

**ANTHROPOLOGY OUTREACH OFFICE
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MOTHER-INFANT OBSERVATION

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE OBSERVATION:

1. To provide an experimental framework within which to study primate and human behavior.
2. To illustrate the importance and intensity of observation.
3. To provide background for studying human and nonhuman primate behavior, communication, and social relations. (See "The Human Infant: A Study in Living Prehistory" in John E. Pfeiffer, *The Emergence of Humankind*, 2nd ed., 1972.)

II. PROCEDURE:

Invite a mother and her infant (age 10 months to two years is optimal) to come to your classroom along with a bagful of favorite toys. Explain that students will be observing the infant playing. Ask students to choose one problem listed below and concentrate their observation for 10 minutes on that problem. Each student should take notes during the observation. At the end of 10 minutes take a break for students to write up a summary of their findings. Then each student chooses a second problem and repeats the procedure. Finally, students share their observations for each of the five problems and draw some general conclusions.

III. THE FIVE PROBLEMS:

1. Physical Characteristics

What seems to be the baby's chief physical characteristics? Start with the head and proceed downwards. Describe the features "in action", which features seem most responsible for the differences in baby's behavior. What are the anatomical differences responsible for the differences in baby and mother's behavior and physical presence?

2. Activity: Locomotion

What locomotion are the two engaged in? How much time is spent sitting; standing; walking on all four's; standing on feet, knees; lying down, etc? What types of locomotion seem most efficient for each subject? How are the locomotor activities related to the behavior going on? How is the method of locomotion related to anatomy?

3. Activity: Behavior

What activities are the two engaged in? Estimate the time for each type. Can you mark off behavior sequenced? What seems to mark the beginning of a sequence, and what motivates or brings about the beginning of a new sequence? What shifts the attention of each subject? (Remember that behavior also includes talking)

4. Communication

List the types of communication acts which occur during your observation period. Communication includes non-verbal acts: visual, tactile, olfactory, vocal-auditory acts.

Try to note the frequency of each act. Which kinds of communication occur most often, which seem most effective, and why?

Who initiates communication more often? Who receives it more often?

The last two minutes of your time focus on the communication going on in your room outside the Mother-Infant group.

Can you draw any conclusions on the possible differences between mother-infant communication and adult human communication based on this observation? Is there anything you might hypothesize about early hominid communication based on this observation?

5. Patterns of Interaction

What interactions occur between the two? How much time is spent interacting? Who initiates contact, who breaks it - how often for each subject? How is contact established (touch, smile, handing something, etc.) What interactions occur between either subject and others in the room -- who initiates this contact, and why?

Do your observation taking careful notes so you can quantify the results: count time; number of interactions; number of times baby initiates contact, etc.

What overall conclusions can you draw?

IV. SUMMARY:

What adjectives would you use to describe the infant's behavior? The mother's? What was the dominant activity? How much interaction occurred and why? Did you enjoy the observation, why or why not? Why is observation difficult and what skills would be useful to have for doing long-term observation studies?