

# The Central Role of Relationship in a Resiliency Based Paradigm



*“No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.”  
Dr. James Comer*

## **A. Neurobiology Reveals Relationships as The Cornerstone of Treatment for At-Risk Youth**

### **1. The Initial Relationship Has Long-term Ramifications**

The initial relationship in life has long-term ramifications on a child’s overall development, especially in the area of social skills. Structure and stability create a predictable environment that denotes safety and security for an infant. In that safe environment, early forms of emotional intelligence begin to formulate. The same sense of safety is also correlated to language development and even in advanced skills such as empathy. However, the presence of multiple risk factors can negatively impact social development.

### **2. The Role Oxytocin Plays in Social Bonding**

All risk factors seem to impact the quality and consistency of relationships. However, some risk factors are directly correlated to the quality of the parent-child relationship as well as the quality of the family support network. Three of the early developmental risk factors highlight the significance of the parent-child relationship. They are infant mother attachment, long-term absence from caregiver, and siblings born within a 2-year period.

Problems in infant-mother attachment refer to the natural act of bonding that occurs between infant and mother in the initial period soon after birth. Infant mother attachment is best described as an intuitive act that occurs within the early weeks following birth. The human mind seems to be predetermined towards attachment to a primary care giver, and chemical reactions that occur in the body seem to assist in this process. At the time of birth the hormone oxytocin is elevated in the systems of mother, father, and child. Oxytocin plays a role in initial bonding and in all subsequent relationships. When oxytocin is elevated in

the body, it reduces stress, allowing the individual to be calmer and therefore better able to trust.

Oxytocin is triggered in one's system by acts of nurturance, sexual arousal, physical touch, and melodic sounds (Uvnas-Moberg et al, submitted). Commonly practiced child rearing rituals, found in traditional child parenting acts, seem to trigger oxytocin on a constant basis. The acts of feeding, holding, massaging, singing, reading, and playing music induce higher levels of oxytocin, insulating many children from the negative impact that stress hormones can have on development. It could be said that relationship is nature's stress regulator. Therefore it is not surprising that many parents report experiencing a reduction in stress when interacting with their babies.

Oxytocin continues to play a role in our parenting, relationships, and even social memory. In many ways the rituals practiced during the infant mother bonding are evidenced in later mating rituals. Many individuals go out to dinner or cook meals for those they are attracted to, inducing oxytocin. We utilize melodic tunes in the mating rituals. We engage in foreplay that involves touch. All of these actions can trigger oxytocin and reduce inhibitions, therefore increasing feelings of trust. This might be why the initial relationship in life is so predictive of the quality of future relationships. Those who bond with their parents usually mimic social practices that increase oxytocin in social situations throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

After infant-mother attachment, two other early developmental risk factors indicate the importance of continued bonding between parent and child. The long-term absence of a main care provider indicates the ongoing importance of continued bonding throughout the developmental stages of a child's life. The presence of a consistent nurturing figure positively impacts social, emotional, and neurological development. Infants count on that consistent figure to which they are bonded to provide consistent verbal, physical, and environmental feedback.

Also, siblings born within a two-year period further emphasizes the importance of having at least one parent who consistently provides nurturance and guidance. Many individuals have siblings born within two-years of each other's birth and never view this as a deficit or risk. However, the negative impact of any risk factor is most pronounced in the presence of other risk factors. For example, having a sibling born within a two-year period would not likely impact a healthy child born to healthy parents with less than two risk factors present in his or her life. Conversely, a child with difficult infant temperament, born to parents who have difficulty in organizing and structuring a household might feel the impact of an additional sibling, resulting in the loss of attention or decreased supervision. The increase in the child's level of stress, coupled with the child's temperament, could

lead to a misperception of the parent's true level of love and caring. It is important to note that the presence of any early stressor that is consistently present or perceived can lead to a significant change in brain and body chemistry resulting in unhealthy behaviors.

There are some additional risk factors that are family stressors that impact child-parent relations. Poverty, single-parent households, and having four or more siblings in the home are all risk factors that can impact the environment of both the child and parent. The correlation of these risk factors to the higher occurrence of poor outcomes should not be overlooked nor taken lightly.