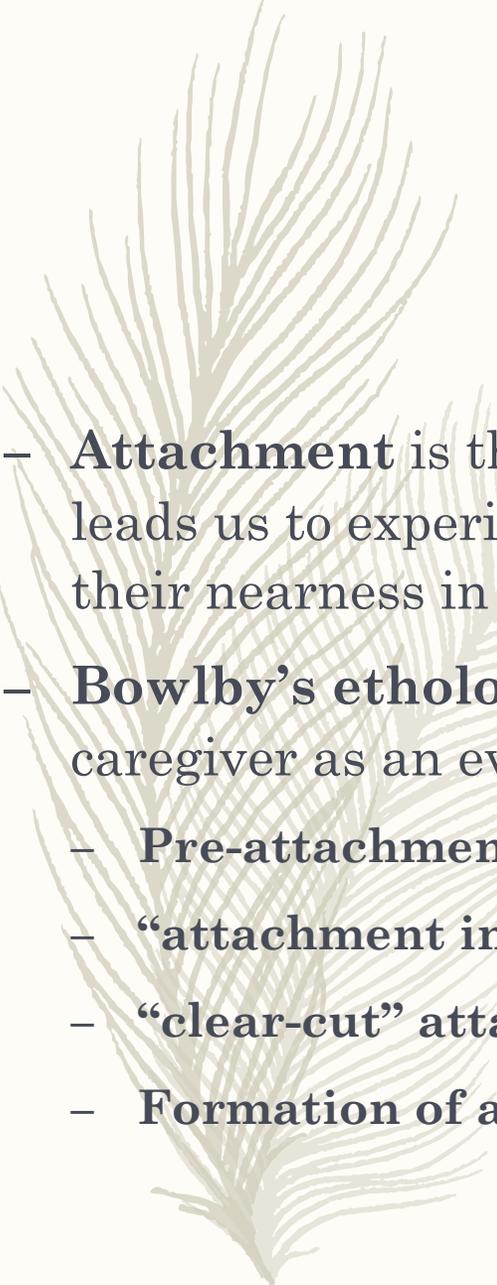




# Healthy Attachment

How to foster healthy  
relationships with your  
adopted kids

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# Attachment Theory

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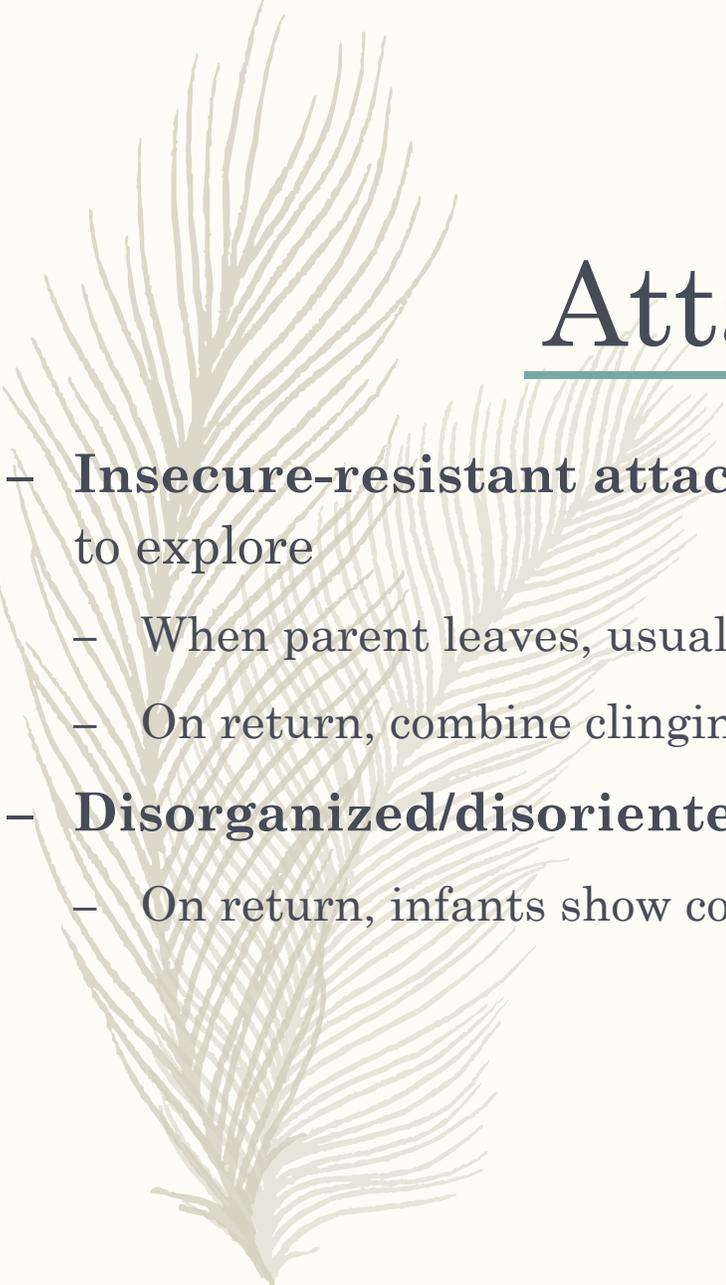
- **Attachment** is the strong affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to experience pleasure and joy when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness in times of stress
- **Bowlby's ethological theory of attachment** recognizes an infant's emotional tie to the caregiver as an evolved response that promotes survival
  - **Pre-attachment phase** (birth to 6 weeks)
  - **“attachment in the making” phase** (6 weeks to 6-8 months)
  - **“clear-cut” attachment phase** (6-8 months to 18 months-2 years)
  - **Formation of a reciprocal relationship** (18 months to 2 years and so on)



# Attachment Styles

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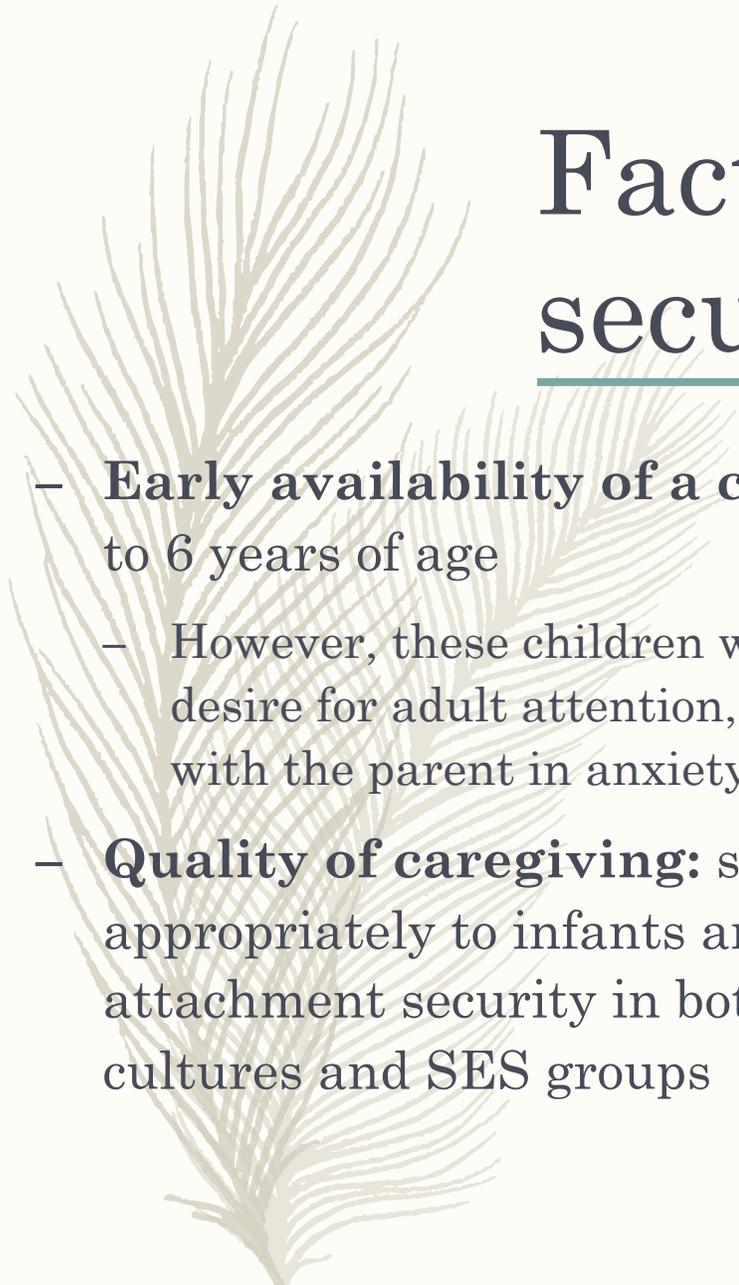
- **Secure attachment:** infants use the parent as a secure base
  - May or may not cry when separated, but if they do, it is because parent is absent and they prefer parent to stranger
  - When parent returns, express clear pleasure & crying is immediately reduced
- **Insecure-avoidant attachment:** infants seem unresponsive to parent when parent is present
  - Not distressed when parent is absent & react to stranger the same way
  - When parent returns, slow to greet parent and fail to cling when picked up



# Attachment Styles

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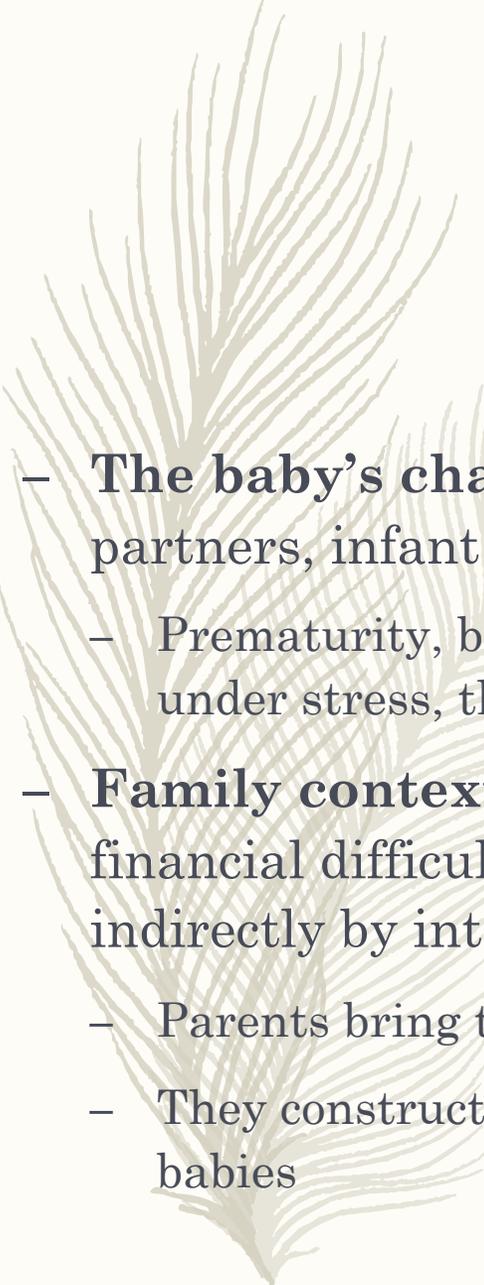
- **Insecure-resistant attachment:** before separation, infants seek closeness to parent & fail to explore
  - When parent leaves, usually distressed
  - On return, combine clinginess with angry, resistive behavior
- **Disorganized/disoriented attachment:** reflects greatest insecurity
  - On return, infants show confused, contradictory behavior



# Factors that affect attachment security

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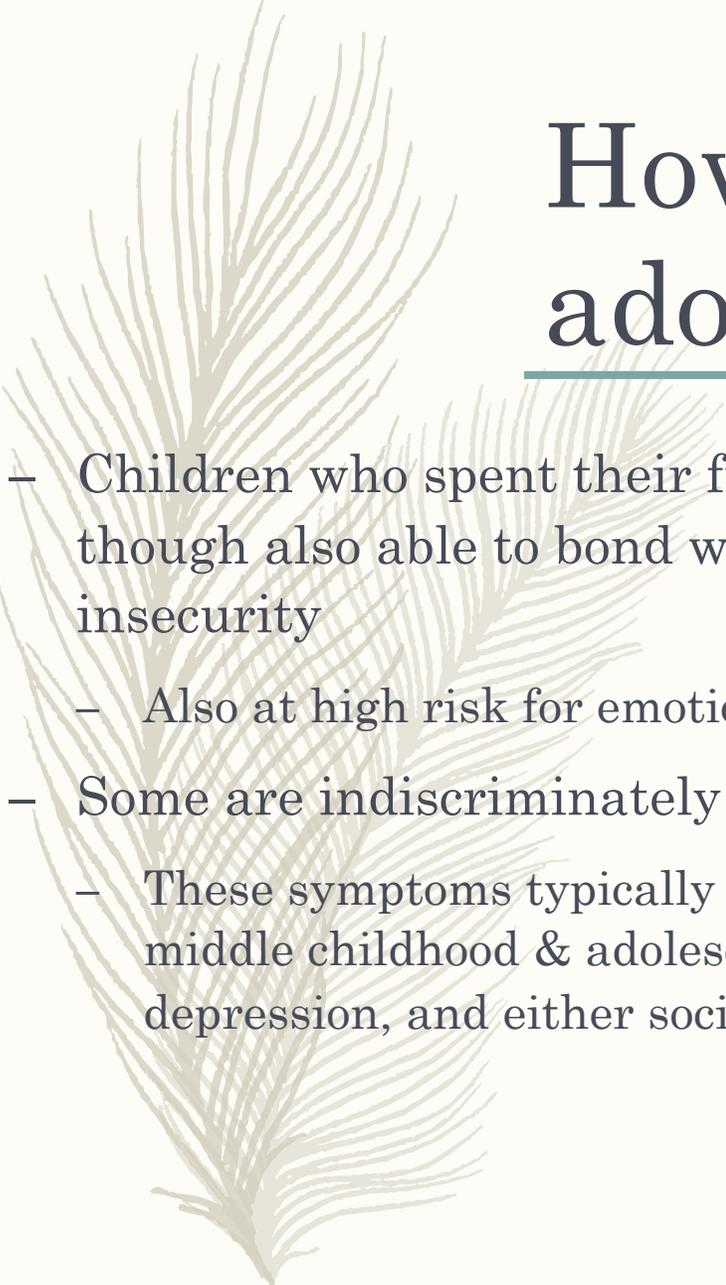
- **Early availability of a consistent caregiver:** a first attachment can develop as late as 4 to 6 years of age
  - However, these children were more likely to display attachment difficulties, including an excessive desire for adult attention, “overfriendliness” to unfamiliar adults and peers, failure to check back with the parent in anxiety-arousing situations, and few friendships
- **Quality of caregiving:** sensitive caregiving (responding promptly, consistently, and appropriately to infants and holding them tenderly and carefully) is moderately related to attachment security in both biological and adoptive mother-infant pairs and in diverse cultures and SES groups



# Factors that affect attachment security

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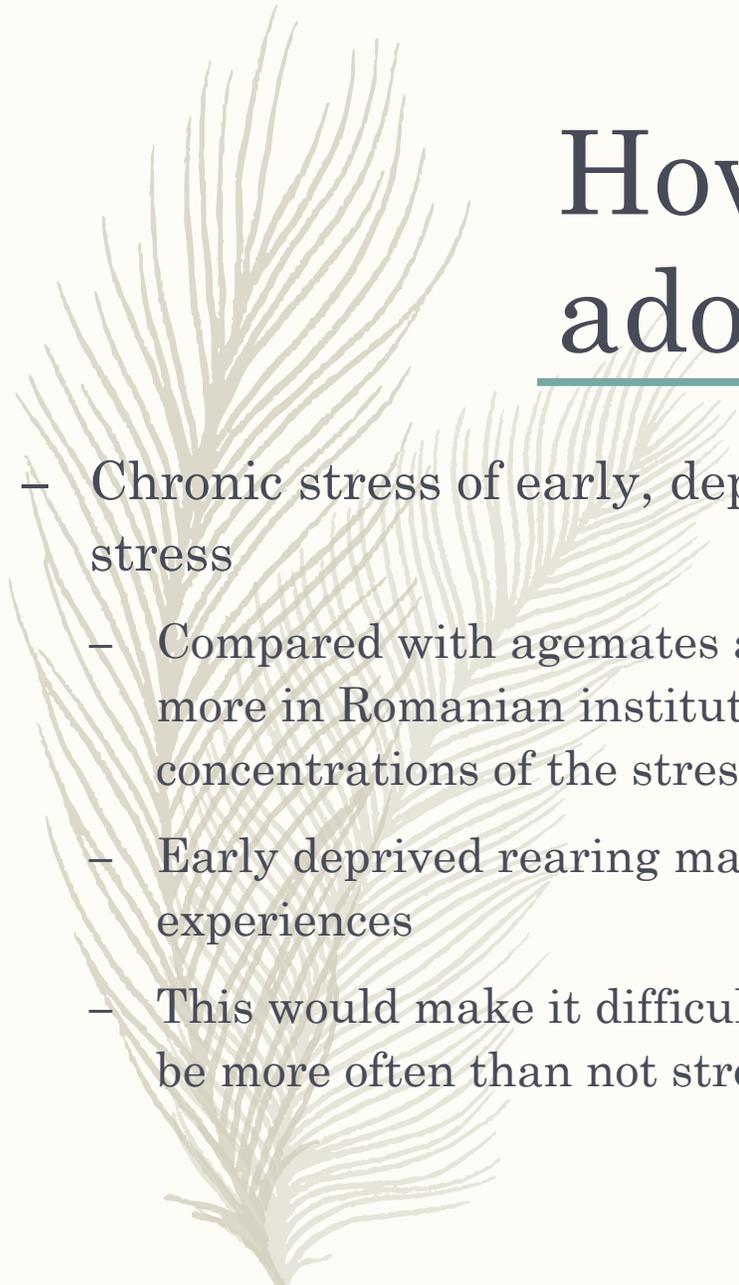
- **The baby's characteristics:** attachment is the result of a *relationship* between two partners, infant characteristics should affect how easily it is established
  - Prematurity, birth complications, and newborn illness make caregiving more taxing, & in families under stress, these difficulties are linked to attachment insecurity
- **Family context & parents' internal working models:** job loss, a failing marriage, financial difficulties, or parental psychological problems can undermine attachment indirectly by interfering with parental sensitivity
  - Parents bring to the family context their own history of attachment experiences
  - They construct internal working models that they apply to the bonds they establish with their babies



# How development prior to adoption may affect attachment

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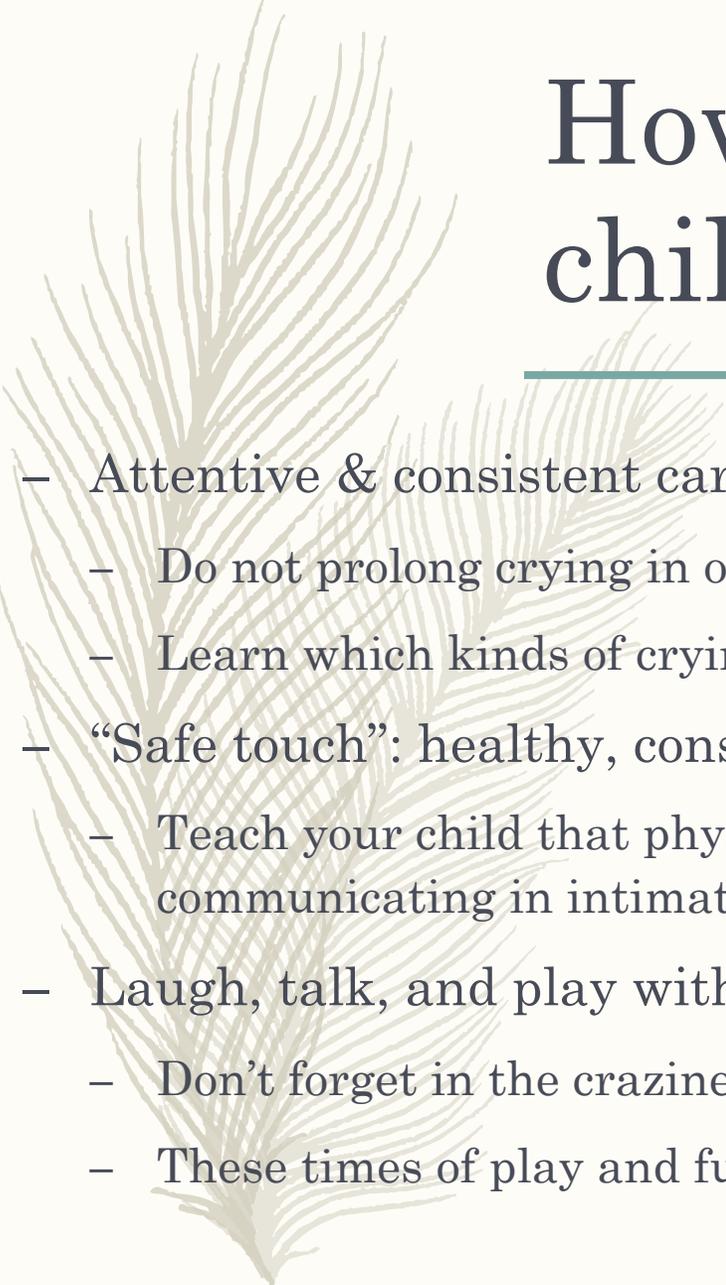
- Children who spent their first year or more in deprived Eastern European orphanages – though also able to bond with their adoptive parents – show elevated rates of attachment insecurity
  - Also at high risk for emotional and social difficulties
- Some are indiscriminately friendly, others are sad, anxious, & withdrawn
  - These symptoms typically persist and are associated with wide-ranging mental health problems in middle childhood & adolescence, including cognitive impairments, inattention and over-activity, depression, and either social avoidance or aggressive behavior



# How development prior to adoption may affect attachment

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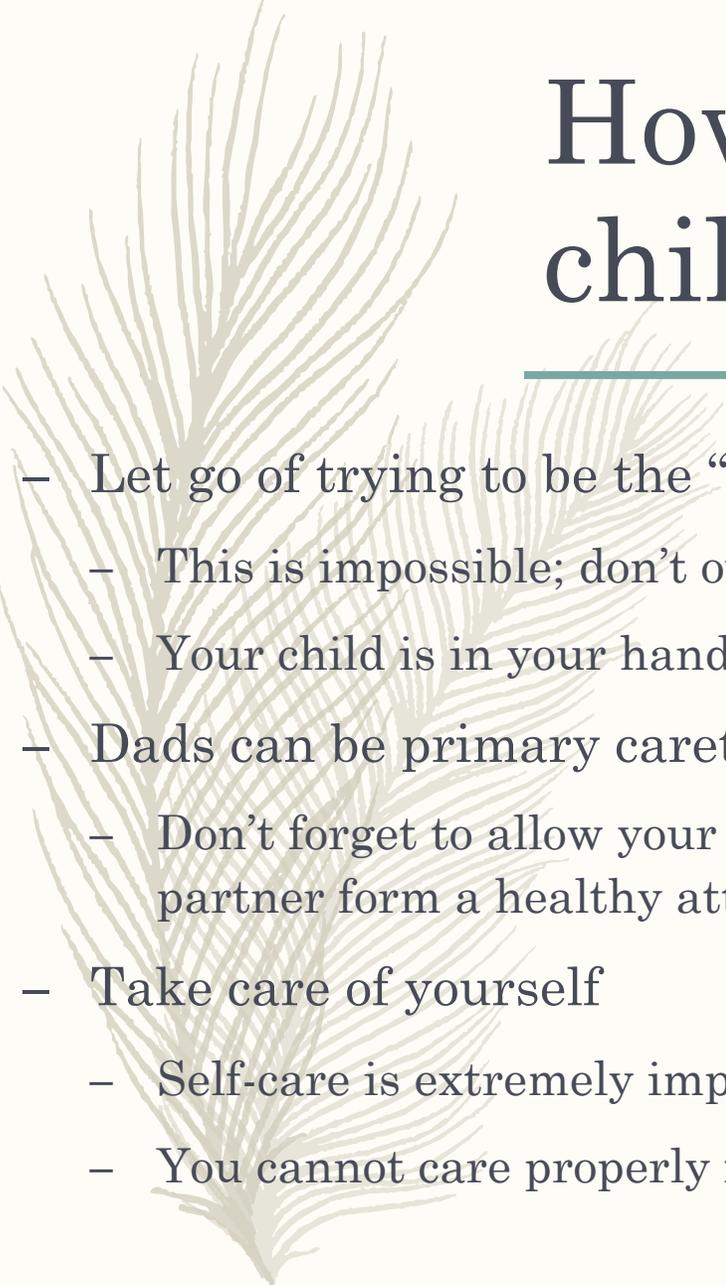
- Chronic stress of early, deprived orphanage rearing disrupts the brain's capacity to manage stress
  - Compared with age-mates adopted shortly after birth, children who spent their first 8 months or more in Romanian institutions showed extreme stress reactivity, as indicated by high concentrations of the stress hormone *cortisol* in their saliva
  - Early deprived rearing may also disrupt the brain's typical response to pleasurable social experiences
  - This would make it difficult to form attachments with adoptive parents because interactions may be more often than not stressful and unpleasant



# How to build healthy parent-child attachments

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- Attentive & consistent caregiving: Learn to understand your baby's unique cues
  - Do not prolong crying in order to teach the child to “deal with pain” or being uncomfortable
  - Learn which kinds of crying indicate different needs
- “Safe touch”: healthy, consistent physical contact that communicates safety and love
  - Teach your child that physical touch is safe with appropriate people and is even necessary for communicating in intimate relationships
- Laugh, talk, and play with your baby
  - Don't forget in the craziness of caregiving that your child needs fun activities and stimulation
  - These times of play and fun also serve as bonding activities



# How to build healthy parent-child attachments

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- Let go of trying to be the “perfect” parent
  - This is impossible; don’t overthink it
  - Your child is in your hands for a reason; you are capable but you cannot be perfect in all areas
- Dads can be primary caretakers, too
  - Don’t forget to allow your partner time with your child; interact as a family unit but also let your partner form a healthy attachment with the child, too
- Take care of yourself
  - Self-care is extremely important; Andrew will talk about this later
  - You cannot care properly for your child if you do not care for yourself



# Resources

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- Berk, L. E. (2016). *Infants and children: Prenatal through middle childhood* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.
- <http://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html>
- <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/secure-attachment/how-to-build-a-secure-attachment-bond-with-your-baby.htm>
- John Smith, Ph.D – Expert on attachment & licensed MFT (333) 333-3333
- Lisa Kudrow, MD – licensed play therapist



Q&A

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QUIZ TIME

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Which attachment theorist  
did we focus on today?

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Which attachment theorist  
did we focus on today?

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Name two factors that affect attachment.

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What is an example of something that is ineffective in promoting sibling attachments?

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What are three ways to  
improve parent-child  
attachment?

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