

The Tree

This tree represents the ways that children learn, grow, and thrive. Parents and caretakers are represented as part of the tree, the outer rings of the trunk that hold and provide support for the developing child. How do parents do this? By providing two key things that every child needs: a secure base and a safe haven.

When a child feels safe and secure, she feels ready to go outward and explore. When we are in exploration mode we can branch out, try new things, and enjoy. Exploring includes playing, learning, and trying new things. Yet even at these times a child still needs a secure base, that is, her parent or caretaker to help her, to enjoy with her, and to attend to her to keep her safe.

There are other times when a child feels unsure, vulnerable, hurt, or distressed. At these times, we say that he has a need for connection, and that this is a time to build, nurture, and strengthen the roots. To strengthen roots a child needs connection with a parent or caretaker; he needs to be welcomed in to his safe haven. Meeting the child's needs for nurturance, restoring his emotional balance, and repairing disruptions helps him grow deeper roots, and to thrive.

A child's sense of self develops through this balancing of exploration and connection—branching out and building deeper roots. Parents or caregivers are part of their inner world that guide and support their secure growth. The child's inner core strength is built up, ring by ring, through daily experiences of having their needs met when branching out and building roots, exploring and connecting. This process begins in earliest infancy, when parents hold, nurture and comfort their child, and gradually support their exploration. It continues throughout childhood, as parents guide and support their children in exploration and connection.

Notice that the Tree's branches and roots are symmetrical, that is, there is a balance between the size of the branches and the depth of the roots. If the Tree's roots aren't as wide and thick as the branches, the Tree will topple. Notice that during times of stress, for example during a drought, a tree will not flower, but will focus on survival by strengthening its roots.

The sun represents the environment for children's growth. Both the branches and the roots need warmth and joy to grow and thrive. Parents provide this warmth and joy by meeting and welcoming their children's needs with a sense of delight and acceptance. When parents or caregivers convey, "I just love supporting your exploration," or "I just love being your safe haven," they provide the sun and warmth that children need not just to grow, but to thrive.

