

Vulnerable children and their carers: Improving the match
Parents for Children

Assessing risk/resilience in carers – an attachment based approach

Antonia Bifulco, PhD

Professor in Health and Social Care

Lifespan Research Group

Royal Holloway, University of London



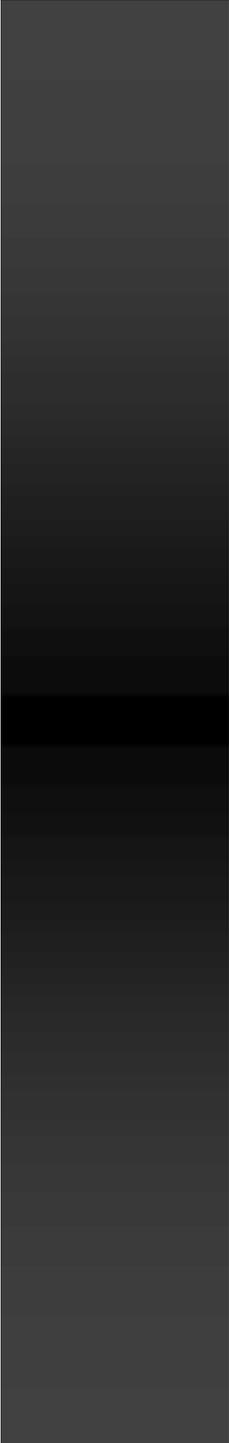
Parents for Children

18/10/2005

1

Plan of session

- Defining attachment theory
- Measuring attachment style
 - ◆ The Attachment Style Interview
- A stress model for parents
 - ◆ ASI insecure attachment and parent disorder
- Policy relevance of carer assessment tools
 - ◆ Relevance of ASI and stress model for carers
 - ◆ What about matching?



What is attachment theory?

Defining attachment

John Bowlby

- An enduring tie with a person who provides security
- A need to remain close to the other
- Safe base from which to explore
- Separation/loss of attachment figure causes distress
- When a child is afraid or unwell attachment behaviours become more evident (ie under stress)

Attachment Theory:

- Attachment is a basic human need
- Relationship with parents in early childhood dictates subsequent security of attachment.
- Loss of parent, parental unavailability or hostile parenting relate to different forms of insecure attachment.
- Insecure attachment shows itself as anxious ambivalence or avoidance.
- Attachment style derives from distorted ‘internal working models’ (cognitive schemas).

Key concepts of attachment theory

- Proximity maintenance (need for closeness)
- Secure base/ safe haven
- Separation protest
- Internal working models
- Secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, disorganised attachment style
- Not all affectional bonds are attachment – attachment strictly is about help and support seeking.

Attachment is a lifespan & intergenerational theory

- Attachment behaviour characterises human beings throughout life.
- Patterns established in childhood parent-child relationships tend to structure the quality of later bonds in adult relationships.
- Adult insecure attachment is correlated with poorer parenting behaviour

Parenting and attachment

- High correlations have been found between mother and child attachment classifications.
- This even holds when mother's attachment assessed ante-natally.
- Insecure attachment in child linked to insensitive and poor parenting behaviour eg inconsistent parenting, punitive parenting, abusive parenting.

Insecure attachment

- Avoidant
 - ◆ Dismissive (angry-dismissive or withdrawn)
- Anxious-ambivalent
 - ◆ Enmeshed (preoccupied)
 - ◆ Fearful

Avoidant individuals

Belsky 2002

- Distance themselves cognitively from distress
- Have lower access to painful memories
- Can be unaware of own anger despite showing physiological arousal
- Do not show much emotion
- Use deactivating or avoiding strategies for coping
- Dissociation between conscious and unconscious levels of responding

Anxious/ambivalent individuals

Belsky, 2002

- Focus on own distress, ruminate on negative thoughts
- Use emotion-focussed rather than problem-solving coping styles – the emotion can undermine problem solving ability
- Easy access to painful memories and generalise these: ‘negative contagion’.
- Hyperactivating strategies – projective identification
- Automatic spread of emotion from one remembered incident to another

Secure individuals

Belsky, 2002

- Appraise stressful events as less threatening
- Have optimistic expectations about coping
- Can access painful memories but do not generalise them
- Can disclose personal information and feelings to close others – express emotion openly
- Use support for regulating distress – discuss problems
- Acknowledge the physiological signs of anger and express anger in controlled way
- Engage in adaptive problem-solving
- Have better mental health & relationships



How can we measure attachment style in adults?

Two approaches

1. Attachment & States of Mind

Assesses defensive style and infers unconscious processes. Used mainly in relation to parenting and early origins of attachment style in childhood. Involves ‘theory of mind’.

Eg Mary Main (AAI), Peter Fonagy (Self-reflective functioning).

Two approaches

2. Attachment & Social Interactions

Assesses inter-personal style, based on perception of behaviour with close others. Used in variety of contexts but also in relation to psychopathology.

Eg Hazan & Shaver (Q), Kim Bartholomew (RQ) Bifulco (ASI interview)

Adult Attachment measures

SELF-REPORT - Social psychology/interpersonal

- AAQ: Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver)
- RQ: Relationships Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz)

INTERVIEW - States of mind/developmental

- AAI: Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn).
- ASI: Attachment Style Interview (Bifulco et al)

Relationship Questionnaire: Bartholomew & Horowitz.

STYLE A: SECURE

It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and have them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others accept me.

STYLE B: FEARFUL:

I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.

STYLE C: ENMESHED

I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable without close relationships but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.

STYLE D:DISMISSIVE

I am comfortable without close relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.

Attachment Styles and adult relationships

- **SECURE** - comfortable with closeness, moderate self-reliance.
- **ENMESHED (AMBIVALENT)**: dependent, needy, low self-reliance.
- **FEARFUL**: avoidant with fear of closeness.
- **DISMISSIVE / WITHDRAWN**- high self-reliance – sometimes angry

The Attachment Style Interview

(ASI) *Bifulco et al. 2002*

- A semi-structured, probing, interview assessing partner relationship, quality of other support and attitudes about closeness/distance and overall adult attachment style.
- 60 minutes administration and 120 minutes coding
- 4-day training
- Manual and consensus meetings for reliability
- Practitioner & researcher training available.

Attachment Style Interview (ASI)

- Assessment of:
 - ◆ Quality of marriage/partnership
 - ◆ Quality of close support others
 - ◆ Ability to make and maintain supportive relationships
 - ◆ Avoidant and ambivalent attitudes to attachment
 - ◆ Overall attachment style and impairment in relating

Attachment Style Interview

(i) Support ratings

- Questions about social network and family of origin.
- Detailed questioning about ongoing supportiveness of relationship with (a) Partner
- (b) 1st 'Very Close Other' (c) 2nd Very Close Other.
- Scales (rated n1. marked, 2: moderate, 3:some, 4:little/none)
 - ◆ Confiding
 - ◆ Emotional support
 - ◆ Negative and positive interaction
 - ◆ Felt attachment
 - ◆ Overall quality of support (scale 1-7 points)

Attachment Style Interview

(ii) Attachment scales

4-point scales:

- Ability to make & maintain supportive relationships
- Mistrust
- Constraints on closeness
- Self-reliance
- Fear of rejection
- Desire for company
- Fear of separation
- Anger

Overall attachment style (13 point scale)

Attachment style classification (ASI)

TYPE OF STYLE

IMPAIRMENT

■ Enmeshed

- ◆ high desire company, fear of separation.

■ Marked insecure

■ Angry-dismissive

- ◆ mistrust; self-reliance, anger

■ Moderate insecure

■ Fearful

- ◆ mistrust, fear rejection

■ Mild insecure

■ Withdrawn

- ◆ constraints on closeness; self-reliance)

■ Clearly secure



II. How does attachment style relate to affective disorder?

Sample of community women

Stage 1: retrospective assessment 304 women selected from London GP surgery lists

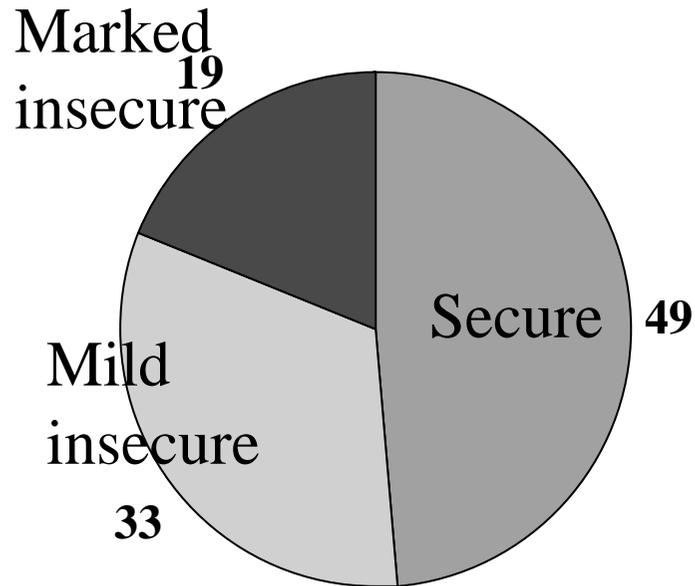
- ◆ 225 vulnerable women with
 - ◆ Current poor relationships (conflict partner or conflict child) OR
 - ◆ Neglect or abuse in childhood
- ◆ 80 comparison women

Assessment Interviews – Lifespan Research Group

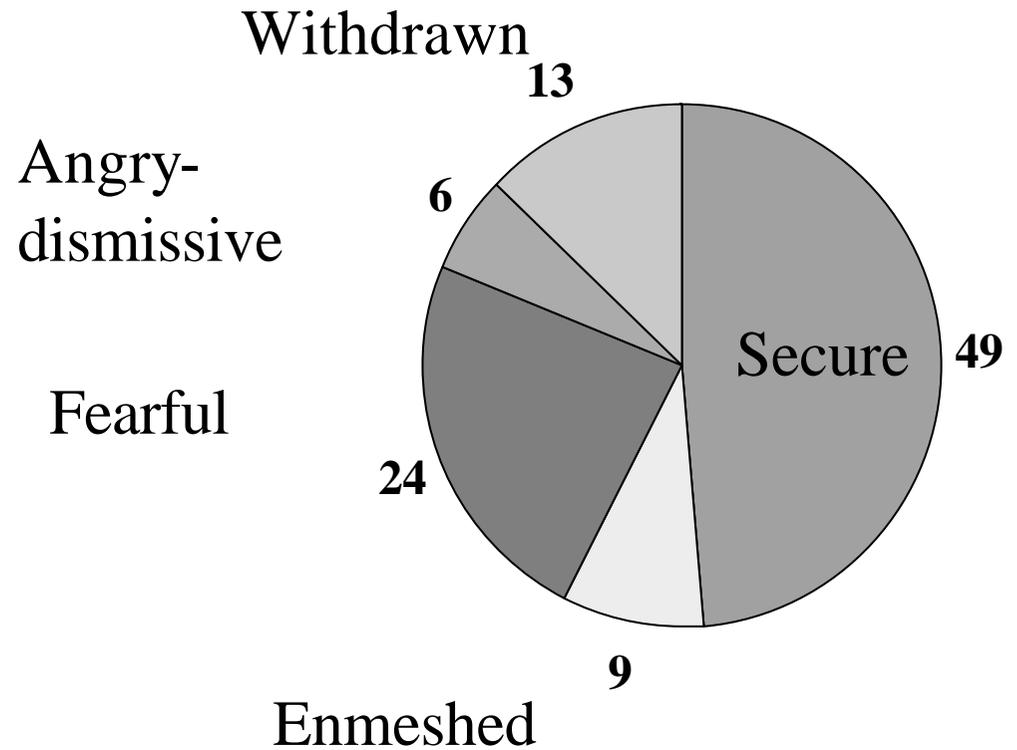
- Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse (CECA): assesses parental loss, neglect, antipathy, physical abuse, sexual abuse & psychological abuse <17.
- Attachment Style Interview (ASI) assesses quality of support as well as degree of insecure attachment and insecure style.
- Self Esteem & Social Support (SESS): Assesses positive and negative evaluation of self
- SCID – psychiatric diagnostic interview

Prevalence of insecure style: ASI: 80 London women

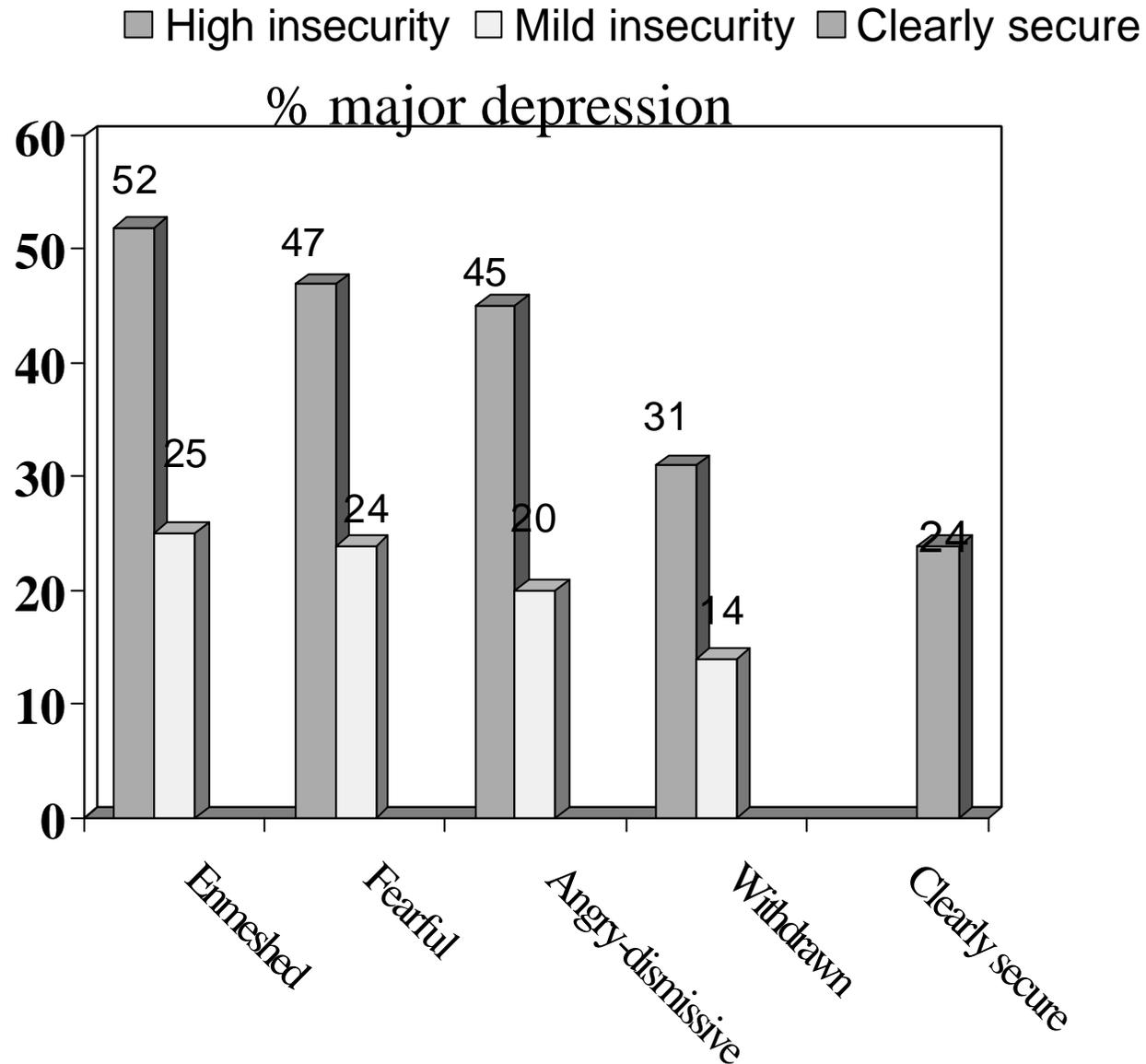
Security of style



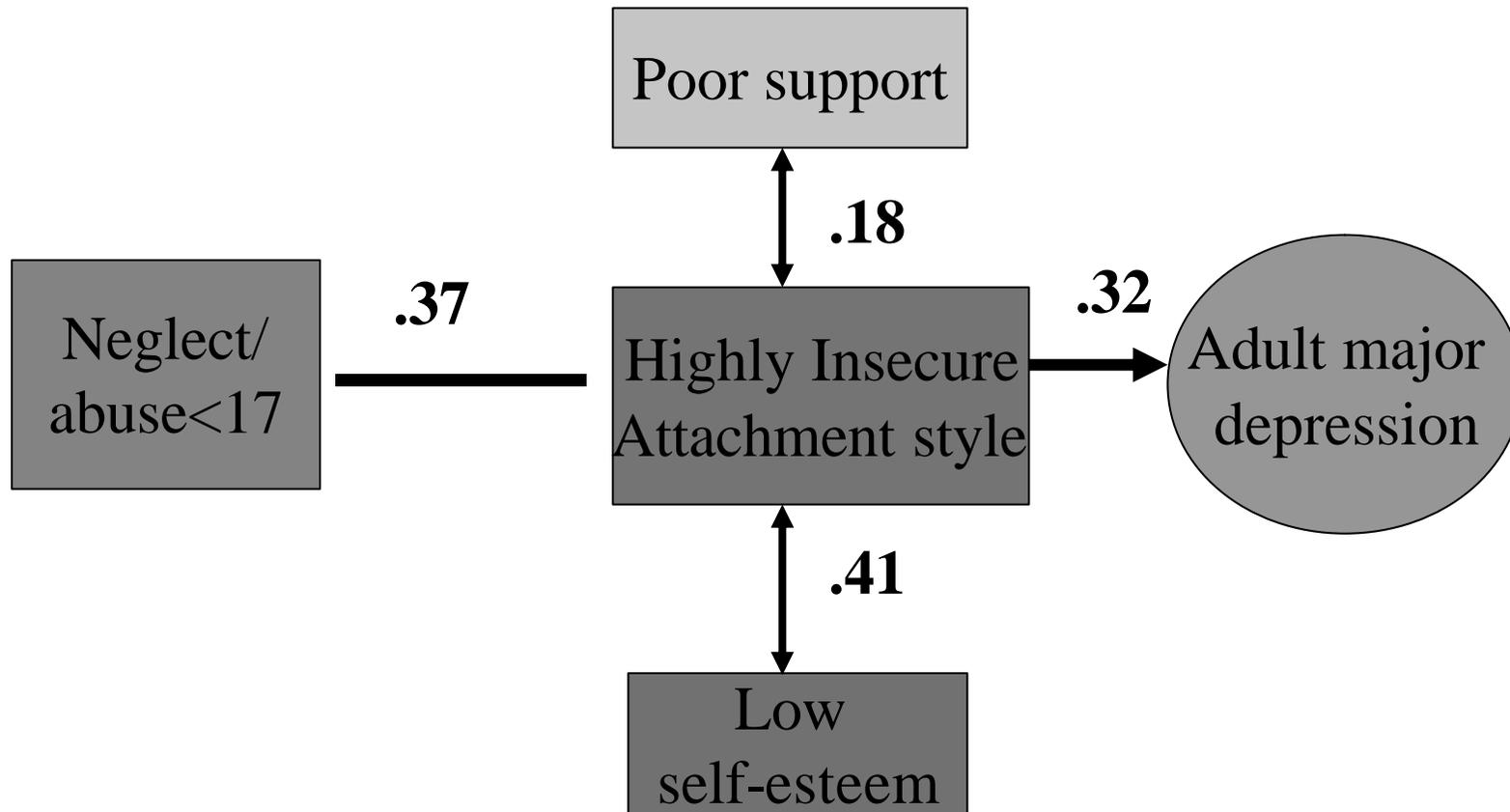
Type of attachment style



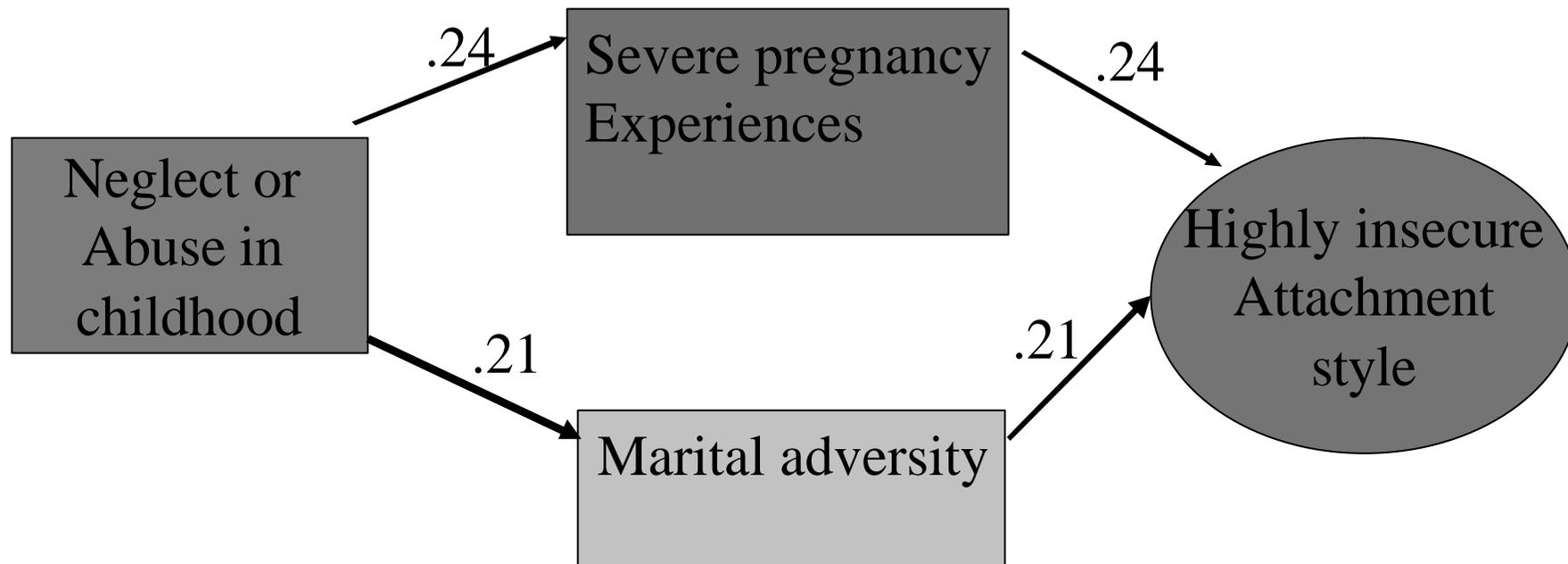
Attachment style and major depression



Path analysis model of lifetime adult vulnerability



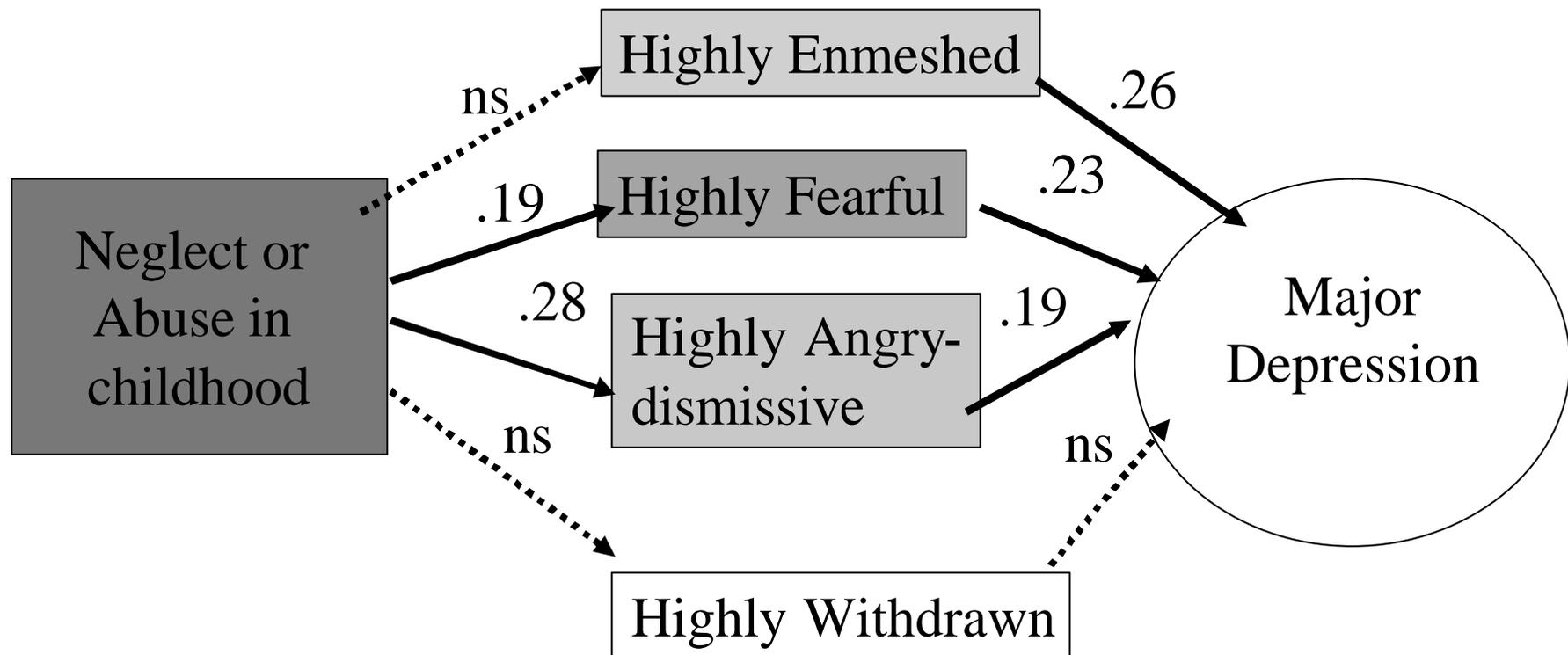
Role of previous pregnancy & marital experience



* Relates particularly to Fearful style

Attachment style and depression

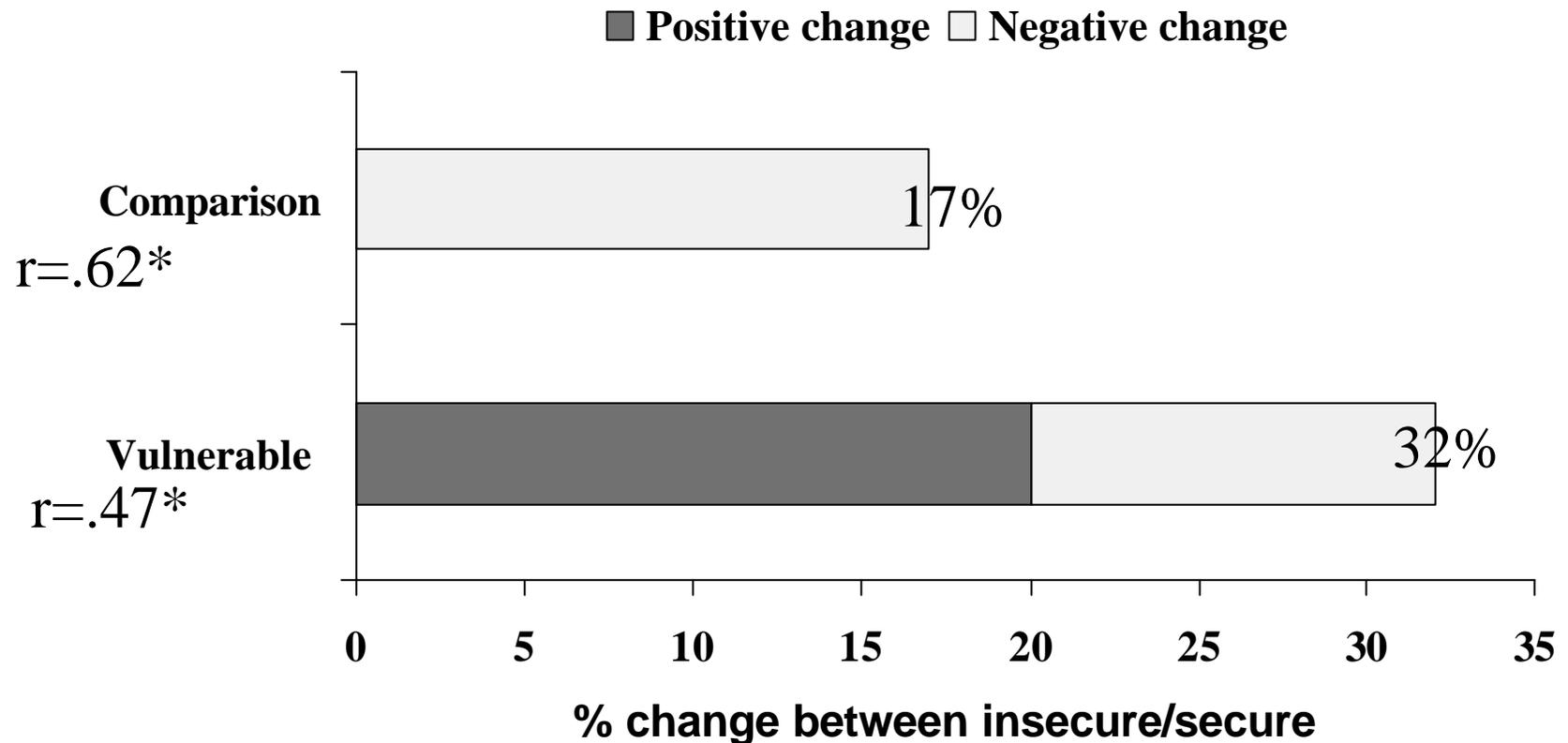
Specificity of style



Loglinear analysis

Changes in attachment security

- prospective analysis over 3 years
(N=154)



* Correlation of ASI at time 1 and time 2

Summary of Findings

- ASI studied in lifespan social model of vulnerability for depression.
- ASI significantly associated with low self-esteem, poor support and depression.
- ASI significantly associated with neglect/ abuse in childhood, previous marital adversity and previous severe pregnancy experience.
- ASI is relatively stable, but there is change over time eg 17%



How is carer attachment style relevant for adoption/fostering practice?

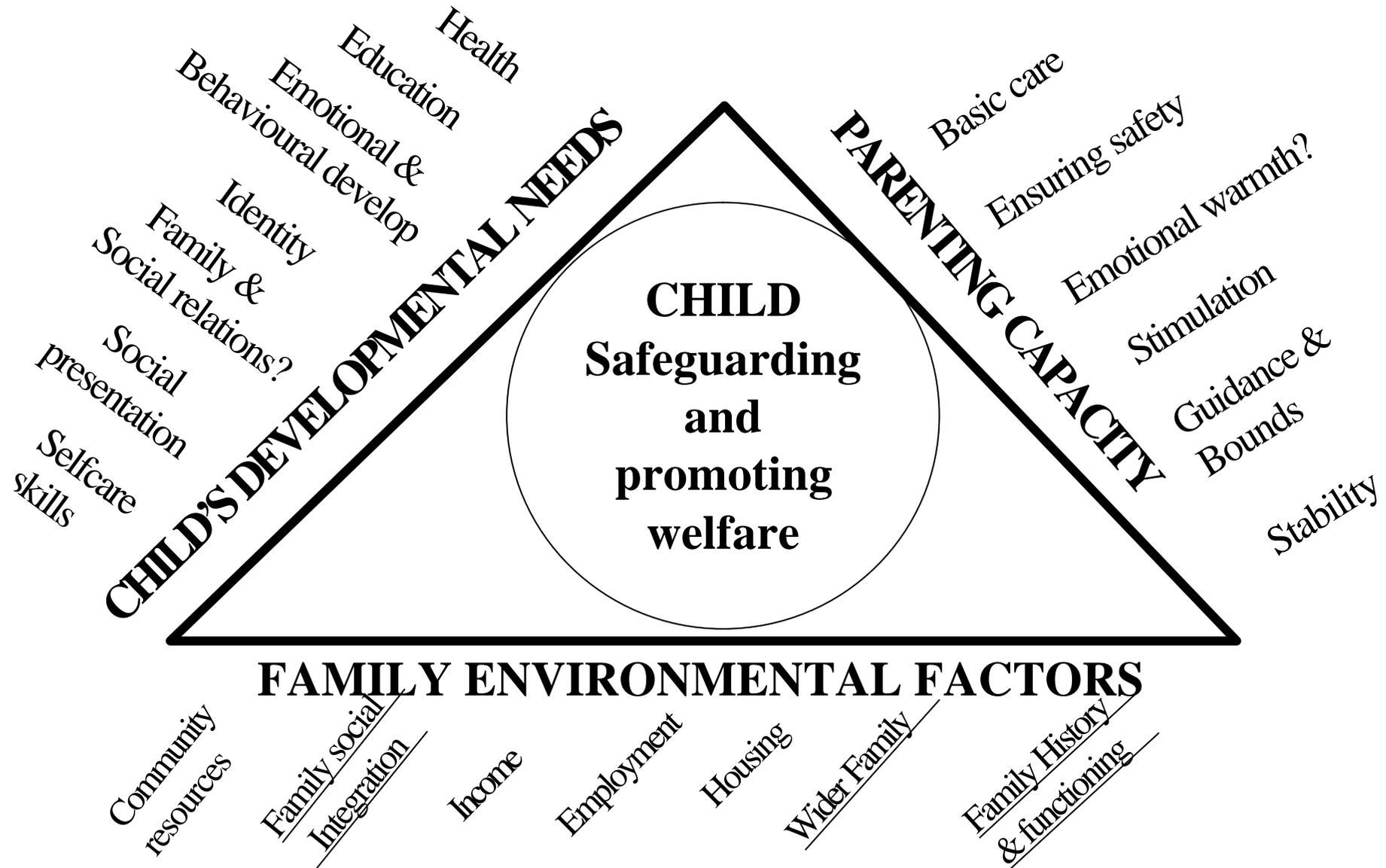
Relevance for adoption/fostering

- Aid understanding of risk/resilience of carers – before and after placement.
- Assess carer ability to access support when under stress.
- Match carer(s) attachment style to child's attachment style (potentially...)
- Assess birth parents attachment style in relation to contact issues.

Policy background

- The Adoption & Children Act (2002) – improving post-adoption support; improving pre-placement matching
- Framework for the Assessment of Children in need (2000) – standardising and increasing reliability of assessments within an ecological framework.
- Evidence-based practice & bridging research and practice – universities and agencies work together

Assessment Framework Model (2000)



Assessment in adoption/fostering

-The Home study – Practice Guidelines

- Looks in detail at prospective adopters history, present situation and likely future to determine capacity (with help and support) to parent adopted child.
- Use of the Framework of Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.
- Free to use additional evidence-based tools to aid completion of Form F.
 - ◆ *“Many agencies ..have tools.. and they are free to use any such tools they find helpful”.*

Assessment of partner relationship Home assessment

“stable and permanent partner relationship to withstand the stresses of adopting a child. Quality and strength of the relationship, although more difficult to evidence, more important than its length.”

- ◆ What makes relationship work
- ◆ How couple resolve difficulties
- ◆ How couple perceive commitment
- ◆ How decisions made
- ◆ What causes conflict
- ◆ How partners support each other and meet each others needs
- ◆ How couple adapt to changing circumstances.

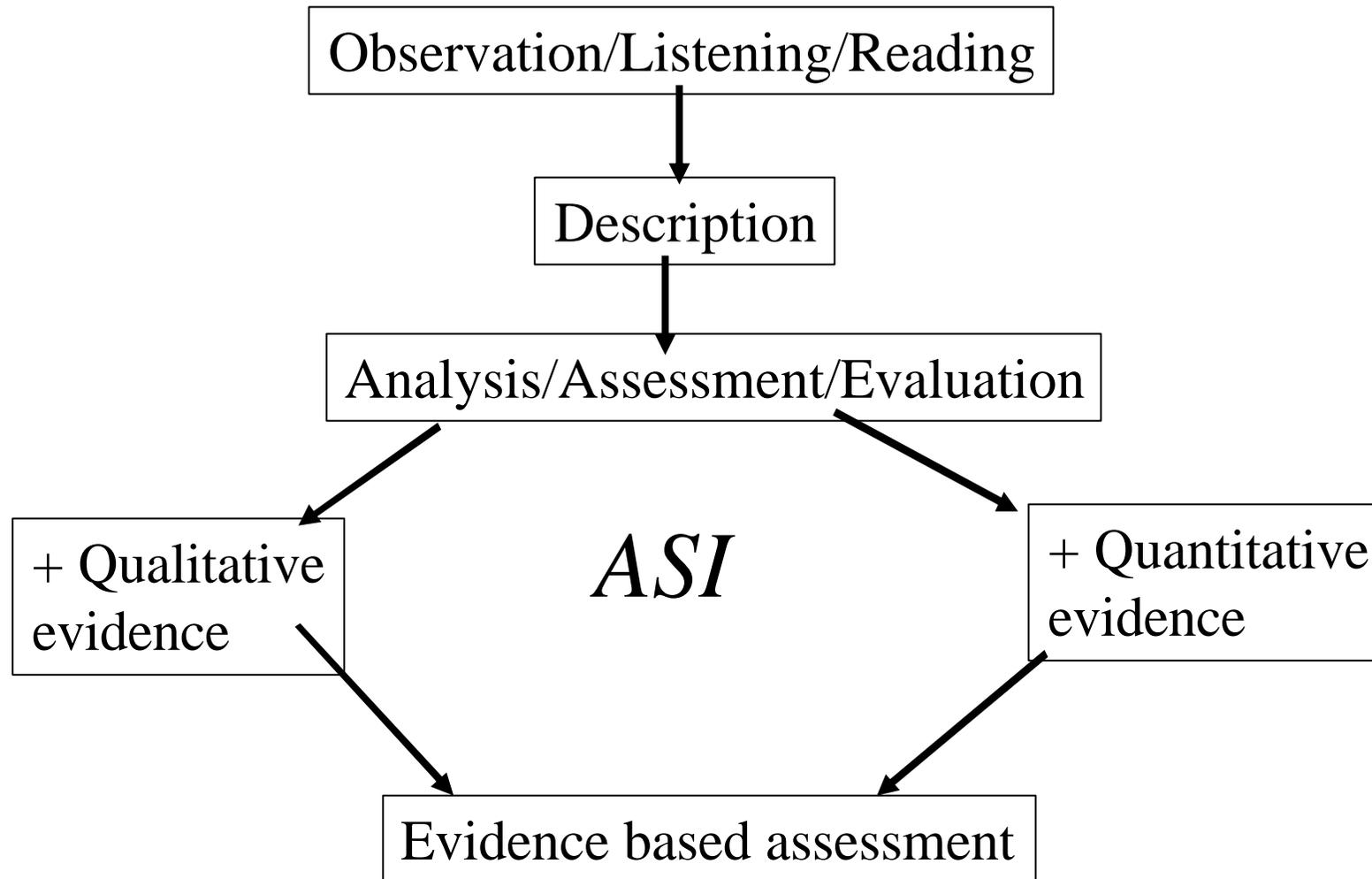
Support

“to sustain them through challenges of caring for adopted child.”

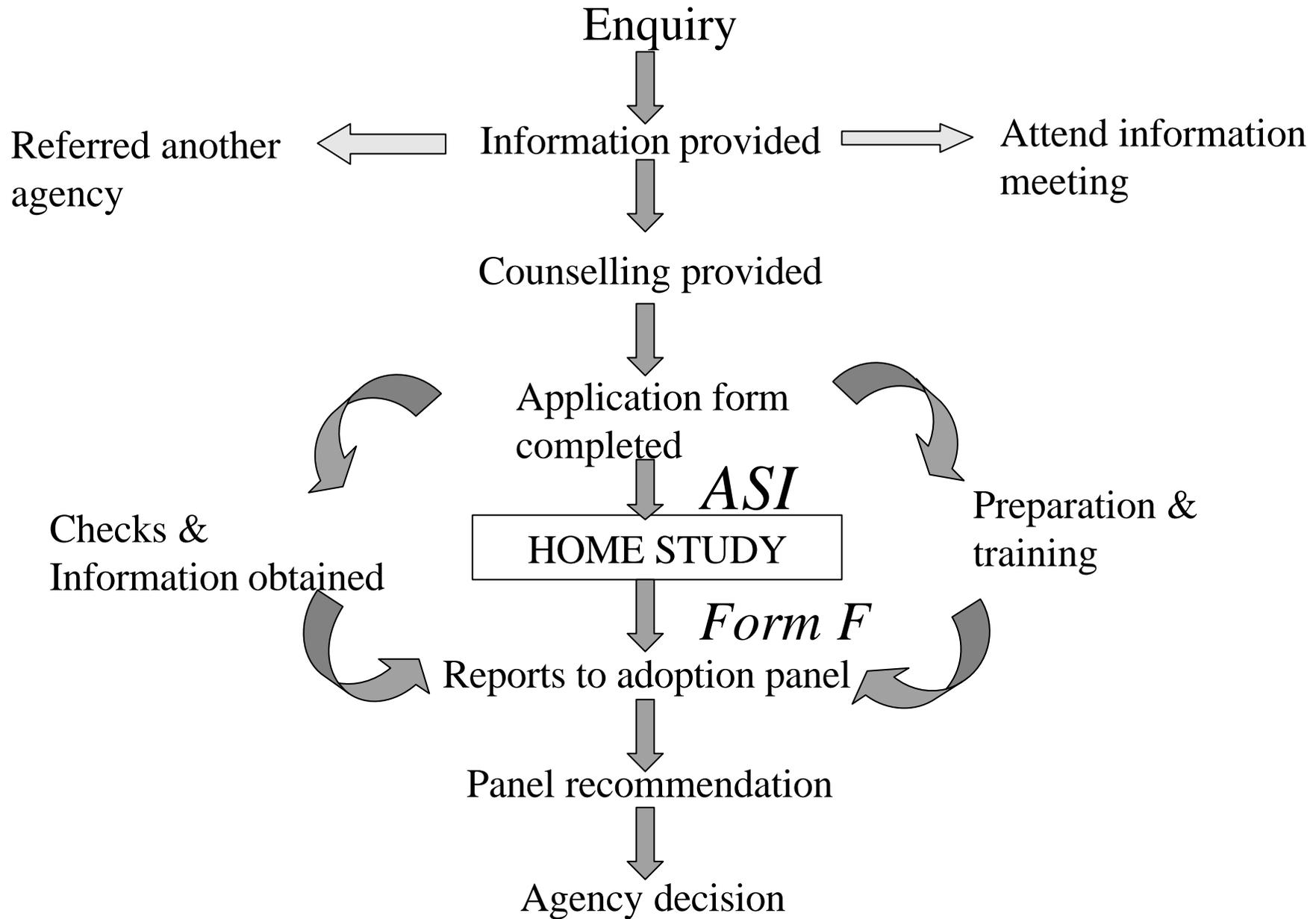
- ◆ Nature of close relationships
- ◆ Good friends and support
- ◆ Close relatives
- ◆ Trusted person nearby to provide practical help
- ◆ Families social integration eg neighbours

RECOMMENDED ASSESSMENT PROCESS

(Practice guidance, page 105)



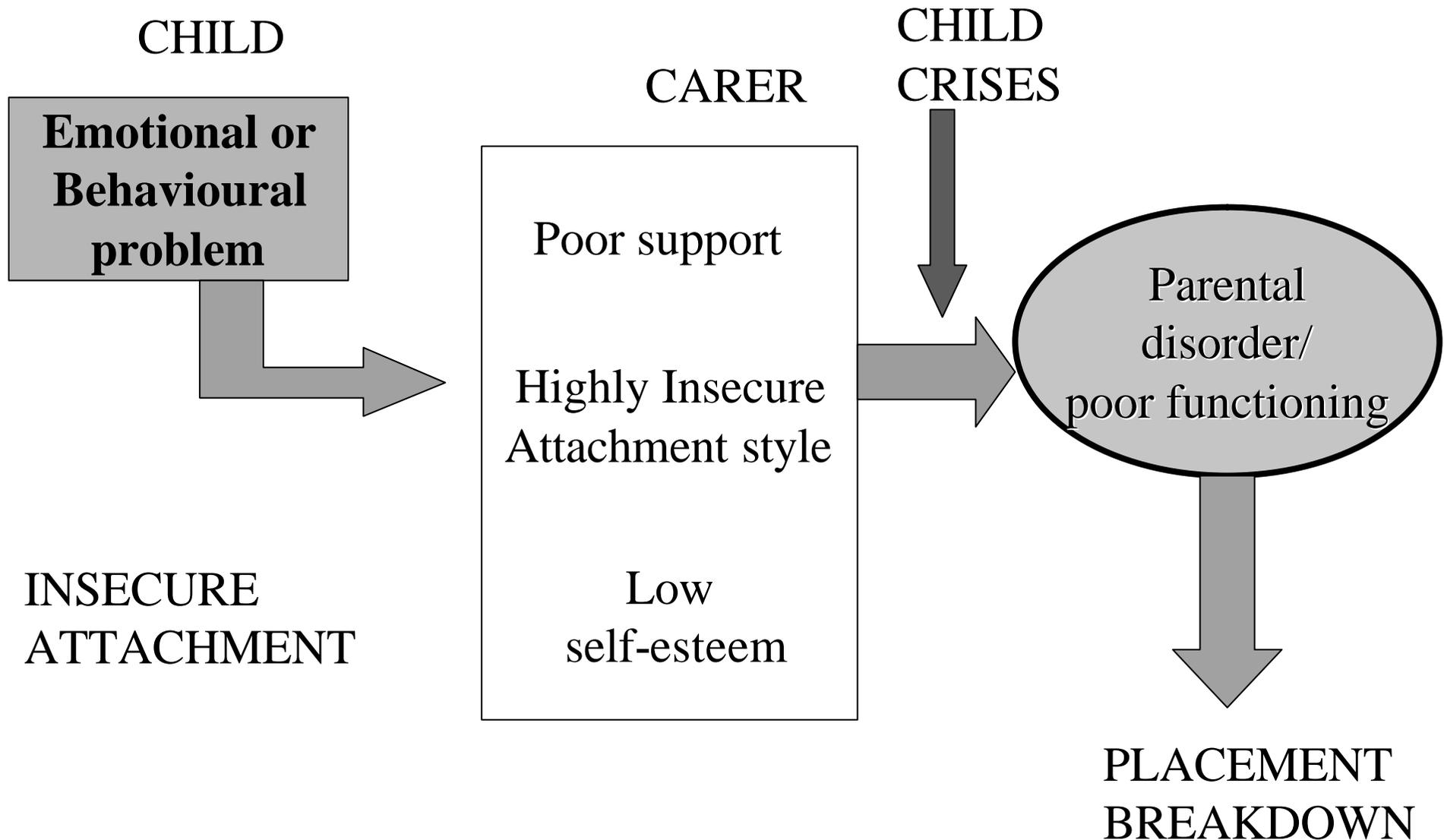
Stages in assessment of prospective adopters



Attachment theory – Impact of child's behaviour on parent's attachment

- The child will transfer a specific style of relating to new relationship.
- The maltreated child's behaviour may be angry aggressive, emotionally withdrawn or disordered.
- The maltreated child's behaviour may challenge the parent's own fearful, hostile, withdrawn or clingy attachment style.

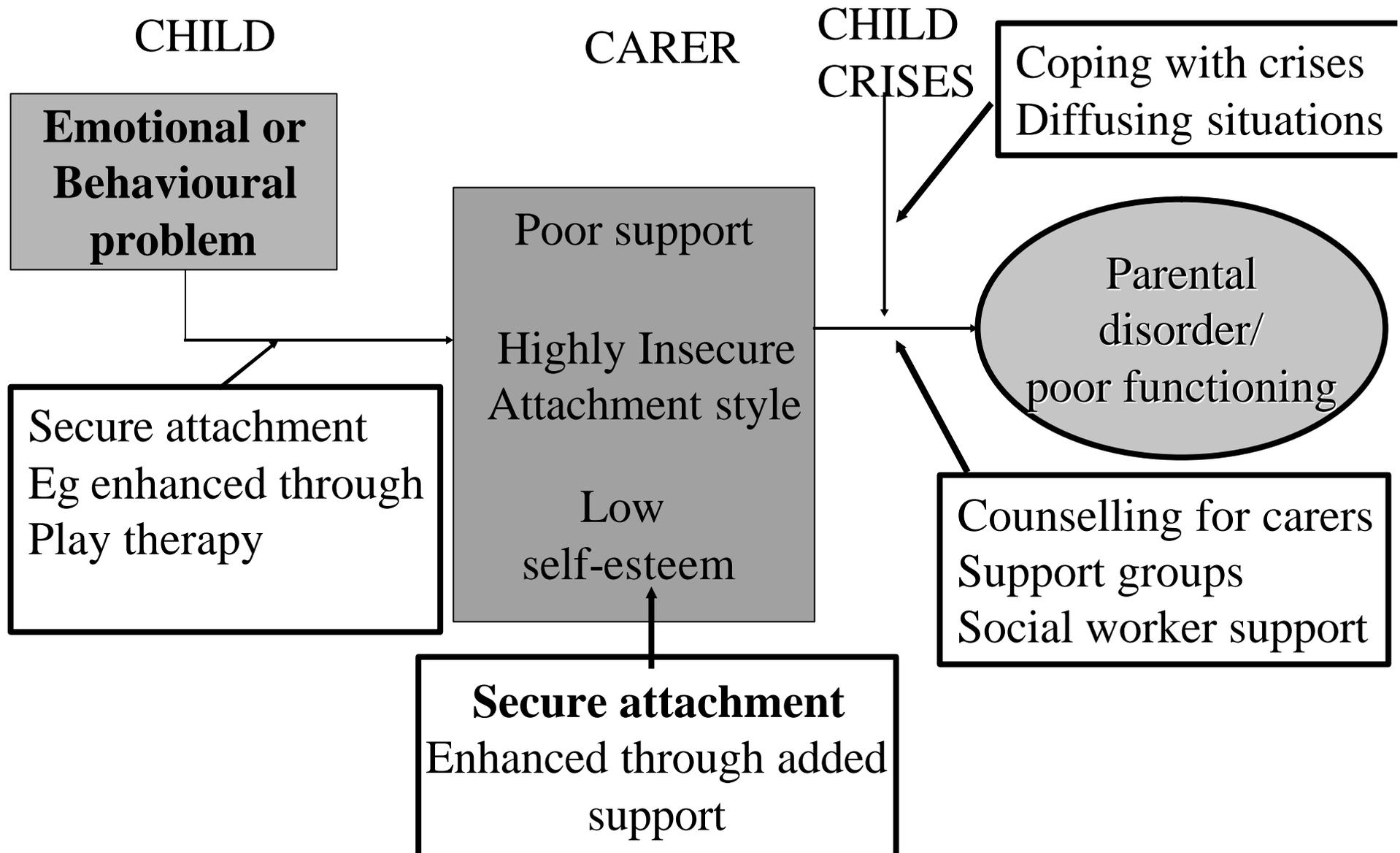
Reverse transmission of risk: Child to carer



Positive outcome for placement stability

- *Not overstressed as family.*
- Strongly motivated to provide home.
- Realistic expectations about possible difficulties.
- *Willingness/ability to receive support from outside.*
- *Opportunity for good quality interactions.*

Resilience model – effect of intervention?



Use of the ASI in adoption/ fostering practice

- DfES have approved the ASI as recommended assessment tool in new guidelines
- ASI training is to be rolled out nationally through Child & Family Training network
- Further dissemination/workshops required for service managers and adoption panels
- Additional evaluation work is being undertaken:
 - ◆ Surrey Social Services have had whole team (45) trained. Follow-up evaluation will determine:
 - ◆ Is ASI used reliably in practice?
 - ◆ Does ASI in carers help predict stable placement and better use of support/services?

How could ASI help with matching?

- Psychological match between carer and child attachment characteristics may improve success of placement.
- Matching principles not yet developed or tested – but some styles likely to be mismatches eg child punitive controlling and parent fearful.
- Matches may occur when parent and child need coincide eg parent enmeshed and child with multiple physical and mental disability.
- Until systematic measurement used of carer and child to be placed, psychological matching cannot be tested.