

# Children's inner life holds the key

Do you know which people are the most successful in their lives? Do you immediately think of people who conquer one mountain or another, or who win one marathon and then desperately train for the next, even longer marathon?

While these people are undoubtedly high achievers, they are often not the most successful when it comes to their inner lives. The people who are the real successes are those who have the ability to be quiet within themselves and at peace with their world.

In psychological terms it's referred to as self-efficacy and it's an important protective factor for children to absorb as they develop.

More than 40 years ago, UK psychotherapist Dr John Bowlby developed his attachment theory, which explained that if small children have a constant and secure attachment to a caregiver, their mental health will have been well-anchored as they face the challenges of growing up.

Without a constant positive figure in their lives who is consistent in responding to a little child's needs, the child will get by as best they can, but without the anchor of secure attachment. Children with insecure attachment carry doubts about relationships.

However, the good news is that as long as there is someone in a small child's life who is constant and reliable and can form a continuing attachment, the child will grow up feeling secure and able to trust people. So if Mum and Dad can't provide this, a grandparent, godparent or other extended family member can be the rock in a child's life.

Children who grow up feeling securely attached are more likely to be able to achieve that inner peace and are less prone to experimenting with risky behaviour. These children achieve the self-efficacy we referred to, and this becomes a strong protective factor when they face the problems of substance abuse or anti-social behaviour.

While kids who grow up securely attached still have their good and bad times, they are sure of themselves in a way a kid who grows up without this ability is not.

Securely attached people are able to express themselves and be content with who they are without having to prove themselves all the time through their achievements.

Of course, even people who have this important protective factor are not immune to bad things happening in their lives. But a 1999 study of 9000 students conducted by the Department of Human Services and Centre for Adolescent Health found students who felt securely attached and connected to their schools, family and friendship circles were less likely to indulge in risky behaviour.

Parents can lecture about the dangers of smoking, drinking and drugs until they are blue in the face, but if your child is well-connected to solid influences in their lives, that is a far more effective protective factor than the longest parental lecture.

Other research has shown that protective factors are also important in helping a child to survive a terrible experience, such as a sexual assault. If a child feels grounded and has success at school in academic, social or sporting activities, the distress, shame and negative feelings resulting from the abuse are mitigated by the fact that they are recognised and affirmed for their skills in academic, sporting or social success.

The message a child takes from this recognition is that other people see them as someone who matters, and a good person. If young people can put a value on themselves, this becomes a protective factor.

The trick is to value the person, not simply the achievements. Sadly, the over-achiever who is never satisfied tends to see their worth in what is achieved and not simply in their character and who they are.

## Survival tips

- Helping a child feel securely attached is a major protective factor against risky behaviour
- The ability to be at peace with themselves will help children survive bad experiences in their lives.