

Adult Attachment Interview Classifications

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was developed in the early 1980s by Mary Main to use in a six-year follow-up study of parent-child attachments of mothers and fathers whose children had been tested in the Strange Situation at one-year of age. Most studies, but not all, have found a consistent relationship among AAI classifications, parenting behavior, and child attachment status. In other words, a parent with an insecure attachment style is unlikely to be able to help her child feel securely attached. Since that study, it has been used in many others to examine the impact of parents' attachment styles on the attachment style of their children. The AAI includes 18 specific questions, which explore the adult's attachment experiences as a child and the rating scales reflect a parent's current state of mind related to his or her own attachment experiences with both parents. For example, here are a few of the questions:

- Could you give me five adjectives or phrases to describe your relationship with your mother/father during childhood? I'll write them down, and when we have all five, I'll ask you to tell me what memories or experiences led you to choose each one.
- Why do you think your parents behaved as they did during your childhood?
- When you were upset as a child, what did you do, and what would happen? Could you give me some specific incidents when you were upset emotionally? Physically hurt? Ill?

In this interview adults are asked to reflect on memories from childhood related to attachment. Adults' attachment styles are rated as secure primarily based on the subject's ability to relate a coherent narrative, regardless of whether the experiences reported were favorable or unfavorable. Thus their ability to process and come to terms with their own early life experiences as opposed to minimizing them or not being preoccupied with old wounds most important in the determination of their attachment security. The classifications are explained briefly below, along with their link to the attachment style most likely to develop in their children:

Secure/Autonomous: The parent appears to value attachment relations and sees past experiences as influential; however he/she seems relatively objective about past events and able to examine them. If neither of the subject's parents is described as loving, the subject can be given an "earned secure" rating if he/she has been able to reflect on and process feelings related to the negative treatment, put the experiences in relevant contexts, and resolve the pain related to past negative experiences. This person is able to tell a consistent, coherent, yet balanced narrative about childhood attachment experiences and, if negative, they have come to terms with the past and released it. These parents are most likely to help their child develop secure attachments.

Dismissing: The parent is attempting to minimize any influence of past attachment relationships by dismissing, devaluing, or denying their impact. The subject's parents may be described in very positive terms that are unsupported or contradicted. This is similar to the insecure-avoidant pattern in infants, in that the parent has learned to minimize expressions of emotions and need. As a caregiver, this adult lacks sensitivity to the child's

needs and is likely to be very uncomfortable with emotional/physical closeness. It is very hard for them to understand and connect with a child's feelings.

Preoccupied: The adult appears to have an excessive, confused, or unobjective preoccupation with past attachment relationships. Their descriptions may seem vague, angry, or conflicted. Some may be overwhelmed by the traumatic aspects of their experiences. This style is similar to the classification of insecure-ambivalent in infants. The caregiver's own issues would likely lead to inconsistent, ambivalent availability to their child.

Unresolved/Disorganized: These adults often spoke in unusual ways about loss experiences and displayed lapses in reasoning or inappropriate shifts in emotion. They have confusing or contradictory details in their narratives and may appear incoherent at times. These adults may have a tendency to dissociate in daily life or be easily triggered by past traumas.

You might refer back to Handout 2.6 in the previous module that contains questions to help parents explore their own emotional issues.

References

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