

ARTICLE

Being Your Child's Secure Base

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When you played neighborhood games as a child, did you have a “home base” you could run to take a break? A place where you could have moment to pause? In our neighborhood, games of chase, kick-the-can, and others often had a designated spot that a player could run to and yell “base!” to seek temporary safety – to negotiate rules, take a bathroom break, or rest. A player couldn’t stay at the home base for the entire game, but other players respected the right to use the base as needed. This “home base” concept is a good metaphor for the way you provide a sense of safety and security for your child. A secure child knows that that their parent or caregiver will be there for them when they are afraid or sad, face challenges, or feel sick. Research across many cultures shows that children use their parents as a secure base.

How does secure-base behavior develop? During early infancy, responding promptly to your infant’s distress helps them to know that when they are upset, they can count on you to help them feel better. When you soothe a distressed infant, this is called “co-regulation,” and it is the first crucial step in the baby’s development of their stress-response system. Over time as you repeat this process, your baby’s stress-response system, which involves communication between the brain, hormone systems, and all major organs, begins to mature and they will be better able to self-regulate, or calm themselves down when upset.

Holding, rocking, and gently stroking your baby’s head, back, and feet are some of the most effective ways to soothe your baby. You cannot “spoil” a baby by holding them too much, or by responding to them when they cry. Research has shown that babies who are responded to promptly in the first 6 months of life cry less during the next six months compared to babies who are not responded to quickly. Why might this be? Even in the first weeks and months of life babies are learning and forming representations of their relationships that they can use to predict future behavior of others, including their caregivers. A secure representation develops when a baby learns that their caregiver will be available when needed, based on what they have experienced in the past.

One way to serve as a secure base is to identify what the child needs in the moment when they ask for your support. Some children may need some positive touch. Although touch is a universal human need, there are individual differences in children’s preferences for touch. Some children are more “cuddly” than others, and that’s ok. Children’s need for touch also changes over time, for example, when they are upset or sick. If you are not sure what your child needs, you can ask. For example, you can ask “do you want me to rub your back right now?” or “do you

want to sit on my lap? Do you think that would help you feel better?" Asking a question like this helps your child to consider, and understand, what they need to do when they are upset in order to calm down, and this knowledge also helps them to self-regulate.

Children who start child care, preschool, or school also need to know they have a secure base. Children need to have important adults available when needed, especially during times of change such as the beginning of the school year. The confidence of knowing that your caregivers will support you when you need them helps children to focus on learning because they know that their security needs will be met. Children may have many different feelings and that is ok, especially as children return to school during this pandemic when some rules may change or there may be confusion. Sometimes children ask directly when they need extra reassurance, but sometimes children might express their needs through behaviors such as clinging, complaining, crying, or resisting (e.g., refusing to brush teeth to delay going to school). The challenge of getting children to school and adults getting to work on time can add to anxiety a child might be feeling about separating from caregivers and going to school.

Take a moment to pause and validate the child's feelings while also clearly stating what they need to do (for example, "I see you are frustrated but you need to get your shoes on so you can get to school on time") and assure them that you will spend time together later ("I can't wait to hear about your day. We can play a game or go to the park after school"). Children may need extra time with you in the morning and evening during the transition to the school year. When children have a new teacher, caregiver, or start a new grade, they may need several weeks to feel safe, secure and become used to new routines and ways of doing things. Be sure to ask questions, such as what made you smile today? Or how did you enjoy your lunch? What is something new you learned? These questions can be better ways to support your child than, "how was your day?" Sesame Street for Kids shares the idea of talking to your child about how this is an adventure. Often adventures are fun and they can also make you feel uneasy. Remind your child that you are in this adventure together. Keep in mind that the changes children experience, even if they are positive, take extra energy and your child may be more tired and less able to tolerate difficulties during this time. Remember you are their secure base and they will benefit from your remaining calm, listening, and knowing that providing that extra reassurance and comfort is so important when needed.

Conclusion

Remember providing the amount and type of touch, comfort, and reassurance your child needs such as a smile or encouraging words helps them to explore the world more confidently.

Resources:

Responsive Care: Nurturing a Strong Attachment Through Everyday Moments



Helping kids grow healthier brains.

123connectwithme.org

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/136542836>

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/230-responsive-care-nurturing-a-strong-attachment-through-everyday-moments>

The Adventure Continues: Back to School | Sesame Street in Communities - Sesame Street in Communities

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/activities/the-adventure-continues-back-to-school/>

What do to (and not do) When Children are Anxious

<https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/>

From Zero to Three:

Birth to 12 Months: Social-Emotional Development

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/238-birth-to-12-months-social-emotional-development>

12 to 24 Months: Social-Emotional Development

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/240-12-24-months-social-emotional-development>

24 to 36 Months: Social-Emotional Development

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/241-24-36-months-social-emotional-development>