

The Strange Situation

In the 1970's Mary Ainsworth developed a theory of attachment through which she explains different attachment styles or qualities that can develop between a child and her caregiver. She developed the first formal procedure for observation of these attachment styles. This procedure was referred to as "The Strange Situation" and continues to be considered the gold standard for assessing the quality of attachment during a child's early years. The procedure has been widely used in attachment research (Waters, Hamilton & Weinfield, 2000; Perry 2001; Bowlby, 2007)). The "strange situation" is a laboratory observation involving an infant or toddler who is between the ages of 12 and 30 months; the child's primary caregiver, who is usually the mother; and a female stranger. The basic premise of the procedure is that the primary caregiver and the stranger interact with, leave and return to the child in an environment which offers the child an opportunity for exploration of toys and materials (Goossens & IJzendoorn, 1990; Waters, Hamilton & Weinfield, 2000; Bowlby, 2007). The "strange situation" begins when the child and his or her primary caregiver are introduced to an unfamiliar room that has a collection of toys for the child to explore. A stranger then joins the pair and a few minutes later the primary caregiver leaves the room so the child is alone with the stranger. After a minute or two the primary caregiver returns and the stranger leaves the room. This procedure is then repeated in order to evaluate the quality of the attachment relationship between the child and his primary caregiver. The observers evaluate the quality of the attachment relationship by focusing on how much time the child spends exploring the environment, the child's reaction when the primary caregiver leaves the room, the amount of anxiety the child displays when left with the stranger and the behavior of the child toward the primary caregiver upon her or his return (Waters, Hamilton & Weinfield, 2000; Perry, 2001; Bowlby, 2007). Depending on the behaviors

observed the child's attachment relationship is classified as one of four types of attachment. It is important to note that the "strange situation" procedure is not used to identify attachment styles. Additionally, this procedure is not used to identify or diagnose disorders of attachment