

The Circle of Security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships

Robyn Dolby



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About the author

Robyn Dolby is a psychologist who has worked in the field of infant mental health for 30 years. She is a Senior Research Fellow with The Benevolent Society and runs child observation seminars for child psychiatry trainees at the New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry. The seminars are set in a childcare centre and attended by psychiatry trainees and staff within the centre—a unique collaboration between psychiatry, and care and education.

Robyn's area of interest is in using attachment theory to inform reflective practice in child care. She is working with Glen Cooper (the US Circle of Security intervention program) and Maria Aarts (Netherlands' Marte Meo developmental program) on Attachment Matters—From Relationships to Learning at Preschool, a relationship-based intervention that supports staff and parents, and children at preschool. This project began in 2001 as a joint initiative of The Benevolent Society and KU Children's Services and is currently funded by The Robert Christie Foundation in Sydney.



Introduction

'The Circle of Security helps you to look beneath children's behaviour to discover their genuine relationship needs.'

The Circle of Security is an early intervention program for parents and children that focuses on the relationships which give children emotional support.

Central to the program is the Circle of Security map, which helps parents and other carers to follow children's relationship needs and so know how to become more emotionally available to them.

The map draws a very clear link between attachment and learning.

The map is equally relevant to early childhood professionals, and can help them to create secure opportunities for children to learn by meeting their relationship needs. The Circle applies to children of all ages.



Early childhood practitioners and the Circle of Security

The Circle of Security is a way of thinking about children that enables carers and educators to look beyond the children's immediate behaviour and think about how to meet their relationship needs. This approach fits well with childcare practice, in which the quality of the relationships you make with children, the way you support their relationships with peers and the partnerships you develop with their families, are crucial.

The Circle of Security helps you observe the different ways that children approach you to seek support and make use of your help. It assists you in understanding children when their behaviour is causing distress, to you and their peers, and in planning how to meet their needs. The Circle of Security helps you to look beneath children's behaviour to discover their genuine relationship needs.

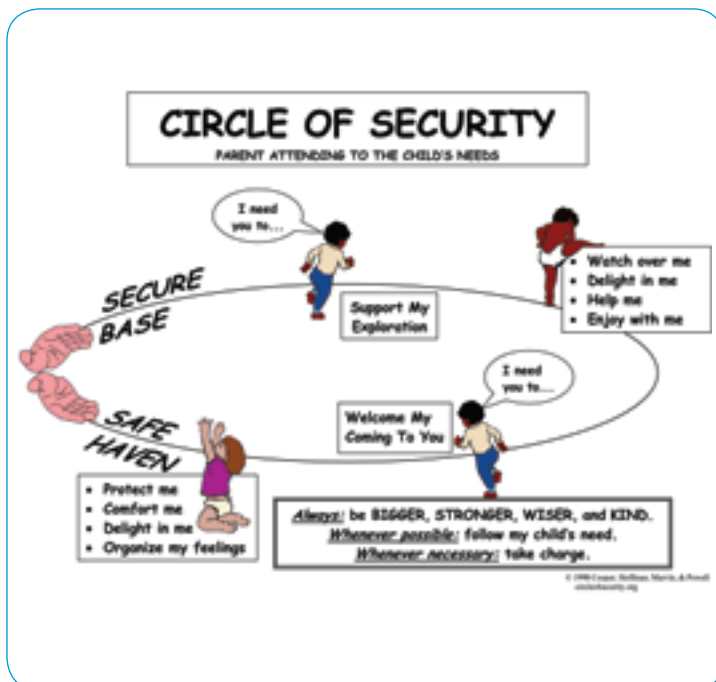
The Circle of Security map

The Circle of Security diagram shows a circle held between two hands. One hand supports the top half of the circle, showing the secure base of support children need for play and learning. Children's underlying needs for exploration are summarised in the box in the top half:

- ◆ 'Watch over me' (to see that I am safe).
- ◆ 'Delight in me' (so I can look into your face and see what I look like to you, and find you are happy to be with me).
- ◆ 'Help me' (just enough so I can do it by myself).
- ◆ 'Enjoy with me' (join my interest).

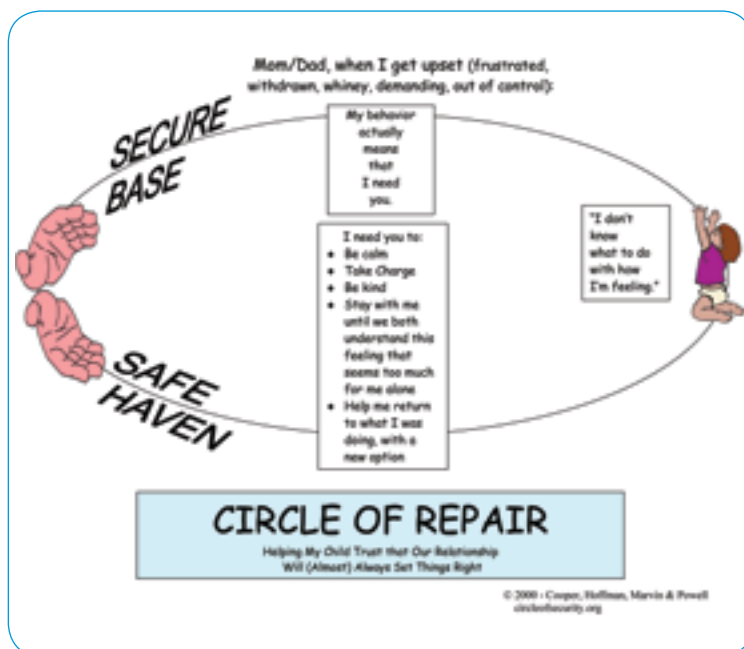
The hand supporting the bottom half of the circle represents the safe haven children need when they have had enough of exploring. Their underlying needs in relation to attachment are shown in the box in the bottom half:

- ◆ 'Protect me' (because I am feeling scared).
- ◆ 'Comfort me' (when I am upset).
- ◆ 'Delight in me' (found on both sides of the circle because it is so important for children).
- ◆ (Help me to) 'organise my feelings'.



The Circle of Security authors point out that, while most caregivers recognise children need help in organising their external world (or their behaviour), for many the idea that children need help organising their internal world (or feelings) is a new one.

When children feel overwhelmed, they need adults to help because they are still too young to manage intense feelings on their own. The Circle of Repair diagram depicts this need in more detail and shows how children can be supported:



To travel smoothly around the Circle of Security—from exploration to attachment needs and back again—children require the support of an emotionally available adult, represented by the two hands. This is:

‘a special person who is always kind and stronger, older and wiser than themselves. This person will follow the child’s needs. Whenever necessary they will take charge.’ (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002, p. 110)

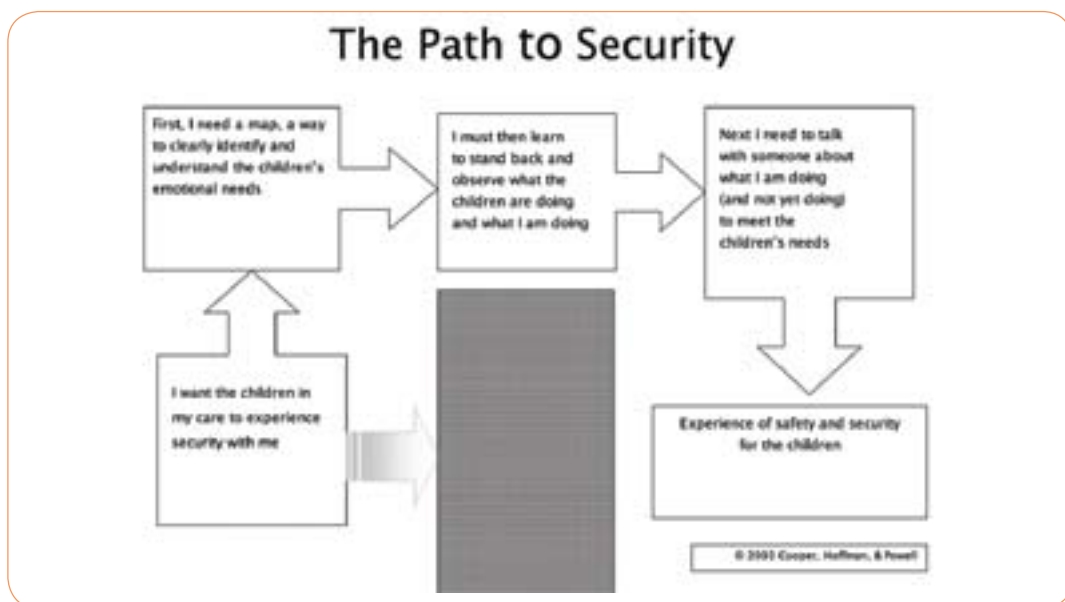
In child care you are the hands for the children in your care. Children are always asking themselves: ‘Can this person who is caring for me take charge?’ Can they comfort me and make me feel safe enough to play? Are they kind?’ Children are constantly travelling around the Circle of Security. They always need you, but this will not be expressed in a clingy or demanding way unless they are afraid they will not be able to get the support they need. If you can welcome and meet their need for reassurance when they are travelling on the attachment side (bottom of the Circle) this refuels them to go out to explore again (top of the Circle). This is how children learn to become independent.



In this picture Marcus is with his preschool teacher, concentrating on cutting out a picture of a moth. This is a clear example of ‘watch over me’ on the top (exploration) side of the Circle. This is a time when Marcus is saying, ‘Help me just enough so I can do it by myself’.

Putting the map to work

How can you use the Circle of Security map in a practical way? The Path to Security diagram below shows the steps involved in becoming emotionally available to children and where the map fits into this.



The Circle of Security comes in at the start as a guide to understanding children's emotional and relationship needs. It provides the basis for observing what children are doing—from a relationship perspective and for working out how you can meet their needs. As the diagram suggests, this is best done in discussion with others. These conversations involve 'seeing and guessing': you say what you *see* a child doing to connect with you and make a *guess* as to what need he or she is expressing, using the Circle as a guide. You can have these 'seeing and guessing' conversations with:

- ◆ your peers (as part of reflective practice)
- ◆ parents (as part of a reflective dialogue)
- ◆ children themselves (as part of empathic conversations with them).



‘Seeing and guessing’ conversations are judgement-free. Staff agree on what they see a child do and work out how they can make themselves more available to meet the child’s needs. This is very different from trying to ‘shape’ children’s overt behaviour. Instead, you look for the message beneath children’s behaviour and then respond to it. This message is often: ‘I am still learning (how not to hit / not to bite / to make friends) and I need your help as an older, stronger, wiser person.’

‘Seeing and guessing’ can be done in many ways. Video can be an ideal way to examine interactions together. For example, in the Circle of Security program, parents meet in a small group to use video film clips of themselves and their child to ‘see and guess’ their children’s needs, with the support of a therapist. In the Attachment Matters—From Relationships to Learning at Preschool intervention program, staff and a mentor review video clips of their interactions with children to identify opportunities for providing relationship support (Dolby & Swan, 2003).

'It is important to find words to describe what is happening in a relationship, as it happens, and to make guesses as to what a child needs from you, because this makes children feel seen ...'



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3

This child is very upset—he has feelings too big to manage on his own and requires an adult to help him return to a calm state. The boy becomes upset when he loses a round in the card game (Photo 1); he receives understanding and the teacher is with him emotionally (Photo 2) which helps him to return to play (Photo 3).

Seeing and guessing with children

Ellie approached Kate, her carer, saying she had a sore throat. Kate had just noticed that Ellie was looking distressed: another child had pulled off her hat at the swings. At other times Ellie had shown Kate her 'sore' finger (which wasn't hurt) as a way of making a connection. Kate expressed concern about Ellie's sore throat and asked if she would like a drink. She also said: *'I'm glad you asked me for help. You know you can come to me whenever you want, like when you are feeling sad. I am always happy to help you.'*

Sometimes there is the opportunity to say something extra. Kate might have made a more direct guess about Ellie's need. After addressing her physical hurt, she might have said, *'I'm also wondering if you are feeling a little bit sad. I saw Jackie pull off your hat and you looked upset'* and then left space for Ellie to talk. If Ellie had said: *'Jackie doesn't want to play with me'*, Kate could have replied: *'Ah, that would be a reason to feel sad. You can sit here with me for a bit or we can go back to the swings together.'*

It might feel awkward at first, talking like this to young children, but it can be very effective for helping them to feel understood. It is important to find words to describe what is happening in a relationship, as it happens, and to make guesses as to what a child needs from you, because this makes children feel seen—that 'you really get it, you understand me. You are someone I can trust to help me. I can listen to what you say and cooperate. I can rely on you; I know you can comfort me, which refuels me to go back to play and return to my learning.' It also reminds us to look beyond a child's immediate behaviour and be aware of their processes of relating.

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The Circle of Security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships

The Circle of Security is a way of thinking about emotion and behaviour that enables early childhood educators and carers to look beyond a child's immediate behaviour and think about how to meet their genuine relationship needs.

Author Robyn Dolby is a psychologist with 30 years' experience working in the infant mental health field. In this book, she demonstrates how practitioners can use the Circle of Security to create secure opportunities for children to learn by meeting their relationship needs.

Robyn demonstrates how to:

- conduct judgement-free, empathic discussions about behaviour with children, parents and other carers
- tailor your approach to reach children who are difficult to connect with
- make use of important transition times to build strong emotional links with families
- increase understanding of your personal emotional map to assist you in reflecting on, and improving, your practice
- help children develop social skills by being with them, with their peers.

High-quality child care and education is all about relationships: connecting deeply with children, encouraging and supporting their connections with other children, and developing strong partnerships with families. Because the Circle of Security helps you find the genuine relationship needs beneath behaviour, it is of immeasurable value to everyone who educates and cares for children.

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