



# Nine Ways Children Benefit From Secure Attachment

Medically reviewed by [Scientific Advisory Board](#) — By Kent Hoffman — Updated on September 21, 2019

Babies need a secure attachment for many reasons, including to survive and grow, to become individuals and to thrive in relationships.

Though many still focus on behavior in child rearing – perhaps because it's something we can physically see – the evidence to parent with an emphasis on establishing secure attachment in children is too significant to ignore.

The following points make the case for why we should emphasize secure attachment in parenting, and have been adapted from my recent book, [How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience and Freedom to Explore](#), which I co-authored with Glen Cooper and Bert Powell.

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## 1. Secure attachment inoculates children against toxic stress.

If attachment is in fact an insistent, primal drive, imagine how stressful it must be to have it regularly thwarted. The stress of unmet attachment needs can certainly manifest in a child's behavior, but research tells us that it can also derail children's mental, emotional, social and physical growth development.

The kind of stress that starts in infancy when the pressures of being a helpless newborn is not eased by a parent's comfort has been called toxic stress, because it creates pathways in the brain the keep the child

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## 2. 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. 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.

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. They also found links between insecurity and later psychological problems. 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. Attachment plays a critical role in many of them.

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## 3. Security paves the way for children to learn to regulate emotions.

Obviously, babies can't handle the intense and baffling experience of emotions all by themselves and experts agree that a major goal of having a reliable parent or primary caregiver is to get help with infant distress and angst.

First, the parent or caregiver regulates the baby's emotions from the outside, soothing her cries, singing lullabies, smiling gently at her, rocking

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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. She's also learned that she can turn to others for co-regulation throughout life when she needs to. And the ability to coregulate emotions is a big part of intimacy later in life.

Being able to regulate emotions frees the child to go about the business of learning and growing and prevents the dangerous buildup of cortisol, promoting physical health, too.

#### **4. Security helps children establish a healthy sense of self.**

It might seem paradoxical that we gain a strong sense of self only in the context of others. But 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. When a parent responds sensitively and warmly to a child's earliest needs, the self is formed with every interaction.

It is in the 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.

#### **5. Secure attachment frees the mind to learn.**

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. Conversely, when children feel safe and supported, learning takes care of itself.

A secure attachment is the first social connection that helps your baby start learning: The parent serves as a secure base from which the child can explore; trust in the parent makes it easier for secure children to seek assistance with learning from parents; fruitful, pleasant interactions between parent and child obviously facilitate exchange of information; and through attachment, children develop a coherent sense of self and others that enable them to think clearly and regulate their thought

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## 6. Security leads to confidence, which leads to self-reliance.

As a species, we were 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

## 7. Secure attachment is a foundation of true self-esteem.

Self-esteem has become a controversial concept. Not long 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!

But conventional wisdom has held that it's competence, actually, that feeds self-esteem. At this point it probably won't surprise you to read that secure attachment is the foundation for confidence and other attributes needed to develop competence.

When a parent is there for us a lot of the time, we get the message that we must be pretty deserving. If when a baby cries his mother consistently shows up to soothe him, mom is essentially sending the message that I am here, and you are worth it, from which the baby can conclude, You are here, and I must be worth it.

Secure babies start life with the big advantage of already knowing that

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Lastly, 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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## **8. Secure attachment sets kids up for social competence.**

Relationships are key to health and happiness in all the ways that these conditions can be measured. The idea of social competence encompasses all the ways we can benefit from the social parts 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 fact, social relationships affect a range of health outcomes, including mental health, physical health, health habits, and mortality risk.

## **9. Security makes way for better physical health.**

Speaking of health, physical development depends on a matrix of complicated factors, owing from both nature (genetics and other biological influences, like illness) and nurture. Secure attachment has been linked with better physical health, although the pathway between the two isn't well-defined.

What we do know is that 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.

So 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

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For more about our book and how to raise secure children, check out "[Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience and Freedom to Explore](#)"

**Adapted with permission from Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience and Freedom to Explore by K. Hoffman, G. Cooper, and B. Powell. (New York: Guilford Press: 2017).**

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