

The Meaning of the Child Interview – An Assessment tool for understanding Parent-Child Relationships

What is the Meaning of the Child?

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 carefully analysed according to a system that examines the ways in which parents talk about their child, their relationship with their child, and their parenting.

'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)

Interviews are classified for the level of risk, and also 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), and **Controlling** (where the parent is 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 strengths in the child's development arising out of this.

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

Considerable research, such as the seminal studies of fatal child abuse carried out by Reder and Duncan in the 1990's, suggests that the way parents think is a more critical indicator as to the risks or potential in child development than the specific things parents do (Reder and Duncan 1999, Slade 2005, and Fonagy 2006). 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, for a variety of reasons, 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). This ties in with the findings of Professor Sue McGaw and her colleagues (2010) that it is childhood trauma, not possessing a learning difficulty for example, that results in dangerous parenting. It follows from this that assessing the impact of past experiences of trauma and loss should be a central part of the assessment process,

otherwise the most central and pertinent issues are being overlooked. This is a key aspect of what is assessed by the Meaning of the Child.

3) 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. Even many other approaches to classifying parenting interviews tend simply to score risk, or lump all 'at risk' relationships in one category (e.g. disorganized attachment) rather than attempting to understand what is going on in troubled and 'risky' relationships. The Meaning of the Child was developed and researched out of a service involved in assessing and intervening with struggling and 'at risk' parents and children.

What is the Research Basis of the Meaning of the Child Interview?

The Meaning of the Child Interview is based upon almost 30 years of research into the ways in which adult speak about their relationships, and what this reveals about how these relationships function. Particular use is made of Crittenden's work on the Adult Attachment Interview (Crittenden and Landini 2011), which is a development of Bowlby's understanding of defensive processes; the way in which the brain processes information about relationships and threat in order to stay safe. Also central is Fonagy's research into Reflective Functioning (Fonagy 2006), the human ability to understand behaviour in relationships in terms of underlying mental states, and its application to parenting (Slade 2005), as well as Solomon and George's (e.g. 2008) work on representations of caregiving.

The Meaning of the Child has been used extensively in the Family Court arena since 2010. It has been directly researched in its own right (Grey 2014), in a 'at risk' sample, and with parents with no statutory involvement. It is one of only comparable tools to be validated with fathers as well as mothers. MotC classifications were compared with the CARE-Index (Crittenden 2007), a well-validated measure of parent-child relationships, assessed through examining videos of the parent-child play. The CARE-Index identifies similar patterns to the MotC, but through observation of face-to-face interaction, rather than interviewing parents. A very strong correlation was found between MotC Sensitivity/Risk and CARE-Index sensitivity (coefficient = 0.80, $p = 0.000$). Statistically significant correlations were also found between Control and Unresponsiveness in both procedures. There was also a very strong correlation between MotC Sensitivity and Parental Reflective Functioning.

What is involved in Training in the Meaning of the Child Interview?

The Meaning of the Child training is offered by Dr Ben Grey and Juliet Kesteven of Family Assessment Partnership. It is offered as separate training and is also part of the University of Roehampton's MSc in Attachment Studies, the only postgraduate course on attachment in the UK. It is taught as a 4-day course (2 blocks of 2 days), and also involves practice classification of interview transcripts, and email tuition, both within and following the course. Participants can then complete a reliability test to become reliable coders of the MotC. Using a coding procedure enables practitioners to give clear evidence for their opinions, and achieve greater consistency and depth of analysis in family assessment.

For further information on the Meaning of the Child please contact Dr Grey or Juliet Kesteven at Family Assessment Partnership (08448 707348 or fap@attachmentrelationships.co.uk). See also www.attachmentrelationships.co.uk for further information and references.