

The Infant Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)

The assessment. The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP, Ainsworth, et al., 1978) assesses the infant's self-protective strategy in an attachment relationship, indicating (1) whether the infant identifies the parent as a source of danger or protection or both and (2) what strategy he or she uses for self-protection.

The DMM coding method and classificatory system expands on the revision of Ainsworth's original method made by Crittenden in her dissertation with Ainsworth in 1983. It is particularly sensitive to nuances of attachment behaviour in high risk contexts. Consequently, as the degree of risk increases, there is a corresponding decrease in the proportion of children classified as securely attached. This reduces the number of 'false' secures found with other methods.

The SSP consists of a 20-minute series of play, departure and reunion episodes that uses a minor threat (a brief separation from the caregiver) to assess the infant's pattern of attachment to that specific caregiver. Its primary limitation is that it gives little understanding of the adult's behaviour.

Securely attached infants both manage their own feelings adequately when alone and also seek bodily contact when the parent returns. Anxiously attached infants either (1) ignore the parents' departure and return or (2) cling excessively to the parent upon departure and also reject or struggle with the parent upon reunion. Infants at risk can also show (3) extreme forms of the patterns, (4) combinations of the two patterns or (5) appear depressed and helpless in the face of danger. Infants who have experienced out-of-home placement often show especially cautious strategies as though afraid seek closeness or display desire for comfort.

Validity. The SSP is the best validated assessment of attachment for 11-15-month old infants (see below), with numerous studies spanning three decades that (a) tie the SSP classification to the infant's prior experience with the caregiver and (b) predict important developmental outcomes. The SSP is the classic, 'gold standard' against which most other assessments have been validated (see Farnfield, et al., 2010).

Outcomes. An SSP yields two types of information:

An attachment strategy, i.e. the way an infant uses information to organize their behaviour when they feel endangered (in all cases).

An over-riding distortion of the strategy, such as depression and intrusions of forbidden negative affect (in some cases).

Limitations. An SSP can only be used with an attachment figure, i.e., a caregiver of substantial temporal duration with the child). Like all assessments of attachment, the SSP must be classified 'blindly' by an authorized coder (who presents a current and valid reliability certificate from The Family Relations Institute). After classification, the SSP

must be interpreted clinically in the light of the history and assessments of the attachment figure. An SSP classification is specific to the attachment figure who participated in the Strange Situation with the child and children can use different self-protective attachment strategies with different parents and carers. Additional Strange Situations, for other attachment figures, should be in a different location, with different people, and spread as widely as possible apart in time. Another limitation is that the PAA gives little understanding of the adult's behavior. An SSP cannot determine whether a child is attached, nor how 'strong' the attachment is.

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