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Understanding attachment

Helping children feel safe, confident and ready to learn

A secure attachment is one of the most important building blocks in early childhood. It supports healthy brain development, strong communication skills, and a child's physical and emotional wellbeing. When children trust that their caregivers will keep them safe, respond consistently and offer comfort, they feel confident to explore the world and learn through experience.

Warm, positive interactions — talking, smiling, responding to cues, and exploring together — help shape a brain that can trust, connect with others, regulate emotions and learn effectively.

Why secure attachment matters

A secure attachment promotes:

- Healthy brain development
- Better life chances
- Stronger parenting skills later in life

It also helps protect children from:

- Anti-social behaviour patterns

What secure attachment leads to

Strong attachments help children develop the values, confidence and skills needed to become:

- Confident individuals
- Successful learners
- Effective contributors
- Responsible citizens

When young children feel secure, they are more willing to explore, interact positively with others, and engage with the world around them.

Attachment and resilience

Resilience is a child's ability to cope, adapt and bounce back from challenges. Attachment is the 'elastic' that helps them do this. Children develop resilience from three key sources: 'I HAVE', 'I AM', and 'I CAN'.

I HAVE:

- People who love me and who I can trust.
- People who set clear limits to keep me safe.
- People who show me how to do things through their actions.
- People who encourage me to try things independently.
- People who help me when I'm unwell, worried or learning something new.

I AM:

- Someone others like and love.
- Kind and caring towards others.
- Respectful of myself and those around me.
- Responsible for my actions.
- Hopeful and confident that things will be okay.

I CAN:

- Talk to others about things that worry or upset me.
- Find ways to solve problems I face.
- Control my actions, even when I feel overwhelmed.
- Ask for help when I need it.

Even when children are deeply loved (I HAVE), they still need inner confidence (I AM) and the skills to cope with challenges (I CAN) to truly develop resilience

How secure attachment develops

Caregivers build attachment by:

- Responding predictably and consistently to a baby's needs.
- Recognising cues such as hunger or distress.
- Offering quick, soothing comfort.
- Using warm eye contact, smiles and gentle speech.

Babies respond by:

- Calming quickly.
- Letting go of distress.
- Feeling able to focus on exploring, which supports brain development.

Without a responsive caregiver, babies struggle to regulate themselves and may cry harder or withdraw. This insight echoes the work of Sue Gerhardt in 'Why Love Matters'.

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