendency to fluctuate between fight-flight and freeze-dissociate states. This affects occupational performance and the capacity to connect and engage with others. The first requirement in intervention is to establish regulation of arousal states. SAI achieves this through facilitating the 'just right' combination of up regulating and down regulating sensory-attachment experiences. This in turn enables higher level sensory, emotional and cognitive functioning and a readiness to engage in cognitive and narrative approaches. SAI follows the neurological principle of use-dependent learning i.e. all parts of the brain can modify their functioning in response to specific patterns of activation. (Perry 2001) This is achieved through embedding regulation into everyday activities.



Join us for a conference showcasing the diverse applications of the SAI model, from the family home environment to secure care, from preschool children to adults. Presentations will explore how the SAI model illuminates the complexity of behavior, emphasising the critical need to identify its source, whether it stems from sensory, trauma, or attachment issues. Groundbreaking research will be presented, highlighting the importance of integrating observations of sensory-motor behaviours into comprehensive attachment assessments.

The stunning setting of Malone House with its beautiful environs offers a wonderful opportunity to network with academic researchers, clinicians, and service managers. Attendees can also take time out to enjoy a relaxing walk on its extensive grounds or use the dedicated SAI Nurture Room for comfort and relaxation.

DAY 1

8.30

Conference Registration
Tea and coffee provided

9.00

Welcome Address
Éadaoin Breatnach

9.15

Integration of the Senses from an Applied Perspective
Claire Pemrick, Emma Smith and Tessa Scully

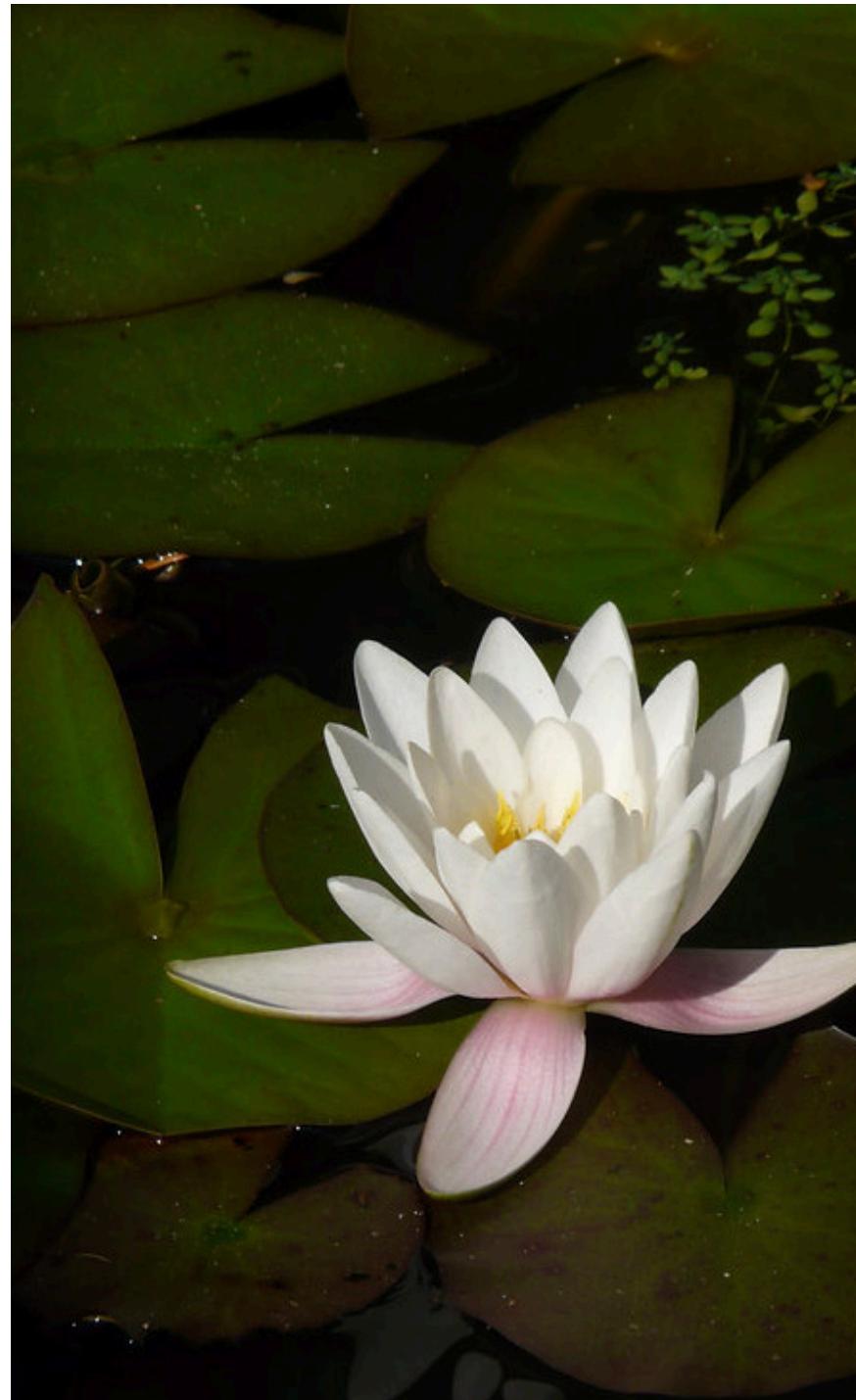
An exploration of how sensory systems function as a dynamic, integrated network rather than discrete modalities. Using the newly developed SAI Transformation of Information Chart as a framework, this presentation examines the role of sensory systems in modulation of arousal states, postural control and praxis. Drawing on contemporary neuroscience beyond Sherrington's model, we highlight the importance of the affective touch pathway, active movement and enriched environment provision as mechanisms for shifting from trauma-based processing to curiosity-driven exploration. This presentation will conclude with practical and low-cost ideas for facilitating sensory-affective engagement.

10.15

A New Approach to Evaluating Children's Behaviours
Steve Farnfield, Fan Zhang and Nick Smith

The presentation is a case study of data gathered as a part of Fan's Zhang doctoral research. Éadaoin Breatnach, Steve Farnfield, Nick Smith and Fan Zhang teamed up to challenge the separate social engagement signalling and physiological arousal management approaches to the functional interpretations of children's behaviours. By viewing the data through an integrated lens, we present new evidence of different arousal profiles and management approaches in children using different attachment strategies. The live and short epoch tracking of HRV data demonstrates a new way of evaluating children's behaviours in clinical settings.

11.00 - Tea/Coffee Break





11.30

Exploring the Relationship Between Sensory Integration and Attachment Patterns in 100 Children Aged 5-12: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Physiological, Motor and Behavioural Regulation during Narrative Story Stem Tasks

Claire Ginty

Claire will discuss investigating how attachment patterns (Types A, B, C) in children aged 5-12 relate to physiological regulation, sensory motor processing, and diagnostic differences, including FASD. Her mixed-methods study combines group statistical analysis with multiple theory building case studies, preserving ecological complexity while generating mechanistic insights into occupational and emotional dysregulation. Claire uses measures of parasympathetic activity, ventral vagal responses, and sympathetic reactivity, alongside sensory motor profiling, during the Child Attachment and Play Assessment (CAPA) to examine how diagnoses such as FASD impact sensory systems and regulatory capacity. Grounded in neurodevelopmental, attachment and sensory integration theory, her research seeks to differentiate attachment driven strategies from sensory driven dysregulation and to identify practical markers for assessment. Claire aims to translate findings into tailored interventions, multidisciplinary practice guidance and policy recommendations, helping clinicians, services and teams better support children and families by distinguishing underlying mechanisms and targeting effective, individualised supports.

12.00

The Just Right State Pre-school and School Aged Programme; A Trauma Informed Approach to Providing Services for Children and Families **Barnardos, Republic of Ireland**

Barnardos is a national charity providing evidence based, outcomes focused family support services across the republic of Ireland. We work with children, parents, and carers in their homes, in schools, and through 56 dedicated Barnardos service locations. Our services are grounded in a Trauma Informed approach, shaped by current research on the effects of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) throughout childhood and across the lifespan. This framework guides how we understand the emotional, behavioural, and relational impact of interpersonal trauma on the children and families we support. It also influences how we design interventions, build trust, and create safe, supportive environments.

In 2019, Barnardos formally implemented a Trauma Informed approach across all direct family support services. As part of this implementation, we introduced Sensory Attachment Intervention and the Just Right State Programme to strengthen our capacity to help children and caregivers regulate, reconnect, and recover. These approaches remain central to our practice today.

12.30

The Devon Journey Experience of the Just Right State Programme

Elizabeth Cann

This presentation takes you on a journey through a successful sensory attachment intervention pilot designed to upskill specialist Children in Care work-force and foster carers. Funding was creatively secured through winter pressures monies, with a focus on preventing inappropriate hospital admissions. Children in Care are often so dysregulated that placements break down, leaving hospital admission as the only perceived safe option, even without self-harm. The pilot strengthened the workforce and the team around the child to stabilise home placements and avoid admission. Qualitative and quantitative data demonstrate the significant impact of the training. The presentation shares the Devon journey experience.

1.00 - Lunch

2.00

The value of integrating the DMM and SAI in family formulations

Helen Johnson and Chris West

Integrating the Dynamic-Maturational Model (DMM) and Sensory Attachment Intervention (SAI) strengthens family formulations by focusing on the function of presenting problems within their relational and protective context. Treating difficulties without understanding their function can leave individuals and families less safe. Behaviours that appear problematic often serve to manage perceived danger within the family system; intervening without recognising this risks removing protection without offering safer alternatives. Working systemically means using the DMM to develop hypotheses about the function of the presenting problem and the critical source of danger within the family. This understanding allows formulations to move beyond symptoms to identify what the system is organised to protect against. In turn, this informs a more meaningful hypothesis about the critical cause of change: reducing danger, increasing safety, and supporting the development of more adaptive protective strategies. Case material will illustrate the clinical value of this integrated approach.

3.00 - Finish



DAY 2

9.00

Tea/Coffee Served.

9.15

The Meaning of the Child in Sensory Attachment Intervention

Ben Grey, and Chris West

Sensory Attachment Intervention (SAI) is an integrative, relational model exploring how sensory processing, trauma, and attachment influence co-regulation between children and parents. It supports the development of self-regulation and co-regulation through reflection on how sensory experiences are perceived and responded to within relationships. SAI encourages Occupational Therapists to adopt a more relational focus and attachment practitioners to incorporate embodied, sensory-based approaches. SAI assessment uses the Meaning of the Child Interview (MotC) to explore parental interpretations of relationships. The MotC helps to inform the SAI four-stage intervention process, guiding readiness for change. A case study will illustrate the clinical application of this model with a parent.



10.15

Embodied Attachment

Georgia Monk and Éadaoin Bhreathnach

"Despite its roots in evolutionary theory, attachment research has traditionally prioritised narrative accounts over physiological data. However, this focus may capture only one side of a two-sided coin. This research responds to that gap by re-establishing attachment as an embodied process, focusing on how caregivers regulate physiological arousal during attachment-related interactions. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, the research explored caregivers' attachment discourse alongside observed physiological regulation during attachment interviews. The Meaning of the Child interview (MotC) and Sensory Motor Arousal Observations (SMAO) were used to examine coherence and divergence between narrative and bodily processes. Most cases demonstrated strong coherence between narrative and physiological regulation, providing support for embodied models of caregiving. However, several nuanced patterns also emerged, which will be discussed"

11.00 Tea/Coffee Break



11.30

Regulating Gardens Facilitating Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation in Garden Spaces
Éadaoin Bhreathnach

Traumatized children and adults exist in a persistent state of hypervigilance, constantly on alert for danger. This chronic state of fear limits their focus to past trauma or the immediate perceived threat, severely restricting future planning and the capacity to recognise safety. To shift this, the solution is the creation of "magical garden spaces" that allow for the full expression of emotions and a connection to the local landscape and ancient mythological time. Ash Cottage's Regulating Gardens, were established in 1990 with Ray Cashell, utilising the SAI Model for this purpose. Each garden room is designed with particular regulating properties in mind, providing opportunities for passive assimilation, active participation, curiosity/exploration, and organization/action for change. Most importantly the gardens provide: a sense of safety, the experience of shared joy and pleasure and an appreciation for the healing powers of nature. This presentation will provide a visual guided tour of the gardens and their development.

12.00

The Role of Sensory Attachment Intervention within Secure Accommodation
Helen Bowkett

This presentation explores the unique role of Sensory Attachment Intervention (SAI) practice within secure accommodation, showing how sensory-relational approaches can thrive even in highly restricted environments. It examines the integration of the Just Right State (JRS) and the creation of a Regulating Garden, highlighting how each supports staff culture, young people's emotional regulation, and greater overall stability. I will outline why, as a secure setting manager, I chose to integrate SAI and how it addresses challenges such as limited space, heightened dysregulation, and operational pressures. The session offers practical insights into adopting SAI, demonstrating that meaningful regulation based practice is both achievable and transferable, even under significant constraints.

12.30

Integration of Sensory Attachment Intervention within Tearmann Cottage,

Use of The Just Right State Programme in the Residential Setting

Mick Mc Callion and Joe Gillen

Sensory Attachment Intervention, as developed by Éadaoin Bhreathnach, is embedded as one of the core therapeutic models underpinning practice at Tearmann Cottage. From the earliest stages of establishing Tearmann Care, the owners were clear that the home would be founded on a relational, trauma-informed vision where children's sensory and attachment needs are understood as central to healing.

This presentation will articulate this vision, outlining how Sensory Attachment Intervention informed the design, development, and operationalisation of the service from the outset. Our ethos in Tearmann Cottage is that all interventions are purposeful and intentional. The concept of the "just right state" is embedded across all aspects of planning and daily living, ensuring children are supported to remain within an optimal window of regulation. This is reflected in decisions about food and mealtime structure, play and movement opportunities, sensory input, routines, transitions, rest, and expectations.

1.00

Lunch

2.00

Plenary Discussion

Reflections, Questions and Discussion.

A Panel of the Conference Speakers will take questions from the Delegates.

3.00

Closing Remarks

3.15 - Finish



To book please visit:

<https://www.sensoryattachmentintervention.com/saiconference>

Venue

Malone House

<https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/malonehouse/home>

Accesibility

<https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/malonehouse/contact-us/visitor-accessibility-at-malone-house>

Consider extending your stay and explore Northern Ireland though small (2 hours by 2hours driving) It offers wide ranging and breathtaking scenery.

Airports:

Belfast City Airport

Belfast International Airport

Your Destination:

Belfast City, UNESCO City of Music.

Visit the Victorian Crown Bar, an outstanding example of a Victorian gin palace created by Italian craftsmen in 1885. Now owned by the National Trust.

<https://www.cafereality.co.uk/blog/the-crown-liquor-saloon-belfast>

Titanic Museum

<https://www.titanicbelfast.com>

Here are some places within driving distance from Belfast:

The Giants Causeway Northern Ireland's Iconic World Heritage Site.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/northern-ireland/giants-causeway>

Causeway Coast with stunning beaches and cliffs.

Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/northern-ireland/carrick-a-rede>

Visit Ballycastle, a picturesque coastal village where you can take the ferry to Rathlin Island.

Rathlin Island - Bird Sanctury, Rich in Wildflower and Wildlife famous for its Irish Golden Hare.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu89FBplJe4>

Derry/Londonderry - Ireland's only intact walled city, its humour captured by the Derry Girls.

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