what kind of parent might I be?

MORE prospective adopters are asking the question, what is the Attachment Style Interview for adoption and fostering assessment?

Its authors, Catherine Jacobs and Professor Antonia Bifulco, of the Lifespan Research Group based at Royal Holloway, University of London, explain what it is and how it helps with the assessment process.

As a prospective adopter, assessing your suitability to care for a child is one of the most important parts of the process of finding alternative families for children, and can be a crucial element in ensuring the success and stability of a placement. Assessing your strengths and weaknesses, and getting to know about your family and wider relationships are key aspects of finding out about your suitability to adopt.

In order to help make this process fair and reliable, an increasing number of adoption agencies now use standardised assessment tools. This is because such assessment tools are tested for their reliability, consistency and robustness, and are less open to the bias of individual practitioners.

One such assessment tool is the Attachment Style Interview (ASI) which is increasingly being used in social work practice. The ASI is based on a separate interview with you and your partner (if you have one) to gather information to help to assess your relationship with each other and others close to you, your support network and your views and feelings about relating to others. This helps to establish your current levels of resilience, and whether you are likely to be able to provide a stable family context for the child.

This article aims to clearly describe the ASI, to identify how it works, explain what it does and doesn’t do, and hopefully help you to understand how useful it can be as part of your overall assessment. This will be set out in terms of four common questions asked by potential adopters.

Why are standardised tools such as the ASI now being used in adoption/fostering?

The ASI is an objective assessment tool that has gone through careful checks to show it is consistent and reliable. When an ASI takes place it is recorded on a tape so that the social worker can play it back and listen very carefully to what has been said.

On the basis of this, ratings are made of different aspects of your relationships and attitudes towards others. The ratings are based on a series of rules and procedures all outlined in a training manual and verified in research contexts. All assessing social workers using the ASI undergo thorough four-day training, run by an experienced training agency. The ASI can be regarded as a fair assessment tool to be used across different teams for consistency in assessment.

Furthermore it is sensitive to the gender, cultural background, social class and age of the person being interviewed and has been shown to work in a range of contexts.

What is the background to the ASI?

The ASI is based on an attachment model of human behaviour, which states that individuals with a Secure (that is stable or autonomous) style of relating to close others are better adjusted, have access to greater support and will tend to become more sensitive and competent parents than those with Insecure styles of relating.

Those with Insecure styles have difficulties in relating based on either Anxious features or Avoidant features. Changes in style are possible over time, so the ASI focuses on recent circumstances and relationships, with the style assessed at the time of the adoption the most relevant. The ASI is only ever used as one element of the assessment process, but it meets some key assessment criteria that are required by the Department for Children, Schools and Families Practice Guidance on Preparing and Assessing Adopters and Assessing the Support Needs of Adoptive Families (2006).

The guidance identifies the following areas in carers’ lives as important for stable placements, and these need to be accurately assessed before placement:

- Ability to make relationships
- Levels of emotional openness
- Stable relationships
- Good support networks

The ASI covers these areas as it explores how easily you can confide in others and ask for help in stressful situations, the emotional support you receive and the quality of interaction with those close to you. It also looks at your level of trust in others, need for independence, and fear or anger in relationships.

While we all experience these aspects in relating to others, the ASI can determine the extent of these characteristics, and how they combine to form different inter-personal styles relating to issues of attachment around being Secure, Insecure-Anxious or Insecure-Avoidant.
The ASI should not be confused with another assessment tool sometimes used in adoption-fostering, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) which assesses the impact of childhood on a person’s attachment style and focuses on a person’s relationships with their own parents as a child. It too divides Secure and Insecure categories.

**what is the ASI interview like?**

The ASI takes around an hour and a half and is a conversational interview that usually takes place towards the beginning of the assessment process and provides helpful information for the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR).

Whilst the social worker has a list of questions to ask, it is very flexible and additional questions can be used for clarification or to allow you to explain your situation at length or explore a particular area further. The ASI has three main sections.

**ASI Support:** The support section consists of questions about the current levels of support from your partner (if present), and from two close adults with whom you can confide and go for help about the emotionally significant topics in your life. It also asks about your contact and interaction with your family of origin members. It is concerned more with the quality rather than quantity of support, although having at least two close support figures is considered important. This information is then combined into an assessment of your ability to relate to close others with ‘good’ ability to relate linked with a Secure attachment style rating. Having ‘poor’ ability to relate to close others is linked to different degrees of Insecure attachment style.

**ASI attachment attitudes:** The second section of the ASI covers different aspects of your inter-personal attitudes, including your trust of others, your feelings of independence and self-reliance, whether you like people around you a lot of the time and how easy you find it to ask for help. Issues to do with a fear of getting close, separating from others and feelings of anger are also explored. The social worker will always ask for examples of your experience and behaviour around particular topics being discussed in order to be clear about your situation.

**ASI Overall attachment style:** The different pieces of information provided in the ASI is combined to derive an overall attachment style profile. This includes one Secure and two Insecure-Anxious styles (one Enmeshed and one Fearful) and two Insecure-Avoidant styles (one Angry-dismissive and one Withdrawn). These have different characteristics, such as high need for company or fear of rejection, or anger or independence respectively.

The Insecure styles can be scored with different degrees of intensity (mild, moderate or marked) which has implications for the overall assessment, since the milder insecure styles (like Secure) imply greater resilience. Those with Insecure styles at higher levels (moderate or marked) will have insufficient support from the adults around them and their Anxious or Avoidant attitudes towards others will interfere with their ability to achieve optimum closeness to others. Such individuals will be less resilient when dealing with stressful situations because they have less support and are less able to ask for help. Identifying your style will help the social worker see areas of strength and areas of difficulty in relationships.

Through using the ASI the social worker can focus on important areas which may impede, or aid, the successful placement of a child. It is worth emphasizing again that the ASI is only ever used to help look at the small part of the PAR assessment related to emotional support. The PAR assessments cover a much wider area than this including your childhood and adult experiences, understanding an adopted child’s needs and capacity to parent an adopted child.

The assessing social worker will use the information obtained from the ASI to help assess whether adoption is a good option at this time and to build a detailed picture of how they can best support you once you have a child placed with you. Therefore the ASI is only one tool amongst many others which is used in the social work team’s decision-making.

**what level of feedback is given about the ASI from social workers?**

The information from the ASI will be only a part of the overall assessment information that goes into the PAR about which they can offer constructive feedback. From the ASI interview in particular, they will tell you about your support levels and your attachment style and how that fits with the rest of the assessment of you and your situation. This can be used to plan what additional support you might need if the child has complex needs.

It is less concerned with which type of style you have and more with how close your supportive relationships are in practice and how easily you can be supported to access help to work with service post placement.

The ASI is now being used increasingly by adoption and fostering teams around the country with positive feedback being reported by both adopters and practitioners in the information it provides to aid with a fair assessment.

**Further information:**


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**the ASI attachment styles**

**Clearly Secure:** This is the most stable and flexible style with comfort with closeness and appropriate levels of autonomy. There will always be good ability to make and maintain relationships with good support from at least two close others. This style denotes flexibility in approach/avoidance issues.

**Enmeshed:** This is a dependent attachment style with high Desire for Company, and low Self-reliance. Individuals with this style tend to have fairly superficial relationships and despite a high number of social contacts may have few which are objectively close. At times this style will involve high Anger which may lead to high ambivalence and ‘push-pull’ in relationships. Positive characteristics include sociability and warmth.

**Fearful:** This style is characterised by anxiety of being rejected or let down. Early life experience of rejection has generalized to fear of future interactions. Often there is a desire to get close to others, but with a fear of doing so which can lead to loneliness. Positive characteristics include high sensitivity to others’ feelings.

**Angry-Dissmissive:** This style is characterised by an angry avoidance of others, with high Mistrust, high Self-reliance and low Desire for Company. Its key characteristic is high Anger. Individuals with this style usually need a high level of control over their lives, are extremely self-reliant, but in conflict with those around them. Positive aspects include assertiveness.

**Withdrawn:** This is a detached style characterised by high Self-reliance and high Constraints on Closeness — often expressed as desire for privacy and need to keep clear boundaries with regard to others. However, there is neither the fear or anger involved in other styles, but rather it denotes a ‘closed’ style of relating. Positives include its practical, rational and non-emotional aspects.