



**Family Assessment Partnership**  
 Expert Assessments of Risk, Parenting and Family Relationships

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## The Meaning of the Child to the Parent - An Inter-subjective Approach to Assessing Representations of Caregiving:

### The Development and Validation of a New Method of Assessing Risk and Resilience in Parent-Child Relationships using Semi-Structured Interviews

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**Introduction**

*'We believe that all children have a psychological meaning to their parents, which if made overt helps make sense of the relationship between them. Exploration of this meaning is especially relevant where there has been a breakdown in the parent-child relationship resulting in rejection, neglect or abuse.'*

(Reder & Duncan 1995 p. 42)

**What is the Meaning of the Child Interview?**

The Meaning of the Child Interview (MotC) is a method of understanding the way parents think about their child(ren) through careful analysis of a semi-structured interview with the parent.

Interviews are classified using a system that examines the ways in which parents talk about their child, their relationship with their child, and their parenting.

**What does the Meaning of the Child Aim to do?**

- ① Differentiate parents whose children may be at risk from abuse and emotional harm from those whose are not
- ② Differentiate parent and child relationships where the child's development is at significant risk, from parents with normally developing children
- ③ Understand struggling or problematic relationships in ways that are useful in deciding how to intervene or offer support to the parent or family.

**Why use the Meaning of the Child Interview?**

① **It is not what parents 'know' and can 'perform' that matters, but how they think and feel**

The problem of assessments which focus primarily on task-based observation of parenting skills, in cases of child maltreatment, is that parents fail in parenting less because they do not know what they should be doing, but more because they cannot apply generalised parenting 'knowledge' to the specific child in front of them.

② **The influence of trauma on the parent-child relationship is critical to understanding risk in parent-child relationships and parenting**

Parents who have had adverse childhood experiences, which remain unresolved, frequently distort the meaning of their own and their child's experience in ways that are self-protective and relate to their own experiences of danger and threat, but are not protective to their child (Crittenden 2008).

② **Understanding the parent is key to assessing parenting, and risk to children**

Much of parenting assessment amounts to observing failure rather than trying to understand what is going wrong. This is a poor guide both to predicting what will happen in the future, and intervening to make things better.

**The Meaning of the Child Validation Study**

The MotC classification of parental interviews was compared with the parents' face-to-face interaction with their child in the CARE-Index (Crittenden 2007), as well as other measures and indicators.

A strong correlation was found between the nature of the relationship and level of risk as assessed by the MotC and as indicated by their face-to-face relationship.

**How is the Meaning of the Child Assessed?**

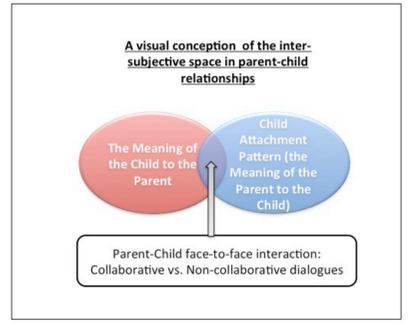
Interviews are classified for the level of risk and the nature of the parent-child relationship. The degree to which it is:

- **Sensitive:** mutually pleasurable to parent and child, and supportive of the child's development
- **Unresponsive:** psychologically distant from the child, leading to neglect in extreme cases
- **Controlling:** psychologically intrusive towards the child, leading to, in more serious cases, hostile and/or enmeshed relationships

The MotC is based upon Attachment theory, and the classifications are linked to their effects upon the child's developing attachment pattern, and the potential risks or benefits to the child's development arising out of this.

**A Dyadic, Inter-subjective understanding of Parenting Representations**

The MotC classifications are drawn from Crittenden's CARE-Index, where the parent's behaviour is seen dyadically, from the perspective of the child (and vice-versa). The meaning of the child to the parent is not seen simply as an outworking of the parent's self-protective strategy in childhood (attachment pattern), but as the result of a developing 'collaborative conversation' between parent and child (Beebe 2012a&b, Lyons-Ruth 1999).



**Sensitive** parents enable the development, protection and nurture of the child through facilitating a collaborative 'inter-subjectivity' between them. Each party offers something of themselves, whilst listening and eagerly attending to both the responses and initiatives of the other. Such 'dialogues' are a pleasure to witness. There is ebb and flow and the integration of both perspectives.

**Controlling** parents need to dominate the meaning-making process. The intrusive parent perceives the child's autonomy and ability to make meaning of the relationship as a threat, and so 'moves into' the space that is otherwise jointly constructed in healthy relationships. The controlling parent deals with the threat they perceive from the child by attempting to make the relationship what they want or need it to be, rather than feeling sufficiently secure to allow the relationship to develop in a way that respects the child's subjectivity and personality.

**Unresponsive** parents seek to withdraw from the 'dialogue', usually out of fear. The unresponsive parent constructs a meaning of the child that justifies their own lack of genuine participation in the conversation.

Usually the child is idealised, so as to underestimate the parental involvement the child needs, and facilitate the parent's absence. The parent's psychological absence leaves a vacuum that the child has to fill for his or her own survival. The child becomes the driving force in the dialogue.

**The Meaning of the Child Validation Study**

**Setting:**

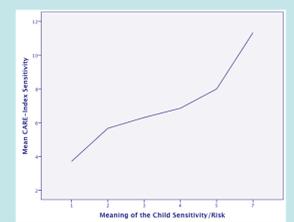
- 85 parent-child dyads, of which:
- 62 were drawn from family court proceedings, or child protection investigations (the 'at risk' sample)
  - 23 were normative families (US sample provided by Dr Lane Strathearn, reported on in Strathearn et al. 2009)
  - 56 were mothers and 26 were fathers. The fathers were all drawn from the larger, risk sample.
  - Ethics approval from Roehampton University

**Assessment Tools**

- The Parent Development Interview (Aber et al. 2003) coded both for Parental RF (Slade et al. 2005) and the Meaning of the Child (MotC)
- The CARE-Index with the child/infant (Crittenden 2007)
- The Adult Attachment Interview (DMM-AAI, Crittenden and Landini 2011)

**Results**

- MotC Parental Sensitivity/Risk had a significant positive correlation to Parental Sensitivity as measured by the CARE-Index (Spearman's rho coefficient = 0.80, p = 0.000)



- MotC Unresponsive and Control classifications had significant positive correlations with the Care Index scales for Control and Unresponsiveness in the sample as a whole (Control: co. = 0.538, p = 0.000, Unresponsiveness: co. = 0.544, p = 0.000), and the Risk sample, but not the Normative when considered in isolation.
- MotC Parental Sensitivity/Risk had a significant positive correlation with Parental Reflective Functioning (RF), though these were not coded blind to each other (co. = 0.86, p = 0.000).
- The significant positive correlations between the 'Meaning of the Child' and the CARE-Index, and parental RF held for fathers as well as mothers. (Sensitivity: Mothers (M): co. = 0.702, p = 0.000, Fathers (F): co. = 0.708, p = 0.000, Unresponsiveness: M: co. = 0.610, p = 0.000, F: co. = 0.541, p = 0.004, Control: M: co. = 0.620, 0.000, F: co. 0.560, p = 0.003)
- The Sensitivity/Risk classification in the 'Meaning of the Child' clearly distinguished Risk from the Normative sample (e.g. normative sample had 70% 'functioning' relationships, Risk 30%).

**Conclusions and Reflections**

"Some children ... had acquired an undeclared script or blueprint for their life that submerged their personal identity or personal characteristics, and this meaning came to dominate the parent-child relationship... *The children became 'actors in someone else's play'.*"

**Reder and Duncan, 1999**

**Construct Validity**

- Established primarily through the strong relationship between the Meaning of the Child patterns of *parental interviews* with the CARE-Index patterns of *face-to-face* parental interaction. There are over 40 publications supporting the validity of the CARE-Index (Farnfield et al. 2010)
- Also in the correlation between MotC risk and Parental RF.

**Generalisability (External and Discriminant Validity)**

- 2 diverse samples used in study
- Both genders studied (almost all validation studies of parenting interviews are of mothers only, see George and Solomon 2008)

**Replication and Reliability**

- Whilst this is just one study, the MotC has been trained nationally over 3 years. Reasonable inter-rater coherence has been found in those taking a reliability test (Pearson's coefficient of above 0.70 required for reliability).

**The Particular Contribution of the Meaning of the Child**

- The Meaning of the Child offers a systemic, inter-subjective approach to classifying parenting representations. As such it is alive to the way in which outside relationships, such as couple, family and wider social relationships help shape the meaning of the relationship for both parent and child, in addition to the influence of the parent's childhood attachment experiences.
- The Meaning of the Child coding system integrates Crittenden's DMM understanding of self-protective information processing (Crittenden & Landini 2011) with a dyadic approach to the 'co-construction' of attachment.
- In doing so it is able to differentiate between differently functioning 'at risk' relationships, rather than lump all of these together in one category linked to 'disorganised attachment'. This extends its clinical and forensic usefulness.
- The Meaning of the Child has been developed to assess fathers as well as mothers, and both are included in the validation study.

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