Child Attachment Style Measures

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The Lifespan Research group at Kingston University, has designed the Attachment Style Interview for adults, a standardised research tool which has been used in adoption, fostering and child protection services to determine whether there is insecurity in the attachment style of parents, carers and prospective parents. This has proved a very effective assessment of both risk and resilience in individuals and couples.

However, there is also a need for child measures of attachment style. This is useful for matching child to parent in adoption settings; to establish the impacts of poor parenting on children, and to examine in relation to intervention and therapeutic change. With funding from St Christopher's Fellowship, Lifespan Research Group have designed and tested a version of the attachment measure for primary school age hildren (7-12). This has been tested mainly in a school population, but with a small number of Looked After Children to see its feasibility in this group. Whilst the analysis and draft publication is not yet complete, we would like to alert services to this new development and hope to work with a few to further pilot the work in Child and Family Services prior to rolling it out. The measure is described overleaf and contacts given for those services interested in using the tools. Full ethical permissions were provided.

We have designed two related tools: A one-to-one interview (ChASI) and group self-report measure (ChAS-SR) administered as a powerpoint. The attachment styles are shown below:

Attachment Style	Descriptor	Cartoon Animal
Secure	good relationships; autonomy	Dog
Enmeshed	dependent, fearful of separation	Monkey
Fearful	Constraints closeness, fear of rejection	Deer
Angry -dismissive	Mistrust, angry at others	Bear
Withdrawn	Self-reliant, avoidant	Tortoise

THE CLINGY MONKEY

THE SENSITIVE DEER

The STRONG BEAR

TORTOISE
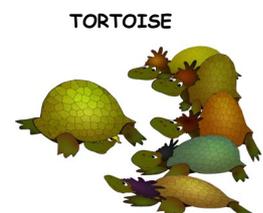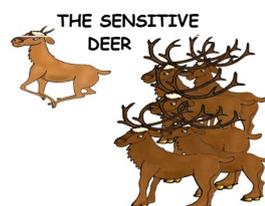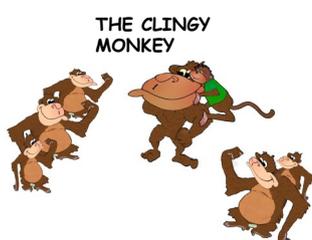
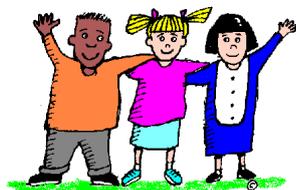# 1—The Child Attachment Style Interview: (Ch-ASI)

The Ch-ASI is an assessment tool which assesses characteristics of the child in terms of their quality of close relationships, with parents, relatives and friends and security of attachment style as determined by attitudes to closeness and trust. As in the adult version, a checklist life events scale is used to determine recent stressors, and the child is asked who they confided in about each event. The number of confidants is then determined. As with the adult measure the child is asked about attitudes to closeness/ autonomy in terms of subscales to derive elements of avoidant (mistrust, self-reliance, constraints on closeness, anger) or anxious (fear of rejection, fear of separation, high need for company) styles. Overall 5 styles are derived – two anxious (Enmeshed or Fearful) and two avoidant (Angry-dismissive or Withdrawn) and one Secure. The presence of two styles simultaneously is called Dual style and considered to represent the Disorganised categories identified in the Attachment literature. As in the adult version, the Chat-In also determines the degree of insecurity, since among adults mild levels of insecure styles in adults seem to hold resilience. The attachment attitudes and overall style are scored from the audio-recording after the interview. Benchmarked rating thresholds are provided taken directly from the child sample to aid in rating the interview narrative. The Mood and Feelings Questionnaire is added to assess emotional symptoms of disorder. (Other symptom questionnaires can be added).

Various adaptations are made to the interview to make it more age appropriate and child-friendly. Specifically:

- it is reduced in length to around 35 minutes.
- The interview schedule is made child-friendly with cartoons, colours and pictures and both the interviewer and the child complete sections .
- There is a larger focus on relationship with parents although friends and elatives also asked about. Children are asked to directly rate their attachment attitudes on Likert scales as well as answering interview questions.

Results (to be finalised) initially suggest:

- Good inter-rater reliability
- Expected rates of Secure and Insecure styles compared to other measures
- High association of insecure styles to symptoms and life events
- Good association between child self report and interviewer assessment.

2—The Child Attachment Style Self-report: (ChAS-SR)

The ChAS-SR measure aims to replicate the speed and economy of a questionnaire measure of attachment style. We have adapted a well known vignette approach to the attachment styles, to be represented by cartoon animals. We have followed the popular Relationship Questionnaire (with the additional vignette from the Clinical version) for adults which describes 5 attachment vignettes: Secure (Autonomous), Enmeshed (dependent), Fearful (anxious avoidant) , Dismissive (Avoidant) and Mistrustful and asks participants to rate how like this style they are. In the ChAS-SR we have selected a family dog for Secure, a monkey for Enmeshed, a deer for Fearful, a Bear for Angry-dismissive and a Tortoise for Withdrawn. We present a powerpoint 'Story of 5 animals' and describe the characteristics of each animal and then ask the children to score how much each one is like them. Children rate their scores on printed paper questionnaires showing the same animal rating scales. We then ask a list of 6 life events around family or peer hostility or rejection. We ask the children to imagine how they felt when these happened and then ask if they felt like each of the animals and if they acted like each of the animals in response to the event. For some of the sample we then collected items on self-esteem and on psychological symptoms in order to validate the questionnaire. The self-report takes around 30 minutes and can be administered to a class/group of children or individually. Children are given a debriefing and animal stickers to thank them for their cooperation. Results (still to be finalised) show:

- The expected rate of Secure, Anxious and Avoidant styles re found as in other studies in the community.

- For animal character given the highest rating for 'most like me' we found the Secure dog the most common as expected. We found 'Can't classify' with no animal chosen as 'very like me' and 'Mixed' selected more than one 'highly like me'. The latter is equated with the Disorganised styles in other measures.

- The insecure styles (all except Dog and 'Can't classify') related to lower self-esteem and higher symptoms as expected.

- There was reasonably high consistency of rating animal characters for the stress situations, but Dog /Secure was less common here as might be expected.

- When the measure was repeated with the same children over 3 months, there was a good level of correlation between the scorings at both time periods.

- Early indications are of association of child self-reports to interviewer assessments.
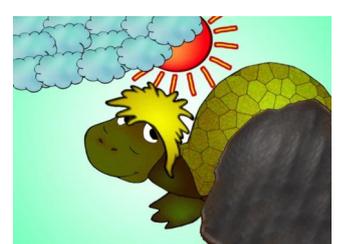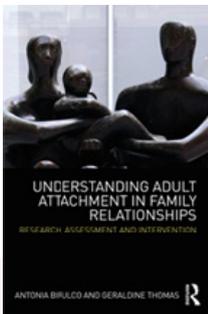
Current progress and future plans

We are currently analysing data from 160 self-report and 60 interviews to check the measures are reliable and valid before recommending their use in social care and psychological services. We will then prepare a journal article for publication.

Once we are happy that the measures really work, we want to pilot them in child and family services in 3 or 4 sites, in order to check on their feasibility in Looked After children and those in adverse family settings, and to construct a training package for social workers and psychologists in administering the measures.

The two versions of the measure will serve different purposes—the Chat-Ser can be given to groups of children; it evokes better cooperation with Looked After children than the interview; it is brief and requires little training. The drawback is it gives no context to the child's life and may have a projective element which may be more useful for therapy than social service assessment. In contrast the Chat-In interview is a contextual measure which gives details of the children's lives, their relationships and their attitudes to close others and will aid social worker assessment. But it is lengthier and requires more training and skill in its use. We expect both measures to be valuable in different ways with different types of children.

Later in 2013 we plan to:

- hold a workshop for interested professionals where we describe the methods and the study findings

- Plan a training session for practitioners in using the measure

- Support a few services to use the tools in every day practice and evaluate its effectiveness

- Roll out the training if we get favourable results

Please let us know if you are interested in any aspects of this new approach.

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