

Core Strength: Attachment

Humans learn to view the world and people in it from repeated experiences and images we have as children. In the modern world, those influences increasingly come to children from outside the family -- leaving parents limited in their ability to filter and choose what their children experience. Unavoidable influences surrounding every aspect of young peoples' lives have the potential to shape the way they experience and view the world. It makes sense that parents would question how they can override the power of these influences. Since they cannot lock children away, the answer lies in what they can instill within their children. Something is needed that is more powerful than the onslaught of troubling images or hurtful experiences. What is needed is a quality known as resilience.

Resiliency comes from building within our children certain strengths. In an article titled "Core Strengths for Healthy Child Development," I introduced the work of neuroscientist Dr. Bruce Perry and the growing knowledge on brain development. Dr. Perry's team identifies strengths that promote emotional health and enable young people to grow in spite of stressful life events. Although primary and fundamental strengths are established in early childhood, they continue to develop and can be enhanced throughout the life of the young person.

Attachment is the first essential skill children develop and the root of all other strengths. The ability to form and maintain relationships is the most important gift a caregiver can give. Our capacity to communicate, love and give emerges from the ability to connect with other people. The human brain develops neurons and connections that create a feeling of pleasure when we have positive interactions with other humans. The more positive interactions a child experiences, the stronger those brain connections become, shaping their ability to develop healthy relationships throughout life. The key to building attachments is attunement, which is the ability to read and respond to the needs of another. When a caregiver is attuned, a child will become attached. In spite of busy schedules, there are things parents can do to strengthen this process.

For all ages, increase interactive activities while limiting the amount of violent video games and television children view. Keep a collection of school and family pictures in a special place and let them know you enjoy looking at it. Give plenty of hugs. With school-aged children, sit together while they do their schoolwork and you read or make your grocery list. Tuck a note into their jacket pocket. As children get older, work on projects together (cooking, gardening, model building). Demonstrate your support for growing skills and independence. Explore your family history together to give them a sense of connectedness. With teens, volunteer together at a community activity (such as a food bank or senior center). Let them know you care privately to avoid peer embarrassment. Carry on serious, face-to-face discussions about their concerns and yours.

The combination of excessive time demands and extreme exposure to media can make a parent feel helpless. Don't let that prevent you from being attuned to your child and doing seemingly small things that will strengthen their attachment. It will pay off for your children and your family far into their future.