
RAISING CHILDREN WITH AGENCY

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What is Self-Agency?

Agency is a mindset adopted through learned behavior. Having agency is the belief that you have self-efficacy to inform and determine the outcomes that shape your life. It's a belief in yourself, about your inner strength, resilience, and adaptability. This does not just happen. While we can always change the narrative we have about ourselves, how our parents interacted with us has a tremendous impact in shaping our self construct, internal scripts, and worldview. As adults, we in turn, play a large role in how our children will view themselves.

Our goal as parents should be to raise children who are socially adept, emotionally intelligent, morally conscientious, ambitious and productive members of society. We should want them to be independent thinkers, not be persuaded by peer pressure to engage in harmful behaviors and maintain self confidence that is not overcome by fear or anxiety.

Life Skills

These constructs are key to shaping and forming a successful adult with effective life skills. Those skills include being able to maintain a job, find their own success in their career, establishing connections and belonging to community, forming healthy relationships, and solidifying their personal and professional identity. Pursuing their dreams will be determined by self-agency. Based upon Forbes survey, some key traits to developing a successful adult include the following ¹ :

- They are on a unique path
- Know what they want in their career, are self-directed, and are willing to work for it.
- Can point to successes in the workplace and elsewhere
- Self awareness of their own strengths
- Think independently
- Like to problem solve
- Ambitious
- Proactive
- Enjoy learning new things
- Goal-oriented
- Work well on a team
- Responsible

Parents are bombarded today by advice and information on how to raise their children. We need to protect them, but not over protect them. We need to make them feel safe, but not so safe they aren't trying new things. We need to help lead them into the right direction, yet not dominate their decisions. We believe the key is to find a balance. The most important balance is between two major theories: ***Attachment Theory and Anti-Fragility Theory.***

Attachment Theory

The central theme of attachment theory is that primary caregivers who are available and responsive to an infant's needs allow the child to develop a sense of security. The infant learns that the caregiver is dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world.

British psychologist John Bowlby ² first identified Attachment Theory in the 1950s. The four types of attachment include: secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized. Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. He suggested that attachment also serves to keep the infant close to the mother, thus improving the child's chances of survival. These behaviors make up what Bowlby termed an "attachment behavioral system," which is the system that guides us in our patterns and habits of forming and maintaining relationships.



¹ Ryan, L. (2016). 12 Qualities Employers Look for When They're Hiring. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2016/03/02/12-qualities-employers-look-for-when-theyre-hiring/?sh=2df454bc2c24>

² Biography of Psychologist John Bowlby: The Founder of Attachment Theory. Retrieved from: <https://www.verywellmind.com/john-bowlby-biography-1907-1990-2795514>

Research on Bowlby’s theory of attachment shows that infants placed in an unfamiliar situation and separated from their parent will generally react in one of these ways upon reunion with the parent. In the 1970’s psychologist Mary Ainsworth³ groundbreaking "strange situation" study⁴ revealed the profound effects of attachment on behavior. In the study, researchers observed children between the ages of 12 and 18 months as they responded to a situation in which they were briefly left alone and then reunited with their mothers. Ainsworth described three major styles of attachment and later researchers, Main and Solomon (1986)⁵ added a fourth attachment style.

Primary Attachment Styles

- **Secure attachment:** Children who can depend on their caregivers show distress when separated and joy when reunited. Although the child may be upset, they feel assured that the caregiver will return. When frightened, securely attached children are comfortable seeking reassurance from caregivers. This is the most common attachment style.
- **Anxious-ambivalent attachment:** Also referred to as Insecure-resistant attachment. These children become very distressed when a parent leaves. Upon reuniting with the parents, seemed both to seek comfort and attempt to “punish” the parents for leaving. With the lack of parental availability children learn they cannot depend on their primary caregiver to be there when they need them.

- **Avoidant attachment:** These children avoid parents or caregivers, showing no preference between a caregiver and a complete stranger. Infants in this category show no stress or minimal stress upon separation from the parents and either ignored the parents upon reuniting or actively avoided the parents. This attachment style might be a result of abusive or neglectful caregivers.
- **Disorganized/disoriented attachment:** Infants in this category exhibit behavioral disorganization or disorientation in the form of wandering, confused expressions, freezing, undirected movements, or contradictory (i.e., “unorganized”) patterns of interaction with a caregiver. Most of these children have histories of maltreatment and may exhibit fear of the caregiver. These children display a confusing mix of behavior. They may avoid or resist the parent, and later want them. This lack of a clear attachment pattern is likely linked to inconsistent caregiver behavior. These parents may serve as both a source of comfort and fear, leading to disorganized behavior.

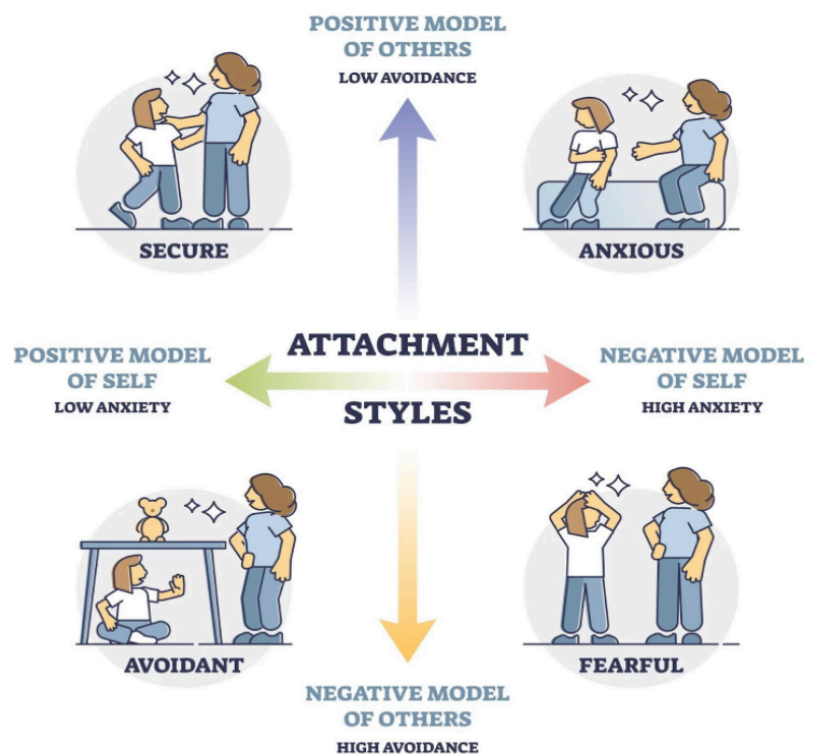


Figure 1: Model of Attachment Styles⁶

³ Biography of Mary Ainsworth. Retrieved from: <https://www.verywellmind.com/mary-ainsworth-biography-2795501>

⁴ Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41, 49-67.

⁵ Main, M., & Solomon, J. (1986). Discovery of an insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern. In T. B. Brazelton & M. W. Yogman (Eds.), *Affective development in infancy* (pp. 95-124). Ablex Publishing.

⁶ Retrieved from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment-styles.html>

Researchers Rudolph Schaffer and Peggy Emerson studied the Stages of Attachment ⁷, through a longitudinal study with 60 infants, observed every four weeks during the first year of life, and then once again at 18 months. These researchers uncovered four distinct phases of attachment:

1. **Pre-Attachment Stage (0-3 months):** Infants do not show any particular attachment to a specific caregiver. Infants may cry and fuss but little preference is given to the caregiver.
2. **Indiscriminate Attachment (6 weeks to 7 months):** Infants begin to show preferences for primary and secondary caregivers. Infants develop trust. While they accept care from others, infants start distinguishing between familiar and unfamiliar people, responding more positively to the primary caregiver.
3. **Discriminate Attachment (7 months to 11 months):** Infants show a strong attachment for one specific individual. They show separation anxiety when separated, and stranger anxiety when dealing with unfamiliar people.
4. **Multiple Attachments (sometime after 9 months):** Children begin to form strong emotional bonds with other caregivers beyond the primary attachment figure.



Factors that Influence Attachment

Opportunity for attachment: Children without a primary care figure may fail to develop the sense of trust needed to form an attachment.

Quality caregiving: The essential foundation for attachment is children learning they can depend on the people who are responsible for their care.

The Lasting Impact of Early Attachment

Children who are securely attached as infants, tend to develop stronger self-esteem and self efficacy. They tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have better relationships with less anxiety and depression. Those who are not securely attached can have problems with emotional management and withdrawal from others.

While adult attachment styles are inevitably informed by early caregiver bonds, adults can work on improving and developing more adaptive and healthy relationships, forming more secure attachment styles and through finding the right partner for them.

Safetyism vs. Anti-fragility

Anti-fragility is a property of systems in which individuals increase in capability to thrive as a result of stressors, shocks, volatility, mistakes, faults, attacks, or failures. The concept was developed by a mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb ⁸ (2012) in his book, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* ⁹, and in technical papers. He is a mathematician who created the concept for products that were robust. Since then, others such as Johnathan Haidt (2018) applied the theory to his book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* ¹⁰, a book that raises concern about sheltered parenting approaches to raising children in America.

⁷ Schaffer, H. R., & Emerson, P. E. (1964). The development of social attachments in infancy. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 1-77.

⁸ Biography of Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nassim_Nicholas_Taleb

⁹ Taleb, N. N. (2012). *Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*. Random House.

¹⁰ Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, J. (2018). *The Coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*.

The concepts of anti-fragility are based on the idea that individuality, agency, independence, and creativity are all concepts that come from one's confidence in themselves. This happens over time with experience and learning. While a parent may do a good job in a child's infancy in forming a bond with their child, if they become over dominant, constantly seeking to keep their children safe, then the child does not have the experiences or exposure to succeeding and failing on their own. These experiences offer a vast amount of learning through exploration, discovery and collaboration. Children have anti-fragile, resilient systems, that can be enhanced through building up their ego strength, self-esteem and confidence.

The Coddling of the American Mind identified harmful beliefs that corrupt anti-fragile systems, which the authors argue are damaging children's resilience ¹¹ :

1. What doesn't kill you makes you weaker
2. Stick and stones may break my bones, but will words will traumatized you for life
3. Always ask for permission first.
4. Safety to the extreme.
5. Battle between good and evil people

Bullying vs Allowing Children the Opportunity to Resolve Conflicts

It's important to mention bullying. Chronic bullying can have serious deleterious consequences on the child who is bullied, with increased release of cortisol, a stress hormone. But what types of bullying should be intervened upon by authorities and which types of relational conflicts should be left to the child to resolve independently (albeit with the informed support of adults).

Schools are dramatically expanding the scope of the definition of bullying. The historical definition of bullying was: 1) a power differential between the children; 2) the issue becomes chronic, in that it is sustained; and 3) that it usually includes violence. This definition is adjusting. Some schools use the word being "mean." To this extent some schools have omitted having "best friends" because it excludes people. This is taking it too far.

As a parent, it is best we project out, what is it we want for our children. We want to help them later in life avoid depression, anxiety. We should want to help them be cooperative, self-initiative, innovative, and creative. We need them to survive and thrive without us. We need them to not have a victim mindset, and instead see the amazing opportunities in front of them. In a book by Esther Wojcicki (2019), *How to Raise Successful People* ¹² , she used the acronym "TRICK" for parents, which stands for "trust, respect, independence, collaboration and kindness." Wojcicki asserts, give your child as much trust and respect as possible.



¹¹ Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, J (2018). *The Coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure.*

¹² Wojcicki, E. (2019). *How to raise successful people: Simple lessons for radical results.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.



At the Optimistic American, we believe in the same concept, but we propose a different acronym, **TRIPLE**, that stems from our Hierarchy of Agency. With children, the idea of scaffolding is a great way to approach the balance between attachment and anti-fragility. While validating and accepting where the child is developmentally, we also encourage them to grow towards the next level that is just outside of their developmental capability. So, they are always reaching and striving for the next developmental stage, while increasingly promoting their independence. All of us as a parent want our children to be safe, but this has to be balanced with the ability to develop an innovative, creative human being, one who has courage to pursue their passions, and to find their own path in life.

Our acronym **TRIPLED** is designed to help you think about this balance necessary to give your child Agency. It's not always easy. It takes our time, our love, but also our courage to step back, to let go, and see them become self-reliant. But we also know that if you make this emotional investment, you will **TRIPLE** your results.

T. Truth: Trust and Truth are interconnected. Both are necessary to build confidence and courage.

R. Respect: Respect the rights of every individual, including your children.

I. Independence: Independence, individuation and autonomy comes from strength.

P. Purpose: Meaning and purpose are key to a valuable life, not happiness.

L. Love: Treating yourself and others with dignity, kindness, value, and love.

E. Engagement: Participating and collaborating to something greater that you belong to

D. Deliver: Be accountable and reliable. Prove yourself in your actions more than your words.

Truth:

Truth and Trust are interconnected, even in the root of the word, through Old Norse ¹³. If you want the truth from your child, trust is an important component. Young children don't lie because they have moral imperfections. They usually lie because they are afraid of the punishment. It comes from a lack of courage, which is built through caregivers actions with children. Building faith in your children, allowing them to be part of the process of decision making, has an impact on giving them confidence and courage.

Good examples of this include the basic actions we as parents provide such as dressing and feeding our infants. Certainly there is a phase in which children know they are being dressed, yet they are too young to dress themselves. You can start by giving the child choices constantly on what they prefer to wear. This can be done even when they are too young to speak but can point. You will be surprised at how a child responds to this. As they get older, increase the responsibility to dress themselves. If you break functions into its parts, you can find areas your child can participate. Build in them early the idea that you trust them to make choices.

¹³ "truth, verity," late 12c., from a phonetic variant of Old English *treowð* "faithfulness, veracity, truth;" see **truth**, which is a doublet of this word. Restricted to Midlands and Northern England dialect after 16c., and to certain archaic phrases (such as *plight one's troth*). Retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/troth>

Respect:

Western Liberal Democracies are built on the idea that the individual is at the center. We believe every individual is worthy of respect and dignity. But sometimes we see our children as part of a unit and not truly having respect for them as an individual. This is not a license to give up your responsibilities as a parent. But the earlier you build that respect, the faster their minds develop the skills necessary to survive as an independent adult. Model as a parent treating children with respect so they can mimic this learned behavior.

Respecting others as individuals is about listening to them and trying to understand where they are coming from. With your children, as they develop their communication skills, ask them their opinions. Value their input and ideas. As you do, they will feel more confident to develop more of their own individual thinking.

Independence:

Independence comes from strength. Experiencing safety and security in infancy is essential to forming attachment and confidence. However, a trend has developed to keep our children safe, not only physically but emotionally long past adolescence. We have allowed the value of emotional safety to take priority over many other values like free speech, due process, and understanding differing ideas.

We build independence within our children through choices. Early in their upbringing that can be how a child selects what they choose to wear or how they break up their time. As they grow, it is exposing them to difficult and challenging ideas and talking with them about issues, helping them process the ideas, but allowing them the freedom to find themselves.

Purpose:

We find meaning in what we create, what or who we love, our service to others, and through our ability to overcome struggle. It is important as parents that we allow our children the latitude to determine their own passions. That we encourage them when we find things that they're excited about. Often as parents we worry when they make choices that don't reflect the path that we hope they will eventually find. Grant them ability to explore their passions. It is much more challenging to have a child who lacks passion or interest, than it is to have a child who may be passionate about something other than what we might want them to be passionate about. And have faith, overtime those passions usually change anyway. But the empowerment of the child will stick with them for life.

Love & Attachment:

This value might be the most relevant right now. How do we teach kindness and compassion? Certainly, discussions with our children when they're not kind is important. Our modeling kindness to others and to them is vital.

As our children get older, we have to worry about them being recruited into groups, gangs or cliques that are antisocial or dangerous. Some social groups are deeply ideological. Other groups can be destructive to them or others.

Our children, often find encouragement to see themselves as part of a group. This could come from mirroring what they see at home, from peers, online activity or even the lack of exposure to other people. If you find that they are being attracted into divisive ideologies, the least effective tool you have is shaming or blaming them.





Your best chance to draw them away from these damaging ideologies is through love and understanding. This can be difficult when you find that you were appalled by the view of the ideology, that may be an anathema to your values. Lean into understanding where they are coming from. Asking them why they feel that way. Attempting to understand where those emotions are coming from.

For your children to be successful in their life, and in their ability to learn, love and be kind, it is crucial. Not just love and kindness for others, but love and kindness for themselves. Building in the atmosphere, where they can make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes as opposed to being traumatized by them. This is probably how we make learning enjoyable and practice making fun of ourselves. If it's not enjoyable, they won't do it.

Engagement:

Believing that you respect your children's ideas, gives them a connection to you that will allow you to be influential with them for life. Often, we will hear ideas that we want to dismiss as foolish, talking them through these ideas is not the same as endorsing them. What you want to endorse is your child's independent ability to think and reason for themselves. More importantly, they benefit from participating and collaborating to something greater, learning that they belong to something larger than themselves.

Deliver:

Children need responsibilities to know that they individually have to deliver. In order to promote what they want for themselves, they need to deliver in their responsibility to the family (i.e., through chores). They need to deliver on their homework. Building self-esteem around the idea that you're proud of your children for delivering is the way we build productive adults. And the easy way to focus on this when they are young is through simple chores. Be careful about punishing them for not accomplishing tasks that say something about their self-worth. Instead, focus on the praise for when they do participate. It helps build security for them in their house, and pride for participating and contributing to the family household.

