

Core Strengths for Healthy Child Development

Over the past 20 years, an expansion of research in the area of brain science has increased our knowledge about the effects of stress and adversity on children and adolescents. Neuroscientist Dr. Bruce Perry is a leading researcher in this field. He has studied the impact of early neglect and trauma on brain growth, learning how life experiences enhance or impair brain development. This helps us understand how children develop resilience and become humane, competent people in the midst of stress. He identifies six “Core Strengths” that promote emotional health and resiliency. An understanding of these core strengths can help parents support their children through the pressures challenging today’s youth.

The six core strengths are: Attachment, Self-Regulation, Affiliation, Attunement, Tolerance, and Respect. These strengths correspond with brain growth -- they develop sequentially; each strength becomes the foundation for the next.

Attachment is the basis of the other core strengths. It is “the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional bonds with another person.” Without this, a child cannot feel empathy, establish trust, or develop healthy relationships. With attachment one is able to love, become a good friend, and care about others. The child is then able to develop *Self-Regulation* - the ability to manage basic urges (like hunger, frustration, and fear) and behave appropriately. It is the ability to “put a moment between an impulse and an action,” a skill that must be learned in order to function effectively in school and in social settings. With self-regulation, the child can develop *Affiliation*, the capacity to join others and contribute to a group. This ability holds societies together and allows children to receive from and contribute to a larger social structure. Repeated affiliation experiences lead to the development of *Attunement* - the ability to “recognize the needs, interests, strengths, and values of others.” The capacity to read and respond to the feelings and needs of others prevents children from teasing, bullying, or engaging in violence. It is essential in developing *Tolerance*: “the capacity to understand and accept how others are different from you.” This is a crucial human capacity in our increasingly diverse society. Finally, these core strengths allow the young person to develop *Respect*, the ability to “appreciate the worth in yourself and in others.”

Throughout a child’s life, parents and caregivers can enhance these strengths; giving the child the capacity to respond to stress in a way that builds strength rather than brokenness. At The Buckeye Ranch, we work with thousands of children and families, helping them develop and enhance core strengths. Although we see many children whose early challenges inhibited their development, the good news is that there are strategies to support the growth of these strengths throughout the life of a young person. Our webpage contains articles identifying ways caregivers can enhance each of the core strengths of their children and help them respond to life’s stresses in a resilient manner.