

Circle of love

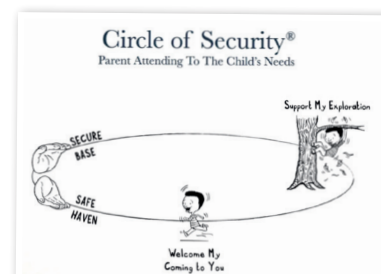
A video-based early intervention programme called Circle of Security Parenting is boosting attachment between parents and children, discovers **Annette Rawstrone**

All parents experience frustrating times when they don't understand what their young child wants from them and don't know how to react to their emotional needs. The Circle of Security Parenting (COS-P) programme is an early intervention model designed to enhance attachment security between parents and children by using video and graphics.

COS-P is based extensively upon attachment theory from the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper and Bert Powell started developing the programme in 1998 as a way to bring a user-friendly version of attachment theory to young homeless and other vulnerable parents they were working with in Spokane, Washington, USA.

Encouraged by the positive results, they adapted it into an eight-week video-based parenting programme, recommended for parents of children aged from four months to six years old. It is cited in the latest *Handbook of Attachment* as one of four attachment-based programmes with the strongest evidence base and is now used internationally.

'We knew something needed to be done to bring the wisdom of attachment research to vulnerable families – those dealing with insecurity, trauma, neglect and abuse – so we created something ourselves,' explains co-ordinator and psychotherapist Kent Hoffman.



'Our remit test was that if it won't make sense to a 16-year-old street parent, then we won't teach it. It turned out that the model worked equally well with middle-class families.'

BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER

Parents need to be bigger, stronger, wiser and kind in order to be a secure base for their child. COS-P aims to help parents manage this by increasing their awareness of their children's needs and whether their own responses adequately meet those needs. It aims to shift parents' focus from looking at how to stop undesirable behaviour to regarding behaviour as a way for young children to communicate their needs.

The programme regards the relationship between a parent and child as a circle – at the top of the circle is the child's need to explore, while at the bottom is their need to be protected (see box). The parent is shown as being at both the top

and the bottom of the circle with the role of guiding their child out to explore and also allowing them to return when they need comforting. Parents can begin to understand their child's cues and what they need from them by picturing where they are on the circle at that time.

'The model is designed to give parents a way to reflect on their natural capacity to love their child,' says Dr Hoffman. 'The common tendency is to struggle with some area of the circle. I've never found a parent who doesn't.'

Core concepts are:

- The parent serves as a secure base from which their child can explore and as a safe haven to which they can return in times of stress.
- Some parents feel uncomfortable or threatened by their child's exploration, whereas others have negative feelings in response to their child's attachment wishes.
- Children thrive when their parent is relatively responsive to

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case studies

Top of the circle

Abandoned by her parents when she was two years old, Carrie (not her real name) was raised in foster care but dropped out of school in her early teens and became homeless and pregnant aged 15. She took part in a COS-P programme in a group setting, where it became apparent that she was over-involved and would not let her baby move without interfering, by overreacting or offering help.

By the time the child was ten months old, instead of crawling and exploring, she would stay close and keep looking at her mother. The child had no autonomy and no sense of a growing capacity in herself. Carrie recognised that she was struggling at the 'top of the circle' and realised she was missing the ability to allow her child to explore.

When Carrie was evaluated when her

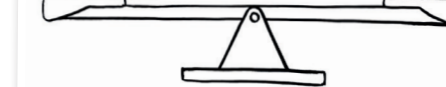
child was 20 months old, she was found to be interfering much less. The child, who is now a teenager, is thriving at school and gaining high grades.

Bottom of the circle

Dr Hoffman says it is common for highly educated parents who are more verbal and information-orientated to struggle at the bottom of the circle. He recalls the mother of a three-year-old who would brag about her child.

'I could see the child move toward the mum and bring a toy. The three-year-old showed cues that they wanted to get in her lap. The mother quizzed the child on the colour of the toy and then instructed them to get another toy. The child never had the chance to get in her lap,' he says. 'The child asked but did not receive affection because the mother was so interested in her

BIGGER & STRONGER



child's performance that she left her child needing.'

The mother was raised to expect high success and primed to support success rather than comfort, but COS-P promotes that secure attachments come from access to the top and the bottom of the circle. Following the programme, the mother gained more awareness to give comfort to her child.

'It was still limited, but I believe the child got 30-50 per cent more comfort than they would have done otherwise,' estimates Dr Hoffman.

both attachment and exploratory behaviour, so it is important for parents to develop the reflective capacity to consider what may hinder or help their capacity to respond.

holding environment for parents as they reflect on their relationship with their child.'

The circle graphic (see left page, bottom) makes attachment theory visual, gives parents a map to understand their child's behaviour and enables them to see the pattern of the child coming in for comfort (using the parent as safe haven) and going out to explore their world (using the parent as a secure base). 'By thinking where their child is on the circle, parents begin to understand what their child needs from them,' Ms Peters explains.

The sessions help parents to see where they struggle with their child and their own state of mind when it comes to responding to their child. 'We all have history when it comes to relationships and the facilitated discussions help parents make sense

SAFE HAVEN, SECURE BASE

Jenny Peters and Dr Clare Gates introduced COS-P to the UK in 2010. Ms Peters now runs a family support project, The Centre in Westminster, where five COS-P groups are delivered to parents each year as part of Westminster Council's Early Help offer. 'Running the course over eight weeks allows parents to embed insight and learning,' Ms Peters explains.

'The model focuses much more on reflection than teaching and the role of the facilitator is to be a



MORE INFORMATION

- www.circleofsecurityinternational.com
- <https://thecentrelondon.com>
- The originators of COS-P believe the programme can work equally well for increasing awareness of attachment with practitioners, www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/cosp-with-carers-welcome
- *Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience and Freedom to Explore* by Kent Hoffman et al (Guildford Press)

of their own instinctive responses to legitimate need,' says Ms Peters. 'For example, a parent who finds comfort hard might label their child as "needy" or "clingy" and dismiss this need. Or a parent who struggles with strong emotions can give in just when they need to step up and take charge in a kind way. It enables parents to engage in their state of mind without the need to use specialist language. Parents are excited to see the circles as their child explores or wants reassurance.'

'The premise is that children behave well when their emotional needs are met, adds Ms Peters, who has found that the programme gives parents more choice of how to react to their child's behaviour and reduces punitive responses.

Dr Hoffman says a key difference between COS-P and other parenting programmes is that it is not focused on changing a child's behaviour. Instead, it aims to impact parents. 'It is about finding a way to understand the underlying paradigm of where they struggle, and this has an immense impact on their parenting – the more we know, the more we can be available in a healthy way for our children,' he says.

'I believe it's successful because it is based on a cache of research and it is a simple way of making a deep message inside our DNA and allowing it to come alive. As soon as parents hear it, they have an "ah-ha" moment – I've seen it thousands of times. Its success is its simplicity.'