

Through the eyes of a child

# Grandparents raising grandchildren



## Relationship expectations: Now and in the future

**T**he way people develop relationships as adults is shaped by the relationships they form with their parents as young children. This fact sheet describes four attachment styles, how the styles affect the child's emotional state and sense of self worth, and how children arrive at various relationship styles.

### What does your grandchild expect?

Children expect different things from relationships, depending on how their families treat them. To learn about what children expect, researchers have looked at how children are treated at home and how they respond to brief separations from their parents. Children's responses tell a lot about the type of care they have been given. Their responses also show the kind of relationships they have and what they expect from the caregiver in the future. (For a description of attachment relationships, see fact sheet #2: *The Importance of Close Relationships*)

The following descriptions outline four general types of relationships. Each looks at how a parent or other caregiver behaves towards the child, how the young child reacts when the parent is present and during brief separations, and what the child's expectations are about relationships.<sup>1,2</sup>

#### Secure attachment (child is comfortable in close relationships)

*Caregiver:* Warm, responsive, and tuned in to the child's needs, especially when the child is upset.

*Child:* Explores the environment with the parent present, but cries when the parent leaves. When the parent returns, the parent can calm the child. After the child is calm, he or she begins to play again.

*Expectations:* Children learn to trust their parents to give them support and love. When their parent is gone for awhile, they know that the parent will return. Children begin to feel worthy of love and protection.

#### Insecure attachment— ambivalent type (child feels conflicted about close relationships)

*Caregiver:* The parent gives support and sensitive care some, but not all, of the time. It is not consistent.

*Child:* The child doesn't know what to expect from the parent. The child does not explore their surroundings when the parent is around. When the parent goes away, the child is anxious and distressed. When the parent comes back, the child has mixed reactions. The child goes back and forth between pushing the caregiver away and then seeking comfort. It's hard for the child to calm down.

*Expectations:* Children learn that the parent gives support and comfort only at some times and not at other times. These children may have a hard time truly connecting to other people, even though they need to be close to others. They are afraid that others won't be there when they need them. Children begin to think they are only worthy of love and attention some of the time.

**Insecure attachment—avoidant type (child avoids close relationships)**

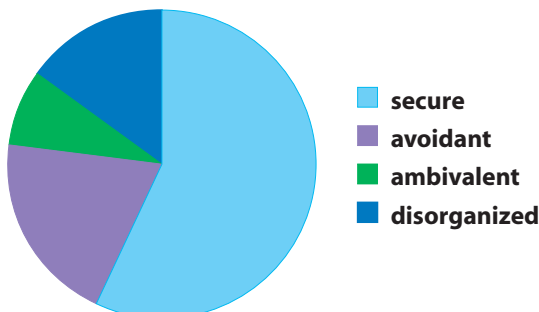
*Caregiver:* Parent does not respond or comfort the child when the child is crying. Parent avoids holding the child.

*Child:* The child plays but doesn't pay attention to the parent when she or he is in the room. When the parent leaves, the child doesn't act upset. When the parent comes back, the child turns away or avoids the parent.

*Expectations:* Children learn to look for comfort from someone other than their parent. Children hold back from other relationships. They're afraid that there is no one they can count on. Children begin to think that they are not worthy of love and attention.



**Percent of attachment types found in research with children raised by their parents<sup>2,4</sup>**



**Insecure attachment—disorganized type (child feels confused and fearful about close relationships)<sup>3</sup>**

*Caregiver:* The parent shows real instability in how he or she responds to or supports the child. The parent may abuse or neglect the child. The parent may act afraid or behave in a way that frightens the child.

*Child:* The child does not explore the surroundings. The child seems confused and may act angry toward the parent. When the parent comes back after being away, the child does not look for the parent for comfort. The child may seem afraid of the parent or behave in strange or inconsistent ways.

*Expectations:* Children learn that the parent can't be counted on for support and comfort. Children don't develop trust in relationships. They may be afraid of the parent or the parent's actions. Children begin to be confused about themselves and their worth.

Most children who do not experience abuse or neglect and who live with both of their parents form secure attachments. However, most abused children develop insecure attachments, usually the disorganized type. Researchers are just beginning to look at attachments in families where grandparents are raising grandchildren.

**Implications for future relationships**

Past relationships affect the child's expectations for future relationships. In many ways, the child creates guidelines for what to expect in future relationships. If children feel safe and secure with their parents or grandparents, they will expect the same from others. These children are the most likely to grow up with<sup>1</sup>

- good emotional health
- positive view of self
- interest and involvement in surroundings
- adaptability to surroundings
- independence and ability to rely on self
- pleasing interactions with others, including making and keeping friends
- participation
- doing things on own if needed
- better ability to resolve conflicts

Insecure relationships also shape what the child expects from future relationships. Such children may:<sup>2</sup>

- withdraw from the surroundings
- hesitate to get involved in activities and make friends
- lack curiosity
- become easily frustrated
- not ask for help when needed
- be angry and aggressive toward others
- have a negative view of self and others

For a child who develops these negative expectations, change can be hard. Caregivers who show patience and who respond with extra sensitivity, day after day, can help the child over time. Grandparents facing this type of situation may need to seek professional help and support.

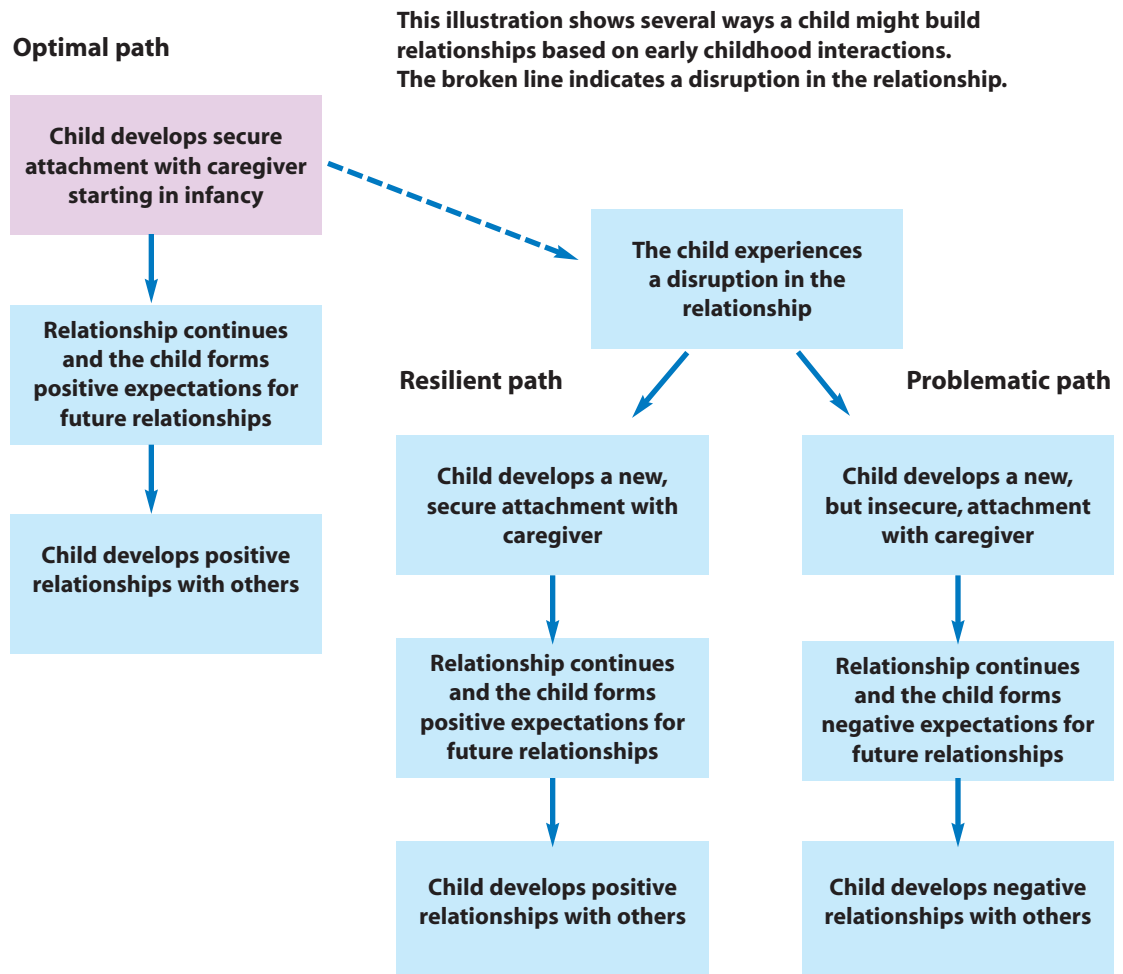
### Resilience: From heartbreak to hope

What is resilience? Resilience is when children develop positively despite bad experiences. If your grandchild has been through hard times, do not lose hope. With patience, support, love, and consistent guidance, your grandchild can develop many positive traits. If you develop a healthy attachment with the child, especially when the child is young, the child may continue to develop good relationships in the future. Good relationships are one key to helping a child develop resilience.

### Relationship pathways

Relationships often develop along common pathways. The paths illustrated here show only some of the possibilities that children may experience.<sup>5</sup> They are based on the quality of care the child is given and whether the child's situation changes frequently or stays fairly stable. You may find that one or more of the pathways are recognizable, based on your grandchild's experiences.

### Relationship pathways for children who initially have a secure attachment

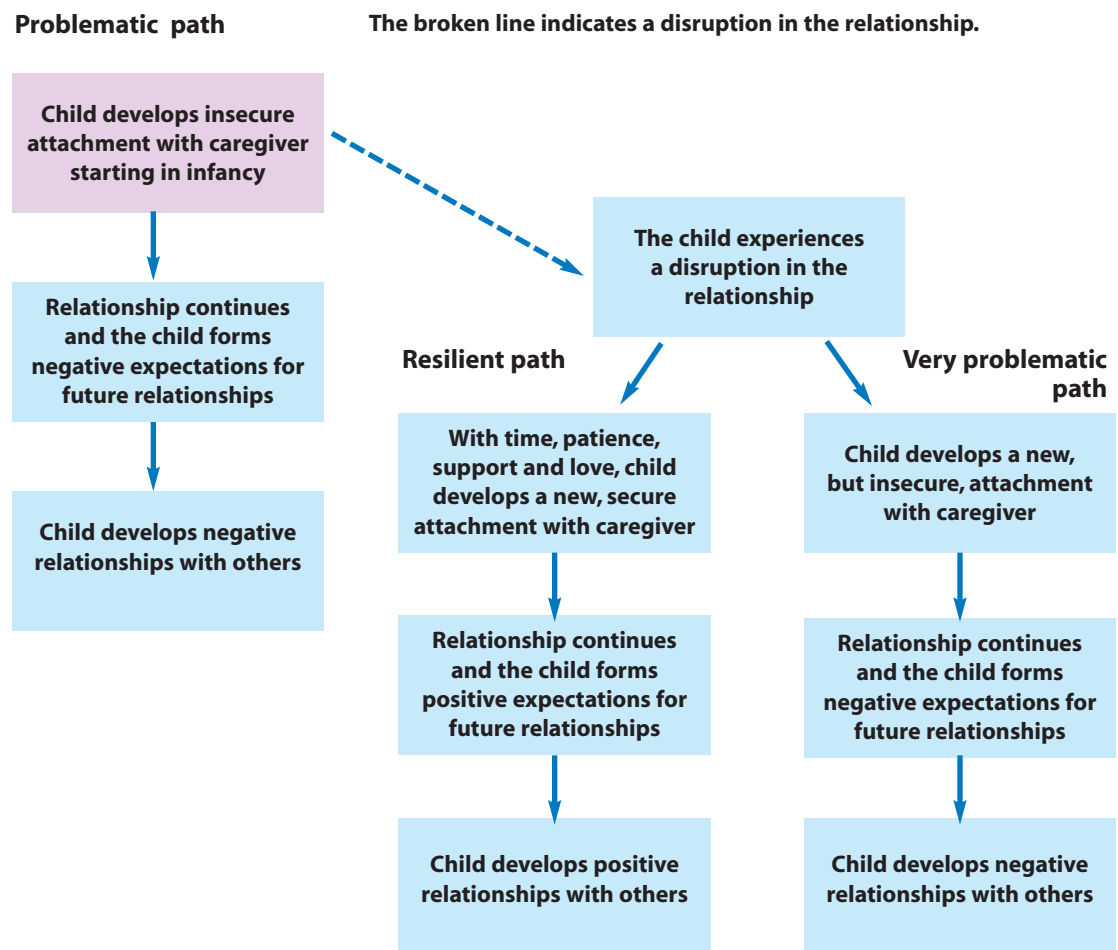


Each relationship is different. The relationships your grandchildren have with their parents are different from the relationships they form with you. A child who had a negative relationship with a parent may have a positive, fulfilling relationship with a grandparent. Other children may be in more—or less—challenging situations. Both negative and positive relationships affect a child’s expectations for future relationships.

### References

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### Relationship pathways for children who initially have an insecure attachment



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### Grandparent groups:

Second Time Around/Mary Dobbs  
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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at [www.uwex.edu/relationships/](http://www.uwex.edu/relationships/). For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.