

The IASA Family Attachment Court Protocol

Introduction: The International Association for the Study of Attachment (IASA) recommends this protocol for assessing attachment for family court proceedings (Crittenden, Farnfield, Landini, & Grey, 2013). Currently attachment is evaluated and reported to courts by individuals without specialized training in attachment and without authorization to deliver assessments of attachment; these evaluations amount to no more than clinical opinion that cannot be verified by others and can lead to irresolvable differences of opinion among reporting professionals (Ireland & Beaumont, 2015).

IASA believes that having empirical and visible evidence that has published procedures and validity and can be tested by other experts is essential to using attachment in family court settings. That is, the goal is to approach the usual evidentiary requirements of civil and criminal courts (cf. *Daubert v Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals*, 1993).

Essential components of assessing attachment in family court proceedings: There are four requirements for generating empirical evidence regarding attachment.

1. *Definition:* A clear definition of attachment, together with theory that is relevant to the safety and well-being of children under child protection supervision. The Dynamic-Maturational Model of Attachment and Adaptation (DMM) defines attachment as the protective relationship between an attachment figure (a parent or spouse) and an attached person (a child or spouse). Protective attachment strategies are activated when the attached person or their attachment figures perceives threat or danger.

This definition of attachment is directly related to issues of danger and protection of vulnerable individuals by caregivers. It, more than other approaches to attachment security, reflects the needs of endangered people to adapt and survive using attachment strategies for increasing safety and comfort as opposed to the often unachievable state of security.

2. *Assessment of attachment:* A set of assessments of attachment that can be used with all family members and have published procedures and validity for maltreated children and their parents or caregivers.

IASA recommends the following DMM assessments: Infant CARE-Index, Toddler CARE-Index (TCI), Infant Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), Preschool Assessment of Attachment (PAA), School-age Assessment of Attachment (SAA), Transition to Adulthood Attachment Interview (TAAI), Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), and Parents Interview (PI). Each of these assessments has a standardized protocol, a written manual for interpreting the results, and published validity data. Other assessments may be added to this list as published validity data become available.

3. *Authorized personnel*: Personnel who are qualified and authorized to deliver the assessments and, separately, interpret their results.

The Family Relations Institute issues certificates authorizing professional to deliver the assessment and, separately, Certificates of Reliability, in interpreting the assessment. Level I and II are suitable for court application. Court reports should include copies of the assessors' certificates.

4. *Coding*: All coding and interpretation of the assessments of attachment should be done when the coder knows nothing about the individuals being assessed and the case in which the assessments will be used. In research terms, the coders should be 'blind' to all information about the case. For this reason coders that are not employed by local agencies are preferred to local coders.
5. Family members to assess:
All caregivers and siblings should be assessed because each influences the functioning and well-being of the others.

Reports: IASA has defined three levels of reports to family courts.

1. *DMM Formulated Reports (Level I)*

These reports are generated by professionals who are authorized to write DMM Formulated Reports. These reports provide the highest level of integrated evidence of attachment strategies.

2. *DMM Coded Reports (Level II)*

These reports use DMM theory and assessments that are carried out and interpreted by authorized coders. The report is written by a professional selected by the court to evaluate parental functioning; this professional is familiar with DMM theory but not qualified or authorized to carry out the assessments of attachment. These reports yield evidence of attachment strategies.

3. *DMM Informed reports (Level III)*

These reports rely on DMM theory regarding attachment and protection from danger, but do not use formal assessments of attachment. They do not yield 'evidence.'

Conclusion: Although IASA's aim is to set a standard for assessing attachment in family court proceedings, it is recognized that there are steps that still need to be taken in order to achieve this. The aim is not to discredit work which falls short of this protocol, but rather to set a standard by which the information given to the court can be evaluated. When assessments deviate, that can be stated clearly. Clarity and transparency can enable the court to take this into account when weighing the value of a particular assessment.