A modified Strange Situation Procedure for use in assessing sibling relationships and their attachment to carers

Steve Farnfield describes a modification of the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), commonly used in the assessment of infant and pre-school children’s attachment, for use in the assessment of sibling relationships. The modified SSP was developed for use in cases where social workers had to decide whether or not to split up groups of siblings for placement in adoptive or long-term foster homes. However, it can also be applied as an aid to understanding sibling interactions in other contexts as well as the attachment of siblings to one another and to birth or substitute parents. Following some practical and theoretical comments, an account of the procedure is given together with case examples.

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Introduction

After the removal of children from their birth parents, one of the most difficult and ethically challenging decisions facing social care professionals is whether siblings should be split up in order to facilitate their placement for adoption or long-term foster care. The assessment brief from the children’s social worker is frequently phrased in terms of whether one child is so cowed by the aggression of another that his or her developmental needs might be better met by placing the children separately. At the same time, there is often a less explicit acknowledgement that the younger or youngest children will be more attractive to potential adopters than the older, apparently more emotionally damaged child(ren), or that a large sibling group is too much for one adoptive family to manage. This tends to place practitioners between the rock of not wanting to further atomise children’s lives by separating them from their siblings and the hard-place reality of the limited availability of long-term family placement. The aim of this article is to describe one possible route out of this dilemma by means of a standardised aid to decision-making based on the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), commonly used to assess attachment in infants (Ainsworth et al, 1978) and pre-school aged children (see Teti 1999 for discussion of the Crittenden and Cassidy and Marvin systems).

Looked after siblings

About 80 per cent of the population have at least one sibling and this seems to hold true for children in the looked after system (Sanders, 2004). Although the 1989 Children Act carries a presumption that looked after siblings will be placed together, this does not happen for most of them. For example, Elgar and Head (1999) estimated that only 25–33 per cent of children in care were living with one or more of their siblings. In a lot of cases the reasons for this reflect the complexity of the children’s birth families; many have siblings living elsewhere, including their biological family, under circumstances that are not always under the direct control of the placing agency (Dance and Rushton, 1999; Harrison, 1999; Neil, 1999).

How many children are separated from siblings as a direct result of a professional assessment is not known, but the main reason social workers give for splitting them up is the needs of individual children (Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Dance and Rushton, 1999). Dance and Rushton found that ‘children’s needs’ usually meant that one child had severe behaviour problems or there was a high level of conflict between the children (put another way, the management of children’s behaviour was a problem for the adults) but, alarmingly, this was not applied consistently across the sample and there were some siblings with aggressive relationships who had been kept together. The authors speculate that the reasons for this inconsistency might be the tolerance of
carers or the commitment of individual social workers (Dance and Rushton, 1999).

In terms of the success of sibling compared to singleton placements, a number of small studies have come up with somewhat mixed results but, in one of the most comprehensive of recent reviews, Hegar looked at 17 studies, including five in the UK. She concluded:

*Siblings are more likely to experience separation in foster care when they are older, are further apart in age, come from larger sibling groups, enter foster care at different times, have special needs, or require placement other than kinship foster homes. More important, findings of the studies support the tentative conclusion that joint sibling placements are as stable as or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings, and several studies suggest that children do as well or better when placed with their brothers and sisters.* (Hegar, 2005, p 731)

It is possible that some singleton placements disrupt because the reason for placing the children alone in the first place was their history of unresolved trauma combined with challenging behaviour, although, as noted above, aggressive behaviour alone does not always mean children will be split up. In general, kinship care seems a better option for keeping siblings together than state care (Kosonen, 1996; Shlonsky et al, 2003; Hegar, 2005; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005).

**Sibling relationships**

Broadly speaking, siblings can be defined as any other child with whom a child has either lived for an extensive period of time or to whom a child is biologically related. This typically covers brothers and sisters – either full, half or through a step relationship – and foster and adoptive siblings (Elgar and Head, 1999).

Considerable attention has been paid to the jealousy that the birth of a second baby can evoke in the first born and, based on the pioneering studies of Judy Dunn, this form of sibling rivalry seems extremely common (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1993). It is also worth noting that, as a group, pre-school children are probably more likely to resort to physical violence to resolve relationship problems than just about any other section of the population (Fonagy, 2006), so fighting between young siblings is not, in itself, atypical. In the school years and early adolescence, while rivalry between pairs of siblings is common, in more advantaged populations of children the psychosocial adjustment of a particular child appears to have more to do with the presence or absence of friendliness and warmth between siblings than the evidence of anger and hostility (Dunn et al, 1994; Sanders, 2004).

**Attachment theory and the sibling relationships of looked after children**

In attachment terms, siblings fight to get access to scarce parental resources of comfort and protection. Empirical data on sibling attachment is limited but children with an insecure attachment to their mother are more likely to conflict with siblings than securely attached children (Teti and Ablard, 1989; Volland and Belsky, 1992). Crittenden found that maltreated children were significantly more likely to maltreat younger siblings than non-maltreated children and that this was apparent in those as young as two years, although the most common pattern for maltreated siblings was a lack of connection (Crittenden, 1984). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that levels of sibling rivalry are much higher for children in care compared to community groups (Rushton, 1999; Rushton et al, 2001).

Looked after children tend to come from families that are poor and larger than average (Bebbington and Miles, 1989). They also tend to have a higher than average number of step- or half-siblings (Sanders, 2004). Based on evolutionary psychology, there is an
argument that as biological relatedness decreases, rivalry will be more intense with, for example, greater conflict between step- and foster siblings than half-siblings (Simpson, 1999). In addition, where there are high levels of conflict between parents and children, aggression between siblings increases and if one child is favoured over others this either reduces sibling interaction, causing children to drift apart, or heightens resentment and conflict. Nor is this a one-way process; as a family gets more stressed, siblings fight more, often leading to greater parental anger or withdrawal, and so on. Pairs of male siblings appear to be more violent than other groupings (Sanders, 2004).

Extreme aggression by one particular child seems likely to have its origins in high fear states, rejection and humiliation in the pre-school years (McBurnett et al, 2000; Gunnar and Cheatham, 2003; Schore, 2003). Many looked after children are traumatised by past abuse and some by frequent moves in the care system. At some point, threats to their safety become so acute that a child is forced to put self-preservation before everything else, so that trust in others is not deemed possible even under new conditions of relative safety. The result is a small number of children with extremely complex psychosocial problems for whom more positive relationships with parents and siblings will be difficult to achieve. Even then, placing children rejected by their birth parents apart from siblings can only intensify their feelings of isolation (Rushton et al, 2001).

However, it is important to stress that although conflict may be common between siblings from all types of background, so is love and affection. Rushton and colleagues (2001) found that, three months into permanent placement, 45 per cent of the parents reported that relationships between siblings were mainly positive.

Role reversal and siblings as attachment figures

A distinction should be made between role reversal, where the child tries to parent their parent, and the caretaking of younger siblings. In role reversal, the child is the psychological parent; that is he or she puts protection of their parent before their own needs. Typically, the parent is depressed or otherwise withdrawn and shrinks away from the child’s dependency needs (Crittenden, 1995). Simply doing practical things for, say, a parent with a physical disability, does not in itself mean the parent–child roles have been reversed. Role reversal appears to be so common that Marvin (2003) estimates it features in over 50 per cent of high-risk populations. It is actually observable from about the middle of the third year (see Main and Hesse, 1990; Crittenden, 1992, 1995; George and Solomon, 1999) and although a significant cause of concern in substitute care, may be short lived once children are placed in a permanent family (Rushton et al, 2001).

Wealthy societies like the UK have come to see the caretaking of younger children by an older sibling as abusive, but in many parts of the world basic child care is performed by older children as a matter of necessity. However, even though they may be an attachment figure to their younger siblings, this does not mean these children have reversed roles with their parents (Goldstein, 1999). For the latter to happen, the caretaker child must fulfil the basic requirements of an attachment figure, namely provision of physical and emotional care and continuity or consistency in the younger child’s life, together with an emotional investment in the child (Howes, 1999). Caretaker children will usually be older and certainly wiser than their charges. This will often be the oldest child or possibly the oldest girl because caregiving is socially valued in females (Jacobvitz et al, 1999; Rushton et al, 2001). Case experience indicates that role-reversing children often do care for younger siblings as well; this is to be expected as
the two types of behaviour have similar antecedents, namely the unavailability of an adult carer. There may be merit in arguing that some large sibling groups actually come into care when the oldest girl reaches puberty and can find another protective figure, usually an older male.

**Family triangulation**

Children in substitute family care bring with them the ghosts from past experiences which are not visible to their new parents but continue to influence children’s behaviour towards one another and their carers in the present. It is probably the repetition of these barely understood old scripts that most exasperates carers and professionals, who may then latch on to separating the children from one another as the most readily available solution to the problem.

From a systemic perspective, the sibling sub-system is actually nested in a series of wider interconnected ones, namely the parenting or caregiving system, which includes the ways in which the adults manage child behaviour, the spousal relationship and the wider family and support network, including professionals (Farnfield, 2008). Once the focus is shifted from undesirable child behaviour (children’s needs) to the functioning of a wider system, the contribution of the children’s carers to sibling conflict has to be considered along with that of the child. For example, one child might be favoured more than another or be perceived as a threat, not just to another sibling but to the viability of the marriage. Children might also be brought in as allies in marital conflicts or used as pawns in spousal rivalries in ways that are not apparent to the child (McHale* et al*, 1999; Talbot and McHale, 2003). Reconstituted families carry an obvious risk of differential treatment to one or more children according to their biological relationship to the parents (Mekos* et al*, 1996) and this is sometimes observable in adoptive and foster families.

**Studies using the Strange Situation Procedure to assess sibling behaviour**

A series of studies has investigated caregiving by pre-schoolers (aged 3 to 4 years) to infant siblings when they are left alone together in the Strange Situation (Stewart, 1983; Stewart and Marvin, 1984; Howe and Ross, 1990; Garner* et al*, 1994). These were, in the main, children from average or advantaged backgrounds and so what is described as caregiving is the offer of comfort or concern for a distressed sibling, which compensates for the absence of the main attachment figure, rather than the primary caretaking by children who have had no available attachment figure and have a need to care for siblings even when a protective adult is present and available. What is of interest is that, in these studies, little more than 50 per cent of the older children offered care to a distressed sibling within ten seconds of their mother leaving them alone (10 seconds was chosen because a prompt response to distress is required by an attachment figure) (Stewart, 1983; Stewart and Marvin, 1984; see also Howe and Ross, 1990, for a similar result).

**Current procedures**

Outside of the ‘Sibling Relationship Checklist’ (Department of Health, 1991) there appears to be little use of standardised measures for the comprehensive assessment of sibling relationships (Beckett* et al*, 1999; Rushton* et al*, 2001). Beckett (1999) obtained 16 questionnaires from local authorities regarding planning and decision-making for siblings in care and found that ten had no existing policies or guidelines and only one department had an assessment format. Although observation was used extensively in the pioneering studies of sibling relationships, such as those by Judy Dunn and her colleagues, it does not appear prominent in current assessment procedures. For example, in his excellent book on sibling relationships, Sanders lists measures devised by 13 groups of authors, none of whom use
observation as a method (Sanders, 2004, Table 3:5).

**The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)**

The model for all observation procedures designed to assess attachment in infants and pre-schoolers is the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The SSP places increasing levels of stress on a single child culminating in a three-minute period when they are left alone in a strange room (the video suite). This procedure actually assesses three interlocking behavioural systems: exploration (play) under varying conditions of stress; affiliation (social behaviour) with a stranger; and attachment-seeking behaviour when mother returns after the child has been left alone or with the stranger. Rating of attachment behaviour is made with particular reference to the child’s behaviour towards their mother or main carer on reunion.

**The modified procedure**

The modified SSP for siblings is designed to assess how children behave when alone together and in the presence of the main carer of at least one of the children. Because the children are always with each other, this procedure places a lower level of stress on children than the standard SSP. The modified procedure requires a standard video suite with observation room and one-way screen. A selection of toys should be available for the children, together with a chair for the adult. All parts of the assessment are recorded on video. One person should act as a manager of the proceedings and, ideally, another ought to operate the camera.

In terms of age, the youngest child to take part in this procedure so far was three years and five months (see Callum below) and the oldest 12 years. Studies of pre-school siblings have used the SSP where the youngest children had an average age of 14 to 17 months but the time left without an adult was no more than two-and-a-half to four minutes (Stewart, 1983; Stewart and Marvin, 1984; Howe and Ross 1990; Garner et al., 1994).

The procedure is as follows:

1. A day or so before the assessment, the children are told that they will be going with their foster carer to a specified location so that the relevant professionals can see how they play together. To ensure an appropriate level of stress, the setting should not be familiar to the children.

2. When they arrive at the location the children should be shown the camera and observation room. This level of transparency can affect children’s conscious behaviour towards the camera, but the results appear similar enough to the standard SSP to suggest that it does not inhibit basic relationship patterns.

3. The children have ten minutes’ free play in the presence of the foster carer of at least one of them. Ideally, she will be the carer with whom the children will live if they remain together as a sibling group. Whether she is an attachment figure will depend on the age of the child and length of time she has had care of the child(ren) (Howes, 1999). The foster carer should remain seated and not initiate play with the children but supervise them in her usual way.

4. The manager knocks on the door and the foster carer leaves, giving the children any explanation she feels to be appropriate.

5. The children have ten minutes play alone.

6. The foster carer returns and on entering the room stands at the door and greets the children by name. She pauses, then sits down in her chair.

7. The children have a further ten minutes’ play in the presence of the foster carer. The procedure is then repeated so that the children are left alone for ten minutes before the foster carer returns and greets them, as described above. To increase information about children’s behaviour on reunion, she should be asked to give each child a hug.

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8. The procedure can then be ended after a few minutes. The children should be asked to help the carer put away the toys. The camera remains switched on until they have all left the room as the exit may provide useful information.

**Additional separations and reunions**

The children can also be separated and then reunited with one another or, rather than the carer, a stranger can be introduced during the second half of the procedure. The formula can also be used to assess the attachment of a child to a particular carer by leaving him or her entirely alone for three minutes and then reuniting them with their carer. If this is done, it is best placed at the end of the sibling assessment and the carer must meet the Howes criteria for an attachment figure (Howes, 1999).

Sometimes ethical concerns are raised about the standard SSP for deliberately making children anxious in this way. There is no doubt that infants do get very upset. Two-year-olds want to retain as much proximity to their carer as do one-year-olds, so the intensity of separation anxiety is expected to remain fairly constant until the third year when the big issue becomes being left alone (Marvin and Britner, 1999). Relatively secure three- and four-year-olds are able to stay with a benign stranger or tolerate brief periods alone if they understand where their mother has gone and when she will be back (Marvin, 1977). Looked after children are a special group in two crucial respects. First, many of them have experienced actual, as opposed to threatened, abandonment or removal from parents and other carers, and being left entirely alone can induce panic. If the standard procedure is used at all, the period alone before the stranger enters should be shortened if the child is frightened. Second, experience with the modified procedure indicates that school-age children placed with adoptive or long-term foster carers do sometimes show attachment-seeking behaviour which is more like that of younger children, so the standard SSP can be used with children as old as seven or eight years.

**Recording**

If necessary, the whole or parts of the assessment can be transcribed from a careful viewing of the videotape. Alternatively, a narrative can be made of the important events in each section using headings such as ‘first ten minutes of free play’, ‘second ten minutes children alone’, ‘reunion of Tina and her foster mother’.

**Validity**

There has been no systematic validation study of this procedure. So far it has been used with approximately ten sets of sibling groups to aid professional judgement and has consistently produced useful information tied to the specific circumstances of the children’s lives. In validation terms, the big question is whether sibling behaviour observed in the video suite is representative of the behaviour that occurs in more natural settings and only a formal research study will answer this. With regard to infants and pre-schoolers, Howe and Ross (1990) found a high concordance between the quality of sibling relationships in the SSP and home observations and Stewart (1983) found siblings were more stressed when left alone together than when they were with the stranger. It is also important to establish whether decisions using this method lead to more stable placements as compared to those based on other approaches.

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1 Attachment assessments of looked after children indicate that several changes of carer in the pre-school years frequently lead to variations of a compulsive Type A strategy in the child (see Crittenden and DiLilla, 1988; Crittenden, 1995, for explanation). Sometimes the child is very worried and fearful when alone but composes him or herself quickly so as not to show distress to carers, or he or she may find comfort with the stranger and prefer her or him to their main carer. For this reason, even when children are very upset, the stranger should still enter before the attachment figure.
**Analysis**
Analysis of the material will necessarily proceed on a case-by-case basis but the following constructs and categories can help in decision-making.

**Warmth, rivalry, hostility and repair**
Questionnaires about sibling relationships for carers and children have tended to focus on three dimensions of sibling interaction: warmth and affection, rivalry and hostility (Sanders, 2004). As noted above, rivalry between at least some sibling pairs is common and may involve aggression. What matters is the presence or absence of warmth and friendliness (Dunn et al., 1994). Where affection and conflict co-exist (‘she’s my best friend and I hate her’), this should be taken as a persuasive argument for keeping siblings together. On the other hand, where one child is abusive to another and poses a threat of significant harm, this may be taken as evidence to place siblings separately (Whelan, 2003) as such behaviour tends to persist after permanent placement (Rushton et al., 2001).

However, even then caution is necessary. For example, is there evidence of genuine warmth? Does the child show remorse after an aggressive act? Of particular importance is the ability of children to regulate their own behaviour, be it positive or negative, when adults are not around. Current work in adult attachment indicates two distinct types of violence: ‘hot bloods’, who are in fact over-controlled, try and bottle up feelings but then explode, and ‘cooler bloods’ who use menace and deception (Schore, 2003). Premeditated acts of aggression might be a stronger indicator for separating one child from another than explosive outbursts that are followed by shame and remorse.

As well as warmth, rivalry and hostility, attention can be given to the ability of the children to resolve conflicts with and without the help of an adult. Securely attached people get into the same relationship difficulties as everyone else but a distinguishing aspect of security is the ability to repair problems when they occur. This appears to come about through a combination of factors, such as reflective functioning, empathy, using feelings as an indicator that the relationship needs attention and trust in the self (Fonagy et al., 2004). Obviously, children are only learning to do all this, usually in families, but these crucial cognitive and affective functions are clearly emerging in the pre-school years and inevitably have an impact on sibling relations (Ruffman et al., 1998; Fonagy et al., 2004). The potential for conflict resolution is, therefore, as important as evidence of more or less warmth and hostility.

The presence of these three core dimensions can be rated for each ten-minute section of the procedure in terms of a simple scale: 0 not present; 1 some evidence; 2 definitely present. However, this is not a tick-box approach and the emphasis should be on understanding the meaning and function of children’s behaviour rather than merely counting items.

**Caretaker child and the attachment of one child to another**
A rating should also be made of whether one child functions as a caretaker to others and which, if any, of his or her siblings treat this child as an attachment figure. In particular, does the attached child use the caretaker sibling as a substitute attachment figure only when the main carer is absent or does he or she prefer the sibling to the main carer when they need protection and comfort and both carers are available?

**Affiliation**
In the standard SSP, affiliation or social behaviour with non-family members is assessed by observing the child’s interaction with the stranger. A stranger can be introduced to this modified procedure but affiliation can also be assessed when the carer present in the free play episodes is not the main carer for one or more of the children.
Exploration: stages and types of play

Attachment and exploration are generally seen as two separate but interconnected systems, so that when one is activated the other is still present but muted. Attachment security means that children can put more of their emotional and intellectual resources into play; they are more adept at using symbolic play to solve problems in relationships and manage their own feelings. Children with varieties of insecure attachments to carers have to devote more intellectual and emotional energy to surviving, with the result that their play is either constricted, listless and unimaginative or else frenetically busy, with little coherence (Solomon et al., 1995).

As the children are playing for at least 40 minutes, this procedure gives very good information about the quality of their play, for which the following indicators may be helpful.

Concrete thinking: This indicates a low level of symbolism; things are what they are and have little in the way of a pretend function. Such a child will have difficulties re-presenting to him or herself and others their blueprint of relationships (his or her internal representational models) (Main et al., 1985). In extreme cases, children aged four and above who appear very concrete in their thinking are described as ‘quasi autistic’ and may be discussed in terms of a learning disability (Teti, 1999). Breakdowns in symbolic thought do, however, occur when anyone gets highly stressed and are therefore fairly common in abused and neglected children (one definition of attachment’s ‘disorganisation’).

Parallel play: Children play alongside each other at the same or different activity. This is common at all ages and most readily observable in groups of children under three years of age. It should also be noted that parallel play in older children can involve shared conversation about a separate topic (see Tina and Grant below).

Solitary play: The child plays alone with different toys and without connection to or reference to other adults or children. Sometimes the quality of the play is repetitive and boring and this form of studied self-reliance, when there are other children to play with, should alert the observer to the possibility that the child is depressed (see Tina).

Co-operative play: There is a shared game that involves taking turns. This does not develop until the third year and beyond. Two-year-olds just do not understand the meaning of ‘play nicely together’!

Dramatic play: At around five years of age children take on roles and act out dramas (for play, see Jennings, 1993).

Being alone with oneself: Winnicott observed that in order to tolerate being alone we first have to experience being alone with another (Winnicott, 1971). This other is usually a mother or mother figure, and infants who have experienced being held in their carer’s mind while they play independently but in her presence are best equipped to tolerate being alone. One of the remarkable things about some fostered and adopted children is that they find being alone acutely difficult. This is observable in the standard SSP. Not only is the child anxious because their attachment figure has left them but the experience of the self becomes unbearable. Self-regulation is impossible and the child panics. Securely attached children manage aloneness by using symbolic play that often refers to the absence of their mother (for example, calling her on the play phone) and by self-speech.

In summary, an assessment should be made of both play as it occurs between the children and the richness or otherwise of the play of each individual child.

Feedback

Video feedback is one of the most powerful of therapeutic media and has
been used with great success in programmes designed to improve parent–
child relationships. The adults involved can look at the film together using a
two-step process: first, what is happening and second, what is the function of
the behaviour we are observing. In itself, the process of reviewing the
session can begin a chain of reflection that illuminates or unblocks some of the
current difficulties.

The film can also be shown to school-age children with, I think, similar results
to the adults. For example, during the ten minutes alone with his two younger
siblings, Chris, aged nine, barricaded them all in the room when one tried to
leave. Watching the film with him afterwards he explained how their
mother, who was a drug user, would leave him in charge and he would lock
the front door of the flat and feed them on toast. This was a model of parenting
he had originally got from their elder sister, now moved away.

A final report can give an assessment based on the dimensions outlined above,
including the result of feedback, together with additional information as
required. Attachment behaviour must be rated by someone trained in the standard
SSP for infants or pre-schoolers as appropriate.

**Case examples**
The following case extracts and synopses, taken from work by a few
colleagues and myself, illustrate this procedure in action.

**Tina and Grant**
Tina and Grant were nine-year-old twins whose adoption had broken down
through a combination of challenging behaviour by Grant and Tina’s aloof
self-sufficiency. A series of foster carers as well as the adoptive parents had
concluded that the twins should be separated because Grant was hindering
Tina’s development. For example, Grant was said to be violent to her, sometimes
flinging himself on top of her when she was asleep.

Free play in the presence of Betty, their foster carer:

Tina orders a pizza on the play phone:
‘Grant, would you like a pizza?’
Grant: ‘Oh yes.’
Tina: ‘What kind?’
Grant: ‘Any.’
Tina: ‘Do you like cheese and onion?’
Grant: ‘Yep.’
Tina: ‘Cheese and onion please.’
Grant: ‘Betty, that’s good for me isn’t it?’
Tina: [With pram and to doll] ‘Watch
where you are going, you naughty
little boy. Not you, Grant.’

*Comment:* Tina feeds Grant but not
Betty, and shows the first of a series of
indicators that she is a little mother to
Grant.

Second session, children alone for ten
minutes:

After 23 seconds alone, Grant runs to
Tina, cuddles into her back and says,
‘I’m scared.’ She does not turn round.
Then he goes to the toys and says, in a
normal voice, that he is playing tractors.
Tina takes little notice. Fifteen seconds
later, Tina says, ‘You’ve no need to be
scared. It’s just people talking okay.’
Grant: ‘I’m not scared.’
Tina: ‘There’s a man coming to see us
again today.’
Grant: ‘I know. To talk about us. I
don’t know why.’
Tina: [Plaintive voice] ‘I don’t want to
leave you.’
Grant: ‘You won’t. He’s coming to our
house.’

She does not reply.
[Emphatic] ‘He’s coming to our
house.’

Grant is off camera. He whines/cries.
Tina turns to him: ‘What’s wrong?’
She doesn’t go to him. He says
something that is not clear.

*Comment:* Both children are worried
about the visit of the independent social
work assessor. They clearly do not want
to be split up. Tina is a caretaker of
Grant but her responses are neither immediate nor always comforting. Although they play separately most of the time, they are connected by a crucial conversation about their future.

After the second period alone, the children’s social worker enters for five minutes. At the knock on the door, she leaves. Grant protests a bit and puts Betty’s coat on again.

Grant: ‘You know that lady? Yeah, the brown one [the stranger], I thought she was, you know, going to kidnap us.’
Tina: ‘Why would you think that?’
Grant: ‘I’m frightened.’ He takes the coat off.
Tina: ‘I’m thirsty now I’m scared [matter-of-fact voice]. Now I’m scared, now I’m thirsty.’ Pause.
Tina: ‘It’s always adults meeting.’
Grant: ‘Why can’t we have children’s meetings?’
Tina: ‘Can’t any children have a children’s meeting and the adults can just play with Barbies?’

Comment: This reveals a clear unresolved trauma regarding kidnap/being taken away for Grant. Tina seems playful but may be minimising her fears or dismissing the danger. There is a clear message that these children need to be included in plans for their future and need good information about what is happening to them. Throughout the time in the video suite Grant was putting Betty’s coat on when she was absent, a concrete demonstration that he missed her.

The conclusion from this assessment was that Tina was a caretaker of Grant and he was attached to her. She offered him protection but not much in the way of comfort. She appeared world weary and during the entire session dressed every doll in the room without playing with any of them, thus suggesting she might be depressed. Tina did not show any attachment behaviour towards Betty but Grant was clearly attaching to their carer. Rather than aggression, the reports of Grant flinging himself on Tina while she slept were now starting to look like desperate attempts at seeking comfort. From all this there were a number of therapeutic and placement conclusions, including a recommendation that the children stay together.

**Peter and Sharon**

Peter is six years old and his half-sister Sharon is aged four.

Sharon: ‘Pretend you hate me.’
Peter: ‘No.’
Sharon: ‘No, pretend you hate me.’
Peter: ‘Why?’
Sharon: ‘No, the horsey silly billy.’
Peter: ‘What? The horse? He doesn’t hate me.’
Sharon: ‘No, you hate her.’
Peter: ‘No I don’t.’
Sharon: ‘It’s only a game.’
Peter: ‘I know but I don’t hate her.’

Comment: This suggests rivalry from Sharon which she can articulate in terms of a game. Her capacity for symbolic thought is actually more advanced than Peter’s who is very concrete in his thinking here, even though he is two years older.

Peter and Sharon had not lived together since coming into care two years previously. The assessment concluded that they were close (they showed a lot of warmth towards one another) and should be placed together. However, this was not possible because Peter had a strong attachment to his prospective adoptive family which needed to be preserved and unfortunately his new family were unable to take Sharon.

**William and Rhys**

Brothers William, aged seven years, and Rhys, aged five, were placed for adoption. Their new mother, a single parent, found Rhys delightful but was struggling to build a relationship with William. In the sibling assessment both children appeared unmoved by the first separation. On the second separation, Rhys waved his mother goodbye but the observers felt this had more to do with
meeting her needs than his own (i.e. reassuring his mother that everything was all right – a form of role reversal). When they were alone, William went to the toilet (indicating he was stressed but unable to use any symbolic means to express his anxiety) but otherwise appeared morose. Rhys, on the other hand, kept up a constant stream of chatter and play that appeared to be designed to attract and hold William’s attention. As one observer noted, ‘He was working his socks off to keep William on the planet.’ When he watched the film afterwards William commented, ‘I am so quiet and still.’ He seemed only aware that there were things to play with when he saw them on the TV screen.

Comment: The emerging picture was that neither child had a strong attachment to their adoptive mother but Rhys was good at engaging with her. The boys were attached to one another. William, the elder, was dependent on Rhys who, in turn, had tried to depend on him but this had failed, so Rhys was now attempting to be a caretaker to his older brother. The film was used as a part of the therapy offered to their mother.

Martin and Callum
Six-year-old Martin and Callum, aged three, were living together in foster care and the assessment was aimed at deciding whether they should be separated for the purposes of adoption. Martin was reported to be violent towards Callum, especially when nobody was looking. This extract is taken from the transcript of the second period when the boys were alone together. Martin is in a large pedal car and Callum on a small car. Points where the transcription has been edited are marked with a dash /.

Martin is in one corner and Callum watches him from his car in the middle of the room. There is a very long pause; Callum is tense and stares at Martin as if he senses he is about to do something violent. Martin goes to the centre of the room in his car, picks up a toy and throws it on the table near Callum. / Martin says he is going to the toilet and leaves the room. Callum is alone. He moves some of the chairs about, as if making a barricade to stop Martin re-entering, then gets into the big car.

Martin returns and wants ‘his’ car and says to Callum in a friendly voice, ‘I just need to mend the steering wheel [on the big car].’ This ploy does not work, so Martin snatches Callum’s sweets from the back of the big car and throws them across the room while shouting at Callum to get out of the big car. Callum will not budge so Martin pulls him bodily out of the car. Callum cries and Martin directs him to the small car. There is a note of false reassurance in Martin’s voice at this point. Callum has a tantrum in the small car and Martin throws the toy cash register in Callum’s direction. Martin rams Callum’s car with his own, Callum cries and Martin says, ‘Do you want me to pull your hair out?’ and reaches out as if to do it. Martin then points to a crib and says, ‘Sit in there Callum and you can be a baby.’ Callum cries and Martin says in a tender voice, ‘Want to go to sleep in there then?’

Comment: As well as extreme aggression, this segment shows how a theory of mind is required not only to integrate information (mentalistation) but to deceive other people (see Nesse and Lloyd, 1992). To manipulate his brother, Martin has to intuit what is going on in Callum’s mind, something Callum is too young to reciprocate. The conclusion from this session, together with observations in his foster home, was that Martin posed an actual threat to Callum and the recommendation from the assessment was that the boys should not be placed together. In fact, this was ignored but ten months into the placement Martin’s adoption broke down and he was back in foster care, again leaving Callum with his adoptive family. Martin had been subject to multiple sexual abuse at the hands of a paedophile ring set up by his own family and was
possibly too preoccupied with self-protection to develop a relationship with Callum that had any warmth.

Limitations
So far this procedure has been used in a small number of cases, none of which included situations where one child had been in a sexual relationship with another, although about half of the children had been sexually abused. While splitting up siblings was a question in the majority of cases, their antecedent and current circumstances varied considerably. In only one case did the outcome of this procedure point to separating children who were living together (Martin and Callum, above) and in general we have tended to find more positives in sibling relationships than the foster carers who had or were looking after the children did, a finding similar to that reported by Hindle (2007). This mismatch in perception raises the crucial issue of the extent to which the time in the video suite represents what really goes on at home. In fact, foster carers may be quite accurate in assessing the behaviour of individual children (for example, see Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005) but because they are immersed in their day-to-day care may over-emphasise the negative impact one child has upon another. The challenge for practice and research is to find ports of entry into the caregiving system (foster and birth families, professional network) that, as far as possible, reduce bias in interpretation.

At a practical level, the procedure does require a video suite and the employment of trained and reliable coders to analyse attachment behaviour. However, this modified procedure for assessing sibling relationships can be safely analysed using the constructs outlined above and does provide a video record for review by subsequent practitioners.

Concluding remarks
This procedure has consistently produced rich and, at times, deeply moving material about sibling relationships. It also offers a structured, relatively quick assessment tool that does not stress children unduly and can be analysed on a number of dimensions crucial to understanding sibling relationships. Used in conjunction with other sources of information, it provides a guide to decision-making in what can be a very complex and emotive area. Further research on the degree of correspondence with children’s behaviour in other settings is needed before it can be validated and this will require home and school observations over time.

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