

# How children's secure attachment sets the stage for positive well-being

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Attachment theory—is the idea that how a parent consistently responds to their child's needs forms how a child "attaches" to a caregiver —has a

long history, spanning a [half a century](#) of scientific research.

It also shows up in popular stories about both parenting [and romance](#) which may [overgeneralize the key concepts of attachment](#) as related to children's development.

As developmental and [clinical psychologists](#) specializing in [attachment theory](#), we would like to provide accurate information for parents and caregivers on what secure attachment is, and how parents can promote it.

## **Babies and children express needs**

From the time a child is born, they will signal requests for support from their caregivers, whether it's because they are hungry, need a diaper change—or just need to be held and know their caregiver is there. Older children might ask their caregiver to play or share their distress over a mild injury.

If a caregiver is consistent and effective in responding to these needs, a child is more likely to form a "secure" attachment. If a parent is inconsistent in caregiving or unresponsive, a child is more likely to form an "insecure" attachment.

Importantly, a child's attachment expectations are not formed from a one-off experience. Rather, these expectations are formed from the consolidation of the series of interactions and responses across the child's first year of life (and beyond).

## **Benefits of secure attachment**

When children do develop secure attachment, we know it can help set the stage for a [child's physical growth](#), [learning](#), [social relations \(such as](#)

[empathy](#)), [well-being](#) and even their [brain's responses to stress](#).

If a child does not initially form a secure attachment it does not mean that they never will.

In fact, there are [countless interventions](#) that focus on improving attachment security throughout childhood and [attachment-based therapies](#) that promote attachment in adulthood.

## What is a secure base?

Parents or caregivers who a child can return to in times of distress to receive comfort or protection provide "a secure base" for the child.

Children feel safe to explore the world knowing that their secure base is there to dry their tears, cuddle them or catch them if they fall.

Importantly, children use their secure base in times of distress and enjoyment alike. At the playground, a child will look over their shoulder to make sure the parent or caregiver is still there. Or, when it seems a toddler is becoming engrossed in play, they may waddle over to show the parent a toy.

## Foundation for secure attachment

Researchers in the United States conducted an [an experiment](#) to see what a secure base looks like in real life. Children ran around a baseball diamond, as fast as they could, while their parents were either paying attention cheering them on or distracted and looking at their phone.

Children ran three seconds faster and were 17% less likely to trip or fall if parents were paying attention.

In times of distress, children seek to return to their secure base for comfort. A caregiver providing comfort offers not only physical nurturing and caregiving, but they also talk with children to help them label their feelings and support the resolution of their distress.

## **Providing children with an anchor**

When a secure base is solid, children most often develop a secure attachment to their caregiver.

Decades of research have shown that children who have a secure attachment are more likely to be better [problem solvers](#), more [emotionally intelligent](#) and [more prepared for school](#) in terms of a child's [executive functioning \(cognitive skills used to evaluate and control thoughts and actions\)](#) and [their behaviors related to showing empathy and concern, helping, sharing and co-operating with others](#) .

They are also more likely to have [better-quality friendships](#).

Being able to provide children with an anchor in a big, and often scary world, will help children to develop into happy and healthy individuals.

## **How can I be a secure base?**

An evidence-based program called The Circle of Security Parent Program [provides many free resources](#) and videos to help parents understand how to be a responsive and nurturing caregiver, which in turn support the child's development of secure attachment. The program offers helpful information in multiple languages.

The concept of a secure base may seem daunting, but it is really about being there for your child both physically and emotionally when they

need you.

## **Tending to a child's cues and signals**

One metaphor for understanding what it means to be a secure base is the notion of ["serve and return" in tennis](#): when the child serves up a cue, a parent or caregiver will ideally recognize the cue, and respond promptly and supportively.

When a parent or caregiver is engaged in attentive serve and return interactions, the child should feel that the parent or caregiver has the situation under control.

When a child gets injured, it can be upsetting for parents. However, children may feel more scared if their [caregiver](#) is also outwardly distressed.

## **When parenting is overwhelming**

Parenting can be overwhelming sometimes. A child's cues and signals can be confusing, or even triggering for parents.

Our own experiences of being parented influences how we parent—and not always in a positive way. At these times, parents face what has been called ["shark music"]—upsetting feelings that limit a parent's ability to be fully available, either physically or emotionally, to their children.

Just being able to recognize feelings in themselves can help parents become more attuned with their child's feelings. Research shows that [parents who have learned to manage their own](#) "shark music" or provide better care for their children.

## Parenting: Challenging and important

Parents with young children might reflect that they are already engaging in a lot of these positive behaviors.

They may also recognize challenges they face when life gets stressful or when they are navigating their own charged feelings [or trauma](#)—or how they are not always able to respond to a child's needs in ways that will help the child flourish.

Although no parent is perfect, and it is normal to navigate challenges staying attuned to [children's](#) shifting developmental needs as they grow, [parents](#) concerned about their own or their child's well-being can always seek more professional help such as therapy or parenting interventions.

The next time you are playing with your child try to identify the signals your child is sending you and see how your child responds when you are sensitive, comforting and consistently available.

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