

# Understanding the Long-term Impact of Early Childhood Experience

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# Considering Early Development: Nature or nurture?

Nature AND nurture!

Nature <----> nurture!



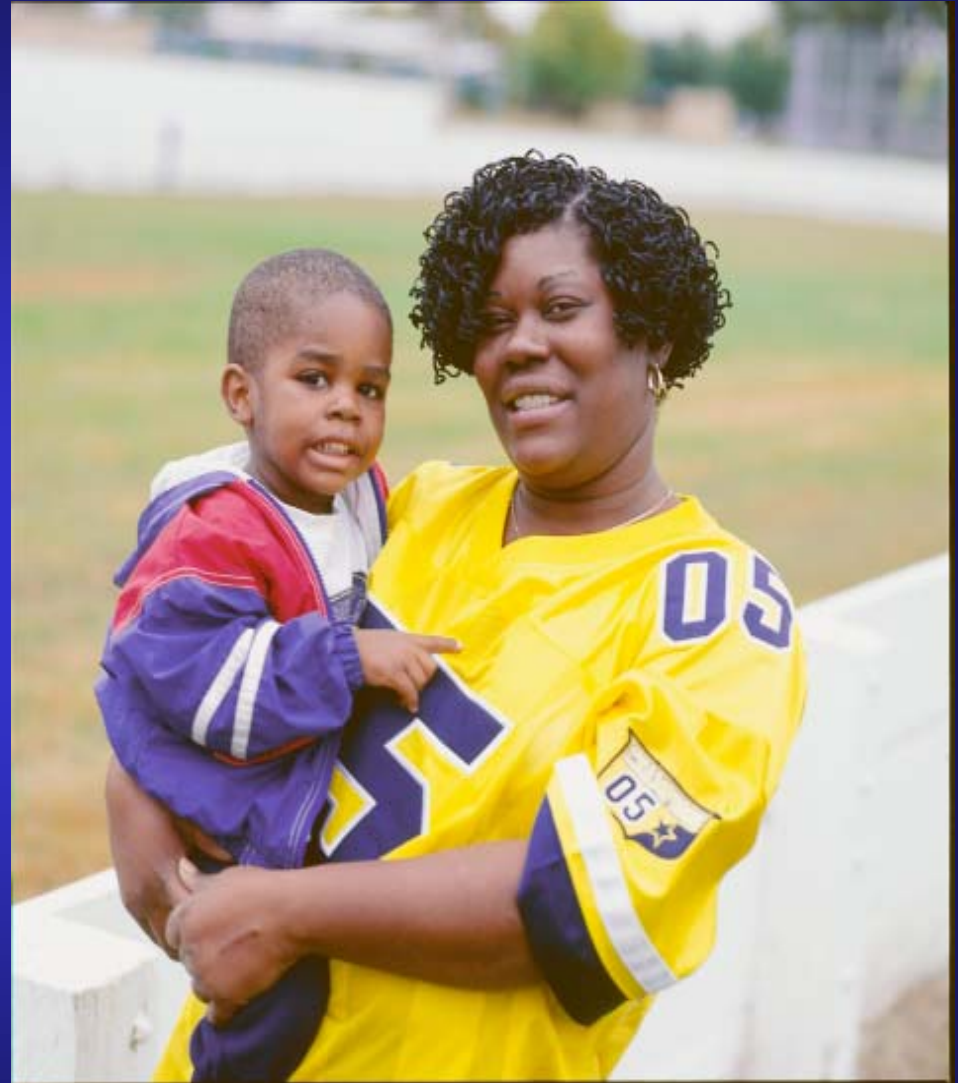
Let's focus on social-emotional development in early childhood, which has a particularly powerful impact on subsequent health and well-being.

# Considering the Effects of Early Experience on Brain Development

- Neural connections: use it or lose it
- Stress hormones: a little bit goes a long way
- “Critical periods” or “Sensitive Periods” in human development
- Questions about “plasticity”

So...

- What SHOULD happen in the first months and years of a child's life?
- What are the solid foundations on which healthy development will build?



# Children should develop:

- A sense of trust
- The capacity to regulate emotion and behavior
- The motivation and confidence to explore

All of these occur within the context of early caregiving relationships or “attachments” with sensitive, warm, responsive adults.



How does “attachment” develop and how does it shape later development, both psychologically and physiologically?

# Secure Attachment



Samantha

*A primary source  
of resilience*

Sensitive care



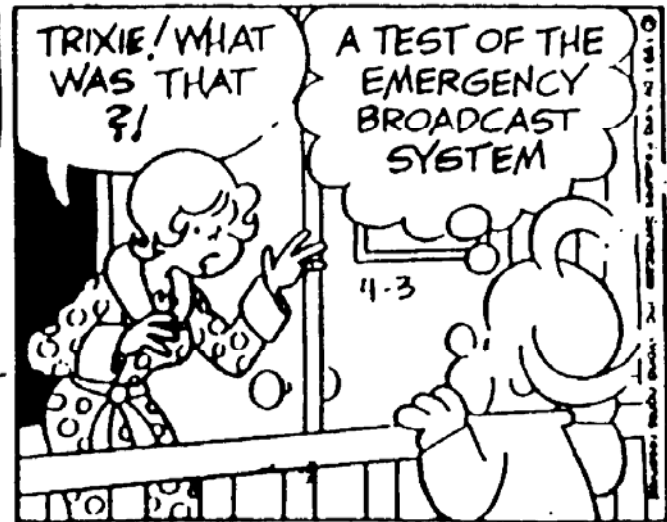
I can count  
on you!



confident,  
connected

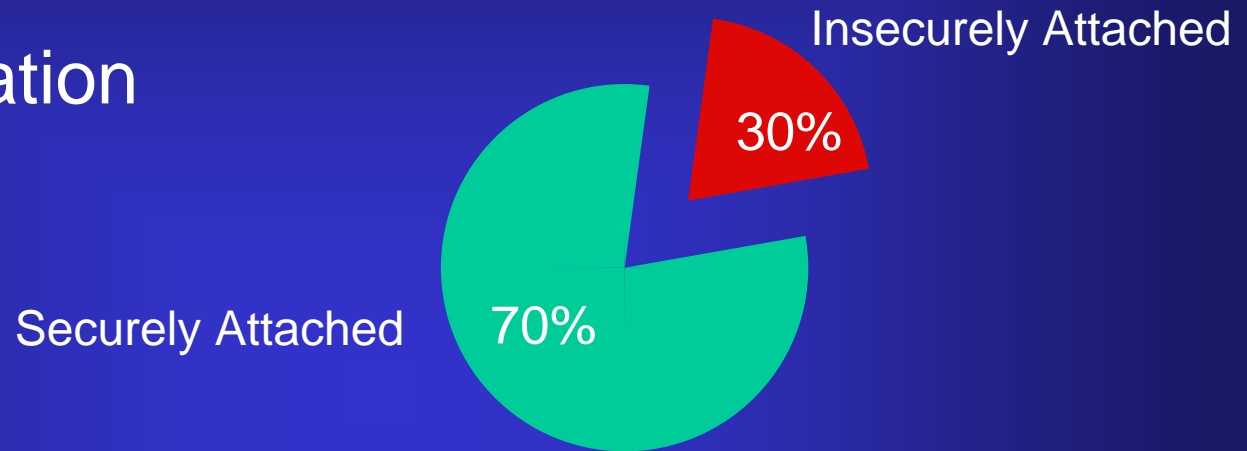
A secure attachment can mitigate the effects of negative experiences, including loss and trauma

Hi and Lois / By Walker and Browne

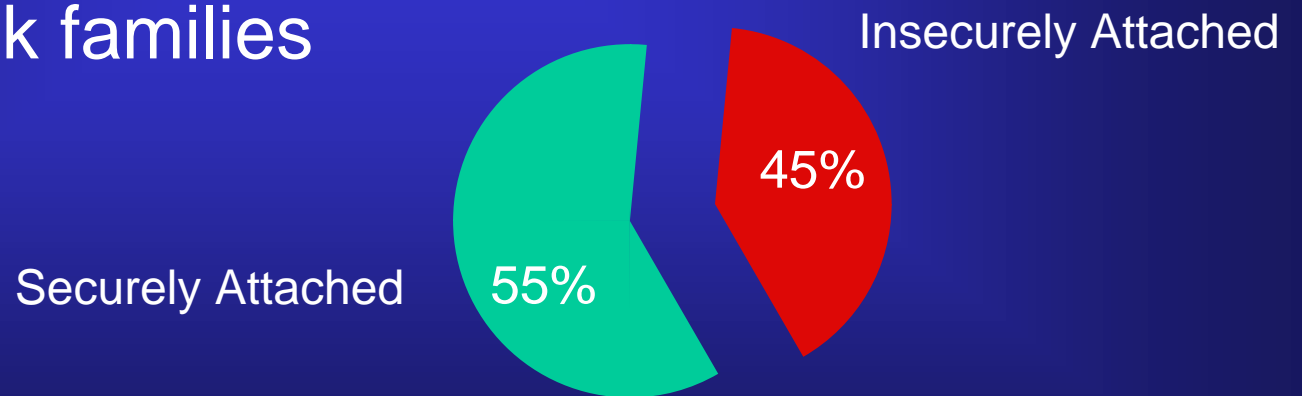


# Distribution of Attachment Patterns

## General Population



## Among high-risk families



# Anxious Resistant Attachment



Reese

*Increased risk for anxiety disorders*

Erratic care



You're unreliable,  
I'm powerless



anxious,  
dependent

# Anxious Avoidant Attachment

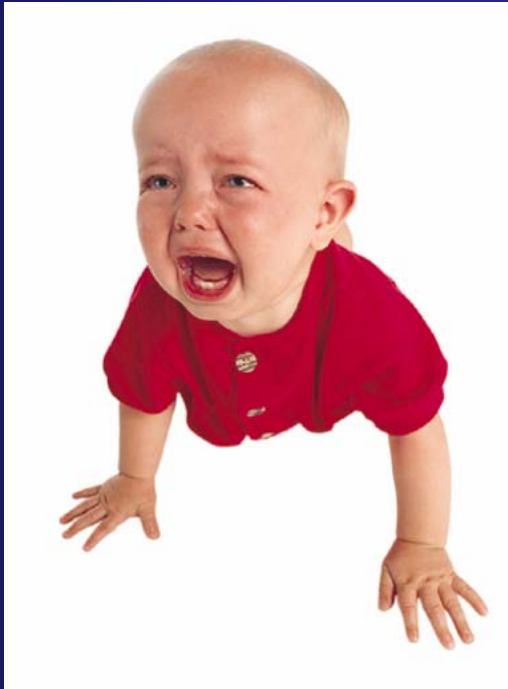


Andy

*Increased risk of  
conduct disorders*

Unresponsive care → It's not OK to show that I need you → aggressive, lacks empathy

# Disorganized Attachment



Devon

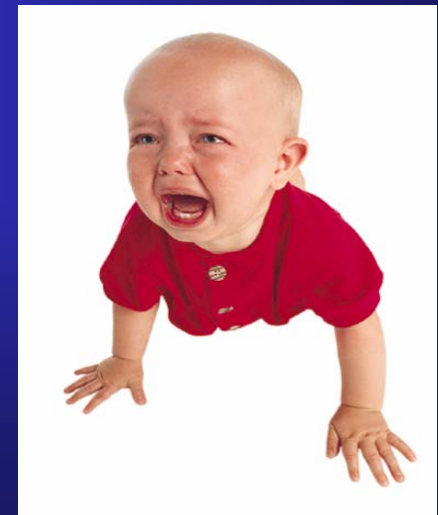
*Increased risk of serious psychopathology*

Threat from caregiver → Will you protect me or harm me? → dissociation

# Trauma in the Context of Attachment

- Protecting young children from trauma (e.g. witnessing or experiencing violence; loss or significant disruptions in care) is important to lifelong health
- Patterns of attachment affect how the child responds to subsequent loss or trauma (and even how and when the child perceives such)

- The impact of trauma is compounded when the child cannot process it with caring, supportive adults
- Particularly disorienting is trauma inflicted by the very person who is supposed to be the child's safe haven at times of threat



What are the factors that support or hinder young children from getting the early experiences they need for healthy development?

## Critical factors

- Parental knowledge, skill, health and mental health\*
- Support systems (formal, informal)
- Accessibility, affordability, and quality of early care and education
- Early screening, identification and intervention with children and parents who are high-risk and/or have identified special needs
- Broader community factors, including housing, neighborhood safety, and transportation



# Prevalence of Depression

- In U.S., twice as many women (12.3%) as men (6.7%) are affected each year
- Most prevalent among women of child-bearing and child-rearing ages (16-53)
- Rates are twice as high (25%) for low-income women and women of color
- Among teen moms, prevalence as high as 44%
- Depression is 2nd most common reason for women being hospitalized in U.S. (second only to childbirth)

# Depression & Parenting

- More negative perceptions of child behavior
- Less consistent sensitivity and responsiveness to child's needs
- More likely to use punitive (and inconsistent) discipline
- Less likely to read or play with child
- Less likely to use preventive safety measures (e.g. car seats, safety latches)
- More negative and less positive affect with child

# Maternal Depression: A Silent Threat?

- Often unrecognized (especially in low-income women and women of color)
- Often untreated (fewer than 20% of low-income depressed women seek treatment)
- Often poorly treated
- Often invisible as a factor in young children's development



How is YOUR  
community ensuring  
that young children  
have the foundations  
they need for healthy  
development?

## For further study:

Erickson, M.F. & Kurz-Riemer, K. (2002). *Infants, Toddlers and Families: A Framework for Support and Intervention*. New York: Guilford Press.

Siegel, D.J. (1999). *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience*. New York: Guilford Press.

Sroufe, L.A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E.A. & Collins, W.A. (2005). *The Development of the Person: the Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood*. New York: Guilford Press.