

The Toddler CARE-Index

The Toddler CARE-Index (Crittenden 2007) is an assessment of the relationship between a caregiver and child. It uses a videotaped 3-5 minute free-play observation in which the adult is asked 'to play with your child as you usually would'. The CARE-Index can be used with all attachment figures (usually parents or foster parents) and also with other adults who do not have direct care of the child.

Because there is not stress to the child, it is a weaker assessment of children's attachment than the separation and reunion measures in the Strange Situation Procedure. In cases where parents risk losing their child to state care, there is, of course, stress on the parent.

In the toddler years, caregivers must manage children's exploration and other behaviour to keep them safe; this can lead to conflict resolution which does produce attachment behaviours in the child. The Toddler CARE-Index takes account of these developmental changes in assessing the parent-child relationship. It is flexible regarding where it can be carried out; it can, for example, be conducted in the parents' home or in a clinic or even in a park.

The Toddler CARE-Index is applicable to children aged from 16 months to about 72 months (before 16 months the Infant version of the CARE-Index should be used). It is coded by reliable coders who are blind to the facts of the case. There are two studies validating the toddler system (Crittenden, 1992; Künster, Fegert, & Ziegenhain, 2010), but considerably more on the infant system on which it is based.

The Toddler CARE-Index provides information about parents' sensitivity, control, and unresponsiveness to children's signals and children's strategies for coping with parents' behaviour. Three steps are involved: first, using the manual, seven discrete behavioural characteristics are coded: facial expression, vocal expression, position and body contact, affection, turn-taking, control, and choice of activity. These codes are summed to yield scale scores for cooperation, compulsiveness, resistant coercion and passive coercion. These are then converted to proxy patterns of attachment, i.e., the DMM A, B, C, A/C patterns. The different patterns each carry a different sort of advantage and threat to the child's development.

Limitations: Unpublished data from a thesis (Olrick, 1992) indicate that fathers are generally more sensitive in play than mothers, but that their sensitivity is not related to the child's development; it is likely that this is because the fathers in this study were not the child's primary caregiver. The Toddler CARE-Index was designed as a screening tool and should always be considered in the light of other evidence, that is, it is not a stand-alone assessment. Further, play episodes cannot provide evidence of how the parent will behave when children are distressed and need comfort (Goldsmith, et al., 2004).

References

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