

Adult Attachment Interview

What it is and the Information it gives

The **Adult Attachment Interview** is an interview of an adult asking them to evaluate their own childhood experiences. It is an interview that elicits information about an adult's current self protective strategy in relationships, something that has far reaching consequences in an adult's relationships with their children, their partner(s) and the outside world.

The Adult Attachment Interview is a semi structured interview (an interview which follows a standard structure, but uses probes and follow up questions that depend upon the speaker's responses) that has been widely used in research and professional practice for over 20 years. It lasts 1-2 hours. It provides a number of different kinds of information that is relevant to family court procedures:

- ✚ *An Attachment Strategy:* This refers to the mental and behavioural strategies used by children and adults in order to stay safe and elicit support, when faced with anxious or threatening situations. Such strategies and defences, whilst developed in infancy and childhood to elicit nurture and protection from parents and carers, continue to shape relationships into adulthood, as well as be informed by them. The Adult Attachment Interview tracks how information is distorted by the brain in order to assist the individual in dealing with any perceived dangers to themselves or their children.
- ✚ *Unresolved traumatic experiences:* These refer to a possible set of terrifying experiences of losses that distort a person's behaviour without them being aware of it. That is, they interrupt the individual's strategy of staying safe.
- ✚ *Overriding Distortions of the strategy* such as depression and other behaviour or thinking that can render an individual's behaviour non strategic (behaviour that undermines the person's goal of staying safe).
- ✚ *An Interpreted early history of the speaker:* Information given directly by the speaker together with a pattern of discourse (ways of speaking) are used to gain some understanding as to how the speaker has come to be where he or she is. The interview cannot directly establish what actually happened to the speaker, but this interpretation (or indirect

reconstruction) can assist in trying to understand why the speaker thinks and behaves the way he or she does.

📌 *The Speaker's Level of Parental Reasoning:* This refers to the speaker's understanding of their own and other's actions in close relationships, giving some indication as to the flexibility and sensitivity in which they will be able to interpret their child's actions and respond to them.

The information is gained by attending both to the individual's speech and their relationship with the interviewer where the speaker's strategy can actually be directly observed in use.

Classification Process

Interpretation of the interview is from a standardised coding procedure which involves extensive training and also the testing of reliability to an internationally accepted standard. A transcript of an audio taped interview is prepared which is then classified blind to the current circumstances of the adult, to ensure that these does not 'colour' the reading of the transcript. For these reasons, the Adult Attachment Interview is audio recorded and an anonymised transcript is prepared and sent to an external coder for classification. My interviews are classified by Dr P.M. Crittenden, an international authority in the field, and founder of the International Association for the Study of Attachment.¹ The classification provided for me by the external coder is not made available to the Court, as it is technical and only meaningful to those who have been trained in classifying and coding the Adult Attachment Interview. However, important conclusions are evidenced fully in my report, as well as explained in detail, and thus are open to challenge.

Advantages of Using Attachment Measures in Assessments for the Family Courts

📌 They are well attested in research and thus observations are evidenced based. Full references are available upon request, and are listed in my reports.

📌 The use of standardised measures that involve considerable training and testing of reliability ensures that observations are truly comparable, and less subjective.

¹ Further information about the work of Dr Crittenden, including her CV and published works can be found on her website, www.patcrittenden.com

- ✚ Use of audio recording allows for a depth of observation and analysis that is not possible for the simple observer.
- ✚ Recording provides the context in which the behaviour or speech of a parent is placed. It therefore allows for much fairer assessment, as the impact of the interviewer is visible for assessment, and disputed about what happened or what was said can be checked.
- ✚ These measures give cogent evidence as to how and adult or child might behave in conditions or stress and anxiety, not simply how the adult believes they will or they ought to behave.
- ✚ Standardised measures and external coding mean that a true indication is given about an adult or child's functioning in the present. Whilst the assessment process must involve a proper understanding of past behaviour, it is important to look genuinely at whether change has occurred, and whether past risks really are applicable now (or by contrast whether apparent change is genuine and likely to last).
- ✚ My own experience of using these measures in social work assessment testifies to their value in unlocking many previously troubling and puzzling situations and highlighting key issues.
- ✚ Given the depth of information that each of these measures yield in a relatively short time, they are actually very cost effective! External coding of the Adult Attachment Interview currently costs £250 (plus costs of international bank transfer).

Personal Experience and Qualifications

In addition to my experience as a Children's Guardian and Independent Social Worker, I have undergone significant training over many years in the attachment field and specifically in relation to the Adult Attachment Interview. More specifically, this training continues to involve participation in an international group of coders; regularly reading, classifying and discussing interviews and attending international advanced clinical seminars, in addition to the 23 days of training specifically needed to carry out any assessments using the Adult Attachment Interview. Whilst I am aware of some other experts who are trained in this way, few also have the experience also of family court proceedings, and conducting such assessments in this context. I have been using the Adult

Attachment Interview in work as a Guardian and Independent Social Work since 2002, and it has become integral to my work.

I currently train for NAGALRO on the subject of Adult Attachment (with Dr Stephen Farnfield, see www.nagalro.com), and am conducting research for a PHD in this area. I have also conducted training for CAFCASS and OUTCOMES UK in the area of attachment, and I have published articles in the field.

My full CV is attached.

Ben Grey January 2008