

Policy Brief from Research to Real World: Linking Policy, Practice, and Philanthropy

Laying a Foundation for Social & Emotional, Cognitive, and Academic Competence: Promoting Responsive, Secure Caregiving Relationships

Imagine two toddlers in a child care classroom... One child is crying when he arrives and is soon hitting other children and trying to get out the door. The second toddler wanders the room with a sad withdrawn expression. How does the teacher understand and meet the needs of both children? What about the six other children who are trying to sit in the teacher's lap?

When infants and toddlers feel safe and cared for, they are able to learn and grow. This is the essence of infant mental health, which has been defined as loving well, growing well, and learning well, all in the context of a relationship. Nurturing relationships provide the foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional development, which are inextricably entwined.

By the fourth quarter of the first year of life, all infants become attached to the individuals who care for them the most. If there are multiple attachment figures, infants develop a hierarchy of preferences for them. One parent may be a toddler's preferred attachment figure, but when that parent is not present, the infant turns to the other parent, a grand-parent, or a child care provider for comfort when distressed. Infants and toddlers who experience responsive, sensitive, and warm early attachments use them as a secure base from which to explore and learn, and a safe haven to return to when they are frightened or distressed.

Research shows that when the primary attachment relationship is secure, children are more likely to have a range of positive outcomes, including empathy, curiosity, adaptive emotional regulation, social competence, on-time developmental milestones, and resilience to challenging situations, all of which influence and are reflected in the actual structure of the developing brain. When primary relationships are disturbed or disrupted, secondary attachment relationships with alternate caregivers can actually be therapeutic, protecting the young child from the adverse consequences of neglect, rejection, or insensitivity on the part of the primary attachment figure.

Although no one who becomes a parent plans to hurt or neglect their child, parents who are struggling with multiple stresses such as poverty, homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, and their own adverse early childhood experiences, are more likely to do so. We know that infants and very young children enter the child welfare system and foster care at higher rates than older children, and may experience multiple placements before being reunified with birth parent(s) or adopted. As a result of biological vulnerabilities (such as prenatal drug or alcohol exposure, low birth weight or premature birth), inadequate or maltreating early care, and/or disruptions in their attachment relationships, infants and toddlers in the child welfare system regulate stress differently from other children and behave in ways that make them 'hard to read' and difficult to nurture. Their caregivers may need to have a greater awareness and special training to understand how children with these early experiences 'miscue' their caregivers about what they need, so that they are able to provide the secure base and safe haven that all children need to thrive. Actually, these skills can be helpful to anyone who interacts with families with very young children, because all children are 'difficult' at one time or another.

What YOU can do to promote a Secure Base and Safe Haven for Every Child:

Policy/Advocacy Professionals

The ultimate goal is to immunize against stress in the early years and optimize executive function ability for successful academic achievement for all young children. Children in the welfare system are some of the highest risk for academic failure and we need to start early to change the trajectory! — Dr. Maxine Hayes, Washington State Health Officer

During the prenatal-age 3 time frame there is an unparalleled rate of physiological, neurological, and developmental growth, policies and programs that support strong families, such as ensuring basic needs for housing, food, and employment, and home visiting for parenting education and support, are critical.

Funding and policy decisions should focus on providing stable, secure attachment figures for infants and toddlers. Attachment figures can include family members, early care and education providers, and friends and neighbors in the community. It is important these relationships be as stable and enduring as possible. When possible, preserve or add, do not subtract, relationships.

Early Care Educators and Family Support Professionals

While I don't know the backgrounds or situations of the young children who come into the library, I can make sure we are promoting reading with babies as a way to create warm bonds. I can make it as simple as offering board books to caregivers and encouraging them to enjoy books with their children. — Sally Chilson, Spokane Public Library

Children are able to form multiple attachments and can experience safety and security with non-parental caregivers who provide a secure base and safe haven. Early learning professionals should make efforts to provide a consistent and emotionally safe space for children. They also need to support the child's primary, enduring relationships with parents, especially when parents are struggling. Providers might need additional training and encouragement to do so. There is a great need to increase child care quality by providing infant mental health training and consultation to child care staff and leadership.

Some providers, like doulas, family support workers and home visitors actually function as a secure base for parents who are struggling, so that in turn they can be the parents they want to be with their children. Special training and ongoing reflective consultation is essential for individuals doing this work. Our research has shown that strengths-based home visiting, such as *Promoting First Relationships* © (Kelly, Zuckerman, Sandoval, & Buehlman, 2008) increases the sensitivity of caregivers to the needs of infants and toddlers, and the infants and toddlers in turn enabling them to be better able to regulate negative emotions.

Informal care providers and all of us who are neighbors of young families in our communities (librarians, community members, etc.) can support nurturing relationships by providing safe spaces for families, understanding the social emotional needs underlying challenging behaviors, and using a strengths-based approach (such as sincerely supporting what a family is doing well) when interacting with families.

Philanthropists

It is important for grantmakers to understand the needs and the challenges of children in the childcare system and the interventions available. —Mike Quinn, SVP Seattle

Philanthropists can invest in evidence-based infant mental health programs and require that these programs continue to be rigorously evaluated and improved.

Funders can support the continued development of a knowledgeable, competent, and committed early childhood work force.