

*The importance of observational assessments, standardization, 'blind' coding by trained observers, and evidence of observer reliability of classification.*

The assessments used to code attachment for this report are observational assessments in which the observed persons are asked to do something and their behavior is audio- or video-recorded. This is preferable to self-report or checklists because (1) attachment involves behaviour that is not conscious (and therefore could not be reported), (2) self-report is open to bias toward what is socially desirable, especially when the assessment could affect aspects of one's life, and (3) some of the crucial behaviour does not mean what it appears to mean, e.g., angry smiles, and such behaviour cannot not easily be identified during live, unrecorded observation.

Further, it is important that the context of the observations be standardized in ways that elicit attachment behavior and strategies. Four conditions are necessary to assess attachment.

- **Structured procedure:** A structured series of conditions that begin without threat, introduce a threat to the child's perception of safety and comfort, then has a resolution phase in which the attachment figure (i.e., the parent or other primary caregiver) can resolve the child's discomfort is essential. Studies have shown that without such structure approximately 30 hours of observation is needed to generate these conditions spontaneously and even then a trained observer is required (van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al., 2004). Notably, parents whose children were in out-of-home placement would be expected to assiduously avoid threat of any kind during court approved contact.
- **Trained observers:** The observers should be trained to recognize which behavior is relevant to attachment and what patterns of such behavior reflect which attachment strategies. Because there are two primary ways of defining attachment strategies, observers should state which method is being used and where they received training; observers should provide evidence of their reliability.
- **'Blind' observers:** Observers should not know anything about the parents and children being observed when observing and assessing attachment (i.e., assessments of attachment are coded 'blindly'). This prevents the coder from looking for particular problems. This is important to avoid because when one expects specified problems or deficiencies, one almost always finds corroborating evidence. When one observes without such a bias, the resulting observations are more likely to be accurate and meaningful. Consequently, the case history and court documents cannot be not viewed until after the coding is completed.
- **Certified observers:** The observers should present evidence that they have been found to reach the correct conclusions on a standardized test of coder agreement; certificates are issued to professionals who have reached such agreement.

Contact meetings between children in care and their parents do not meet any of these criteria: contact is not a standardized, does not incorporate a series of attachment-eliciting sequences, is not filmed, and lacks observers who are trained in the behavioural criteria needed to define attachment and who are blind to information about family members and their histories.

van IJzendoorn, M. H., Vereijken, C. M. J. L., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Riksen-Walraven, J. M. (2004). Assessing attachment security with the Attachment Q Sort: Meta-

analytic evidence for the validity of the observer AQS. *Child Development*, 75, 1188-1213.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00733>.