

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# **TIES THAT BIND**

Attachment Formation in the Maltreated Preadolescent  
Child Placed in Long Term Foster Care

**August 1999**  
**Shirley-Ann Chinnery**

# **TIES THAT BIND**

**Attachment Formation in the Maltreated Preadolescent  
Child Placed in Long Term Foster Care**

## **MASKING FEELINGS**



**A CORRELATE OF INSECURE  
ATTACHMENT**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master in Social Work  
at Massey University, Albany Campus**

**August 1999  
Shirley - Ann Chinnery**

## ABSTRACT

While the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 enshrines the primacy of family placement for children in need of care and protection, it simultaneously acknowledges by way of S.13 (h) that for some children this may not be a viable, available or safe option and where such circumstances prevail, children are to be given the opportunity to develop an alternate psychological tie to caregivers other than their primary kin. It is this small group of children who require long term alternate care that are of primary interest to this thesis. The legislative principle that mandates this practice is founded, in large part, on attachment theoretic assumptions. This conceptual framework also informs the current study.

This research aims to investigate, by way of the case study method, the attachment experiences of a small sample of previously maltreated, New Zealand European preadolescent children in long term state care. The effects their attachment experiences have on the formation of a new attachment relationship with alternate caregivers and the facilitative or impeding role played by social workers and their organisation (NZCYPFA) in regard to the development of this relationship are examined. The field work involved a multimodal exploration of the above relationships and included four sets of participants: a key informant group, three social workers, five caregivers and three preadolescent children. Fundamental to this research is the need to identify factors integral to performing a social work assessment of attachment of both prospective caregivers and the preadolescent child requiring placement.

Foster care literature, drawing on attachment theoretic constructs, would suggest that this process is imperative to making sound placement decisions and for ensuring placement stability (Thoburn, 1997; McAuley, 1996; Triseliotis, Sellick & Short, 1995). Attachment theory indicates that placement stability is linked to caregiver sensitivity and the development of relational mutuality (Bretherton, 1996; 1993; 1987; Howes & Segal, 1993; Marcus, 1991). These variables have also been associated with relational continuity which in turn has been implicated in positive developmental outcomes for children (Lyons-Ruth, 1996; Cicchetti, Toth & Lynch, 1995; Bowlby, 1988; 1982; 1980; 1973). This thesis documents similar findings, and concludes with a set of recommendations for social work policy, practice and future research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a result of the manifold support afforded me by a diverse range of people comprising, family, friends, mentors, colleagues (past and present) and the organisational assistance of the New Zealand Children, Young Person and Their Families Service (NZCYPFA), and the Social Policy Agency (SPA). Thank you all for your help in the completion of this thesis. More importantly its existence is occasioned by the key informant, social work, child and caregiver respondents who consented to participate in this study. I wish to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation for your involvement in this research. Your voices and the experience they represent has been fundamental to its production. I hope that the knowledge garnered from this study will be used to enhance social work practice in this area and ensure increasingly better outcomes for children placed in long term state based foster care.

On a more specific level I wish to thank Raewyn Good in her role from the Social Policy Agency as Research Liaison Officer for this project, in particular for her assistance in obtaining the research grant awarded for this study. Thanks also to Fiona Coy (Social Work Advisor, HO, CYPFA) for mediating the sample selection process of this research with CYPFA'S information technology section. Thanks also to Chris Harvey for similar help in this regard. My appreciation is also extended to the CYPFA Site Managers and research broker who consented to assist in this project. For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity I am unable to name you personally. To my former work colleagues at CYPFA, Takapuna - thank you all for your support and continued interest in this research. A warm thanks also to my current colleagues at Campbell Lodge, your tolerance and support has been very much appreciated. I wish to particularly thank Dr Mike O'Brien and Jill Worrall for their supervisory support. Your assistance, patience, interest, editorial direction, advocacy and academic challenges have been invaluable to the final production of this thesis. Jill, my special thanks to you for containing my anxiety when it was at its highest and for being insistent that I would finish the task. Your insistence bolstered me at a time when my belief in my own ability to complete this undertaking was at its lowest.

I also wish to thank Dr Marilyn Waring for directing me to select a thesis topic for which I had enduring passion and for pointing me in Mike's direction for assistance with the multifarious ethical issues posed by this research. In hindsight your advice has proven critical to the completion of this thesis. My profound thanks also to Professor Inge Bretherton (University of Wisconsin-Madison) for directing me to her inaugural works on the construct of the internal working model. My thanks is also given for the administrative and transcription assistance in the research process by Karen Beedie, Te Aroha Kiro, Tapaeru Tauraki and Barbara Saergent. Moreover, I wish to extend a very big thanks to both Catherine Lidgard and Karen Beedie for the effort expended in making this thesis presentable. It simply would not have looked like this without your help. Thank you.

Now to my family and friends, what can I say?, your support has been indomitable and I thank you all for your forbearance with my preoccupation in this venture. Katrina, thank you particularly for your relentless encouragement. Nana, its all but over and I am still in one piece. Mum and Dad, you have provided me with riches greater than gold, I could not have wanted for any better secure-base. Thank you. Mum, thanks also for the many dinners cooked and chapters read in the final flurry to complete this thesis. Amish Wiremu - there have been moments, and you have witnessed every single one of them. The steadfast nature of your love and support has been a stabilising influence in what has been a tumultuous year -thank you. Chyante, the hours in the study are set to reduce!

Finally I wish to dedicate this thesis to Melissa, a young person for whom early parental abandonment proved a loss too great to bear.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Contents	vi
<b>FIGURES</b>	
<b>Figure 3:1</b> Crittenden's Information Processing Model	77
<b>Figure 3:2</b> Fahlberg's Arousal and Relaxation Cycles	78
<b>Figure 3:3</b> Caregiver Attunement	80
<b>Figure 3:4</b> Caregiver Misattunement	81
<b>Figure 4:1</b> Case Study Method	108
<b>Figure 4:2</b> The Case Studies: An Analytic Schema	110
<b>Figure 4:3</b> The Feeling Faces	149
<b>Figure 4:4</b> The Body Prompt Card	150
<b>Figure 4:5</b> The Feeling Symbols	152
<b>Figure 4:6</b> The Memory Prompt Card	156
<b>Figure 4:7</b> Angie and Byron's Sandtrays	160
<b>Figure 4:8</b> The Sandtray	162
<b>Figure 4:9</b> Symbols in the Sand	164
<b>Figure 4:10</b> Other Media	170
<b>Figure 4:11</b> The Separation Pictures	170
<b>Figure 5:1</b> The Mask	265
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION: POSITIONING THE THESIS</b>	<b>1</b>
The Mandate for Permanency	1
Focusing the Study: Rationale and Justification	2
Delineating the Argument	5
Theoretical Influences	6
Attachment Theory	6
Object Relations and Ecological Systems Theory	6
Feminist Principles	7
Relational Referencing Schema	8
Operands of Power	9
The social work participants	9
• The caregiver participants	9
• The child participants	10

	<b>Page</b>
• The key informants	11
Research Activities	11
• Social work participants	11
• Caregiver participants	12
• Child participants	13
• Methods of recording	13
Culture Bound	14
Thesis Organisation	15
Centrality of the Researcher's Position	15
<b>CHAPTER 2 THE CONCEPT OF ATTACHMENT</b>	<b>18</b>
Introduction	18
Attachment Quality of the Preadolescent and Their Caregiver(s)	19
An Editorial Word: Relocating Theoretical Discussion	19
Attachment Theory: Its Origins in Brief	20
The Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: The Effects of Mother Loss	21
The Effects of Early Institutionalisation on Attachment Formation	22
Relational Security: An Inoculation Against Vulnerability?	22
Object Relation's Theory: The Roots of Attachment Theory	24
Attachment Theory: How it Differs from Object Relation's Theory	24
Attachment Theory's Critical Difference: The Need for Others	25
Attachment: A Biological Phenomenon	26
Attachment: An Emotional Bond	26
The Strange Paradigm: Birth of an Assessment Schema	27
Secure Base Phenomenon	28
The Importance of Familial Security	28
The Strange Paradigm Procedure	29
Patterns of Attachment	30
Behavioural Strategies: The Ability to Adapt	31
A Behavioural Strategy Summary	35
Caregiver Sensitivity: The Pivotal Element in Caregiving	36
Standing the Test of Time	37
Being There No Matter What	38
The Internal Working Model	39
Attachment Quality: Characteristic of the Individual	40
An Object Relation Perspective	41
Cognitive Maturity:-Its Implications for Assessing Attachment	41
Defensive Exclusion	42
Attachment: A System on Constant Alert	43
A NeuroBiological Perspective	44

	<b>Page</b>
New Developments in the Cognitive Sciences	44
The Work of Schanks and Johnson-Laird	45
A Summary in Brief: - Identifying Principles for Practice	47
<b>CHAPTER 3 LINKING ATTACHMENT THEORY AND PERMANENCY PLANNING</b>	<b>49</b>
Introduction	49
The Link between Attachment Theory and Permanency Planning	49
The 'Clean Break' Phenomenon	51
'Clean Break': A Misinterpreted Phenomenon	52
• Research: The Child's Experience of Foster Care	54
• They Can Be Taken Out of Sight But Not Out of Mind	54
• Maltreatment: Its Effect on Relational Capacity	56
• Attachment Reorganisation: The Chance for Change	56
Relational Support: The Agent of Relational Repair	57
Defensive Exclusion: A Child Protective Strategy	59
Family Continuity: A Paradigmatic Practice Shift	61
Fiscal Motivation: 'Permanency By Guardianship'	62
The Child's Perspective On Severance Of Family Ties	62
Loyalty Conflicts: Its Effect On Placement Security	63
Foster Care: Essential Features for Making Placement Decisions	63
The Changing Face Of Foster Care	68
The Place Of Sensitivity in Foster Care Research	71
• Thoburn, Murdock & O'Brien (1985)	71
• Marcus (1991)	71
• Howes & Segal (1993)	72
• Main, Kaplan & Cassidy (1985)	73
Factors of Affective Attunement between Caregiver and Child	75
The 'Transference': Implications for Caregiving	83
The Importance of an Ecological Framework	85
Summary Highlights of Chapters Two and Three	89
• Recalling the Discussion	89
Theoretical Propositions	90
• Re-addressing the Attachment Relationship	90
• Caregiving and Relational Insecurity	91
• Patterns of Attachment	91
• Attachment Strategies	91
• Attachment Strategies: Implications for Foster Care	92
• The Need to Assess for Attachment	93

	<b>Page</b>
Developmental Impairment: The Travesty of Poor Practice In Permanency	94
Planning	
<b>CHAPTER 4    METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>95</b>
Introduction	95
A Note on Chapter Length	95
The Research Process	96
The Influence of Attachment Theory on Method Development	97
<b>CASEWORK METHOD</b>	<b>98</b>
Appropriateness of a Case Study Strategy	98
The Case Study Process	100
A Range of Documents	101
Archival Material	101
Interviewing	102
Direct Observation	102
Participant Observation	102
Physical Artefacts	102
Relational Referencing Schema	103
Tools used with the Key Informants	104
Tools used with the Caregivers	104
Tools used with the Child Participants	105
Tools used with the Social Work Participants	106
File Research	106
Methods of Recording	107
Case Study Design: The Process of Analysis	107
When to Generalise and What About	109
<b>ETHICAL ISSUES</b>	<b>111</b>
Human Participants: A Sensitive Topic	111
Ethics Approval: A Timely Process	112
The Role of the Broker	113
Including Children: Dilemma after Dilemma	113
Justification Made: Ethical Issues Encountered	115
Obtaining Informed Consent	115
Obtaining Consent from the Guardian	118
The Role of the Broker: Its Place In Obtaining Parental Consent	119
Parental Consent Obtained	120
Attending to Distress	120
Protocol for Abuse Disclosure	123
Ascendant Emotional Issues	123
Vicarious Traumatization	124

	<b>Page</b>
<b>VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>125</b>
Situating the Voices	125
Characteristics of the Sample	130
Key Informant Characteristics	130
Social Work Characteristics	131
Social Work Qualifications	132
Caseloads	132
Work Role	132
Caregiver Characteristics	133
Relational Referencing Schema	133
Characteristics of the Children	134
<b>RESEARCH ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>135</b>
Interviewing: The Primary Method	135
File Review	136
Child's Play: Tools for Interviewing	138
Principles of Attachment: Their Effect on Methods	140
Summary of Principles	143
Tools developed for the Child Participants	146
Projective Techniques and the Semi-Structured Interview	147
The Squiggle Game	147
Concept and Emotional Literacy Check	147
Use of Feeling Faces	149
Check for Defensive Phenomenon	151
Question Rationale	151
Use of Feeling Symbols	152
Commencing the Work	155
Sandplay	156
Sandplay Equipment: The Sand Tray	158
Symbols	161
Family Genogram Work	161
Psychometric Measure	165
Naturalistic Observation	165
Separation Picture Method	167
Previous Research with Separation Pictures & Narratives	168
Limitation of the Method	169
The Role of Attachment Constructs in Formulating this Method	169
The Attachment Behavioural System	171
Relevance to Instrument Selection	171
Fahlberg's Attachment Cycles	171
Relevance to Instrument Selection	172

	<b>Page</b>
Activation of the Attachment System	173
Rules for use of the Separation Picture Method	173
First and Third Person Question Probes: An Ethical Dilemma	175
Separation Picture and Narrative Development	179
Picture: One and Two	179
Picture: Three, Four and Five	181
Picture: Six, Seven, Eight and Nine	181
Development Summary: The Separation and Reunion Picture Set	181
<b>TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS: THE ADAPTED AAI &amp; CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE</b>	<b>183</b>
Interrogating the Data	183
Defining Narrative Coherence: The Child's Data	184
The Adapted Adult Attachment Interview: A Tool for Analysis	189
The Assumptions of the AAI	189
Research Support of the AAI	190
Process of Analysis	193
Rules for Interpretation	195
Classification Schemata of the AAI	196
Clinical Implications of Adult Attachment Status on Caregiving	197
Discussion Summary	199
 <b>CHAPTER 5</b>	 <b>201</b>
<b>RESULTS AND ANALYSIS</b>	<b>201</b>
The Organising Analytical Framework	203
<b>CANE'S RELATIONAL STORY</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>KEY ISSUES</b>	<b>208</b>
• Family Context and Composition	208
• Revisiting Cane's Early History	211
• Early Life Influences	213
• Parental History	214
• Excerpts of Early Notification Content: Their Attachment Theoretic Relevance	214
• Excerpt 1	214
• Excerpt 2	215
• Cane's Response: An Attachment Theoretic Conceptualisation	215
• Continuity In Relational Patterns	216
• Mother-Son Interaction (2:5 years)	216
• Father-Son Interaction (4 years)	216
• Father-Son Interaction (5 years)	217
• Summary of Parent-Child Interactional Observations	217
• Practice Implications	218

	<b>Page</b>
• Cane's Final Leg To Permanency	219
• Puzzling Behaviour	220
• Return to the Community: Between Year Six and Seven	221
• Institutionalisation	222
• The Power of Politics	222
• Permanency Secured	223
<b>MEETING AND WORKING WITH CANE</b>	<b>223</b>
• Commencing the Research Process with Cane	223
• Children's Play: A Representational Measure of Attachment	224
• Cane's Responses to the Research Tools	225
• Analysing the Narrative	226
<b>SEPARATION AND REUNION PICTURES</b>	<b>234</b>
• Picture Set of Sammie the Lamb	234
• Picture Set of Infant Chrissie	234
• Picture Set of Mr and Mrs Green	235
• Picture Set of Parent-Child Reunion	236
<b>DATA SUMMARY FOR CANE</b>	<b>237</b>
• An Interpretative Note	240
<b>THE CAREGIVER ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>244</b>
• Commitment To Stay	247
<b>CAREGIVER RESPONSES TO THE ADAPTED AAI</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>THE CHILD AND CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>CANE'S EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>THE SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION</b>	<b>252</b>
• Social Work Connection to the Caregiving System	252
<b>SUMMARY OF CANE'S DATA</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>ANGIE'S RELATIONAL STORY</b>	<b>258</b>
<b>KEY ISSUES</b>	<b>260</b>
• Family Context and Composition	260
• Maltreatment History	260
• Factors Of Resiliency	261
• Early Maternal Abandonment	261
• Temperament and Sociability	263
<b>MEETING AND WORKING WITH ANGIE</b>	<b>264</b>
• Commencing the Research Process with Angie	264
• Feelings About Dad and The Reason For Leaving	266
• Separation and Loss: The Importance Of Family Relationships	266
• New Attachment Confirmed	267
• Family Matters: An Emotionally Coherent Perspective	268

	<b>Page</b>
• Family Drawings: I Belong Here and There	268
• Drawings Interpreted	269
• Family History: The Narrative Continued	270
<b>SEPARATION AND REUNION PICTURES</b>	<b>271</b>
• Picture Set of Sammie the Lamb	271
• Picture Set of Infant Chrissie	271
• Picture Set of Mr and Mrs Green	272
• Picture Set of Parent: Child Reunion	272
• Sandplay	273
<b>DATA SUMMARY FOR ANGIE</b>	<b>274</b>
• Compulsive Caregiving: The Only Way To Belong	275
<b>THE CAREGIVER ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>276</b>
• The Frustration with Lack of Social Work Support	277
• Assessment and Training	277
• Attuning to the Child	278
• Angie's Attachment Anna's View	279
<b>CAREGIVER RESPONSES TO THE ADAPTED AAI</b>	<b>280</b>
• Transformation In Attachment Quality	283
<b>CHILD AND CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>ANGIE'S EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>THE SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION</b>	<b>285</b>
• Limited Contact with Angie	286
• Angie's Attachment Capacity: The Social Work View	287
• On Caregiver Assessment	287
• Attachment: The Construct in Practice	287
<b>SUMMARY OF ANGIE'S DATA</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>BYRON'S RELATIONAL STORY</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>KEY ISSUES</b>	<b>292</b>
• Family Context and Composition	292
<b>MEETING AND WORKING WITH BYRON</b>	<b>296</b>
• Indications of Avoidance	296
• Separation From Family: Byron's View	297
• Picking Reality From Fantasy	297
• Determining Relational Expectancies From Story Telling	298
• Where Do I Belong: An Experience of Loss and Rejection	298
• Themes of an Avoidant Quality of Attachment	299
• Sandplay	299
• A Case For Working Directly With The Child	300
• Family History Recalled: A Mixed Picture	301
• The Tug of Loyalty	301

	<b>Page</b>
• The Ultimate Trauma of Childhood: Parental Loss	302
<b>SEPARATION AND REUNION PICTURES</b>	<b>302</b>
• Picture Set of Sammie the Lamb	302
• Picture Set of Infant Chrissie	303
• Picture Set of Mr and Mrs Green	303
• Picture Set of Parent: Child Reunion	303
• Byron's Reunion Responses to Contact With Mother	304
<b>DATA SUMMARY FOR BYRON</b>	<b>305</b>
<b>THE CAREGIVING ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>CAREGIVER RESPONSES TO THE ADAPTED AAI</b>	<b>307</b>
• Placement Change: Redundancy of the Adapted AAI	307
• Bernadette's Motivation for Caregiver	307
<b>CHILD AND CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP</b>	<b>308</b>
• Attuning to the Child: "I'm Feeling Depressed"	308
• Assessment and Training	309
• Caregiver Views on the Social Work Role	310
• The Caregiver's: A Final Comment	311
<b>BYRON'S EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS</b>	<b>312</b>
<b>THE SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION</b>	<b>312</b>
• Assessment of Caregivers	313
<b>SUMMARY OF BYRON'S DATA</b>	<b>313</b>
• Philosophical Change: 'Permanency' a Movement Out of Favour	315
• The 1989 Act: A Shift in Responsibilities from State to Family	316
• Political Correctness No Matter What The Cost	316
 <b>CHAPTER 6</b>	 <b>319</b>
<b>ANALYSIS, POLICY AND PRACTICE</b>	<b>319</b>
Case Differences and Commonalities: Implications for Practice	321
The Key Informants View: Attachment a Critical Issue for Social Work Practice	
With Children In Care	321
• The Ability to Assess	321
• The Ability to Conceptualise, Interpret and Understand	321
• The Ability to Work with the Children	322
• The Ability to Resource, Support and Educate Caregivers	322
• The Need for Organisational Commitment to the Task	322
The Practitioner's Experience	323
• Social Work Identified Constraints to Effective Permanency Planning	324
False Logic: Service Paucity = Higher Costs	328
Ignoring the Needs for Long Term Care: A Costly Experience	328

	<b>Page</b>
With Security Comes Developmental Gains	329
Permanency: A Principled Approach	330
Recommendations for Policy and Practice	332
Areas For Future Research	343
A Final Comment	345
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>347</b>
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Caregiver Information and Consent Form	347
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Key Informant Interview Guide Sheet	351
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Social Work Interview Guide Sheet	357
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Caregiver Interview Guide Sheet	362
<b>Appendix 5:</b> The Squiggle Game	371
<b>Appendix 6:</b> Child Interview Guide Sheet	372
<b>Appendix 7:</b> Family Map and History Questions	374
<b>Appendix 8:</b> Attachment Qualities Flashcard	380
<b>Appendix 9:</b> Data Caption Sheet	383
<b>Appendix 10:</b> Confidentiality Declaration For Transcriber	384
<b>Appendix 11:</b> Child Information and Consent Form	385
<b>Appendix 12:</b> Checklist for Caregiver for Behaviour Change in Child	389
<b>Appendix 13:</b> Sample Selection Criteria	391
<b>Appendix 14:</b> Children's Homework Diary	394
<b>Appendix 15:</b> Separation Narratives and Question Probes	396
<b>Appendix 16:</b> Key Informant Information and Consent Form	402
<b>Appendix 17:</b> Checklist for Social Worker's Perception of suitability for Child's Inclusion in the Research	406
<b>Appendix 18:</b> Social Work Information and Consent Form	408
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>412</b>