

The Six Core Strengths for Healthy Brain Development

Each of the following six core strengths developed by Dr. Bruce Perry, Senior Fellow, The Child Trauma Academy, www.childtrauma.org, is a building block in a child's development. Together, they provide a strong foundation for his or her future health, happiness, and productivity.

ATTACHMENT – Be a friend. The most important gift you can give a child is the gift of attachment, the ability to form and maintain healthy emotional bonds with another person. It is first acquired in infancy, as a child interacts with a loving, responsive and attentive caregiver. Healthy attachments allow a child to love, to become a good friend and to have a model for future relationships. As a child grows, other consistent and nurturing adults such as teachers, family friends and relatives will shape the child's ability for attachment.

What you can do to promote the development of healthy attachment: The most important ingredients in building attachment in your children are your time and approval. At every age these two factors develop and strengthen attachment.

For Very Young Children

- Read a story together, pausing to talk about what is happening.
- Sing a familiar song with your child or make up a new one
- Go for a leisurely walk hand-in-hand
- Remind them at every opportunity, and at least three times a day, how special they are to you.
- Limit the amount of time your child spends watching television and substitute an activity where you interact together

For Older Elementary School Children

- Tuck a "love note" into their jacket pocket and give plenty of hugs.
- Sit together while they do their schoolwork and you read or make your grocery list
- Work on a special project together: cooking, gardening, model building, etc.
- Display their artwork and school papers in a place of honor.
- Continue to limit the amount of time your child watches television or plays electronic games in favor of interactive activities.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Continue working on special projects together, and demonstrate your support for their growing skills and independence.
- Get a personal bulletin board where they can display their treasures.
- Explore your family history together to give them a sense of connectedness.
- Volunteer together at a community activity such as a Food Bank.

SELF-REGULATION – Think before you act. Self-regulation is the ability to notice and control primary urges such as hunger and sleep, as well as feelings of frustration, anger and fear. Putting a moment between an impulse and an action is an essential skill but it is a strength that must be learned. We are not born with it.

What you can do to promote the development of self-regulation: From the time you responded to your baby's cry, you began developing your child's self-regulation ability. Your strongest tools for further development of self-regulation are consistency and a calm, peaceful environment.

For Very Young Children

- Model self-regulation by using a calm tone and matter-of-fact manner when it is necessary to correct your young child.
- Be alert to a rising level of impulsive activity and re-direct your child to a quiet activity such as reading a story together.
- Remember that play time is learning time for the very young and expect that children will play side-by-side in the early years.
- Play "going to the store" or "going to the park" before you leave home in order to show your child appropriate behavior.
- Provide a calm and predictable environment.

For Older Elementary School Children

- Continue to be a role model for self-regulated behavior
- Maintain a regular schedule, assuring that your child gets adequate rest every day
- Take steps to make the environment calmer if you sense your child is having difficulty. Turn down the volume on the TV or radio, dim the lights, find a different, quiet activity.
- Provide structure for your child's free time. You do not need to schedule every minute, but a weekly trip to the library, to visit relatives, to church, caring for a pet, etc., all enhance your child's ability to self-regulate.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Develop a weekly schedule together, allowing sufficient time for schoolwork and for sleep.
- Give appropriate rewards for sticking to the schedule that you have developed together.
- Discuss what is expected in new, unfamiliar situations, such as how to behave at a wedding or a funeral.
- Let them see you stop and think before you act. If the situation is appropriate, talk about the factors you are considering before taking action.

AFFILIATION – Join In. Affiliation is the capacity to join others and contribute to a group. This strength springs from a child's capacity to form attachments.

What you can do to promote the development of affiliation: Direct and reinforce positive affiliations for your child in ever widening circles from home and family to neighborhood, community and nation.

For Very Young Children

- Family is a child's first affiliation. Encourage positive interactions with your extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins.
- Provide opportunities for supervised play with other children, remembering that the youngest children will be more apt to play side-by-side than together.
- Practice social skills together; answering the phone, greeting guests, etc.
- Build success into the visits of very young children by keeping them brief.

For Older Elementary School Children

- Friends are the important affiliation at this age. Make every effort to know the children your own child considers friends.
- Discuss the qualities such as cooperation, trustworthiness, and loyalty.
- Provide opportunities for your children to participate in age-appropriate clubs and teams.
- Offer a welcome in your home to your child's friends, and after the visit talk about why they are friends.
- Be willing to chaperone or transport your child and a group of friends for school, club, team, or church activities.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Be involved from afar in the affiliation choices your child makes. Offering to make popcorn at your house or drive to the movies gives you an opportunity to assess and guide their choices.
- Continue to support your child in developing good social skills and self regulation techniques.
- Affiliations are paramount at this age and a child with impulsive or immature behavior may find that others avoid them.
- Support your child in affiliating with something larger than home and neighborhood. National children's clubs such as Scouts, Junior Red Cross or 4-H may offer positive affiliations.
- Help your child prepare in advance for new social experiences.
- Encourage and support your teen's participation in school-sponsored teams and clubs.
- Broaden your teen's sense of affiliation by volunteering together for national programs such as Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, or Search & Rescue.

ATTUNEMENT – Think of others. Attunement is being able to recognize the needs, interests, strengths and values of others. The ability to read and respond to the needs of others is an essential element of human communication.

What you can do to promote the development of attunement: Modeling un-biased interaction sends a strong, positive message to your children. Provide your children with a wide variety of opportunities to interact with diverse people in order to avoid stereotyping others.

For Very Young Children

- Avoid using generalizations and stereotypes when talking about others. Encourage your child to react to others as individuals.
- Visit and enjoy community fairs and carnivals sponsored by a number of different cultural groups. Young children may enjoy the music and games of these events.
- Invite families with different backgrounds to visit in your home or to share a restaurant meal, and accept their return invitations.
- Look for books to share that feature families different from your own and talk together about the lives of the characters.

For Older Elementary School Children

- Begin a continuing dialogue about stereotypes: “Some people think that . . .” and about how that is neither an appropriate nor accurate way to classify people. Talk together to overcome labels based on age, size, race, religion, gender, sexual preference, physical abilities, etc.
- Sample different cultures by trying a variety of ethnic restaurants and attending diverse cultural programs.
- Check out videos about different cultures from the library and watch them together.
- Offer to share your own cultural heritage with your child’s peers at school or in youth groups.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Continue discussing stereotypical attitudes including “Some people think that we . . .” and begin talking about how stereotypes are formed by lack of understanding.
- Attend special exhibits of art, music, or dance from cultures different from your own.
- Support your child’s friendship with children from diverse backgrounds, treating them and their parents with sincere interest and respect.
- Experiment together with cooking meals from different cultures.
- Encourage your teen to volunteer at community activities, such as day camps or pre-schools that serve a culturally diverse population.
- Take advantage of opportunities for your teen to interact with those who have special needs such as volunteering for Special Olympics or Reading for the Blind.

TOLERANCE – Accept differences. Tolerance is the capacity to understand and accept how others are different from you. When a child learns to accept differences in others, he is able to value what makes each of us special and unique.

What you can do to promote the development of tolerance: Continue to seek out new interactions and experiences for your child, because the root of tolerance is in not feeling threatened by something or someone new or different.

For Very Young Children

- Adventure together to a different part of town, a new park, another shopping center.
- Model your lack of anxiety in these new situations.
- Try a different means of transportation together: a train or light rail ride, a harbor boat trip; a bus ride, a horse-drawn wagon, etc.
- Present new experiences as a routine part of life, but remember to praise your young child for accepting the new situation without a fearful response.
- Encourage your child to taste new and different foods.

For Older Elementary School Children

- Discuss with your child the balance between safety and meeting new adventures. Work to develop their sense of what is appropriate and encourage them to try new things while in your company and under your supervision.
- Be alert to judgmental statements and work with your child to correct them when possible.
- Model tolerance when you travel to different geographic areas together, showing your acceptance of others as you relate to new people.
- Cook new ethnic foods together, later visit a restaurant that serves the same sort of food.
- Watch for open houses or public events and different community centers, schools, or churches and attend them together.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Continue to be a role model as you demonstrate tolerant behavior and willingness to meet new people.
- Discuss any intolerant behaviors you hear in a calm, forthright manner. Talk about how these attitudes develop and how they can be avoided.
- Sign up for a class together that features something completely new for both of you. Many recreation departments offer inexpensive classes in everything from archery to folk dancing.
- Many families have ancestors from several different parts of the world. Explore your ancestry together and then learn more about the countries of origin and their lives there.

RESPECT – Respect yourself and others. Respect is appreciating the value in yourself and others. Respect, as the sixth core strength, springs from the foundation of the other five strengths. An attuned, tolerant child with good affiliation, attachment and self-regulation acquires respect naturally. The development of respect is a lifelong process as children learn to process each of these core strengths and integrate them into their behaviors and world view.

What you can do to promote the development of respect: When children are made to feel special and valued, they grow to respect themselves and a positive sense of self allows them to respect others.

For Very Young Children

- Remember the importance of your words to a child. They will remember your negative comments much longer than the positive ones. Intervene and stop negative comments that are being used either by or against your child.
- Make it possible for your child to succeed at whatever is attempted; break skills into small steps to be mastered one by one where you assist with the steps not yet mastered.
- Talk with your child about respecting all family members and ways to show that respect.
- Model respect for all people including the elderly, the young, authority figures such as police officers and teachers, and those who are different from you in ethnicity or religion.

For Older Elementary School Children

- Continue to build your child's sense of self respect, dwelling on their skills and talents and being matter-of-fact about the things they may not do as well.
- Continue to limit and supervise the amount of television your child watches.
- Help your child to value real life qualities of consistency, predictability, kindness, humor, and grace under pressure, both through your example and by talking about others who demonstrate these qualities.
- Be patient and help your child with self-patience as new tasks and skills are learned. If needed, meet with your child's teacher for guidance in helping with new academic skills.
- Speak about others, including family members, in respectful terms: Mrs. Jones, Doctor Smith, Officer Green instead of Jones, Smith, or the cop.

For Middle Schoolers/Teenagers

- Carry on a continuing dialogue about respect; why you respect others, what respect consists of, how we demonstrate respect, etc.
- Help youngsters learn appropriate ways to express their opinions to teachers and other adults with respect, even when their opinions are different.