

Traveling Around the Circle of Security

(To be used in conjunction with the Circle of Security graphic)

“Let’s use the idea of Secure Base as a starting point for taking a tour around the Circle of Security. We will start with what we call the top half of the circle. When children feel safe and secure their curiosity kicks in and they want to learn about the world. However, before they set off to explore, children need a sense that their parent is supporting that exploration (see “Support My Exploration” on the Circle). “Support My Exploration” is one of the two transition needs on the circle. Even young children watch their parents very carefully to figure out what is safe and what is dangerous. Since they depend so much on their parents to protect them while they explore, young children also watch to see if their parent is paying attention to them for that protection. Young children don’t actually think about this—remember, they are wired to do this automatically! Over time, they remember what parents have indicated is safe and what is dangerous. Support for exploration is often a combination of the history of that parent’s support for exploration, as well as an immediate cue of safety.

“With support from their parent, children head out for grand adventures. They may wander across the room or behind the couch. As they get older, they can travel farther and stay away longer. And here’s one of the most important points—as they are exploring, children need their parent just as much as they do when they are in their parent’s lap. Even though what children need from their parent changes as they travel around the circle, it is important to remember that children need their parent all the way around the Circle.

“When the child is exploring, it is usually the parent’s job to watch out for danger or be there in case something happens (see “Watch Over Me” on the Circle). Although the

parent may be barely aware of this, and the child may seem preoccupied with play, if the parent becomes unavailable, the child's exploration ends.

“Sometimes children need more than having the parent watch over them. At times children need help exploring (see “Help Me” on the Circle). This requires the caregiver to provide the necessary help without taking over (children need just enough help to do it by themselves). This is called scaffolding and usually requires the parent to continue to follow the child's need rather than taking charge.

“At other times, children simply want their caregiver to enjoy with them (see “enjoy with me” on the Circle). These shared moments provide children with a sense that the caregiver is attentive, available and attuned. It also makes children feel they are worthy of such attention.

“At all times, children need to know that no matter what they are doing, their parent finds delight in them, for no other reason than their simply being alive. Hence, during moments of exploration – moments that often have to do with building autonomy and mastery – a child will look back just to make sure the parent is delighted “(Delight in me”). This delight doesn't have to do with “what I just did” but “that I just am.” Such moments do much to build a well-engrained sense of self worth in the child.

“When children have explored long enough or become tired, frightened or uncomfortable, they are no longer interested in exploring. Or if children get into an unsafe situation, parents need to take charge and end the exploration. Either way children suddenly have a new set of needs that require a response from their parent.

“We are now talking about the bottom half of the circle. Unless they are very frightened, the first thing children need on the bottom half of the Circle is a sign from the parent that they are welcome to come back to the parent. “Welcome My Coming to You”

is the second transition need on the circle. (See “welcome My Coming to You” on the Circle.) Like support for exploration, a children’s sense that they are welcome to come back is a combination of a history of support, as well as an immediate cue.

“Children sometimes cue their parents for protection (see “Protect Me” on the Circle). Providing protection from clear and immediate danger is a basic part of parenting that we clearly understand. However, children are sometimes frightened and need to be soothed even when, to the adult, there is no clear danger.

“Sometimes the child is not in danger but needs comfort (see “Comfort Me” on the Circle). Although most parents understand the idea of comfort, not all parents have experience of either comforting or being comforted and so they struggle giving comfort to their children.

“Sometimes children need help organizing an internal experience that is overwhelming (see “Organize My Feelings” on the Circle). Most parents understand that their children need help organizing their external world or their behavior, but for many parents, it is a new idea that children need help organizing their internal world. Children’s need for internal organization may come from being tired, hungry, disappointed, startled, sad, frustrated, etc. Whatever the cause, children need their parent’s help because they are still too young to do it alone. It is through the repeated process of parents helping their children organize internally that children learn how to manage feelings both by themselves and in relationship.”