

[Adoption & Fostering journal #9 | Adoptive parents' worries and concerns about their adolescent adopted children](#)

Welcome to *CoramBAAF Conversations*, the podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering, and kinship care. We invited children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us and share their experiences, reflections, and knowledge with us and you, our listeners. I hope you enjoy the episode.

Welcome to another episode of *The Adoption and Fostering Journey Podcast*. You can find all previous episodes, as well as the journal articles we discuss, on the CoramBAAF resource webpage at corambaaf.org.uk/resource. It is my absolute pleasure to introduce today's guest, Sol Hillman. Sol is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Tutor at the Anna Freud Centre and an Honorary Lecturer at University College London. Today, we will be discussing one of his research projects, from which he and his team have published multiple articles on adoption and fostering. So, hello and welcome, Sol.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to speak. My time at the Anna Freud Centre, which has spanned over two decades, has run parallel to this longitudinal adoption research project that began in the late 1990s. I have been involved in all three phases of the project, which included conducting assessments with children, playing a significant role in the analysis, and later writing my PhD, which specifically focused on one of the measures I'll be discussing today, the Story Stems. My main interest has been in attachment, and my work on Story Stems has been central to that. Today, I'll be discussing three papers we've either published or are about to publish—two of which are more quantitative, focusing on attachment, and one that is more qualitative, examining experiential factors.

Just to clarify, all the articles we're discussing today come from the same research project, correct?

Yes, that's right. So let me tell you about it. The original study, which began in the late 90s, was named the *Adoption and Attachment Study*. It was a collaboration between Coram, the Anna Freud Centre, and the Institute of Child Health at Great Ormond Street. The three original principal investigators were Dr. Miriam Steele, Dr. Jill Hodges, and Jan Kaniuk. Initially, the project wasn't intended to be longitudinal; it was simply aimed at examining late- and early-placed adopted individuals and their families.

In summary, we studied 111 children in the first phase, roughly split between those who were adopted later—placed with their families between the ages of four and eight years,

having experienced significant maltreatment and discontinuity—and a comparison group of children who were adopted in infancy. This early-adopted group was seen at the same age, but they were adopted mostly within the first six months of life, with no recorded adversity. The late-adopted group was of particular interest because we knew they had experienced a significant number of caregiver changes—up to 18 in some cases—along with multiple instances of maltreatment and various birth family risk factors. While attachment was a core focus, the study also involved conducting Adult Attachment Interviews with both adoptive mothers and fathers prior to adoption.

We explored various domains beyond just the placement of children, including psychopathology, parental mental health, stress, self-confidence, and affect regulation. Both adoptive parents were interviewed at the baseline regarding their parenting capacity and perceptions. In the first phase, we observed the families at baseline, then 12 months later, and again 24 months later. This provided us with a vast amount of data—interview data, observational data, and questionnaire data.

In early adolescence, we conducted a follow-up with the children at a single time point. Despite some natural attrition, we were able to see around 70 to 75 children across the two samples. During this phase, since the children were too old for the Story Stems method, we interviewed them using the Friends and Family Interview, a schedule developed by Miriam and Howard Steele. We also collected questionnaire data and conducted interviews with the adoptive parents.

Fast-forwarding to the present day, we entered a third phase of the study, which unfortunately was unfunded. However, with the help of many postgraduate students and researchers, we were able to interview a number of young adults who had been adopted, as well as their adoptive parents. Although the sample size decreased, the richness of the information we gathered was immense. So that's a brief summary of the phases.

When you mentioned this, it made me reflect on how innovative this study was. I wanted to ask you about what makes it innovative, but then I realized that in the mid-90s, a study like this—especially one focusing on late placement—was quite novel and groundbreaking, wasn't it?

Absolutely, it was definitely novel. We had both late-adopted and early-adopted groups and worked with a number of different adoption agencies and local authorities. This resulted in a diverse sample of families from across the country. In terms of its uniqueness and novelty, we used a large battery of both quantitative and qualitative measures across multiple domains, beyond just attachment. One strength of the study was our success in

interviewing and collecting questionnaire data from nearly all of the adoptive fathers, who are often neglected in such research.

The study was also novel because we employed relatively new instruments at the time. The Story Stems method, for example, was quite new in the late 90s, though it's now widely used in international training. Miriam and Howard Steele's Friends and Family Interview was another relatively new instrument. Additionally, the collaboration between a range of institutions added a great deal of value to the study.

It was a large sample as well. What was the original sample size at baseline?

At baseline, we had 111 children across the two samples. Although the numbers dipped by phase two and it became more challenging to follow up with families in phase three, we still managed to gather substantial data.

Seventy out of 111 is still a pretty good follow-up rate.

Yes, it is.

What kinds of questions were you asking in the broader research project, and how did they help answer key research questions?

That ties into two of the papers I'll be discussing today. Given that attachment was central to the study and was an area of focus for both Miriam Steele and Jill Hodges, both academically and clinically, we were particularly interested in attachment and internal working models. With the longitudinal nature of the study, we examined attachment at both phase one, where we saw the children annually at three time points, and again during adolescence, using another attachment measure. The principal question we were interested in was understanding what happens to these children, particularly those in the late-placed group, who often spent the first seven to eight years of their lives in multiple environments, facing significant adversity and discontinuities. We wanted to see what happens when these children are placed in a stable home, as was the case with nearly every adoptive placement.

Remarkably, the placements remained stable, with only one known placement breakdown in the late-placed sample. This consistency and stability were significant, and we were very interested in exploring what happened over time in terms of attachment. Through the Story Stems method and later with the Friends and Family Interview, we examined these changes. I'll discuss two papers later that specifically address this question.

Since you mentioned internal working models, I think most of our listeners are familiar with attachment. But just to be sure, could you briefly explain what an internal working model is?

Of course. Internal working models originate from the work of John Bowlby. Essentially, they are like expectations we form based on our early experiences with our parents. Bowlby explained that new experiences are gradually assimilated into existing models, which are like mental scripts. For example, if we consider one of the late-placed children who was adopted at the age of six, they might have developed internal working models of parents as being unresponsive, unavailable, or even rejecting due to their previous experiences, which often involved a lot of discontinuity. These models shape their expectations of how others will behave toward them and how they should respond to others.

The theory behind internal working models, which is central to our research, suggests that if these children, who have faced adversity, are placed in more loving and stable environments with supportive and affectionate parents, their internal working models may shift. The assessments we use, including the Story Stems method, which is a semi-projective assessment rather than a traditional interview, allow us to observe whether these children begin to see adults as more trustworthy, reducing the negativity in their perceptions, and viewing them as more helpful and present.

So, we've touched on the studies a bit. Which one would you like to start discussing?

Thank you. I think it makes sense to start chronologically, especially since the first paper we published with *Adoption & Fostering* back in 2020 focuses on the initial phase of the study. This paper relates to the Story Stems method, and for those unfamiliar with the tool, it's a narrative-based approach. In this method, the interviewer introduces the child to 13 standardized story stems, each presenting different conflicts. The child then responds to these narratives both through narration and by enacting the scenes using Playmobil figures, animals, and props.

The Story Stems method is a projective measure, meaning it's not directly about the child themselves. We make it clear to the child at the beginning that the stories are about another family, and we ask them to name the dolls. Research suggests that children are less inhibited when discussing another family, but in doing so, we learn a great deal about their perceptions and experiences. The Story Stems method is a rich tool, and we video-

recorded these sessions with children from both the late-placed and early-adopted groups at baseline, one year later, and two years later. The responses are then meticulously coded through an intensive system, analyzing 39 different nodes. The constructs we focus on are very attachment-oriented, allowing us to assess security, disorganization, and other related factors. Importantly, it's a dimensional measure, not a classification tool like the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) or the Strange Situation.

To summarize the findings from this study, the paper had two parts. The first part focused on baseline data, examining the internal representations of children in the late-placed group, the early-adopted group, and a community group with no known adversity, raised by their birth parents. We found that the late-placed group exhibited statistically significant levels of avoidance, disorganization, and insecurity, with significantly lower levels of security. In contrast, the community sample showed the opposite pattern, with higher security and lower disorganization and insecurity. Interestingly, the early-adopted group, who had no documented maltreatment or discontinuity according to social worker records, still displayed characteristics that fell between the late-placed group and the community group, though closer to the community group. This was in line with what we anticipated, highlighting the differences we expected to see.

It's quite interesting that the early-adopted group also showed differences compared to the non-adopted group who were raised by their biological parents.

Absolutely. As I mentioned, social worker records at the time of the study didn't indicate any discontinuity or maltreatment in the early-adopted group. However, these records are not infallible, so it's possible that some factors were not documented or fully understood at the time.

Do you know the reasons? Were the children in that group mainly relinquished at the time?

Absolutely. Most of the children in that group were relinquished and typically moved directly from their birth families into adoption, with no additional placements in between. Our research findings suggest that even in these cases, the placement itself might have had some impact. However, I'd like to approach this with some caution because we don't have as much detailed information about those families and their histories as we'd like.

The second part of the paper, or the second sub-study, is perhaps even more interesting. This part examines the Story Stems results at time points 1, 2, and 3 in both the late-placed and early-placed groups. What we were able to demonstrate aligns closely with John

Bowlby's theories on internal working models: changes take time, and new experiences don't quickly assimilate into existing models.

Some aspects of attachment improved, but others didn't show significant change even after one or two years, which makes sense considering that a child may have spent up to seven years in highly challenging circumstances. In terms of key findings, we saw a significant increase in security from year one to year three, and a significant decrease in avoidant behaviors. However, disorganization and insecure responses, including negative representations of adults and children, did decrease but not as significantly. Initially, these findings surprised us, but they ultimately made sense within the theoretical framework.

Were these findings consistent for both the late-placed and early-placed groups, or were there differences?

The late-placed group showed the most significant changes. In contrast, the early-placed group did not exhibit the same level of change. By the third time point, the differences between the late-placed and early-placed groups started to even out. The late-adopted children were becoming more secure and less avoidant, while the early-adopted group showed less change overall. Although there was some improvement in the early-placed group—they became slightly more secure and less avoidant—it was not to the same extent as the late-placed group.

Did the early-placed group ever reach the level of the community group?

No, they didn't reach the level of the community group. We only collected data from the community sample at one time point, so we never followed them up. However, even two years into placement, the late-adopted group still told stories very differently from the community group. The changes were quite drastic in the late-adopted group. It was moving to see how some children, who had previously told chaotic and negative stories, were able to incorporate themes of affection, responsiveness, and help-seeking into their narratives.

The late-adopted group showed much more drastic changes.

Absolutely. It was a fascinating study. Interestingly, when we looked at pre-placement factors like the number of maltreatment subtypes or the number of placement changes, these didn't end up significantly impacting the changes in attachment representations. We had assumed that children with more extreme pre-placement experiences would have worse attachment profiles, but that wasn't the case.

That's surprising.

It was surprising, indeed. We reflected on this and wondered if there might be a ceiling effect. Whether a child had experienced two types of maltreatment or five, the impact was already significant and may have reached a threshold where additional factors didn't make a noticeable difference.

So, perhaps they all had a similar level of impact from their experiences.

Yes, that's likely. And that was the first paper, which we were delighted to have published in your journal

Here's a refined version of your content with improved clarity and grammar:

Assessing changes in the internal worlds of early and late adopted children using the SAP. We also strive to link these studies with the podcast.

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Where did you go from there? What happened next?

After that, thanks to some funding from the Sir Hallie Stewart Foundation, we realized that we hadn't sufficiently analyzed much of the adolescent data. We secured a grant, hired a researcher, and began working through some of those papers. The first paper we focused on examined attachment from the Story Stems in early childhood up to adolescence, using the Friends and Family Interview. I believe that paper is scheduled to be published in your journal in a couple of months, correct?

Yes, it's accepted but not yet printed.

This paper, titled Predictors of Attachment in Early and Late-Placed Adoptees, looks at a further step in the attachment trajectory in both late and early-placed samples. This study was quite complex because we used different measures, and our sample size had decreased. However, we still had a sufficient sample for quantitative analysis. What we found was that the models—specifically looking at attachment representations from the Story Stems and their predictive value on the Friends and Family Interview during adolescence—were significant. The Friends and Family Interview had similar constructs, which we were able to link.

The three key models—security, disorganization, and coherence (which were subscales on the FFI)—were significant in relation to the Story Stems. However, the biggest driver was

IQ. Interestingly, whether the child was placed early or late wasn't a predictive factor for this change. We delved deeper to see if there were any other significant findings.

Could you explain that in simpler terms for listeners who might not be familiar with these concepts?

Sure. The models were significant, meaning that early attachment representations from the Story Stems were predictive of attachment representations in adolescence as measured by the Friends and Family Interview. We also added other variables to the analysis, such as the number of placement changes and the types of maltreatment in the late-placed group. Essentially, we wanted to see if we could predict whether a young person would show disorganized attachment in adolescence based on how they presented in the Story Stems during the first phase.

Does that mean there was continuity? So, if a child showed disorganization early on, it was more likely they would be disorganized later in development?

Yes, exactly. We found that higher levels of insecurity in the Story Stems at the first time point were predictive of higher levels of disorganized attachment in the Friends and Family Interview during adolescence. Other interesting findings emerged as well. For example, high levels of security in the Friends and Family Interview were predictive of less defensive avoidance in the Story Stems. We also found that children who had been in fewer than five placements—meaning the more placements they experienced, the lower their IQ, and the more avoidance they showed in the Story Stems—tended to have lower levels of security.

So, IQ also played a role?

Yes, IQ played a role throughout the study. Interestingly, the construct that was most significant in this paper was avoidance. The strongest levels of defensive avoidance maneuvers in a child seemed to be the construct most likely to explain changes in attachment as measured by the Friends and Family Interview in adolescence.

By changes, do you mean positive changes, like moving toward more secure attachment?

Yes, changes in terms of moving toward more secure attachment representations.

Was that surprising? Did it align with your expectations?

Some of these findings were surprising. We had expected there to be a clearer trajectory from phase one to phase two. Given the amount of time that had passed between the

initial Story Stems assessment and the Friends and Family Interview, as well as the number of other factors influencing their lives, we knew that many variables could impact attachment outcomes in longitudinal studies.

The study as a whole was interesting, though it didn't present as clear a picture of developmental trajectories as we saw in the first paper. However, there were some intriguing findings in the second part of the study. In this section, we focused solely on the late-placed group, and once again, we were able to demonstrate significant models that explained variation in attachment outcomes. Defensive avoidance, coupled with a history of abuse, emerged as the strongest predictor of the levels of security these adolescents exhibited.

Defensive avoidance seems to have a profound impact on later development. These children often develop strategies to keep painful emotions at bay, which can influence their attachment security over time.

Can you give an example of defensive avoidance? What does it look like in a child?

In the context of the story stems, defensive avoidance can manifest as shutting down or evading the central conflict of a story. For example, if a story stem involves a child burning their hand in a terrible fire, a child exhibiting defensive avoidance might abruptly end the story at that point or avoid mentioning the injury altogether, focusing instead on something tangential, like food spilling on the floor. These are ways in which children might circumnavigate the emotional content of the story.

We have one study left, don't we?

Yes, we do. It's a different study, and I believe it was published either earlier this year or late last year. This study focused on the concerns and worries of adoptive parents regarding their adolescent adopted children, specifically those who were late-placed.

We conducted interviews with 17 adoptive parents using Arietta Slade's Parent Development Interview, which is a rich and varied tool that delves into the anxieties and fears these parents might have about their 12- to 15-year-old children. We performed a thematic analysis of these interviews, and several strong themes emerged.

Can you give an overview of these themes?

One prominent theme we identified was "vulnerability," which captured the parents' concerns about their child's susceptibility to risks or disadvantages across various contexts. Parents worried about their children being too impressionable, unsafe, or making

poor decisions, particularly in social interactions and relationships. Many of these adolescents had additional needs, which heightened parental concerns.

Another significant theme was "violence." This encompassed both violence the parents had already observed and the violence they feared might occur. This theme was further subdivided into "risk to self" and "risk to others." Interestingly, the concerns were more focused on the adolescents' potential to harm others, particularly peers, rather than themselves.

Did this violence include child-on-parent violence, or was it more about interactions with peers?

The focus was more on peer interactions. A recurring thread in these themes was the world these adolescents were entering. Despite being on the cusp of adolescence, these 12- and 13-year-olds were already presenting significant behavioral concerns.

Another theme was "derailing opportunities," where parents expressed fears about their children's potential to sabotage their own futures. This was coupled with "autonomy," which explored both the young person's readiness for autonomy and the parents' struggles with their emerging loss of agency. The adoptive parents, having been through significant journeys with these children, often felt disempowered as they faced increasingly challenging behaviors.

You mentioned a theme related to birth families. Can you elaborate on that?

Yes, the final theme revolved around anxieties about the presence and role of the birth family. Despite minimal or no communication between the child and their birth family—often limited to letterbox communication—there was significant fear among adoptive parents as the child entered adolescence. These fears included concerns about the child's interest in meeting their birth parents and the potential repetition of negative behaviors observed in the birth family.

Given all these findings, what are the policy and practice implications? How could they inform training and policy?

These findings underscore the need for targeted support and interventions for adoptive families, especially those with late-placed children. The heightened fears and concerns among adoptive parents point to the importance of providing ongoing psychological support, particularly as children transition into adolescence.

Moreover, the findings highlight the necessity for tailored sex education and preventive programs, given the significant worries about risky behaviors and the potential for violence. Policymakers and practitioners should consider these insights when designing training programs for adoptive parents and developing policies that support adoptive families throughout the adoption journey.

I think across all the studies, and even the ones I've not spoken about today, there is a real sense that during adolescence, heightened issues emerge for a lot of these families. Many of these adoptive parents spoke in the interviews about a lack of support and how they could benefit from having more input at this stage. They had a lot of support earlier on when their children were first placed, but none during adolescence. Parents really said there were so many concerns and challenges that they were facing, and there was such an amplification of issues that they felt they needed some support. So that was definitely a learning, not just from the study I've talked about, but across all the studies.

The learning in relation to the two attachment papers is really about how social workers and therapists need to work with these young people in terms of disconfirming those negative models. We know that the positive stuff is increasing, but the negative stuff is still remaining, and it's still remaining even in adolescence.

So would you say that maybe attachment interventions could become standard for late-placed children, that they get additional support or kind of attachment interventions?

Absolutely. It feels very important that attachment interventions become embedded, and that social workers and adoptive parents have the resources to learn how to use these strategies to disconfirm those models and help build up new positive ones. I know some of this does take place, but it's very inconsistent and patchy. The parental and therapeutic work really needs to focus on attachment and continue into adolescence.

And early on as well, isn't it? I feel like a lot of conversations are always around if only we had more preventative measures or interventions early on, we could prevent so many things kind of knock-on effects and further downstream, or you know, all families are in crisis.

Absolutely. One area we haven't talked about today, and probably because we haven't looked at it in sufficient detail, is that we collected data from adoptive parents using the Adult Attachment Interview. So, in terms of placement, we have the possibility of actually doing adult attachment interviews early on with prospective parents to get some sense of their attachment profiles and ensuring that the placement is well aligned with the child's needs, not just their attachment representation but their overall profile. There is a lot of scope for this, and it happens in places but could be more formalized.

Did you find that the adoptive parent attachment had a positive or negative effect?

Yes, we did. We're still looking at that now. I'm not in a position to say a lot more, but we are hoping over the next year to look at the adoptive parents' Adult Attachment Interview in relation to the young adults. We've interviewed the young adults in the third phase using the Adult Attachment Interview now—not on a huge sample because of attrition, but hopefully we could show some useful patterns even as a descriptive statistical piece.

And if our listeners want to know more about your studies or work with you, how can they get in touch with you?

I'd be delighted to hear more. People can contact me via email. At Anna Freud, where I work, we are very much in the analysis and dissemination phase. We are in the planning stages of having a conference and possibly some webinars which will report on all phases, particularly drawing upon the third phase, the adult phase, which we're really starting to look at now. We're managing this with a wonderful array of postgraduate students and also benefiting from retired social workers supporting us, as we haven't managed to secure funding for that. These are the plans to disseminate our work in a meaningful way in relation to policy and practice.

That sounds good. We're going to link your contact details with the podcast so that people have all the information and can find you. We're also going to link the papers so that people can have an in-depth look at all the interesting findings. It was very nice to have you.

Thank you very much. I'm delighted to have had this opportunity to talk about these papers. So thank you.

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