The Story Stem Assessment reparenting and changes

Estonia 2016 workshop Gabrielle Lees

"Although the capacity for developmental change diminishes with age, change continues throughout the life cycle so that changes for better or for worse are always possible. It is this continuing potential for change that means at no time of life is a person invulnerable to every possible adversity and also that at no time of life is a person impermeable to favourable influence."

John Bowlby

Children seek their attachment figure for many things – but <u>especially</u> when they are frightened or distressed…

and (**ideally**) the attachment figure helps the child to regulate emotion and regain a sense of safety and well-being

Once the child has returned to a well-regulated state, they can get on with all the other tasks of life

(hence the acuteness of separation anxiety –it reflects the child's <u>need</u> for the parent, in order to survive and function)

Because children <u>must</u> get care and containment when frightened, sad or angry, they learn to approach parents in the way which will best elicit these.

A **secure** child does not have to consider how the parent will respond - s/he develops a mental representation of a parent who will reliably respond as s/he needs.

An **insecure** child has to take account of the parent's needs and likely responses, and alter not only his/her behaviour, but also feeling state accordingly. The child protects the parent.

- "Insecure" attachments are the child's best possible adaptation within that particular parent-child relationship.
- But the cost to the child is to distort and limit access to his/her own real feelings, thoughts and emotions, and alter his behaviour accordingly.

Attachment disorganisation

'fear without solution'

Caregiver is needed for safety but is also a source of fear

Feelings of helplessness or hostility in relation to the caregiver become the organising principles of attachment relationships and representations.

IWMs resist change

- As internal working models become organised, they operate increasingly outside conscious awareness.
- Resistant to change - New experiences are understood in terms of the old model as far as possible, which makes for stability but also distortion if conditions change.
- Strategy based on old model may become dysfunctional in new set of relationships….

such as adoption

the most radical and far reaching intervention possible.

Research team

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Internal working models

- Once internal working models become established, they operate increasingly outside consciousness, and guide how further experiences are perceived. New experience is assimilated to existing models where possible.

- This makes for simpler processing and greater stability, but also potential distortion if conditions change.

Research study using narrative assessments:

1) How do experiences of maltreatment and the care system affect children's attachment representations?

2) How do these representations change as children settle into their adoptive families?

3 samples: high, intermediate and low risk groups

- Children recently placed for adoption after maltreatment and removal into Local Authority care (N=63)

- Children adopted in infancy, no known maltreatment (N=48)

- Community sample of children, no known maltreatment, always lived with at least one of current parent figures, and not referred to clinical services (N=95)

Statistically significant differences between groups on all 4 constructs

Saul Hillman (PhD thesis UCL 2011) SSAP :standardisation and psychometric properties.
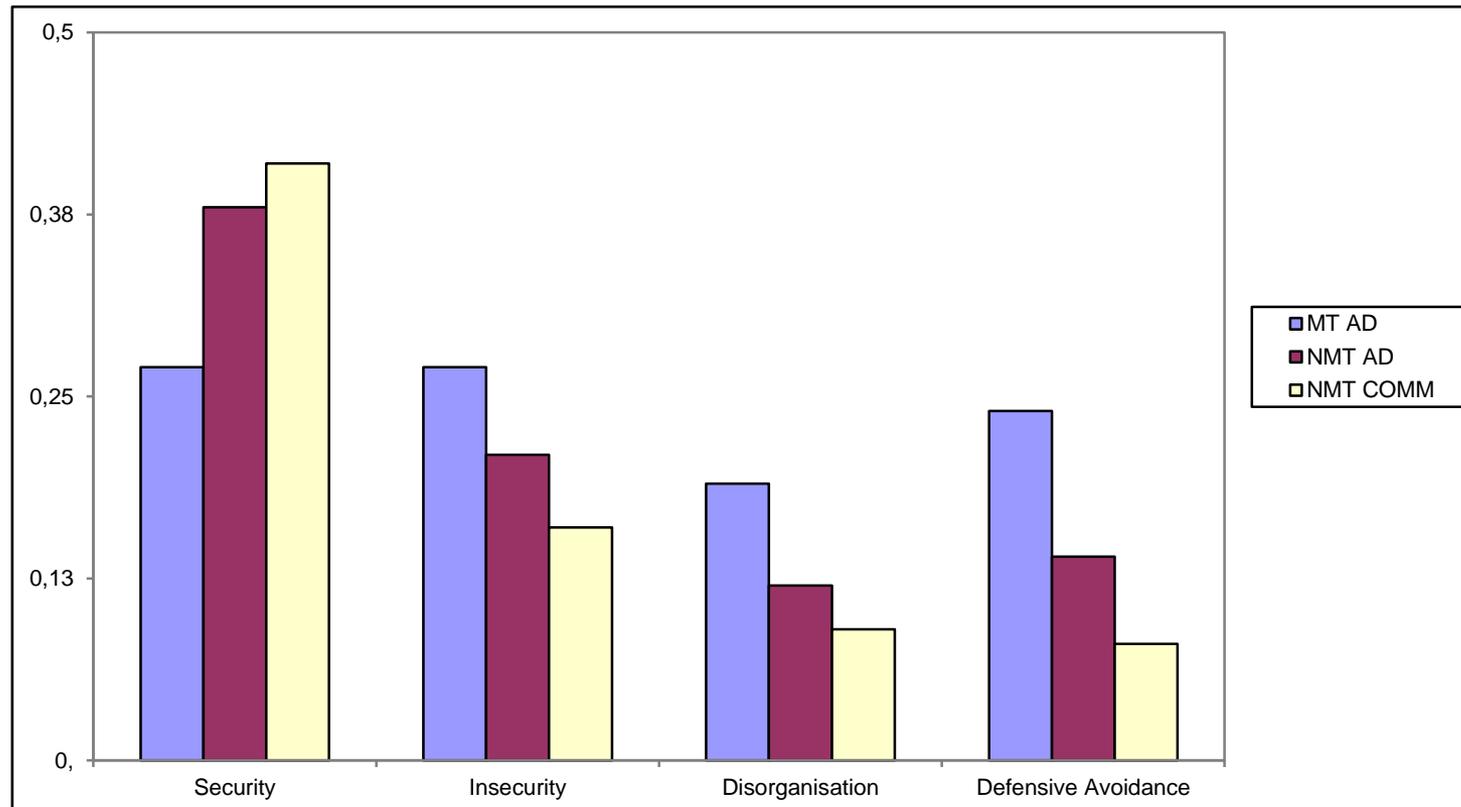
Study design

- Pre-placement assessment of prospective parents

- First post-placement assessment - child and parents

- Second assessment, after 1 year

- Third assessment, after another year.

Adoption of maltreated children from care - a natural experiment, with a sharp discontinuity between pre- and post-adoptive environments

Examining change

- Individual ratings

- Construct scores;
  - secure,
  - insecure,
  - defensive avoidance,
  - Disorganisation.

Storystem changes between T1 and T2 (two years later) - late placed group

Construct scores

- Increase in: Secure

- Decrease in: Defensive Avoidance

- No significant change in: Insecure, Disorganised.

Storystem changes after two years – previously maltreated group

Increase in

- Adult Provides Comfort,
- Adult Provides Help
- Adult Affectionate
- Limit Setting
- Physical Punishment

- Child Seeks Help
- Realistic Mastery
- Sibling/Peer Helps
- Acknowledge Distress (child and adult)
- Domestic Life

Storystem changes after two years

Decrease in

- Avoidance of Conflict
- Changes Constraints
- Disengagement
- Initial Aversion
- No Closure

- Adult Unaware
- Magic Omnipotence
- Self Blame
- Denies Distress
- Excessive Compliance

Comparison of groups after two years

Late placed maltreated children higher on

- **Disorganised construct**
- **Defensive Avoidance construct**

- **Adult unaware**
- **Self Blame**
- **Kidnapping**
- **Parents Childlike**
- **Excessive Compliance**
- **Catastrophic Fantasy**
- **Bizarre/Atypical**
- **Bad to Good Shift**
- **Extreme Aggression**

Comparison of groups after two years

**Children adopted in infancy higher on**

- **Secure construct**

- Siblings/Peers Help
- Realistic Mastery
- Adult Provides Comfort
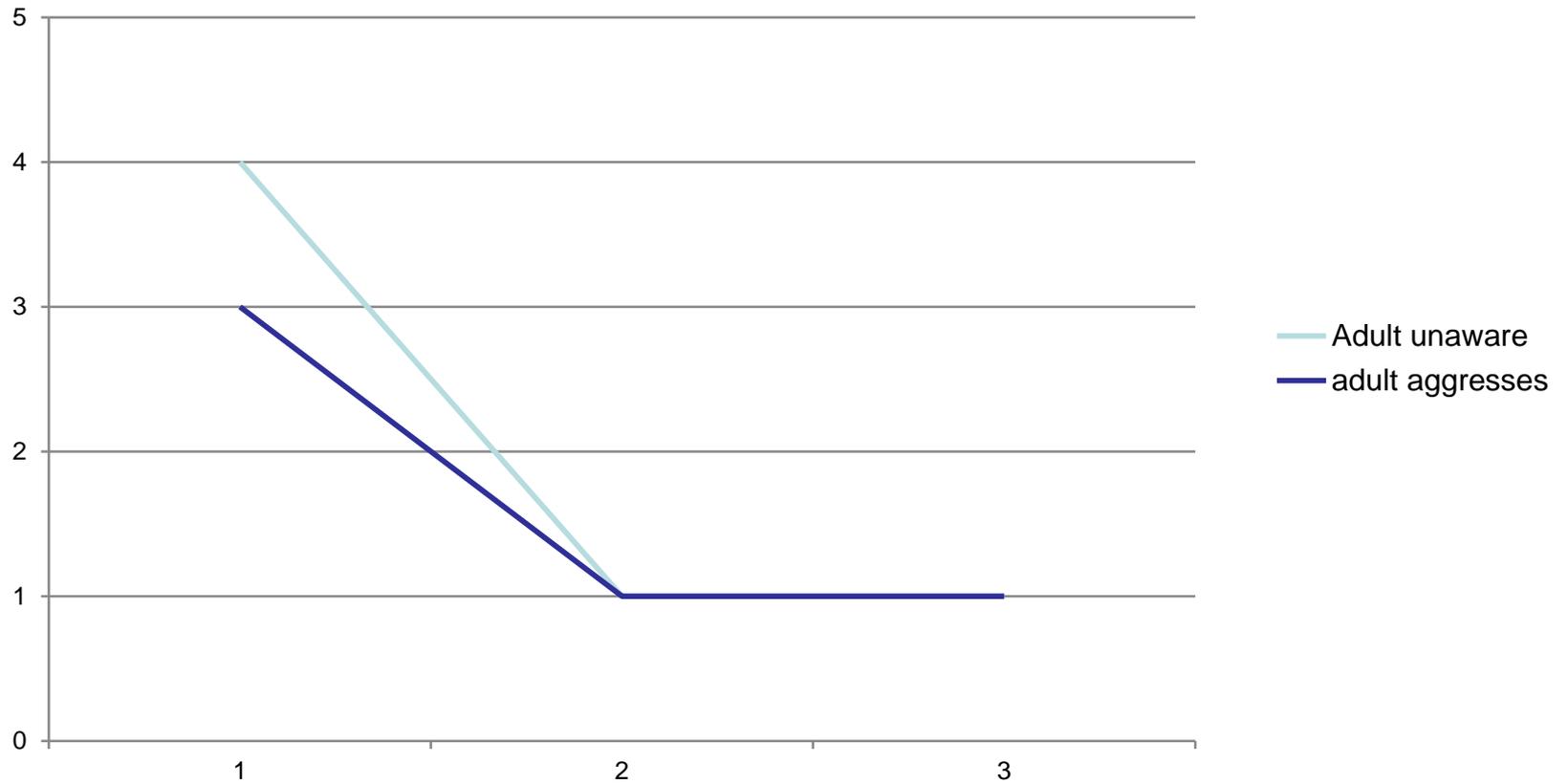- Adult Provides Help
- Domestic Life

"Thomas"

4 years old at adoption placement - 3 previous caregivers

Prior to Care Proceedings had been on CP Register – exposure to domestic violence, emotional abuse, neglect.

Some "secure" themes; how often does Thomas show these across his 13 stories?
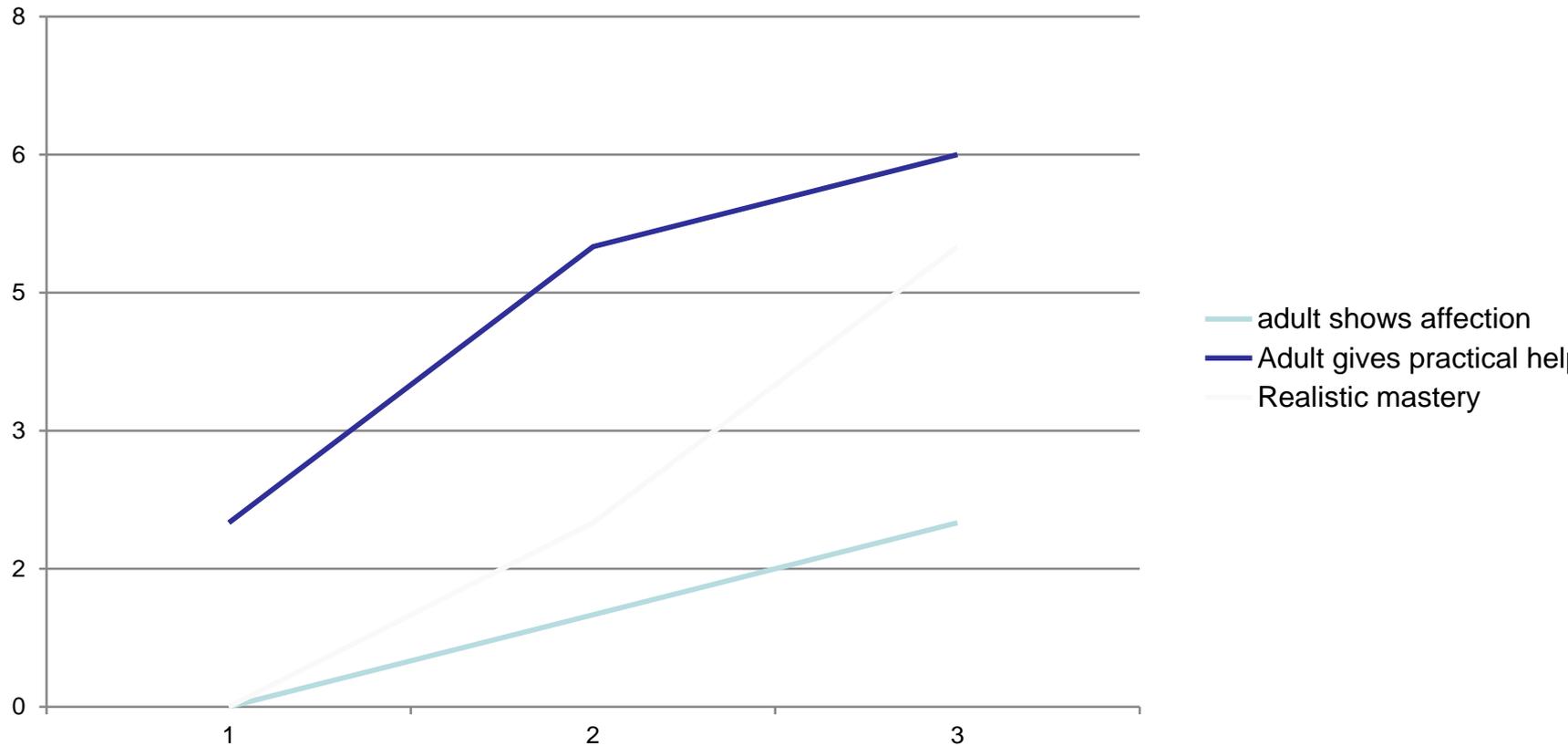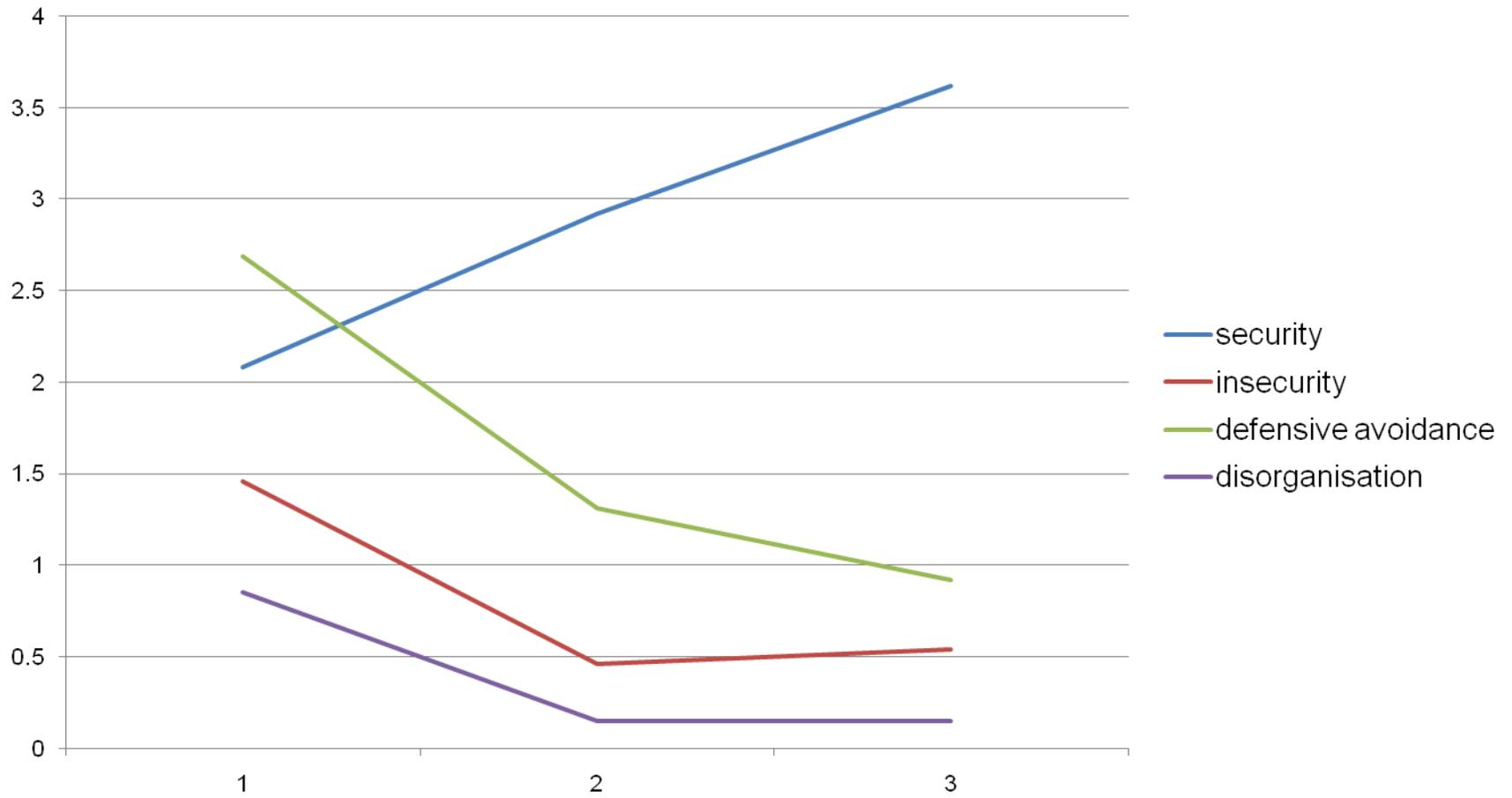
Some "insecure"/negative themes

Changes following adoption?

- How did experiences of maltreatment and changes of carers affect attachment representations as children entered their adoptive families?

- how far, and in what ways, did attachment representations change?

"Thomas" - change over two years

- "Thomas" is what we would ideally hope to see after adoption – improvement all round.
- But if we look at the picture across all the children in the study, we find a much more complicated picture.

The complex picture

But alongside increased Security, mean scores for Insecurity and Disorganisation did not decrease.

A Darwinian explanation?

If you are a caveman, and narrowly escape from a tiger, your chances of survival are increased if you remember that tigers are potentially dangerous – even if you don't experience another attack.

If you are a child, and learn that parents can be frightening or neglectful, that knowledge tends to remain as part of the mental representation of parents – even if you are adopted into a new family.

So how has the child's internal "story" changed?

It is moving in this direction……..

Adults will know when children need looking after, and will provide help and comfort; this means children no longer need to rely on denying that they need help, or trying to make themselves feel safe via omnipotent fantasies. It becomes safe to acknowledge distress if parents will provide comfort, and it is worth seeking adult help because it is likely to be forthcoming.

In addition, the children are starting to build a picture that adults will set nonpunitive boundaries (which help them feel safe); and they are affectionate, will help them and provide comfort when needed. As this is 'internalised' and grows, children are more able to manage difficulties themselves.

The enduring negative themes - no significant change after two years…

- **Aggression (children and adults)**
- **Sexual material**
- **Adult rejecting child**
- **Child endangered**
- **Child parents or controls adults**
- **Extreme defensive manoeuvres (these are linked with attachment disorganisation)**
- **Bizarre /atypical material**
- **Catastrophic fantasy**

Change in children's attachment representations after adoption is complicated, uneven and heterogenous.


- children made significant progress in terms of their underlying expectations and perceptions of family relationships,

- and still displayed significant, lasting damage.

Hidden reefs and rocks

- Earlier negative representations remain, as enduring vulnerabilities for the child's development
- Parents can easily trigger these unknowingly
- Narrative assessments can chart these hidden risks
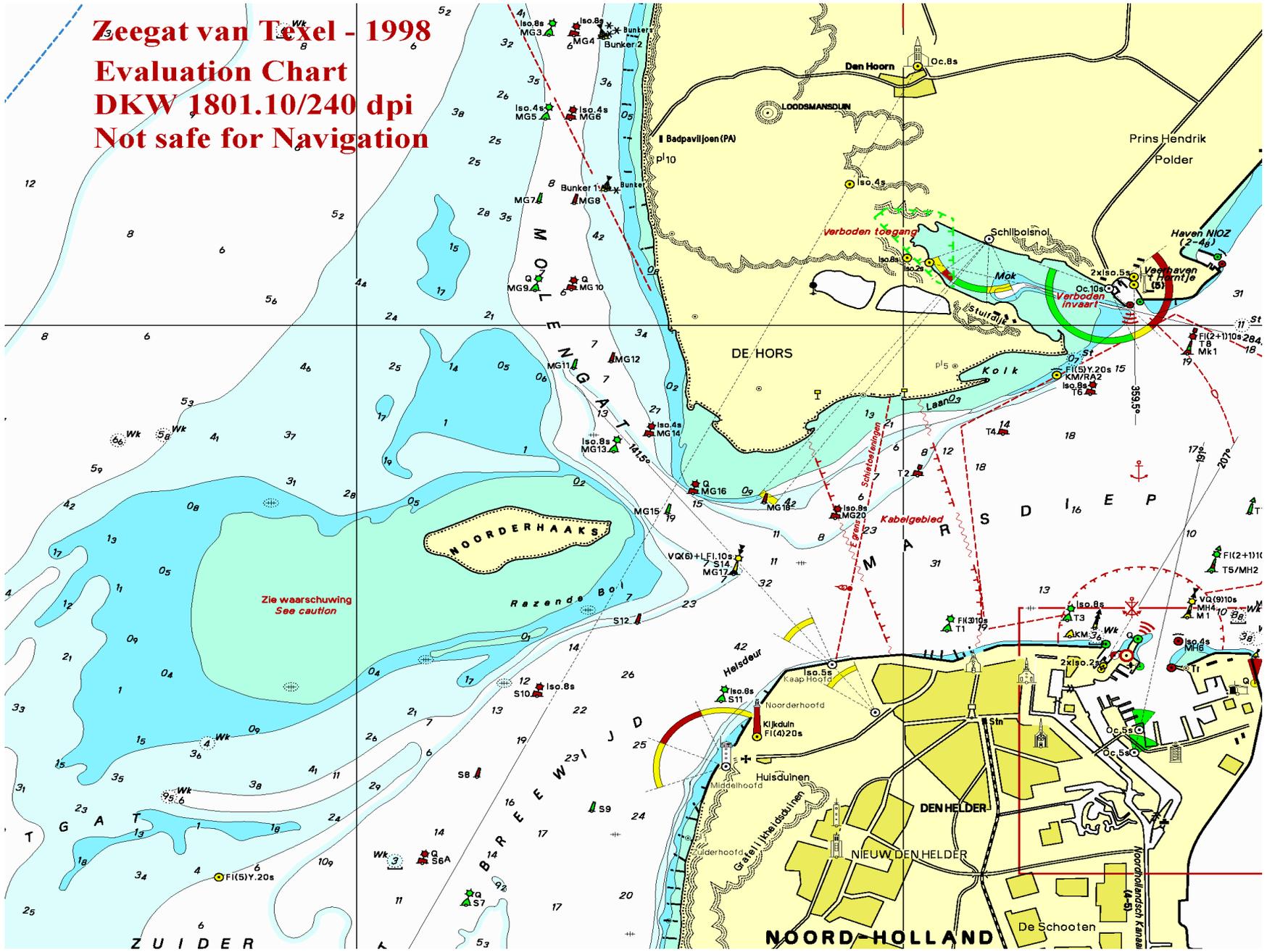
So the embedded story also says...

Adults might not keep you safe, they could become frightening, rejecting and aggressive,

Maybe if you can control the adults you could avoid danger

Maybe if you could be the dangerous one yourself then you could avoid danger

Terrible things might happen

Life stories

When children move to an adoptive family, they carry with them the story of their life so far. Not just their life story book or later life letter, but **an internal story, much of which is not explicit or even conscious**, which embodies their representation of their self and of key relationships, and which organises their interactions with the new family setting.

The adoptive parents task is to build up competing, secure representations - many existing negative ones do not disappear with time, but remained as vulnerabilities, over the two years we studied.

With longer in their adoptive families, how much more change would children show?