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Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience, and Freedom to Explore. Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, and Bert Powell with Christine M. Benton.
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ATTACHMENT

Why It Matters

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Something extraordinary happens in the most ordinary moments between parent and child:

> Danny waits for his mother's reassuring smile and nod before climbing into the sandbox with the other children.
> Emma instantly calms when her dad lifts his 1-year-old daughter onto his lap even though he's tapping away at his phone and barely looks at the little girl.
> Jake stops clobbering his toy drum when his mom switches from demanding that he put it down to exclaiming, "Wow, that's some sense of rhythm you've got, buddy."

Moments like these are so ordinary as to be forgettable, even unnoticeable. Yet what accrues to children as those moments accumulate is nothing short of profound. Every time you answer your child's need for comfort or confidence, you're building a bond of trust. Every time you show that you understand how your child feels and what your child wants, you're demonstrating the power of a primal connection that all of us are born seeking. Every time you help your baby or toddler manage the discomfort and frustration of being a newcomer to the human condition, you're teaching your child acceptance of emotions (even the "ugly" ones), of himself, and of others.

These are the gifts of attachment. A secure attachment forms naturally for a child when a parent or other primary caregiver can:

- Help the child feel safe when frightened or uncomfortable
- Help the child feel secure enough to explore the world, essential to growth and development
- Help the child accept and manage his or her emotional experience

Both parents and children are hardwired for attachment. You start forming a bond with your child even before birth, and miraculously, your newborn emerges with a powerful instinct to be close to you. Not just any adult will do, even though plenty of adults can provide the food, warmth, and protection necessary to the baby's physical survival. Decades of research suggest that babies immediately fall in love with a parent's face because even when they can barely focus on it, they can already sense the parent's love and devotion. This is the person, a baby intuits, who is going to be here for me. This is someone who will help me figure out this confusing new world and find the goodness in it.

Our common bond as parents is that we all want goodness—love and compassion, understanding and acceptance, meaning and fulfillment—for our children. And children come into the world wanting and needing goodness from us. One of our most important mentors, developmental psychologist Jude Cassidy (along with social psychologist Phillip Shaver), recently defined attachment security as "confidence in the possibility of goodness." From our perspective, this is precisely the issue. We want what's good, deeply necessary, and fulfilling for our children. And they come to us in their unique, miraculous, ever-fresh, and often demanding way with that exact request. "Please help me trust in the goodness of you, the goodness of me, the goodness of us." Of course, this is what we're here to offer.

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The Critical Importance of "And"

We all begin life more integrated with another person than separate. This is not just an acknowledgment that sharing a body before birth creates a bond for mothers and babies that often endures after it. Babies also become attached to their fathers, their grandparents, or anyone else whose gaze says "I am here for you," and who then makes good on

that promise much of the time. The very youngest babies seem to recognize this devotion and start to respond in kind during their first days of life. They follow us with their eyes, flap their arms in excitement when we return from work, and their first smiles come in response to our smiles at them—a gift that few parents ever forget. In the Circle of Security program, when we are trying to convey to parents how very important they are to their children, we play Joe Cocker's song "You Are So Beautiful" as we show video clips of attachment moments between parent and child.

As pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott once said, "If you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby *and* someone." He was referring to how essential we are to our infants. Baby Gino or Sasha or Hiroto may have separate arms and legs and face but really doesn't fully exist yet as an individual. We tend to view babies as completely formed little creatures who know deep down what they're feeling and needing and who they are but simply lack the language to express it. In actuality, newborn babies have no clarity about what they're feeling except that there are many times when something unknown and difficult starts happening to them (they need *something*)—an unformed longing begins to grow. When Mom or Dad gazes into a distressed baby's eyes and coos "There, there" and magically figures out what the baby needs—and even provides it!—the parent is telling the baby "I'm here with you. We share the same kinds of feelings, and we'll figure this out together." As this exchange is repeated again and again, the baby learns that human emotions are natural, acceptable, and shareable. She learns that this special adult can manage them for her and gradually help her learn to manage them for herself—a process called "coregulation of emotions." She learns that although she and her parent(s) have many important things in common, each of them is also unique. She learns that the relationship—the *"and"*—is critical to the formation of the self.

Up until the middle of the 20th century, the self—a being separate from other humans—was the focus of developmental psychology. In Western society, this emphasis informed many attitudes and expectations about how we should conduct ourselves over the lifespan. As soon as we were able, we were expected to take care of ourselves, and social policies—in the United States at least—often favored individual rights over community needs. In our work with the Circle of Security, we've come around to the opposite view: it's the "and" that matters. We would even go so far as to say this: Self-sufficiency is a myth. From

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birth through old age, our ability to act with some sense of autonomy is directly related to our capacity for connectedness. What does this mean for parents raising a young child? *If we want our children to be independent, to go out and take on the world, we have to give them full confidence that they can come back to us as needed.* Autonomy *and* connection: That's secure attachment.

Here's what it might look like:

Lei is 3 years old. She's vibrant, playful, and full of curiosity. She and her father have just walked to the park that's two blocks from their home and, typically for them, as they approach the climbing structure, Lei briefly looks back at her father (not more than a millisecond) and then rushes off to climb her version of Mt. Everest. What the casual observer might not notice is that in that millisecond of checking in with her dad, Lei gets precisely the permission and support she needs—Is it a glance? Is it something in his eyes?—to know it's perfectly OK to risk this new adventure.

Fourteen seconds later she's already atop the structure, looking back at her father, pride flowing from every pore, as she calls out her sense of accomplishment: "I'm a big girl."

"Yes, you are, Lei," her dad responds, "Yes, you are!" (What Lei doesn't know is that her father has to work very hard not to interfere, to hover, because some part of him is afraid she might fall. But, based on their previous experiences on this structure, ones where he's felt the need to stay close and protective, he's found that his daughter has the strength and the balance and the enthusiasm to find her own way on this particular part of the playground.)

Twenty more seconds pass, and Lei is now climbing down. She's still having fun, she's still enjoying her increasing sense of competence, but she finds herself running back to her father, smiling and remarkably proud of her accomplishment. She's delighted. He's delighted. She looks in his eyes, they briefly touch, and then—bam!—she's off, running toward the slide, ready for yet another round of excitement.

Again, that's secure attachment. In that simple moment, Lei's father is right there with her, responding to the shifting needs that his daughter experiences as she goes about the somewhat scary task of exploring her world. Significantly, Lei also *knows* that her dad will respond, because he has done so many times in the past. This is one reason the entire sequence appears so seamless, so unplanned. Lei's

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expression of basic psychological needs and her father's answering them have become the fabric of their relationship.

Attachment: A Lasting Legacy

Lei and her dad may not have had to think consciously about interacting this way, but the benefits of their secure attachment certainly had staying power, as they do for all of us. That first relationship, so close as to make "two" almost indistinguishable from "one," isn't something we shrug off the way a butterfly shrugs off its chrysalis and flies off to live happily ever after. It's something we carry with us into all relationships, all work, all communication, and if it is a secure attachment, it just *might* lead to "happily ever after."

Decades of research have now shown that having a secure attachment with a primary caregiver leaves children healthier and happier in virtually every way we measure such things—in competence and self-confidence, empathy and compassion, resilience and endurance . . . in the ability to regulate emotions, tap intellectual capacity, and preserve physical health . . . in pursuing our life's work and having a fulfilling personal life.

Fifty years of research has shown that children with a secure attachment:

- Enjoy more happiness with their parents
- Feel less anger at their parents
- Get along better with friends
- Have stronger friendships
- Are able to solve problems with friends
- Have better relationships with brothers and sisters
- Have higher self-esteem
- Know that most problems will have an answer
- Trust that good things will come their way
- Trust the people they love
- Know how to be kind to those around them

Perhaps most important, a secure attachment in a child's first relationship lays the foundation for good relationships throughout life. And we now know without a doubt that relationships are the engine and the framework for satisfaction and success in all domains of life. Research has shown that social relationships promote mental and physical health and even lower the risk of death: In studies of many countries, analyses have shown over and over that the more people were involved in social relationships, the less likely they were to die prematurely—in fact, the

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most isolated individuals were twice as likely to die as the most social. Western society seems to be making a shift toward understanding the importance of the "and," with books and TED Talks on topics like the value of vulnerability enjoying growing popularity. We're beginning to recognize that our relationships aren't just "extras." Those who get along best with coworkers often get promoted first—and not just because they've formed smart alliances; they're often the most productive. And although we understand that hovering obsessively over our children isn't helpful, we do recognize these days that consistently soothing babies isn't hovering and won't ruin them for life. The relationships we form sustain us—even define us—because in every "and" we form we become something more than we would be alone.

> *"I reassured myself that he has always been resourceful, resilient, and confident. Two days later, he . . . called me full of exuberance and delight at his success. I told him, 'Good luck with your adventure,' knowing that this is exactly what he needed to hear. I was able to hold him from afar, knowing that he had all the tools, love, attachment, and resources resulting from years of experience with secure attachment. It was because of his secure attachment that he was able to explore further and further away."*
>
> —Heidi S. Roibal, Albuquerque, New Mexico, after her 23-year-old son left on a solo cross-country journey

Attachment: It Really Does Matter

Intuitively, you already know about the importance of the "and." Trust and a feeling of security with others can transform relationships—deepening a friendship when you confide a shameful childhood secret, cementing an intimate relationship when you risk proposing marriage, creating collegiality and mutual respect when you ask for the promotion you deserve. Even the major achievements—painting your best picture ever; coming up with a great, if radical, innovation on the job; writing a great speech—that don't seem to involve others are often made possible by security. When we trust in the openness and acceptance of others in general, creativity, competence, wisely chosen risks, and clear thinking become more available to us because we expect our offerings to get an understanding, welcoming reception, in an environment of safety. And when they do, and we succeed, the importance

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of attachment is reinforced by the fulfillment of sharing the joy with others.

A secure attachment is like a virtual teddy bear. When you have confidence and trust in the goodness of me, you, us, you carry that trust with you through important transitions and passages in daily life. In fact, we adults generally measure how our lives are going by how our relationships are going. If our relationships are going well, life goes well. When love is in place, we do well.

Secure attachment is knowing that someone has your back,* and knowing someone has your back opens a world of new possibilities.

If you've experienced secure attachment's beneficial effects, you won't be surprised that the total absence of attachment can be devastating. As far back as the 13th century, Roman emperor Frederick II decided to conduct an experiment to see whether newborn children would speak the language of Adam and Eve if they weren't exposed to another language by the adults around them. He ordered caregivers not to talk or gesture to a group of babies, and they all languished. Seven hundred years later, the same association showed up in the alarming 30% death rate of children in orphanages during the 1930s and 1940s. Provided with the apparent necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing—many still could not survive without an attachment to a primary caregiver.

With this kind of evidence, how could it have taken so long for attachment to be valued? These things take time, and as is so often the case, embracing a new theory often means displacing others that have become entrenched. The two dominant schools of thought regarding child development during the early 20th century were the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and company and the behaviorist theories of John B. Watson and later B. F. Skinner and others:

- Freud decided that the psychological problems he saw in his adult patients might have their roots in various unconscious thought processes that started humming along during infancy and continued to exert their effects as a baby matured. These processes drove how a

*Thanks to Jude Cassidy for this insight.

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baby interacted with his parents and what the baby appeared to need in addition to food and other care. These theories kept the focus of some developmental psychologists (and psychoanalysts treating adults) on arcane concepts regarding the unconscious mind that didn't resonate with people living in the real world.

- In another camp resided the behaviorists, who believed babies had one thing on their mind when they reserved a special smile just for Mom, cried when she left their sight even though other willing caregivers were handy, or settled miraculously into Mom's arms. That thing was a reward: If they smiled, Mom seemed happy and would come closer. If they cried, Mom often came back. If they snuggled into Mom's arms, she'd let Baby stay there. As far as Watson was concerned, babies were driven to attach so that Mom would stay nearby, where she could dispense the food, warmth, or dry diaper they needed. Few today would deny that we humans respond positively to rewards. The trouble with adhering strictly to these early forms of behaviorism, however, was that Watson advised mothers not to show too much loving care for their children, *or children would grow up expecting the world to treat them the same way, which would make them all invalids.*

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Enter the voice of reason: British psychologist John Bowlby. It was after World War II, and Bowlby was participating in research for the World Health Organization involving institutionalized World War II orphans and hospitalized children. The children were all receiving optimal care: they were well fed, clothed appropriately, and had warm beds and attentive health care, just like the prewar orphans. What they didn't have was Mom or Dad. And just like the orphans of earlier decades, all suffered terribly without the comfort, love, and closeness of a primary caregiver. Similarly, in the 1950s Bowlby and colleague John Robertson filmed a 2-year-old who spent 10 days in a hospital and saw her parents for only a half hour once a day. The little girl was transformed from vivacious to completely despondent.

Bowlby's observations changed visiting rules for hospitals forever and have informed professional child care ever since as well. And they spawned his efforts to answer the million-dollar question that should have been asked since the dawn of the human race: *Why* did the lack of a parent or other caregiver matter so much when everything the children seemed to need to thrive was provided?

As is typically the case with scientific advances, the answers came

from a confluence of evidence from different fields of study, summed up in the box on pages 20–21.

As Bowlby surmised, babies may be driven to attach to their primary caregiver because of a deeply instinctual evolutionary drive designed to help the species survive. *Out of the mouths of babes*: On a nonverbal level, babies may understand a lot more than we adults do about how important attachment is, and that's why they pursue it with such determination. Bowlby and Ainsworth already had plenty of evidence that the absence of attachment in early life can be harmful to the child, so they dedicated themselves to studying it during the second half of the 20th century. They identified three subsystems that fall under the attachment umbrella:

- Careseeking: the instinct to stick close to someone who can comfort, protect, and organize one's feelings
- Exploration: the instinct to act on one's curiosity and to pursue mastery
- Caregiving: the instinct to provide the care sought and bond with the baby

As you'll see in Chapter 3, these three drives form the landscape for the Circle of Security. These drives explain why babies need a secure attachment to survive and grow, to become individuals, *and* thrive in relationships. Ironically, many people today still focus on behavior in child rearing, perhaps because it's something we can see, and if we can change it, we feel confident that we've addressed any problems that are arising. Behavior, however, is merely an expression of a child's needs. Behavior is a message—a message about the attachment needs that are hidden in plain sight.

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Hidden in Plain Sight: Why Behavior Management Is Not Enough

Let's get real: As parents or expectant parents, our concerns are much more immediate than the enhancement of the species into a future too distant to imagine. We all have so much on our plate, and trying to ensure the healthy development of our own children is overwhelming enough. This is, of course, why so many caregivers and caretakers of children rely on behavior management to corral children into feeling

The Development of Attachment Theory

If babies provided with all of the apparent necessities of life still failed to thrive, John Bowlby speculated, maybe a deeper instinctual drive was at work in the urge to attach: Was an evolutionary drive behind it? Could something that parents provide beyond the body's survival needs be necessary for the preservation of the species?

Animal studies said yes. Konrad Lorenz, a pioneering expert in animal behavior, found that, through a phenomenon called "imprinting," goslings would follow around whatever animal or object they saw first. Psychologist Harry Harlow then explored the mother–infant bond by studying baby monkeys' behavior. First he found that the monkeys raised in the lab in isolation from other monkeys became reclusive, couldn't socialize normally with other monkeys, and displayed unnatural fear and aggression. Second, when he gave infant monkeys a choice of being with a wire monkey that doled out food and a cloth monkey that didn't, the babies overwhelmingly chose the monkeys that felt more like mother's fur even though they couldn't offer any food. Once they were introduced to these surrogate mothers, they returned to the same one over and over—showing clear signs of what has become known as "attachment."

Over the next several decades, Bowlby formulated attachment theory, a view that explains how seeking a connection with a primary caregiver not only helps the individual survive but also serves the preservation of the species. Imprinting, a sort of primitive attachment behavior, is seen as a way of introducing the newborn animal to its species—not only so that the baby could learn how to survive from an animal with the same needs and the experience to satisfy them but also so that it would know which other animals to seek out for mating and reproduction.

But to what extent were humans similar? How was the preservation of the human species being enhanced by attachment? The simplest answer is that when human babies stick close to a protective, caring adult, the chance of long-term survival for each one is improved, and the more infants who reach adulthood, the more the species is perpetuated. Yet we now know that attachment clearly enhances development and creates not just *more* adult humans but also *better* ones. With secure attachment, apparently, the species not only survives but also evolves. If it was that potent, how could we understand its formation to ensure that secure attachment happens as often as possible?

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Back to the human lab. Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth, recruited to work on Bowlby's research team in London, became instrumental in showing that there were patterns in the way attachment happened. Based on her observations during a groundbreaking field study in Uganda and then, back in the United States, in Baltimore, Ainsworth determined that there were different attachment styles that arose between Mom (or other primary caregiver) and Baby. Later, Ainsworth also came up with an enormously valuable research procedure for studying specific parent–child duos to identify their attachment style. Ainsworth's so-called Strange Situation Procedure (SSP), described in Chapter 4, is the gold standard for assessing attachment today and a central part of our own work with families. It helps us, and others in the attachment field, understand where attachment might not be secure and how to help parents and children become attached.

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their best, doing their best, being their best. As we said, rewards have their place in child rearing and elsewhere. But if all we do is address the behavior before us, we might as well get used to the idea of using star charts and time-outs forever. (Picture having to send your 30-year-old daughter $10 every week to get her to call you.) Targeting behavior is like treating the symptoms and ignoring the cause of an illness.

When we're confronted with a child who is "acting out" or acting distressed, it helps to think about what's hidden in plain sight: Is the child frustrated by feeling like he can't make us understand his need for comfort? Is this little girl "so emotional" because she hasn't learned to regulate her emotions with an adult's kind understanding and confident boundary setting? Is this little boy struggling to learn the alphabet because his mind is constantly caught up with trying to convey his need to be the architect of his own adventures? Is the child before you having trouble making friends because she hasn't learned to trust others' goodwill?

> Leading neuropsychology researcher Allan Schore found that many regulatory and survival functions in the right brain (which dominates during the first 3 years of life) depended on the baby's experiences to mature, *specifically attachment experiences with the primary caregiver.*

Over the last 50 years, researchers have been looking at what's hidden in plain sight on a broad scale. We now know

that attachment can tip the balance in a child's stress level, ability to manage emotional experience, capacity for learning, physical vitality, social ease, and more. The more we individual parents know about what's hidden in plain sight underneath our child's behavior, the more compelling it feels to form a secure attachment.

Secure Attachment Inoculates Children against Toxic Stress

If attachment is an insistent, primal drive, imagine how stressful it must be to have it thwarted. The stress of unmet attachment needs can certainly manifest in a child's behavior (How do *you* act when you're under a lot of stress?), but we know from a lot of research that it can also derail children's mental, emotional, social, and physical growth and development.

The kind of stress that starts in infancy when the pressures of being a helpless newborn aren't eased by a parent's comfort has been called "toxic stress," because it creates pathways in the brain that keep the child on high alert for danger, making it difficult to concentrate on learning and often prone to "shoot first and ask questions later." When a baby is hungry, wet, or frightened, the stress hormone cortisol courses through his brain; cortisol triggers a "black hole" kind of longing that a newborn can't articulate but feels intensely. (See the box on the facing page for more details on the health effects of excess stress.)

Feeling secure in the presence of a loving, dependable caregiver is like being offered a second skin that protects us during times of stress.

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Security Keeps Children on a Healthy Developmental Track as They Grow

The stress of unmet attachment needs can burden a child not just in infancy but throughout growth. Although it's difficult to determine how *directly* secure attachment affects the attainment of certain developmental milestones, a landmark 30-year study at the University of Minnesota initiated in the mid-1970s found long-term patterns between secure attachment and specific aspects of development. Imagine a 9-year-old having a mother with breast cancer or a sole-breadwinner father who has lost his job. Life events like these, tragic but common,

Stress and Health

The human body comes equipped with a brilliant system for handling threats, and yet we can't always control the threats we face—ongoing worry about finances, family conflicts, dangerous living environments, *or, for an infant, whether or not a sensitive, responsive caregiver is generally available*—and this is when stress arises. Perception of a threat sets off a complicated series of neurochemical events, one of which involves the stress hormone known as cortisol. Cortisol's main job is to return the body to a state of equilibrium and stability (homeostasis) following stress. The problem is that in regulating various systems affected by stress, mainly metabolism, cortisol affects others along the way, most notably the immune system. In doing its work, cortisol tells the body to stop fighting, to return to a stable state, and thereby lowers immunity, making the body more vulnerable to disease. This is one reason that those under chronic stress seem to get sick more often than others. Unfortunately, through repeated episodes of acute stress and also chronic stress, excess cortisol is released, and it can damage memory, cognition, and even add abdominal fat, which carries cardiovascular risk. *Babies whose attachment needs aren't met start life at a physical and mental health disadvantage.*

We adults lose our grasp of how stressful these mundane problems feel to an infant, but for the baby *any* unmet need can send cortisol soaring—and the black hole expanding. Fortunately, there's an antidote: comfort from Mom or Dad. *In lab research, babies' cortisol has been seen to plummet when they are picked up and held during any stressful incident.*

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impose a lot of stress. This is where security born of attachment comes to the rescue. The Minnesota researchers found, for example, that children around grade 4 who had a secure attachment history had fewer behavior problems when their families were under major stress than those who did not.

In the Minnesota study, L. Alan Sroufe, Byron Egeland, Elizabeth A. Carlson, and W. Andrew Collins looked at the development of 180 children from the last trimester of pregnancy into adulthood and found that starting out securely attached afforded measurable protection from the ravages of stress all the way through those years.

They also found links between insecurity and later psychological problems. Security comes in the form of providing a safe haven for comfort as needed and also offering a secure base for exploration. Lei's father provided both for his daughter in the scene described earlier. In the Minnesota study, children whose parents were emotionally unavailable for comfort had more conduct disorders in adolescence, and children whose parents resisted letting them explore were more likely to have anxiety disorders as teens. The study also found an association (though not as strong) between both types of insecurity and depression—the children felt either hopeless and alienated or helpless and anxious.

The developmental path is filled with tasks for your baby to do, skills to learn, capacities to develop. Here is how attachment plays a critical role in many of them.

Learning to Regulate Emotion

Your bundle of joy can seem a lot more like a bundle of distress during much of the newborn months. Experts in developmental psychology widely agree that a major goal of having a reliable parent or other primary caregiver—called the "attachment figure" in the field of psychology—is to get help with all that infant angst. Obviously, babies can't handle the intense and baffling experience of emotions all by themselves. First, Mom or Dad regulates the baby's emotions from the outside—soothing her cries, singing lullabies, smiling gently at her, rocking her, and so forth. As Baby learns that someone can help make difficult feelings acceptable and manageable, she increasingly turns to that caregiver in times of need, and this helps her start to learn to soothe herself. Ultimately, when all goes according to developmental plan, the child learns to regulate her own emotions. Now she has a budding ability to comfort herself when she is being dropped off at preschool instead of spending the morning sobbing. Now she can sometimes talk herself out of being afraid of the monster under the bed instead of endlessly seeking reassurance without an ability to self-soothe. Now she can turn away briefly when she feels shy upon meeting someone new before looking back again once she's calmed down. (Importantly, however, she has also learned the valuable lesson that she can turn to others for coregulation throughout life when needed.) Being able to control emotional arousal not only frees the child to go

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about the business of learning and growing but also prevents the dangerous buildup of cortisol and thus promotes physical health too. Recent and ongoing research is demonstrating that being able to regulate emotion has far-reaching benefits, because being free of the stressful arousal of prolonged or exaggerated emotion means being free to pursue life to its fullest.

Emotional regulation skills serve us in the same ways throughout life. Besides facilitating productivity at work, helping you deal effectively and kindly with that annoying neighbor, and channeling your passions to "change the world" in the way you want, emotional regulation is great for relationships. And this is not just because you won't actually "throttle" your tantrumming toddler or agonize over the "insensitivity" of friends if you can regulate your emotions but because being able to *co*regulate emotions is a big part of intimacy. Going to a scary medical appointment? Just having your partner or a close friend by your side might help you keep your fear (and cortisol) at a manageable level. Ever cried over a loss with someone you trust and found your anguish subsiding faster than you thought it

The Minnesota study found that security made children less likely to get frustrated or aggressive when they faced social problems and less likely just to give up and go away. They exhibited more persistence and flexibility and less fussing and whining in general.

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A Caveat: Don't mistake "emotional regulation" for rejecting or suppressing emotion. In the cradle of a secure attachment, babies and children learn that emotion is normal, acceptable, and useful. Just accepting it goes a long way toward keeping it from getting out of control or overstaying its usefulness. We help our babies learn this invaluable skill by "Being-With" them in their full experience, which is the subject of Chapter 4.

Also beware of overprivileging your child's emotions. As also discussed in Chapter 4, sometimes in the process of trying to be sensitive to our children's emotional needs, we inadvertently teach our children that every feeling they have is paramount and must be attended to "now"—which actually thwarts resilience.

could? If so, how do you feel about that person now, as you recall that moment?

Becoming an Individual—without Being Alone

The small hands of a 6-year-old child fidget and fumble with the slender wick that her father has tied to the middle of a coat hanger. Sitting in front of her is the familiar family canning pot, now holding warm water and a container half full of molten wax. Gingerly, with the nervous precision of a first grader, the girl gradually dips the wick into the gently bubbling wax. The first coat is barely discernible as she brings it up for her parents to review. Sensing her uncertainty, her father reassures her that the candle will gradually build with each repetition. The second and third rounds bring little more in the way of noticeable results. Then, in a moment of surprised delight, she begins to see that the wax is finding its way onto the thread that dangles before her. Again and again she dips. Again and again she looks over to see the smile in her mother's eyes as the candle gains in size. The reassurance she seemed to require only minutes before is now securely within her knowledge as she continues this process of candle-in-the-making. Months, even years from now, as this particular candle is lit, the reassurance, confidence, pleasure, and delight experienced in its creation will be available in each moment of its burning.

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Trust learned early radiates late. This 6-year-old child has once again been bathed in the caring response of her parents, a resource she has known since the moment of her birth. What she has experienced in her early years has been an attunement and sensitivity that allow her to settle in and have confidence in her caregiving environment. Young children need to know that they can be sure of someone who is committed to caring for their physical and emotional needs. Trust in self and trust in others is invariably built on early experiences of relying on the sensitivity and availability of at least one responsive caregiver—that is, on security via attachment.

In the field of developmental psychology, the formation of a coherent sense of self—personality, identity, and so on—is of course a major goal. When a parent responds sensitively and warmly to a child's earliest needs, the self is formed with every interaction, just like the wick repeatedly dipped into wax until a candle emerges. The emphasis here

should be on the *interaction*; it's in this first relationship that a baby's individuation is cultivated, and it's in all the rest of our relationships that we continue to develop throughout life. When attachment is secure, all the psychological capacities of the growing child are nurtured to form a coherent self—one where the individual's memories and self-image make sense with the history that helped form them.

It might seem paradoxical that we gain a strong sense of self only in the context of others. But maybe it's not paradoxical at all: How can a baby recognize that he is an individual person without becoming aware that there is an "I" and a "you" in this "we"? Secure attachment to a caring adult gives babies the support they need to become separate individuals by not asking them to deal with the confusion and distress of being alone and helpless. To navigate the often difficult and confusing experiences of a child's emerging sense of self, babies need an "other" who is available to understand and empathically regulate. In the many experiences of being soothed, comforted, sensitively stimulated, and calmed, it is as if the wick of a child's innate self is repeatedly being dipped into the quality of relationship provided by the caregiving environment.

For a newborn baby, not being alone is of course life preserving. But scholars of both attachment theory and object relations theory* stress that survival is more than a beating heart and a full stomach. Babies are driven to make a connection with that "other" who can help them make sense of the chaotic world in which they find themselves. Not finding that connection leaves a frightening void. Psychoanalysts like Donald Winnicott called the terror of being alone and abandoned when you can't even form words one of the "primitive agonies." Imagine a free fall from a trapeze—you reach out for the hands of your fellow acrobat and let go of the bar in time to catch them . . . and find no one is there. If we are born seeking a self in the context of other people, finding no one there *definitely* threatens our survival. Now imagine this sense of abandonment—this fearsome feeling of free fall—buzzing along in your subconscious thoughts for the rest of your life. Talk about stress!

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*A fascinating field of psychological study with an impossibly opaque name: It's a complex but enlightening theory of how we develop a sense of self in relation to others ("objects") and how we carry our images of ourselves and others into our later relationships.

Freeing the Mind to Learn

It's no exaggeration to say that when children feel safe and supported, learning takes care of itself. We're innately curious; we don't need to be talked into it. We don't need to be quizzed into cognition ("What color is this?"). Children need to be allowed access to their own innate desire for mastery. This desire will, naturally, find its own focus and its own pace. For Jacob, age 4, it's a plastic zoo with animals all over the living room floor. By age 7, it might be Minecraft on the iPad. For another boy it might be painting and drawing at age 7 or Club Penguin in social media. For 3-year-old Lei, when she's not at the playground, it's anything she can turn into little people who can act out whatever script comes to her mind. In 10 years it might be how the world's tallest buildings are constructed or math that her parents have never even heard of.

> In the Minnesota study, secure children were found to be more open and more flexible in problem solving, to welcome novel situations, and to deal with tough learning tasks with less frustration and angst. This is no surprise to us. At the core of trying to meet a child's attachment needs is the notion that "We'll figure this out together"—that emotional struggles can be worked through within the "and."

Of course children vary in their intellectual capabilities. But with a secure attachment they can at least all be primed to fulfill their unique potential. Without that security, children are so distressed by the wasteland of unmet needs and lack of connection that they can't think about much else—at least not very efficiently. When we talk to teachers and parents about attachment and cognition, we often say:

Children can't learn when their hair is on fire.

Children who are brought up with enormous stress, due to lack of comfort, among other necessities, are so busy preparing for danger that they can't concentrate.

They also don't seem to learn as well in the absence of social connection. Who hasn't noticed the contribution to literacy of a parent reading to a preschooler or the value of a really good teacher? A secure attachment is the first social connection that helps your baby start learning. Here's how it works:

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1. The parent serves as a secure base from which the child can explore—whether it's the playground, as in Lei's case, or a chemistry set.
2. Trust in the parent makes it easier for secure children to seek assistance with learning from parents.
3. Fruitful, pleasant interactions between parent and child obviously facilitate exchange of information.
4. Through attachment, children develop a coherent sense of self and others that enable them to think clearly about, well, *thinking* and to regulate their thought process efficiently.

Toddlers who are securely attached have been seen to be more active in exploration and to have longer attention spans. In one study, 2-year-olds got involved in more symbolic play when securely attached, fueling the development of a healthy, creative imagination (see the box on page 30). Researchers Corine de Ruiter and Marinus van IJzendoorn created a diagram showing that when parents form a secure attachment with their children by interacting with sensitivity, gentle, nonpunitive instruction, and scaffolding, they build the child's self-esteem and mastery of motivation, attention control, persistence time on-task, and metacognitive skills. All of these abilities contribute to academic achievement.

> The longitudinal Minnesota study showed that insecurely attached preschoolers were much more reliant on their teachers than securely attached children of the same age. The same pattern became evident at summer camps when the children were age 10.

Security → Confidence → Self-Reliance

As a species, we're not meant to be independent to the point of isolation or utter self-sufficiency, but we won't live very long if we can't become fairly independent. Just as it might on the surface seem paradoxical that we need an "other" to develop a "self," children who can rely on an adult from birth will be able to rely on themselves when they get older—*particularly because they will know when to seek the counsel or comfort of a trusted other.* Of course the converse is also true: Children without a secure attachment can end up having trouble relying on themselves when they're older (or they can end up unable to rely on anyone *but* themselves).

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Does Attachment Help Develop Your Child's Imagination?

We all want our children to grow up with a firm grip on reality, but there's little doubt that a healthy imagination has benefits. Dr. Robert Emde, an expert in early social–emotional development, has called imagination an "adaptive psychological function of emotional significance." Attachment researcher and scholar Inge Bretherton ascribed creativity and learning benefits to imagination: When a child can use imagination to tell a story, he can translate the "as if" of imagination to the "what if" of cognition, creating and experimenting with alternative futures. This means imagination can enhance social interactions too, as children try to picture what their peers and caregivers might do and say and respond accordingly.

Most children develop the capacity to imagine at age 3 or 4, but research has shown that even as young as age 2 children enjoy fantasizing with parents and can often distinguish between reality and fantasy. Interestingly, though, they may become much more confused when under stress. *In reducing the child's moment-to-moment and long-term stress, the security of attachment may offer the by-product of a healthy imagination to children at an early age.*

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A Foundation for True Self-Esteem

When a parent is there for us a lot of the time (not all the time—an important point that we'll delve into throughout this book), we get the message that we must be pretty deserving. Sounds silly—I mean, that's Mom or Dad's job, right? It's not an award. But imagine the thought process if the baby were verbal: "Hmm, I cried and Mom came over and picked me up. She looked into my eyes and made a sad face, then she said so softly, 'I know, I know, it's so hard. . . . ' How did she know how I felt? Well, whatever, here she is, and I'm starting to feel better." Then, the next time around: "Well, look at this: Mom's back. She was running around doing something awfully fast, but she still came over when I cried." And again: "Look! She's here! I was just starting to get a little worried—hadn't seen her in a few minutes and didn't know where she'd gone. But I didn't even cry, and here she is!" Here's the conclusion the baby draws from this pattern:

Mom is saying "I am here, and you are worth it."

I conclude "You are here, and I must be worth it."*

> The researchers in the long-term Minnesota study found that this is also a by-product of the emotional regulation learned in a securely attached relationship: Children who learned to trust that their parent would help them regulate painful emotions also accumulated confidence in their own ability to regulate emotion, and this resulted in greater self-confidence and self-esteem during preschool and by age 10.

Secure babies start life with a big advantage: They already know that, when nothing makes sense in the world, when pain and fear and sadness seem to come out of nowhere, there's someone who thinks they're worth being with—no matter what.

As you undoubtedly know, "self-esteem" has been a controversial concept. Not that many years ago, many parents and other adults dealing with children believed that self-esteem came from ensuring that children didn't feel inferior to others: a gold star for everyone! Just for showing up! The counterargument that it's competence that feeds self-esteem seems to have won out in conventional wisdom, and fortunately, as we've already seen, a secure attachment is also the foundation for the confidence and other attributes needed to develop competence. The idea that low self-esteem increases stress seems self-evident. We want our children to feel good about who they are and what they can do and not be wracked with envy or relentless competitiveness to prove their self-worth.

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> **Another Caveat:** Self-esteem comes from attachment security, not from being told you're superior to others. In a revealing longitudinal study of 500 elementary school–age children, researchers at the University of Amsterdam reported in 2015 that children who said their parents let them know they were loved had higher self-esteem 6 months later, whereas those whose parents told them they were more special than others showed more narcissism but not greater self-esteem. Self-esteem comes, at least in part, from being accepted, not from being overvalued.

* With thanks to Jude Cassidy.

Building Social Competence

In the Introduction to this book we noted our firm conviction that relationships—the "and" in life—are key to health and happiness in all ways these conditions can be measured. To us, therefore, the term "competence" seems too flat. Yet its meaning encompasses all the ways we can benefit from the social part of our lives: intimacy, mutual support, empathy, and getting along in all the domains of life, from school to work to home and community. In an article about how health policy can take into account the way social relationships benefit our well-being, the authors concluded that "social relationships affect a range of health outcomes, including mental health, physical health, health habits, and mortality risk."

> Supportive interactions with others benefit immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular functions and reduce wear and tear on the body due, in part, to chronically overworked physiological systems engaged in stress responses. These processes unfold over the entire life course, with effects on health. In childhood, emotional support from others (like a primary caregiver) assists in the normal development of various regulatory systems, including those that govern digestion, mood, energy, and our overall response to stress. For adults, social support can keep stresses we're experiencing and those we see coming from having negative effects on our heart. People who are married have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease than those who have lost a marriage through death or divorce.

> Children with secure attachments exhibited social competence in the Minnesota study "from their expectations and representations of relationships, to their engagement with others and skill in interaction, to their popularity." Sroufe and colleagues found that secure children were more actively involved in their peer groups both in preschool and middle childhood and less isolated. The preschoolers had more empathy and more mutual relationships. By age 10 they had more close friendships and were able to sustain those relationships better in the midst of larger peer groups. By the time they were teens the secure children could function well even in social arenas where they felt vulnerable and demonstrated leadership.

Better Physical Health

Speaking of health, physical development depends on a matrix of complicated factors, flowing from both nature (genetics and other biological influences, like illness) and nurture. Secure attachment has been linked with better physical health, although

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the pathway between the two isn't well-defined. If attachment enhances social relationships as we know it does, and social relationships promote physical health as we know they do, then we can guess that attachment may promote physical health too. We do know that the psychological immunity from secure attachment reduces the wear and tear on the body that causes all kinds of disease.

Attachment: Is It the Key to What It Means to Be Human?

Maybe there's more behind attachment than an evolutionary drive. Something about attachment strikes a deep chord in us. Perhaps this is because the interactions between a parent and an infant are a child's initiation into the essence of life, emblematic of the way we navigate the influences of nature and nurture as we move through our world. One researcher called the mother–baby relationship "the first encounter between heredity and the psychological environment." The fact that attachment happens is a reminder that we are inherently relational beings.

And because our first experience of an intimate relationship is in our contact with our first caregivers, the quality of this connection will affect our every future perception of relationship. Alan Sroufe put it this way: "The infant–caregiver attachment relationship is the core, around which all other experience is structured, whatever impact it may have. Thus, we came to a position that early experience is never lost, however much transformation occurs in later development."

That is, it takes two—to develop and to thrive, from birth to death. As Donald Winnicott implied, it's all about the "and." And that "and" is profound—and profoundly important. Robert Karen, whose 1990 *Atlantic* article "Becoming Attached" introduced the concept of attachment to the general public, said, "There is something simple and life affirming in the attachment message that the only thing your child needs in order to thrive emotionally is your emotional availability and responsiveness."

The attachment message in fact affirms the view of thinkers from psychology to philosophy and theology about the meaning and purpose of life: Many have found that our common bond as human beings is the desire to love and be loved. This need is as universal as it is beyond the bounds of science to measure it. Attachment and bonding behav-

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ior, while obviously necessary for the survival of the species, does not explain the mystery of how a parent falls in love with a child. Nor does it explain the wonder of how a child falls in love with a parent. The need to protect and be protected does not fully define the need to tenderly nurture and be nurtured. Nor does it account for a child's request to be in a relationship centered on pleasure and mutual delight.

Attachment shows us that love isn't just a warm feeling. Developmental researcher Colwyn Trevarthen says that each infant comes into the world waiting to "experience being experienced." The process of seeking and receiving help with strong emotions that is at the core of attachment contributes to the young child's belief that the relationship is stronger than any given emotion. This is a belief that can be the foundation of not only strong relationships throughout life but, more broadly, strong communities and strong nations around the world. We can speculate and debate about where this power arises, but there is little question that it may be one of the greatest gifts to humanity.

Whatever the question, learning to be connected is a big part of the answer.

"Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only as an infant or a toddler or a schoolchild but throughout adolescence and years of maturity as well, and on into old age. From these intimate attachments a person draws strength and enjoyment of life and, through what he or she contributes, gives strength and enjoyment to others. These are matters about which current science and traditional wisdom are at one."

—JOHN BOWLBY, *Attachment and Loss, Volume 3**

And now for the unavoidable, thorny question: If attachment is so deeply inborn, instinctive, so ingrained in the human operating system, why do we need to talk about it?

*This quotation has been paraphrased to remove gender-specific language.

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