

SAFE HARBOR PARENTING

ATTACHMENT THEORY IN REAL LIFE

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“INHERENT IN OUR HUMAN DESIGN ARE TWO BASIC AND COMPLEMENTARY INSTINCTS THAT EXIST TO INSURE OUR SURVIVAL. FIRST IS OUR INSTINCT TO SEEK REFUGE IN A CAREGIVER. THIS SERVES TO PROTECT US FROM DANGER AND HARM. SECOND IS OUR INSTINCT TO EXPLORE OUR ENVIRONMENT. THIS SERVES TO HELP US DEVELOP COMPETENCE AND MASTERY.”

The above quote is based on the work of psychiatrist John Bowlby, who coined the term “Secure Base” to describe the vital relationship between a primary caregiver or “attachment figure” and his or her child. He theorized that a child is developmentally wired to attach to a caregiver for protection and support to explore. Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth investigated this concept scientifically by developing a reliable means of measuring attachment behaviors. Ainsworth and subsequent researchers established, as attachment theory postulated, that children who are able to move freely between exploration of their world and refuge taking in their caregiver possess an internal security that serves as a bedrock and springboard for future social, emotional, and cognitive development. Likewise, researchers have described the deficits in social, emotional, and cognitive development that result from disrupted attachment patterns, the most severe of which arise out of early neglect and abuse environments. In either case, whether secure or insecure, these patterns develop over the course of thousands of interactions between a child and his primary caregivers day-by-day, year-by-year. Within the past 10 years, the growing field of neuroscience is further expanding our understanding by describing how brain development is shaped by a child's refuge-seeking and exploration interactions with his caregivers.

As a simple and easy way of accessing these concepts of refuge seeking and exploration, and your role in them as a “Secure Base”, imagine an image of a ship and its harbor. You are the harbor, and your child is the ship sailing to and from your shore. As a harbor, you have the authority and facilities to christen, support, direct, protect, repair, and supply your ship. When these tasks are executed consistently, you become a Safe Harbor to and from which your child can sail confidently and competently. In relational terms, your role as a Safe Harbor to your child involves the smooth integration of the following key “harbor tasks” with your child's refuge seeking and exploration instincts: delighting, supporting, maintaining boundaries, protecting, comforting, and equipping.

Refuge-supporting Harbor Tasks:

Protection Safety from hurt. Your number one duty as a parent is maintaining your child's safety. For most parents this task is straight forward and easy to accomplish. It is instinctive. However, some parents may find themselves unable to act when their child is in danger due to failures in being protected themselves growing up. Other parents suffer from physical or emotional disabilities which get in the way of being able to protect their child. When this is the case, it is important to get professional help to identify and address these limitations, as children who are not consistently protected from physical and emotional harm are at much higher risk for a range of emotional and behavioral problems. There is a reason that harbors have forts at their mouth. The guns positioned there establish an essential zone of safety for her ships..

Comfort Soothing the hurt. The fact is that the world is a difficult and painful place. Your child, no matter how diligent your attempts at protection, will experience pain and suffering. What largely determines a child's healthy development is not a relative lack of suffering, but the consistent experience of comfort and support in the midst of suffering. Children who have caregivers who actively help them grieve pain and disappointment are much more likely to grow into resilient and emotionally healthy adults. In the Safe Harbor metaphor, there are times when your child is surely to experience storms that swamp and disable him. In those times, your child needs someone to draw alongside of him in the midst of the storm. Sometimes that means taking on water yourself. Have you ever seen one of those open water rescues by a coast guard helicopter? The rescuer has to be reeled down into the water with the one drowning, grab hold of him, secure him to the rescue basket and then together they return to safety. Likewise, your child needs you to get in the water with him before he can right his ship and sail again.

Equipping Guidance for the future. Beyond comfort, your child also needs preparation for a world that is at times confusing, complicated, tiring, and dangerous. He or she needs supplies and strategies for facing the complex demands of life. Sometimes equipping is prospective, as in preparing for an expected challenge. At other times it is retrospective, as in debriefing what went right and went wrong in a challenge already faced. Equipping also includes the very basic, but hugely important, job of keeping your child physically supplied for the rigors of life. Many parents are amazed at how much more competent and successful their child is simply by addressing sleep, diet, and health factors. A ship without supplies or instruction is guaranteed to have difficulties sailing successfully.

Exploration-supporting Harbor Tasks:

Delight Expressing your love. To protect, comfort, and equip your child for life are all important, but it is delight that is the wind in your child's sails. Delight is the expression of unconditional love. It communicates to your child that he is special and loved completely apart from his accomplishments or failures. Delight says "I am happy to see you coming over the horizon whether you are bringing home treasure or trouble." Without delight, your child is sure to flounder no matter how well protected, comforted, and equipped she is. The more wind, the farther she will go, even if there are holes in her hull or tears in her sails. Did you know that a hole in a boat does not necessarily sink a ship? Sure, eventually it will need to be patched up (that's the task of comforting), but in the

meantime, so long as the hole isn't too big (and sometimes it is) and she has a strong wind at her back (i.e., she feels your delight), she'll stay afloat. But if the wind dies, a ship is sure to sink, no matter how small the hole.

Support Guidance in the moment. No matter how much attention is given ahead of time, or after the fact, to prepare for life's troubles and challenges, your child will find herself regularly struggling to comprehend or master specific situations. Sometimes she needs to be able to figure it out herself, using whatever tools and knowledge she has accumulated from you. But at other times, to master a problem, a child needs someone who is wiser and more equipped to come alongside and tackle the problem with her. Healthy support involves knowing when to go beyond "Keep working on it yourself" to "Here, let me show you" while keeping short of "Just let me do it." The famous psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, borrowed the concept of scaffolding as a means of describing optimal support in educational development. Scaffolding stays just beyond the portion of a building that is completed in order to add to one layer at a time, which is how a building must be built. In parenting, it can be tricky to know if you are meeting your child at his growth edge, or whether you have underestimated or overestimated where that edge is. In normal development (and especially during early development), that edge of mastery or competence is often a moving target. In other words, it's often 2 steps forward, one step back. But wherever that edge between competence and incompetence is today (or this hour), your child needs you to meet him there.

Maintaining boundaries Setting and keeping course. A ship is at a great disadvantage without maps. Maps identify where the rocks, shoals, and reefs are located. They are a safeguard for the journey. Without good maps, life is a shipwreck waiting to happen. When I use to go swimming at a nearby lake as a kid, there were buoys in the water marking where I could swim. I entered the water within those buoys with freedom and confidence knowing that a lifeguard had determined where I would be safe. This is what boundaries do for a child. They create a sense of safety by marking off where there is danger so that a child can invest his energies fully in exploration and mastery inside of those boundaries. When boundaries exist only minimally for a child, anxiety ensues ("Am I close to danger or aren't I. I don't know."). When they exist, but are too constraining, rebellion ensues ("I know I'm safe, but I'm also bored."). When they exist inconsistently, frustration ensues ("Yesterday I was safe here, but today I'm not? Which is it?"). Many behavioral problems in children arise out of a lack of boundaries, or the inconsistent, or too rigid, enforcement of them.

In summary, these six Safe Harbor tasks: protection, comfort, equipping, delight, support, and maintaining boundaries compose the basic elements necessary for supporting your child's social-emotional maturation as he moves back and forth between refuge-seeking and exploration. Broadly speaking, when your child is primarily in exploration mode, he is most actively in need of your delight, support and boundaries. When he is primarily in refuge-seeking mode, he is most actively in need of your protection, comfort and equipping. Effective parenting is greatly facilitated by learning to identify what mode your child is in (or should be in) and what Safe Harbor tasks correspond to it.