Brainwave™
early years last forever
whakamana i te tamaiti

Circle of
security

Written by: Keryn O'Neill, MA PGCertEdPsych
Senior Researcher

The concept of "attachment" has found its way into much writing and talking about parenting, but what does it mean, and more importantly, how can parents help their child to develop a secure attachment?

Children who are securely attached are more likely to be resilient under stress, have better relationships, and enter school ready to learn.

Attachment is the lasting emotional bond that a child forms with a specific person that provides safety, comfort, soothing, and pleasure. Almost all children will develop an attachment but the nature of attachment varies, depending largely upon the care-giving style of their parents. Children who are securely attached are more likely to be resilient under stress, have better relationships, and enter school ready to learn.

Drawing on attachment research a group of American psychotherapists have developed a user-friendly graphic illustrating the different needs children have of their parents, named the Circle of Security (COS) (Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell, 1998). The hands represent the parent, and the circle represents the child moving away to explore and coming back when necessary.
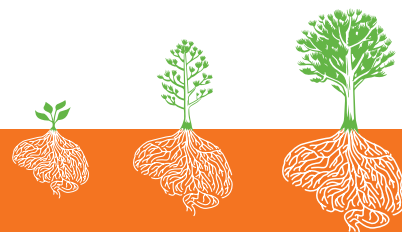
To develop a secure attachment, children require their parents to fulfil two key roles. First, (on the top half of the circle) the parent's role is to be a secure base from which the child can move away and explore their world. For a baby this may be subtle, looking away from mum as something catches their interest, for a toddler with new-found mobility, it may be more obvious! This is an important role as it is through exploration that a child's learning occurs. Children are more likely to explore when they feel safe and look to their parents for cues that it is OK.

Children are more likely to explore when they feel safe and look to their parents for cues that it is OK

There are several distinct needs that a child has while exploring. Sometimes they need help, ideally just enough to do the task themselves, without the parent taking over. Children need their parents to enjoy their adventures and achievements with them, but they also need to know that their parents delight in them, just for being who they are (as distinct from what they do) and experiencing lots of genuine delight is likely to lead to a secure attachment.

Secondly, children need a safe haven (bottom half of the circle) to return to. Children come to their parents and move away over and over again. As children get older they are likely to venture further from their secure base, and stay away longer, but still need to know that they are welcome to come back.

Babies and children need support when they face feelings that are too intense to manage by themselves.

One of the needs on the bottom half of the circle, is help to organise their feelings. Babies and children need support when they face feelings that are too intense to manage by themselves. This support is most effective when parents accept the child's feelings and don't try to get them to feel something different. Easier said than done!

Being emotionally available to our children is necessary, just being physically present is not enough and even very young children will spot the difference, as adults do. For example, imagine how different it feels to talk to your partner who is really 'with' you compared with when they are listening - while watching TV! As parents we can be doing all the 'right' things but may allow ourselves to become too busy to really 'be with' our children.
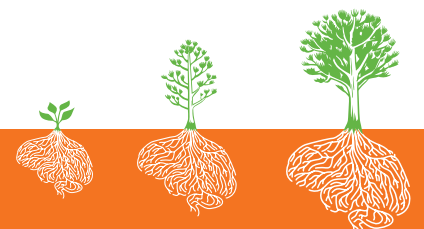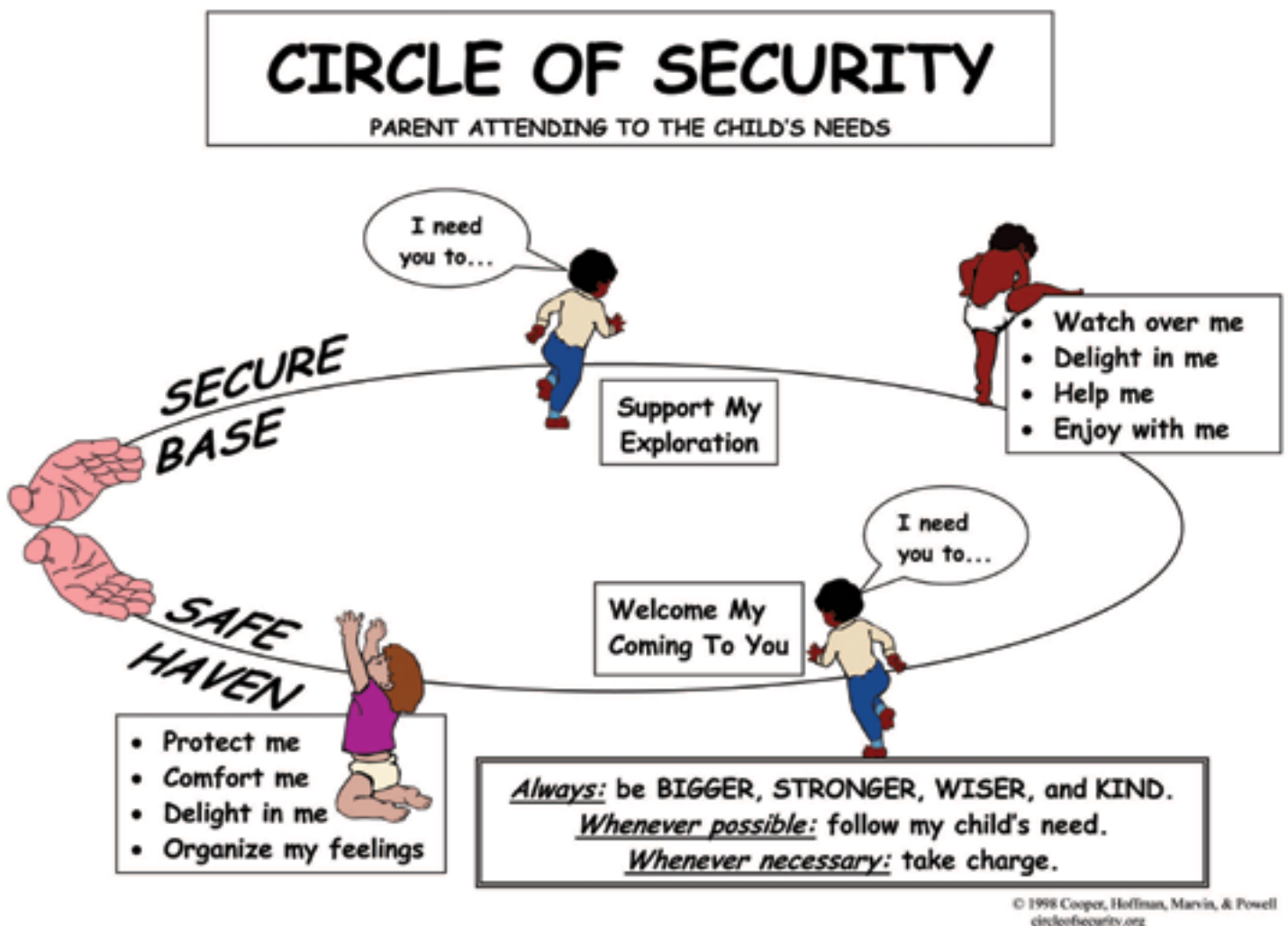
Can parents do this all the time? Of course not, but if we can really be with our children more often than not, and at times when they really need us, that is good enough. A secure attachment doesn't mean always getting it right, but it does mean repairing the relationship when necessary.

As parents we can be doing all the 'right' things but may allow ourselves to become too busy to really 'be with' our children.

Typically, parents feel more comfortable on one half of the circle than the other. They tend to overuse the role they are more comfortable with, for example, providing comfort, and underuse others, such as enjoying their child's exploration. COS helps parents to understand this about themselves, and to develop those areas that are not strengths so that they can more effectively respond to their child.

CIRCLE OF SECURITY
PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS

I need you to...

SECURE BASE

Support My Exploration

- Watch over me
- Delight in me
- Help me
- Enjoy with me

I need you to...

Welcome My Coming To You

SAFE HAVEN

- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings

Always: be BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER, and KIND.
Whenever possible: follow my child's need.
Whenever necessary: take charge.

© 1998 Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin, & Powell
circleofsecurity.org

Sometimes a child will let their parents know what they need in a direct way, for example raising their arms to be picked up; at other times they may be less direct, such as coming in close to their parent when they want a cuddle. However, if a child has learnt that their parent is uncomfortable meeting some of their needs they may behave in a misleading or contradictory way, for example, appearing as if they want to play when they actually need comfort.

> A secure attachment doesn't mean always getting it right, but it does mean repairing the relationship when necessary.

It can be helpful to consider what lies behind our children's approaches to us. For example, asking for help with a task like putting on their socks may be more about seeking emotional support than actually requiring our help. Recognising this helps parents to respond more effectively to their child's needs.

> Typically, parents feel more comfortable on one half of the circle than the other.

COS also helps parents understand what they bring to their relationship with their child, and how subjective their perceptions of their child can be. Parent's own upbringing influences the areas which they struggle with and reflecting on their responses is vital. Certain needs of their child can activate painful feelings for the parent. For example, a parent may feel abandoned when their child is moving away from them, and may therefore encourage their child to be overly reliant on them (usually unconsciously). The child may then act like they need comfort a lot of the time.

> Parent's own upbringing influences the areas which they struggle with and reflecting on their responses is vital.

None of us get it right all the time, and (thankfully!) it is not necessary to do so, but if we are trying to recognise and meet our child's needs, both for attachment and exploration, they are off to a great start.

If you enjoyed this article, here are some others that may be of interest

Why babies wake at night
https://brainwave.org.nz/article/why-babies-wake-at-night/

Rethinking the nappy
https://brainwave.org.nz/article/rethinking-the-nappy/

Love & limits
https://brainwave.org.nz/article/love-limits/

References
Cooper, G. (2009). *Understanding Attachment: The Circle of Security Approach.* Seminar at Auckland, NZ, 26th May 2009.

Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Marvin, R. and Powell, B. (1998). *Circle of Security: Parent attending to the child's needs.* Available from https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/userfiles/Downloadable%20Handouts/full%20circle%20new.pdf (Original Circle)

Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Marvin, R. and Powell, B. (2000). *Circle of Security: Treatment Assumptions.* Available from https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/treatment-assumptions

Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Marvin, R. and Powell, B. (2004) *Travelling Around the Circle of Security.* Available from https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/userfiles/Downloadable%20Handouts/COS_travelingaroundCOS.pdf

Dolby, R. (2007). The Circle of Security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships. *Research in Practice Series, 14*(4). Available from www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au.

Marvin, R., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K. and Powell, B. (2002) The Circle of Security project: Attachment-based intervention with caregiver-pre-school child dyads. *Attachment and Human Development, 4*(1), 107-124.

Powell, B. (2008). *Understanding Attachment: The Circle of Security Approach.* Seminar at Auckland, NZ, 24thOctober 2008.
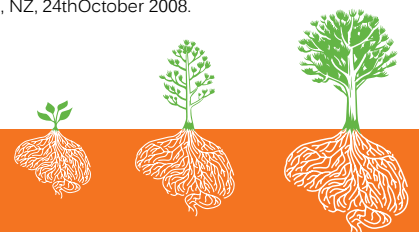
References

Bialystok, E., & Werker, J. F. (2017). Editorial: The systematic effects of bilingualism on children's development. *Developmental Science*, 20(1), n/a-n/a.

Brito, N. H., & Noble, K. G. (2018). The independent and interacting effects of socioeconomic status and dual-language use on brain structure and cognition. *Developmental Science*, e12688.

Bruderer, A. G., Danielson, D. K., Kandhadai, P., & Werker, J.F. (2015). Sensorimotor influences on speech perception in infancy. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(44),13531-13536.

Byers-Heinlein, K., Burns, T. C., & Werker, J. F. (2010). The roots of bilingualism in newborns. *Psychological Science*, 21(3), 343-348.

Byers-Heinlein, K., Morin-Lessard, E., & Lew-Williams, C. (2017). Bilingual infants control their languages as they listen. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(34), 9032-9037.

Gathercole, V. M. (2018). Language Development in Bilingual Children: Fact, Factoid and Fiction. In *Language Policy and Language Acquisition Planning* (pp. 237-255): Springer.

Gollan, T. H., Starr, J., & Ferreira, V. S. (2015). More than use it or lose it: The number-of-speakers effect on heritage language proficiency. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 22(1), 147-155.

Growing Up in New Zealand. (2015). *Growing Up in New Zealand Policy Brief. The intergenerational use of te reo Māori: Evidence from Growing Up in New Zealand*. Retrieved from Auckland, NZ: https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/growingup/research-findings-impact/GUiNZ-te-reo-use-policy-brief-June2015.pdf

Hoff, E., & Core, C. (2015). What clinicians need to know about bilingual development. *Seminars in Speech and Language, 36*(2), 89-99.

Hoff, E., & Ribot, K. M. (2017). Language growth in English monolingual and Spanish-English bilingual children from 2.5 to 5 years. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 190, 241-245.e241.

Hsu, Y. (2015). Shared reading in children's heritage language development: case studies of three Chinese-American families. *Journal of Education and Social Policy, 2*(3), 128-140.

King, J., & Cunningham, U. (2017). Tamariki and fanau: Child speakers of Māori and Samoan in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Te Reo, 60,* 29-46.

Kovács, Á. M., & Mehler, J. (2009). Cognitive gains in 7-month-old bilingual infants. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(16), 6556-6560.

Kuhl, P. K., & Ramirez, N. (2016). *Bilingual language learning in children*. Retrieved from http://ilabs.washington.edu/sites/default/files/Ramirez_WhiteHouse_Paper.pdf

May, S., Hill, R., & Tiakiwai, S. (2004). *Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of good practice*. Ministry of Education, New Zealand Retrieved from http://www.kns.ac.nz/files/6d9cf62d1d8e8824/file_set_file/0000/0532/May,%20Hill,%20Tiakiwai%20(2004)%20Education%20Counts.pdf

Montag, J. L., Jones, M. N., & Smith, L. B. (2015). The words children hear: Picture books and the statistics for language learning. *Psychological Science*, 26(9), 1489-1496.

Morton, S. M. B., Atatoa Carr, P. E., Grant, C. C., Berry, S. D., Bandara, D. K., Mohal, J., . . . Wall, C. R. (2014). Growing Up in New Zealand: *A longitudinal study of New Zealand children and their families. Now we are Two: Describing our first 1000 days*. Retrieved from Auckland, NZ: www.growingup.co.nz

Murphy, A. F. (2014). The effect of dual-language and transitional-bilingual education instructional models on Spanish proficiency for English language learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 37(2), 182-194.

Paradis, J., & Jia, R. (2017). Bilingual children's long-term outcomes in English as a second language: language environment factors shape individual differences in catching up with monolinguals. *Developmental Science*, 20(1), n/a-n/a.

Ramírez-Esparza, N., García-Sierra, A., & Kuhl, P. K. (2017). The impact of early social interactions on later language development in Spanish–English bilingual infants. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1216-1234.

Ramírez, N. F., Ramírez, R. R., Clarke, M., Taulu, S., & Kuhl, P. K. (2017). Speech discrimination in 11-month-old bilingual and monolingual infants: a magnetoencephalography study. *Developmental Science*, 20(1), n/a-n/a

Reese, E., Keegan, P., McNaughton, S., Kingi, T. K., Carr, P. A., Schmidt, J., . . . Morton, S. (2017). Te Reo Māori: indigenous language acquisition in the context of New Zealand English. *Journal of Child Language*, 1-28.

Stine-Morrow, E. A. L., Hussey, E. K., & Ng, S. (2015). The potential for literacy to shape lifelong cognitive health. *Health*, 2(1), 92-100.

Taua'i, E., Richards, R., & Kokaua, J. (2018). Is Pacific language ability protective of prevalence of mental disorders among Pacific peoples in New Zealand? *Pacific Health Dialog*, 21(1), 10-16.

Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust. Retrieved from https://www.kohanga.ac.nz/

Zauche, L. H., Thul, T. A., Mahoney, A. E. D., & Stapel-Wax, J. L. (2016). Influence of language nutrition on children's language and cognitive development: An integrated review. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 36*, 318-333.

Zhang, D., & Koda, K. (2011). Home Literacy Environment and word knowledge development: A study of young learners of Chinese as a Heritage Language. *Bilingual Research Journal, 34*(1), 4-18.