

Research Spotlight
1 to 4 years



How do you instill confidence in your child?

It's a beautiful day at the park with your toddler. She ventures off to the climbing toy and within minutes she's running back to your arms crying. You take a moment to find out what happened. Apparently a "big boy" scared her with a dinosaur toy. You talk about it and before you know it, she wiggles off your lap and makes a beeline back to the play area. This time, she looks back to see if you are watching. So what just happened here? Your toddler wants to be independent, but the world can be a scary place. Just having you close gives her the confidence to know she can check back when she needs to. This secure feeling doesn't happen overnight. It's a process called attachment and it starts when your child is an infant and continues to strengthen as she grows.

Give Your Child Wings

When a child feels secure, he will explore the world



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Is “attachment” the same as love?

It is certainly connected, but it’s not quite the same thing. “Attachment” is the foundation for a child’s expectation that the people he loves and depends on will support and help him when he needs them. A child who has experienced comfort and acceptance will develop expectations that close relationships work that way. This expectation will include parents, caregivers and other prominent people in his life. He will feel safe in his home and confident in his interactions with others, even when bad things happen or big feelings seem overwhelming.

Of course, at this age, a child’s desire for independence begins to grow and that can be frightening too. A child may worry that it isn’t okay to explore, or that his parents may be angry that he didn’t stay close. Once you’ve become a brave explorer, can you still be somebody’s baby? (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1985).

What researchers call a “secure attachment” is a pattern of behavior that shows that a child has learned to turn to a person they love to help them cope with these strong and contradictory feelings. Secure attachment has usually been assessed in a laboratory with a toddler and their primary caregiver. When a “securely attached” toddler is separated from her mother, she may miss her and may cry, but she can be calmed by another adult and might even return to playing while she waits for her mom to return. When mom returns, she may burst into tears again, but the important thing is that she will go to her for reassurance. Securely attached children have learned that they won’t be scolded or rejected for needing comfort OR for trying out little periods of independence.



So what does insecure attachment look like?

On the other hand, a child can develop what researchers call a pattern of “insecure attachment” to a person that they love. For example, in the laboratory task described above, a toddler who is “insecurely attached” may continue to cry and search for her mother, for fear that if she takes her attention away from her for even a moment she will never come back. When mom returns, the child feels angry with her for being left alone, and even though mom is back, the child doesn’t feel any better. Another pattern of “insecure attachment” demonstrated in the laboratory is when a child doesn’t even acknowledge that their mother is gone or that she has returned, because the child has learned that it isn’t okay to show that she missed her mom. It may seem strange, but both of these strategies are ways children have learned to keep their mothers close without becoming overwhelmed themselves or making their caregivers angry with their needs. Children who use these “insecure” attachment strategies love their parents too, but as you can imagine, it is hard for them to feel very safe (Ainsworth, M., Blehar, M., & Waters, E. & Wall, S., 1978). These patterns of expectations and interactions with others are carried out into the world, and make it harder for insecurely attached children to trust other adults or make friends with peers (Sroufe, 2002).

Does attachment affect brain development?

You bet! When a baby is born, the limbic system, or the part of the brain associated with strong emotions, is already functioning at a very high level. For the next six months, emotions become more and more associated with experiences. By ten months, happy and sad experiences begin creating electrical activity in the outer part of the brain, the cortex. The cortex is where, among other things, conscious thoughts and ideas are processed. This part of the brain will keep growing and making new connections for many years. It is the growing connections between the limbic system and the cortex that allow a toddler the very beginnings of control over their big emotions (Denham, 1998).

The process is a difficult one though, and toddlers are easily overwhelmed. What makes these connections stronger? You do, with attention and practice! When you help your child label his feelings, notice other people’s feelings, and try different ways to cope with his strong emotions, you are building pathways of connection in his growing brain between feelings, actions, words and relationships. With practice, these pathways get stronger until they are the normal way for him to deal with his emotions, even when you aren’t there to help. That means that when they are upset, they may feel less out of

control and be able to “calm down” more easily (Gunnar, Broderson & Nachmias, 1996). Sound familiar? That’s right, it all comes back to your child’s relationship with you.

A secure attachment encourages a child to turn to their parent to help them regulate big emotions. As a result, children who are “securely attached” have also been found to have an easier time regulating their emotions, have more strategies to cope with upset feelings, and understand the emotions of other people better (Howes & Matheson, 1992).

How do you encourage “secure attachment” at different ages?

It’s a lot easier than it sounds. A baby’s ordinary, day-to-day experiences of being responded to when they cry, smile, or need a diaper change gradually form connections in his growing brain between emotions, actions, and the responses of his parents or caregivers. When you are changing a baby’s diaper and respond to his sounds or make faces when he does, you may not be thinking about attachment or brain development,



but you are creating a secure attachment. It is these simple early experiences of being cared for and responded to that make an infant feel safe. As he grows into a toddler, that sense of safety and acceptance will make him feel secure enough to explore his world, and check back in with you when he needs reassurance. A toddler needs an adult in their life who is a "Secure Base" (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). This means supporting their exploration when it is safe, setting limits when necessary, and allowing the child to return to you for reassurance or comfort when they need to.

What if I can't always respond in just the right way?

No parent can!

The interactions between parents and their young children are full of disruptions, miscommunications and misunderstandings. That's typical in today's families. Fortunately, "secure attachment" doesn't depend on perfect interactions with your baby every single time. In fact, researchers have found that perfectly in-tune moments happened less than 1/3 of the time in typical pairs (Tronick, 1989). What makes a relationship feel secure is the ability to "repair". Your child can feel safe in the understanding that when mistakes or disagreements happen, you will pay attention to the cues they are sending, try to understand what they need, and behave differently in the future. There is always another chance to connect. The "Circle of Security" intervention developed by the Marycliff Institute suggests that parents can best be responsive to their child's attachment needs if they keep these ideas in mind:

"Always be bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind. Whenever possible, follow my child's need. Whenever necessary, take charge." (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002). In other words, let them know you love them, encourage them to be independent and be there when they need you.

Sometimes, responding to your child this way may come very naturally. But parents are people too, and sometimes being bigger and stronger can be very hard to do! Parents can sometimes find themselves feeling smothered when their child constantly needs them, or feeling hurt and resentful when their child acts like they don't need them. It's natural that this will happen sometimes, which makes it more important than ever to keep in mind what your child's needs really are. Instead of thinking "this makes me uncomfortable - he's too big to run to me every time he's upset," try thinking that if he knows he can come back to you and be comforted, he will feel safer to explore and play. Being aware of the attachment process can help you avoid sending a child confusing messages, and support them in feeling secure (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002).



Your connection makes a big difference!

Attachment begins at birth and continues to strengthen as your child grows. It all comes down to your relationship with your child. The more secure your child feels, the more confident he will be to explore the great big world! Your love, support, and encouragement will make a big difference to your child's healthy social and emotional development. In other words, your parenting counts!

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ **Look for cues, right from the start:** Notice how your baby is responding during play. Does she want your attention or does she need a little break? When you respond, even a very young baby feels more secure.
- ★ **Make repairs:** No parent and child are perfectly in-tune all of the time. When a child learns that parents and children don't always agree, he doesn't feel that the entire relationship is at risk. This makes him feel safe.
- ★ **Talk about feelings:** Young children need your help to cope with strong emotions.
- ★ **Support exploration, and welcome returns:** Be there to support them as they venture out, and provide them a safe place to return to when the world (or an emotion) feels too big.
- ★ **Get support when you need it:** Parenting is a big job. In order to be a "bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind" parent, don't be afraid to turn to people you trust to support you as you support your child!

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**For more information on parenting and early learning,
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