

RAPPROCHEMENT

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1. Core Definition and Dual Contexts

The term **Rapprochement**, derived from the French word meaning "the act of bringing together," encompasses two primary academic and practical applications. In its most general usage, **rapprochement** signifies the establishment or restoration of cordial relations, mutual understanding, or harmony between previously antagonistic individuals, groups, or nation-states. It represents a crucial pivot away from conflict or estrangement toward a state of cooperative interaction, often serving as a foundational step in peace-building or conflict resolution processes. This general definition emphasizes a negotiated or developmental shift in relational dynamics, characterized by reduced tension and increased mutual respect.

However, within the field of psychoanalytic developmental psychology, particularly in the work of Austrian child psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler, **rapprochement** takes on a highly specific and critical meaning. Mahler identified it as a distinct and complex subphase within her influential **Separation-Individuation Theory**, which describes the psychological processes through which an infant moves from a state of symbiotic fusion with the mother to establishing a stable, autonomous sense of self. This psychological definition focuses intently on the oscillating behaviors of the toddler (approximately 16 to 24 months) as they navigate the simultaneous desires for independence and reassurance from the primary caregiver.

The duality of the term--applying both to complex geopolitical negotiations and intimate infant development--underscores a universal theme: the difficulty inherent in achieving balance between autonomy and connection. Whether discussing the thawing of relations between Cold War adversaries or the initial steps toward psychological independence in a child, **rapprochement** always denotes a period of sensitive adjustment where previous boundaries are redefined and emotional distances are traversed, requiring significant behavioral and ideological shifts from all parties involved.

2. Etymology and General Usage in Diplomacy

Etymologically, **rapprochement** originates from the French verb "se rapprocher," meaning "to draw nearer." Its formal adoption into English vocabulary, particularly in political and diplomatic contexts, occurred predominantly during the 19th century. In this arena, the term is indispensable for describing the cessation of hostility and the initiation of dialogue aimed at normalizing diplomatic and economic ties. A successful diplomatic **rapprochement** is often dependent on

significant concessions, mutual recognition of sovereignty, and the establishment of trust, which can be a protracted and delicate process involving multiple rounds of negotiation and confidence-building measures.

Historical examples abound where **rapprochement** played a pivotal role in reshaping global power structures. The detente between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s, characterized by arms limitations treaties and cultural exchanges, serves as a classic illustration of nations seeking to mitigate existential risk through managed cooperation. Similarly, efforts toward **rapprochement** between rival nations in regions like the Middle East or East Asia involve overcoming generations of historical grievances and deeply ingrained mistrust, highlighting the profound difficulty in transitioning from mutual suspicion to shared interests.

In general social usage, the concept extends beyond international politics to describe reconciliation between estranged family members, former friends, or warring factions within an organization. Regardless of the scale, the process fundamentally involves an acknowledgment of past breaches and a conscious effort to forge a new, more constructive relational narrative. This general application stresses the voluntary action required by both parties to intentionally reduce the psychological or physical distance separating them.

3. Rapprochement in Psychoanalytic Theory (Margaret Mahler)

The most influential psychological application of the term **rapprochement** stems from the groundbreaking observational studies conducted by Margaret Mahler and her colleagues, culminating in the formal articulation of the **Separation-Individuation Theory** (1975). This theory maps the crucial psychological developmental stages occurring between approximately five months and three years of age. Mahler posited that the infant begins life in a state of 'normal autism' followed by 'normal symbiosis,' where the child experiences the mother and self as an undifferentiated unit. The process of separation-individuation begins when the child starts to perceive themselves as distinct from the mother.

The **rapprochement** subphase, typically following the 'Practicing' subphase (when the toddler achieves bipedal locomotion and revels in newfound motor independence), marks a critical turning point. The toddler, having experienced the exhilarating autonomy of moving away from the mother, now begins to understand the reality of their separateness and vulnerability. This realization leads to a psychological need to return to the mother for emotional refueling and reassurance. This phase is characterized by an internal conflict: the strong drive toward autonomy clashes directly with the equally strong need for attachment and security.

Mahler stressed that the success of this phase is contingent upon the mother's capacity to provide consistent availability without intrusive over-involvement. The mother must serve as a stable emotional base, allowing the child to oscillate freely between exploration and return. A healthy

experience of **rapprochement** is considered essential for the child to eventually develop object constancy--the capacity to maintain a positive internal image of the mother even in her absence, which is the hallmark of emotional maturity and stable self-identity.

4. The Subphases of Rapprochement (Mahler's Model)

Mahler further subdivided the **rapprochement** subphase (roughly 16-24 months) into three distinct psychological stages, each reflecting shifts in the child's awareness and behavior regarding their newly perceived separateness. These micro-stages provide a nuanced view of the toddler's struggle to manage the tension between individuation and dependency. The initial stage is the **Beginning of Rapprochement**, where the child's active exploration decreases, and they start bringing objects and experiences back to the mother, seeking shared interest and validation.

The second stage, the **Rapprochement Crisis**, is the most intense period. The child, now highly mobile and verbally expressive, frequently vacillates between clinging behavior and defiant pushing away. The child's realization of separateness is fully acknowledged, leading to a profound fear of loss of the mother's love or availability. This crisis is manifested by temper tantrums, increased demandingness, and an urgent need for the mother to share in every experience, as the child attempts to magically restore the symbiotic closeness they previously enjoyed while simultaneously demanding recognition of their individuality.

The final stage is the **Solution to the Crisis**, or the consolidation phase. Successful navigation of the crisis leads the child to gradually internalize the mother's reassuring presence. They begin to accept that they are separate but not abandoned, and that the mother is a distinct person with her own life, goals, and limitations. This acceptance paves the way for the development of cognitive skills, such as symbolic representation and language, which eventually lead to the establishment of **object constancy**--the psychological anchor necessary for true independence and a cohesive self-concept.

5. Characteristics of the Rapprochement Crisis

The **Rapprochement Crisis** is defined by several observable characteristics that clinicians and parents often recognize as the classic "terrible twos," although its underlying psychological mechanism is rooted in the fear of re-engulfment versus the terror of isolation. One key characteristic is the phenomenon of "shadowing," where the toddler follows the caregiver everywhere, often maintaining physical proximity even while engaging in independent play, as if using the caregiver as an emotional anchor tether. This behavior reflects the child's desperate need for immediate accessibility to mitigate feelings of anxiety arising from perceived separateness.

Another defining feature is the emotional ambivalence displayed toward the caregiver. A child

might lovingly embrace the mother one moment and violently reject her help the next. This rapid oscillation is not malicious but rather a behavioral manifestation of the internal conflict between the need for autonomy ("I can do it myself!") and the recognition of dependence ("I need you to confirm my worth and safety"). The toddler frequently tests boundaries, attempting to control the caregiver's attention and presence, thereby seeking confirmation that the relationship is robust enough to withstand their newly discovered power of independent action and refusal.

Furthermore, during this phase, the child becomes keenly sensitive to the mother's emotional state and responsiveness. If the mother is unavailable, inconsistent, or responds to the child's demandingness with withdrawal or excessive anxiety, the child's struggle intensifies, potentially leading to developmental arrest or the development of insecure attachment patterns. The intensity of this crisis dictates the quality of the ensuing psychological structure, making the caregiver's response during **rapprochement** a powerful predictor of future psychological health.

6. Clinical Significance in Developmental Psychology

The concept of **rapprochement** holds profound clinical significance, serving as a lens through which developmental pathologies and adult relational difficulties can be understood. Failures in navigating the **rapprochement** phase are often theorized to contribute to adult personality disorders, particularly those involving difficulties with stable self-identity, boundary issues, and chronic relationship instability. If the child's needs for both independence and connection are inadequately met, they may develop a pattern of either perpetual psychological dependency or, conversely, an exaggerated, defensive pseudo-independence that rejects necessary intimacy.

In treating patients with borderline personality disorder (BPD), for example, clinicians often observe echoes of the **rapprochement crisis**. The BPD patient may struggle with "splitting"--seeing others as either all good or all bad--which mirrors the toddler's difficulty in integrating the loving and frustrating aspects of the parent into a cohesive whole (object constancy). Their intense fear of abandonment, combined with a tendency to push people away when intimacy becomes too threatening, reflects an unsuccessful resolution of the primal struggle to separate without losing essential emotional support.

Thus, Mahler's framework provides a crucial diagnostic tool, allowing therapists to trace contemporary relational conflicts back to early developmental milestones. Understanding the dynamics of **rapprochement** helps therapists recognize when a client is reenacting the developmental push-pull conflict, allowing for targeted intervention aimed at fostering the delayed internalization of a stable, supportive internal object--the ultimate goal that was deferred during the original crisis of separation.

7. Criticisms and Limitations of Mahler's Model

While Mahler's theory of **rapprochement** remains highly influential, especially within classic psychoanalysis, it has faced significant scholarly criticism, largely due to shifts in developmental research paradigms toward more interactionist and attachment-focused models. One major criticism centers on the concept of the initial 'autistic' and 'symbiotic' phases, which modern infant research, particularly studies involving immediate face-to-face interaction and sophisticated measurement techniques, largely disproves. Contemporary researchers argue that infants are far more engaged and socially adept from birth than Mahler initially postulated.

Furthermore, critics argue that Mahler's model is overly focused on the mother-child dyad, neglecting the crucial roles played by fathers, siblings, and other primary caregivers in the process of individuation. The intense emphasis on the mother's behavior potentially leads to an undue burden of responsibility on the maternal figure, failing to account for the child's innate temperament and the complexity of the entire family system in shaping developmental outcomes. This narrow focus limits the applicability of the theory in diverse cultural settings and modern family structures.

Finally, the concept of **rapprochement**, as a discrete, time-bound stage, is often viewed as too rigid. Developmental psychology today tends to favor continuous models where separation and individuation are lifelong processes rather than fixed stages. While the push-pull dynamics described by Mahler are undoubtedly observed during the toddler years, modern attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, offers a more empirically robust explanation for these behaviors based on the child's internalized working models of relationships and security, rather than solely relying on drive theory concepts.

Further Reading

[Margaret Mahler - Wikipedia](#)

[Mahler's Separation-Individuation Process and Borderline Phenomena](#)

[Détente \(Diplomacy\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Object Constancy in Psychoanalytic Theory - Wikipedia](#)