

The eReview summarizes children's mental health research and implications for practice and policy

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Attachment Relationships and Adoption Outcomes

Research Summary

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Research has demonstrated the powerful influence of the attachment relationship between parents and their children. How does the nature of this relationship affect children who have experienced trauma in the past or newly developing parent-child relationship with adoptive parents? How does it affect the parent's experience of parenting? This review summarizes recent research that examines these questions and reveals implications for practice and policy.

In his groundbreaking work on attachment theory, John Bowlby (1973, 1980) describes the critical importance of a long-term, secure relationship between a child and caregiver. This relationship, and the way the child is treated within it, has a powerful influence on the child's development and personality functioning. From birth, and particularly during times of crisis, infants learn to cry and reach out toward primary caregivers in order to be held and comforted. If the caregiving environment is consistent, positive, and aims to meet the child's needs, then the infant is apt to develop a 'secure' attachment. If, on the other hand, the caregiving is typically inconsistent, or negative, then the attachment pattern that is most likely to develop is an 'insecure' one, either avoidant or resistant. A fourth pattern called 'disorganized' typifies children who have experienced less than optimal caregiving often with displays of frightening behavior on the part of the caregiver. These infants display fear or lack a strategy to deal with stressors in their environment such as separation from a caregiver. These patterns develop within the context of an attachment relationship with primary caregivers and are reflected in the children's 'internal working model' or template for how relationships work. These repre-

sentations are thought to guide their expectations about others and inform their own sense of self, especially with regard to thoughts and feelings concerning relationships with others.

The move into an adoptive placement represents a dramatic intervention for a child. Bowlby (1973) gave expression to the challenge faced by these children and the parents who adopt them when he described the following —

...once a sequence of behavior has become organized, it tends to persist and does so even if it has developed on non-functional lines and even in the absence of the external stimuli and/ or the internal conditions on which it first depended. The precise form that any particular piece of behavior takes and the sequence within which it is first organized are thus of the greatest consequence for its future.

However, Bowlby was emphatic that while these internal working models once formed are resistant to change, change is possible throughout the child's lifetime. This potential for change reflects the importance of understanding the experiences of children as they are placed in new homes with new attachment figures.

The *Attachment Representations and Adoption Outcome Study*¹ examined attachment relationships in adoptive families with previously maltreated children. The study explored the specific features that children

1 The study was generously funded by the Glasshouse and Tedworth Sainsbury Family Trusts and was undertaken with co-principal investigators Jeanne Kaniuk and Jill Hodges.



and parents bring to their newly forming attachment relationships and assessed perceptions of both adoptive parents and children two years after placement. This study included 61 children placed after the infancy/toddler age (between the ages of four and eight at the time of adoption) who had experienced repeated maltreatment, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and/or sexual abuse. This study was unique in that it examined (1) the impact of parents' representations of their own attachment history on the child's developing attachment to that parent, and (2) the mother's state of attachment and her experience of being an adoptive parent over time.

The Adoption and Attachment Study examined —

- Adoptive parents' perceptions about their own childhood history and relationships
- Parents' representations of their child and themselves as parent
- Narratives (or stories) of maltreated children in adoptive placements

Measures

Adoptive parents' (mothers and fathers) narratives were collected through the Adoption Attachment Interview (AAI). The AAI developed by Mary Main and her colleagues (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985) is a robust measure of an individual's current state of mind with regard to attachment, and a potent predictor of parenting capacity. The interviews are classified as either

'autonomous secure', 'insecure-dismissing' or 'insecure-preoccupied'. Significant for this study, the AAI also reveals whether adults who experienced early adversity such as loss of a loved one or trauma have worked towards resolution. Adults who have not are classified as 'unresolved'. In this study, the AAI was administered to parents just before the adoptive placement. The Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP) presents children with a story and requests that they complete it using verbal

descriptions and non-verbal communications or play (Hodges, Steele, Hillman, & Henderson, 2003). Story stem themes presented to the child focus on common experiences in family life that allow for the assessment of the child's expectations of attachment figures, including expectations in times of distress. The SSAP was administered shortly after the adoption placement, one year later, and two years later.

A third measure assessing representational qualities was used in this study. The Parent Development Interview (Aber, Slade, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 1985) assesses the adoptive parents' perception of their relationship to the child. Parents were asked about their view of the child and their relationship, their perception of themselves as parents, and their view of the child's adaptation to placement. This interview was administered to adoptive mothers shortly after the adoption placement, one year later, and two years later. Figure 1 shows how these three tools were administered.

Figure 1

Pre-placement	Early in placement	One year post-placement	Two years post-placement
Adult Attachment Interviews (AAI)	Parent Development Interview (PDI)	Parent Development Interview (PDI)	Parent Development Interview (PDI)
	Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP)	Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP)	Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP)

Findings

First, all children in this sample, regardless of parental attachment state of mind, showed an increase in *positive* attachment themes as shown through the SSAP from the initial placement to one and two years post-placement. This finding highlights the powerful influence of adoption as a form of intervention. (Hodges, Steele, Hillman, Henderson, & Kaniuk, 2005; Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Steele, 2008).

All adopted children became more secure after placement.

Second, the child's attachment as determined by the SSAP was significantly correlated with the parent's AAI responses. Children placed with parents who demonstrated autonomous-secure responses to the AAI showed not only increases in positive themes (for example, help-seeking) but also declines in the *negative* themes (for example, aggression) over time.



This finding illuminates a critical feature of working with traumatized children, namely that it is easier to take on new positive representations than to ameliorate negative representations (Hodges et al., 2005; Steele et al., 2008).

Specifically, if one adoptive parent (having a secure-autonomous mother or father was equally predictive of a better outcome in the child) demonstrated a secure AAI at the time of placement, then the child showed fewer themes of aggression and disorganization in their story stem responses across the two years of the study. These themes of aggression and disorganization

Over time, children of securely attached parents became more secure than children of less securely attached parents.

remained high or escalated for those children with two parents demonstrating insecure AAIs at the time of placement. Those children placed with mothers with autonomous-secure AAI responses showed significantly lower levels of insecurity within three months of placement.

Security themes increased throughout the two-year period. These findings highlight that it is within the child's ongoing experiences of interacting with a securely attached parent that the negative representations can be reduced over time (Steele et al., 2008).

Third, at each of three points over the two years of this study, there were meaningful links between the attachment interviews provided by mothers before placement and their experience of being an adoptive mother. Shortly after placement, adoptive mothers with autonomous-secure AAI responses expressed in their PDI significantly more joy in their relationship, more competence and confidence, more focus on the child in an effort to make the relationship work, and a greater ability to provide a rich and vivid description of the child. These observations remained one and two years later. The secure group was distinguished from the dismissing and unresolved group of mothers in their experience of parenting by being significantly more competent in the parenting role, possessing greater knowledge of attachment, and being able to provide a richer and more coherent narrative about the evolving mother-child relationship. Shortly after placement, adoptive mothers with unresolved grief responses in their AAIs expressed in their PDI lower levels of joy and competence, higher levels of disappointment/despair and hostility, a perception of the adopted child as being rejecting, and narratives that were less rich and less

descriptive. They revealed a significantly greater need for social support and a lower level of satisfaction with support received. These observations remained one and two years later. These findings point directly to policy implications for providing much needed support, and directing resources where they are most needed and can be most effective.

The summary above highlights the value of an attachment perspective in providing a framework to understand some of the central issues that underpin adoptive parent-child relationships. Central to this perspective are the range of assessment techniques relying on observation of behavior as well as interview narratives, which provide reliable and valid tools with which to assess the complexity and richness of the internal world of both adults and children. These features are crucial to our understanding of the process involved in the emerging attachment relationships at the heart of an adoption and foster care context.

Securely attached parents experienced more joy in parenting adopted children.

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Implications for Practice and Policy

Carolyn Smith, MSW
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This research could stimulate change if, as a result of the findings, adoption workers were provided an assessment tool which could routinely be used to help the prospective adoptive parent(s) explore their capacity to permanently parent a child who has experienced trauma in the past. Adoption staff members typically assess a prospective adoptive parents' ability to parent an adoptive child through a home study process, which explores family systems, ages of family members, demographic information, parenting skills, and parenting history. Sometimes a matching tool is used to examine interests, hobbies, marital status, education, etc. These tools capture strengths and needs within adoptive parent families, but don't include an assessment of the adoptive parent(s) own attachment history. This research presents opportunities to explore how the prospective adoptive parents' own attachment to their parents and caregivers may positively or negatively impact their capacity to sustain the adoptive relationship over a lifetime. Use of the Adult Attachment Interview would offer more objective, in-depth information than what is currently gathered, and allow prospective parents the opportunity to examine their own attachment history. During the home study process, some prospective parents may be guarded in their responses to particular questions about their personal family backgrounds — use of the AAI as part of an assessment may encourage them to reflect and think more deeply, equipping them to provide more informed responses.

This research can also help to inform adoption staff about the specific therapeutic and training needs of the prospective parent(s) prior to the placement or adoption finalization. The assessment tool results could be used to help guide decision-making about the adoptive placement, avoiding those with low prognosis for being secure until certain conditions are met. I would welcome use of this research in adoption placement decisions. It would supplement other training typically done. If the assessment tool were to become an adoption process "best practice", it would be my hope that this research could increase the probability that the adoption is more likely to last a lifetime. All involved in the adoption process — adoption staff members, parents and children — want to do everything possible to make the best match possible.

This research could have a different impact for some relative/kin families and the AAI could prolong the time a child waits to be adopted. On the other hand, extended family members in particular sometimes work very hard despite numerous obstacles to make adoptive placements work over their lifetime. Relatives tend to have more realistic expectations regarding adoptive children, and consequently understand developmental behaviors and go the distance with the relative adopted child.

Nationally, an assessment tool based on this research could be utilized as part of the training for child welfare adoption workers. The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption (NCWRCA) develops curricula for child welfare workers and adoption agencies and may want to consider utilizing the research and assessment tool as a part of their training.

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African American Adoption Agency

I see this research being utilized to train providers and educate clients. In the field of adoption, specifically in training and preparing families to adopt older children from the foster care system, this research can be used to enhance and support current assessments to help prepare families for adoption. Trainers have the ability to offer research information to families in order to provide insight to the importance of evaluating their own stability in the area of attachment. Traditionally adoption professionals have used the attachment and special



needs issues directly related to the child as indicators of anticipated post adoption services. This research helps predict or anticipate early in the process the needed support for adoptive parents when providing post adoption services.

This research can stimulate change in the area of prevention practice. It is a natural and regular part of the training requirements of adoption professionals to familiarize individuals and families with the attachment needs of children. This information can help professionals become more aware of the parents — their perceived feelings and attachment history. Exploring attachment of the parents as part of the process and not simply emphasizing parenting skills may serve to assist the transition and blending of families in the long term. This exploration should be considered rather than simply pursuing the goal of permanency and moving children out of the child welfare system. This research guides adoption professionals to prevent disruptions and reduce children struggling in adoptive homes as a result of unmet needs of parents.

In general, I do not see uses of this research being problematic. However, I can envision some challenges. Safeguarding professionals from making judgments during the home study or limiting the pool of viable adoptive resources may be challenging. It is important to see this research as an indicator for parents and professionals to understand the importance of how a family's perspective and attachment can influence the experiences of a child at the time of placement and thereafter. It is not a concrete and exact solution. These research findings provide "tools of awareness" — they do not reflect red flags, but assist with the continuous process of helping families to determine their own attitudes about parenting and their readiness to parent. Using this research, parents have the opportunity to reflect about how they see themselves *earlier in the process* and possibly begin to resolve unmet attachment needs before a child is placed into the home. In all, improving the adoptive parent's experience of parenting and the adoptive child's experience of being parented is one of the goals of permanency.

I think this research can apply to all families pursuing adoption of children who are in the foster care system. However, I would be cautious because interpretations and views regarding healthy versus unhealthy attachment can look different across cultures and groups. What is considered a healthy attachment to an adoptive parent may not be considered healthy to the assessor. There are also differing perceptions of what is considered healthy given the circumstances under which family members were reared and the situations

to which they compare themselves. For example, family members experiencing poverty may fully believe that, in comparison to the families and relationships they knew, they are indeed healthier and have more significant relationships. This isn't to say that families in poverty do not have healthy attachments. This research leads us to explore the notion of how a person's past experiences may impact their sense of attachment and parenting, and consequently their relationship with their child.

I think it is important to circulate these findings to adoption professionals who are training and preparing families as they pursue waiting children. Using this information will encourage families to consider their own attachments as possible predictors for the children placed into their homes.

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Wendylee Raun, MA **MN ADOPT**

I see use of this research in the pre-adoption process from two perspectives. First, I strongly believe that use of the AAI instrument in the home study process would be of great value, provided the social workers involved in the home study process were skilled at working with parents. When an AAI showed that a parent or both parents would struggle in an adoptive placement situation, the worker could use this instrument to help address these issues without disrupting the entire process, i.e. raising defensive barriers in the clients. Rather than using the knowledge gained to 'rule out' families, it could be used to 'lift up' families. Skilled professionals could help the adopting parents see that by address-



ing their own issues (attachment styles, unresolved grief and loss, or lack of understanding of the child's point of view), both adults and children would have a far better experience and long term outcome. Pre-adoption training of parents could address the parent's attachment style in a non-threatening manner and open up the idea that the parents play a significant role in the outcome for the child.

Second, so much of the focus of pre-adoption training, as currently provided, focuses on the 'special needs' of the children. Parents are often overwhelmed by the training and indicate that it is 'negative' in nature. Perhaps a follow-up training should be mandated within the first six months of placement so that parents can make connections between their AAI responses and their own experience with their new child. Many parents do not recognize the importance of grief and loss issues (both theirs and the child's) and the impact of this on the outcome of the adoption experience. The public generally believes that adoption is a 'happy' event and a single moment in time, not an on-going process of development for both parent and child.

In our training events at MN ADOPT (see description on page 7) we are shifting the focus from behavioral interventions (fixing the children) to addressing the parent's experience of adoption. This is accomplished in a six part series focusing on supporting parents and training them to be aware of their own attachment

style in regard to their parenting approach. A participant at a recent series on Reactive Attachment Disorder stated that prior to adopting, she 'knew all about it in her head, but was overwhelmed and taken by surprise by how it felt'. We address self care, marriage preservation, and true attachment-based parenting rather than traditional means of par-

enting that are not designed to build connection with a hurt child. This research shows that adoption in and of itself is of significant value to the child but that value can be enhanced so much by parental (and professional) understanding of the experience of both children and parents. The work with the parents in our Reactive Attachment Disorder - Learning Alternative Behavior Strategies (RAD LABS) series, which combines parent support, general resources, and information about the impact of trauma on the child, has been described as 'life changing' by parents. It would be wonderful to obtain feedback from the children as well about how their experience has changed as a result of these classes. I would like to see this research implemented as a standard part of adoption practice for waiting children and their adopting families.

Use of this research in training professionals would be a challenge, but of paramount importance. From the therapeutic community to the child protection frontline workers to the juvenile justice system, the viewpoint of the child is not often considered or understood. The specific disabilities (such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders) of the children are also not understood. Over the last decade, the level of difficulty of the children being placed has increased while the training and preparation of parents has remained the same and is not uniform by any means. Training is the most viable means by which to address this issue at the moment. Getting professionals to attend training is the biggest challenge. Support of adoption competency certificate programs, such as the one being developed in Minnesota, most certainly would be enhanced by coursework related to this research and would be a wonderful way to promote this level of service enhancement.

The entire culture of adoption is changing drastically at this moment. With the Hague Convention, international adoption is significantly reduced and more people are turning to foster/adoption as a means to build their families. This is also considered a low cost alternative. Single people, the gay and lesbian community, older couples wanting to continue parenting, and those who perceive adoption as a spiritual calling are increasingly adopting from foster care. Communities of color are being recruited. Many who are willing to consider older children with special needs are in a different socio-economic class than the international adoptive parents. Applying this research to that wide variety of adopters will be a challenge, yet one well worth taking on.

I would like to see this research replicated. I would like to see it become standard practice to use this kind of ongoing assessment within families over time. I



would like to see therapeutic and support interventions based on the outcomes implemented with families. I would like to see professionals trained to be aware of the attachment factors in both parental and child satisfaction with adoption. We ask a lot of both the parents and the children. Use of this research and further research based on these findings would greatly enhance the outcomes for families.

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