

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) World Congress held in Brisbane last year (September 19-22 2004) was a significant event for researchers and practitioners in the field of child maltreatment globally. In this *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* we showcase examples of research and activities being undertaken by Australians who presented at the ISPCAN world congress, including:

(a) a reproduction of poster presentation authored by Dr Rosamund Thorpe and Dr Marie Caltabiano from James Cook University in which the authors reported preliminary results of their study into the relationship between foster carers' attachment styles and their ability to cope with fostering abused and neglected children; and

(b) a reproduction of a poster presentation authored by Netty Horton of the Australian Council for Children and Youth Organisations in which she describes a program being rolled out nationally to help create child safe organisations.

If you presented a paper or poster at ISPCAN or another relevant conference and would like to have it considered for inclusion in the National Child Protection Clearinghouse's *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* contact us by phone at (03) 9214 7888 or email [ncpc@aifs.gov.au](mailto:ncpc@aifs.gov.au).

## Foster carers' adult attachment styles

A reproduction of the poster *Foster carers' adult attachment styles: Preliminary findings from a research study in Queensland* presented at the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect World Congress in Brisbane (19-22 September 2004)

Rosamund Thorpe and Marie Caltabiano

It was hypothesised that those foster carers with secure attachment (an expectation that difficult feelings can be tolerated and understood, and an ability to be attentive to their own children's needs; Kaniuk, Steele, and Hodges 2004) or with earned secure attachment (people who have had experiences of loss or trauma and who have been able to resolve their feelings about this, putting it in context so that they can move on in their lives; Kaniuk et al. 2004) status would be better able to cope with the challenges of caring for children who had been abused and neglected, or had attachment difficulties.

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan 1994) was used to assess foster carers' attachment styles in the following areas: confidence; discomfort with closeness; relationships as secondary; need for approval; and preoccupation.

### Study aims

- To assess the adult attachment styles of foster carers
- To explore the relationship between adult attachment style and foster caring role performance
- To explore the relationship between adult attachment style, role performance, and carers' own childhood experiences (forthcoming)

### Background literature

#### *Attachment*

- According to attachment theory, close relationships in adulthood are viewed as originating in childhood relationships with parents or caregivers.
- Responsiveness of the adult attachment figure to the child's calls for attention and protection leads to "secure" attachment. The nature of the relationship between infant and caregiver over time, leads the child to form a mental representation of the infant-caregiver relationship (that is, a working model of attachment). This working model of attachment shapes how the person



comes to view the self and others' responsiveness to emotional needs, evolving into an attachment style that the person carries into adulthood (Bowlby 1973; Hazan and Shaver 1987).

- Research on infants temporarily separated from their mothers identified three types of attachment style: secure, avoidant and anxious (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall 1978). These three attachment styles have been found to reflect adult intimate relationships (Hazan and Shaver 1987).
- Bartholomew (1990) has proposed that adult attachments are defined by positive and negative views of the self and others: secure, preoccupied, dismissing and fearful.
- Attachment in adults has been measured through the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan and Main 1984) or self-report instruments such as the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling and Brown 1979) and the Intimate Bonds Measure (Wilhelm and Parker 1988); or self-report prototypes of attachment style (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Hazan and Shaver 1987).
- In the current study, attachment in adults was measured using the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller and Hanrahan 1994), which comprises five sub-scales: confidence, discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary, need for approval, or preoccupation. Each sub-scale represents a dimension central to adult attachment. Each item is scored on a 6-point response scale ranging from totally agree to totally disagree.
- The five scales of the ASQ have been shown to have adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .76 to .84; and 10-week retest reliability coefficients ranging from .67 to .78 (Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan 1994). Feeney and her colleagues also reported significant associations between the ASQ scales and measures of personality and family functioning. Thus, the reliability, construct, and criterion validity data, and the ease of administration, make the ASQ a useful instrument for measuring adult attachment.

#### *Foster carers' own childhood experiences*

- The crucial difference between good and less good foster carers was whether there had been resolution of unhappy childhood experiences (that is, that compensatory or healing experiences had occurred; Jenkins 1965).
- Where foster carers had unhappy childhoods, this was sometimes but not always, related to good foster caring (Kay 1966).
- Successful female foster carers identified with deprived children because of their own unhappy childhood experiences, though this finding may have been distorted by the fact that the carers, by definition, were successful as they were all long-term carers (Dando and Minty 1987).
- Successful adoptive mothers had secure or "earned secure" attachment status (Kaniuk et al. 2004).
- Those foster carers who have not had healing experiences may be less likely to have "secure" or "earned secure" attachment in adulthood.
- Foster carers with insecure adult attachment may encourage dependence in their foster children, but may not respond appropriately to children's needs (Kaniuk et al. 2004).
- Kaniuk and colleagues (2004) proposed that an adult's attachment history, their current attachment status and evidence of resolution of past losses are fundamental to the assessment of their capability to be adoptive parents.

## Method

The interviews explored the: attachment styles of foster carers (using the Attachment Style Questionnaire); role performance as assessed by senior foster care professionals in the region; and life experiences leading to secure or earned secure adult attachment (results relating to this area of inquiry were not included in preliminary analyses, but will be forthcoming).

Carer role performance was rated in three areas: understanding and acceptance of the foster caring role agreed by the Queensland Department of Families (QDOF)<sup>1</sup> and Foster Care Queensland (FCQ)<sup>2</sup>; provision of basic child care; and provision of additional care needed by foster children.

Carer role performance in the three areas described above was rated using the following classification coding: A for very good performance in this area; B for good performance in this area; or C for reservations concerning performance.

Table 1. Attachment style questionnaire	
Confidence	Per cent agreement
Overall I am a worthwhile person	99.1
I am easier to get to know than most people	86.0
I feel confident that other people will be there for me when I need them	81.6
I find it relatively easy to get close to other people	75.4
I feel confident about relating to others	82.5
If something is bothering me, others are generally aware and concerned	79.0
I am confident that other people will like and respect me.	84.3
I often worry that I do not really fit in with other people	25.4
<b>Discomfort</b>	
I prefer to depend on myself rather than other people	88.6
I prefer to keep to myself	62.3
I find it hard to trust other people	45.7
I find it difficult to depend on others	50.9
I find it easy to trust others	57.0
I feel comfortable depending on other people	41.3
I worry about people getting too close	26.3
I have mixed feelings about being close to others.	36.9
While I want to get close to others, I feel uneasy about it	35.1
Other people have their own problems, so I don't bother them with mine	59.7
<b>Relationships as secondary</b>	
To ask for help is to admit that you're a failure	19.3
People's worth should be judged by what they achieve	32.5
Achieving things is more important than building relationships	10.6
Doing your best is more important than getting on with others	35.9
If you've got a job to do, you should do it no matter who gets hurt	15.7
My relationships with others are generally superficial	14.9
I am too busy with other activities to put much time into relationships	14.9
<b>Need for approval</b>	
It's important to me that others like me	50.8
It's important to me to avoid doing things that others won't like	57.9
I find it hard to make a decision unless I know what other people think	28.9
Sometimes I think I am no good at all	26.4
I worry that I won't measure up to other people	35.1
I wonder why people would want to be involved with me	21.9
When I talk over my problems with others, I generally feel ashamed or foolish	29.8
<b>Preoccupation</b>	
I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like	31.6
I worry that others won't care about me as much as I care about them	23.0
It's very important to me to have a close relationship	82.4
I worry a lot about my relationships	29.8
I wonder how I would cope without someone to love me	43.0
I often feel left out or alone	25.4
I get frustrated when others are not available when I need them	55.3
Other people often disappoint me	43.9

## Sample

This study assessed the adult attachment styles of over 100 male and female foster carers of children who have been abused and neglected in the Mackay/Whitsunday region of Queensland.

The sample comprised 115 foster carers of children who had been abused and neglected in the Mackay/Whitsunday region (60 per cent response rate). Seventy-one of the foster carers interviewed were female and 44 were males. In 76 of the 115 foster caring families one carer was interviewed. In the remaining 39 foster caring families both carers were interviewed. Of the 115 foster carers interviewed, 95 were currently caring for a child and 18 were not currently fostering. The sample was drawn from several different foster care agencies and services, specifically:

- 74 foster caring families were attached to non-government shared care agencies;
- 23 carers were fostering through the Mackay Aboriginal and Alternative Foster Care Service; and
- 18 of the participants were government carers.

## Results

**Aim 1:** To assess the adult attachment styles of foster carers

**Technique:** Foster carer attachment style was assessed using the Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire. Agreement was calculated by combining responses to three of the points on the six point rating scale: totally agree; strongly agree; and slightly agree. The other three points on the rating scale are three similar levels of disagreement.

**Findings:** The attachment styles of foster carers in this sample are described in Table 1.

**Aim 2:** To explore the relationship between adult attachment style and foster caring role performance (that is, does attachment style predict role performance or does role performance predict attachment style?)



*Techniques:* The sample was divided into three groups on the basis of foster carer role performance classifications: foster carers rated as having a *very good* role performance; foster carers rated as having a *good* role performance; and foster carers for whom the interviewer had *reservations* concerning their role performance.

Discriminant function analyses were performed to predict foster care role performance using the five dimensions of adult attachment (as measured by the Attachment Style Questionnaire) as the predictor. To confirm the discriminant function analysis findings, a one-way ANOVA was performed to see if there were differences between groups of foster carers (defined by foster carer role performance) on each of the adult attachment styles.

*Findings:* Attachment styles in foster carers did not distinguish between groups categorised based on foster carer role performance (that is, attachment style did not predict foster carer role performance). There were no differences between foster carer groups on any of the attachment styles, further supporting the discriminant function analysis findings.

*Aim 3:* To explore the relationship between adult attachment style, role performance, and carers' own childhood experiences

*Findings:* Further analyses are to be undertaken on life experiences in relation to role performance (forthcoming).



This study assessed the adult attachment styles of over 100 male and female foster carers of children who have been abused and neglected in the Mackay/Whitsunday region of Queensland.

### Summary of findings to date

- The five dimensions of the Attachment Style Questionnaire did not discriminate between groups of foster carers based on assessed role performance.
- There was no group differences between groups on confidence, discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary, need for approval, or preoccupation.

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney, Noller and Hanrahan 1994) therefore does not appear to be useful, at least as a primary tool in the assessment of foster carers. While it can give some indication of attachment styles, and may thus be of use as a preliminary tool, it does not provide an in depth exploration of foster carers' resolution of their own life experiences which may be gained through interview techniques. Further analyses of the research will examine data gathered on foster carers' own life experiences with a view to assessing the following issues:

- whether selection of foster carers should include a focus on the carer's own childhood;
- whether it is desirable to select carers who have secure or earned secure attachment styles; and
- whether it is desirable to provide good support to carers who have unresolved childhood issues.

### Footnotes

1 Now the Department of Child Safety

2 Formerly the Foster Parents Association Queensland (FPAQ)

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