

“Exploring Attachment and Internal Representations in Looked-After Children”

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This research explored the use of Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP), a narrative-based measure, for the assessment of internal representations in children between the ages of 4 and 11 years old with Five Rivers.

The findings draw upon two samples of children comprising of a sample of 42 children at Five Rivers Child Care and 42 children from the community.



SECURE



INSECURE



DISORGANIZED



DEFENSIVE AVOIDANT

Consistently children in the Five Rivers displayed significantly more disorganized, avoidant and negative representations than children in the community, whilst at the same time having significantly fewer representations characteristic of ‘secure’ attachment.



This research illustrates that children who are cared for within Five Rivers need to experience a relationship which provides love, safety and nurture. Such a relationship can be therapeutic, helping to address the impact of adverse childhood experiences.



It was noted that children in care are likely to have established Internal Working Models (views of the self, the world and others; Bowlby, 1969) which have been shaped by their early experiences of adversity. These templates have been learned and understood as a replica for future relationships.



Our ongoing research is exploring the possible changes in these representations and our follow up data is looking promising and intriguing. Our efforts as an Assessment and Therapy team allow for improved clinical formulations, increased understanding and therefore positive outcomes relating to the children in their care.



The output of the SSAP demonstrated avoidance and defensive mechanisms to be much higher in the FR sample. This is consistent with prior findings: early experiences of abuse often encourage a child to avoid contact with attachment figures, to protect the self from future harm (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989). Understanding this allows us to put research into practice: we can develop training for carers and staff around defensive mechanisms and avoidant attachment styles. Training not only empowers carers, but allows us to support children in placement further too.



The Five Rivers assessment process goes beyond that of using only the SDQ (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) which allows for a more robust understanding of children in care. It ensures that the SDQ is not used alone as a sole means of identifying significant needs in a vulnerable, high-risk population. The help from carers and staff in completion of these reports has meant we have begun to develop a good understanding of what may help children recovery from abuse, trauma and neglect.

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