

# The Role of Attachment in Child Protection

What We've Learned from STEEP  
and How We've Used It

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# Research Foundations of STEEP

1975

Professor Byron Egeland launched the Minnesota Study of Risk & Adaptation, a prospective, longitudinal study of 267 pregnant women and their firstborn children. Professor Alan Sroufe joined him soon after.



# Research Foundations of STEEP

## Questions in the Minnesota Study:

Why do some parents & children do well in high-risk circumstances?

What are the antecedents & consequences of child maltreatment and what factors help parents break cycles of abuse?

What is the impact of attachment on long-term development?



# Research Foundations of STEEP

1979

Marti Erickson joined the Minnesota Study, with a focus on attachment and child behavior problems and consequences of child maltreatment, especially emotional neglect

*See “References” handout*



# The Development of STEEP

1986


Erickson and Egeland developed the STEEP Program, guided by findings from the Minnesota Study. The National Institute of Mental Health funded them to implement STEEP and conduct a randomized, controlled evaluation.





# Structure of the STEEP Program



- Bi-weekly home visits beginning during pregnancy
  - *Seeing Is Believing*<sup>®</sup> video strategy
  - Bi-weekly mother-baby groups led by home visitor
  - Occasional family nights
  - Father groups when possible
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# Principles of STEEP

- Relationship-based
- Strength-focused
- Individualized
- Ecological






# STEEP Aims to Help Parents...

- Expand knowledge of infant and child development
  - Enhance sensitivity to infant cues
  - Strengthen social support
  - Develop strategies for coping with stress
  - Make life choices that support a safe, healthy home environment for them and their children
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# Original Evaluation of STEEP Program

- Randomized controlled study
  - 154 first-time mothers (age 17 or older, no more than high school education, low income, 92% single)
  - Intervention from pregnancy through year one (subsequent programs lasted 2 years or more)
  - Outcomes assessed at 12 months, 19 months, 2 years and 3 years
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# Outcomes of 1-year STEEP Program

- Better understanding of child development
  - Greater sensitivity and responsiveness to cues and signals
  - More organized and appropriately stimulating home
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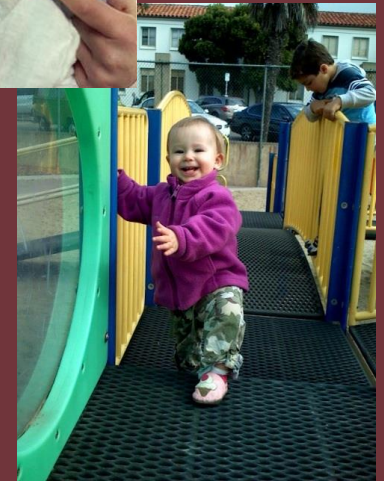
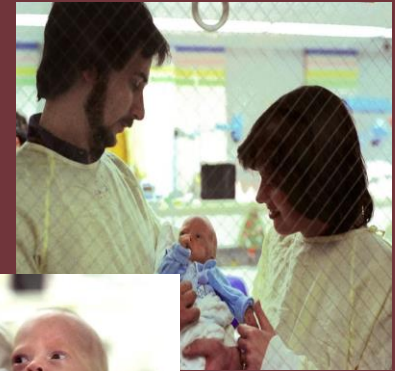
## Outcomes of 1-year STEEP Program, cont'd


- Fewer depressive symptoms in mothers
  - Fewer repeat pregnancies within two years
  - More active coping strategies at times of stress
  - Participation buffered effects of stress on maternal sensitivity
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# STEEP with Different Populations


1990 to present

- Mothers abusing substances
- Depressed mothers
- Premature, medically fragile babies
- Teen mothers
- Parents of infants in childcare





## STEEP Strategies Applied in Other Programs and Contexts

- STEEP training for Healthy Families America
  - Seeing Is Believing® used in nurse home visiting
  - Reflective Practice Groups offered to community
  - Infant Early Childhood Mental Health graduate program, U of M Institute of Child Development
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# Lessons We Have Learned, #1

Knowledge of child development and positive parenting is important, but not enough.



The greatest challenge lies in the space between what we know and what we do.

••• As parents, what makes it hard to use what we know?

- Contrary messages from family, friends & society
- High stress and lack of coping skills
- Weak support system
- How our parents treated us and how we think about it (“attachment state of mind”)

## Lessons We Have Learned, #2

Sometimes change in parenting happens slowly, and babies cannot wait.



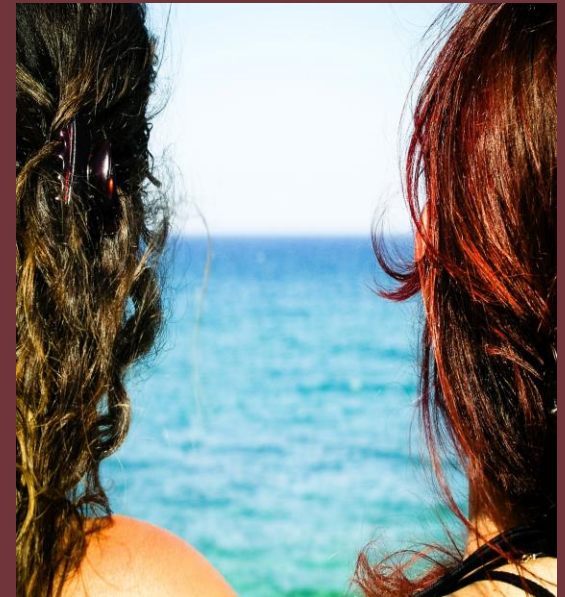
We need to scan the environment for other caring adults to engage with the child.



## Lessons We Have Learned, #3


### Relationship IS the program!

- Stand shoulder-to-shoulder
- Learn from & with each other
- Face challenges & possibilities
- Look back, move forward





## Ways to Help Parents Look Back, Move Forward

- “Message buffet” group exercise
  - Own the feeling (“I feel sad when I think of ...”)
  - Reflect back what you notice about how parents learned to protect themselves
  - Engage baby as your ally (using video)
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# Lessons We Have Learned, #4



To help parents look back, we need to look back ourselves.



Looking Back, Moving Forward:  
The Legacy of My Own Journey



## Lessons We Have Learned, #5

Attachment-based work needs an organization that embraces reflection, self-awareness and parallel process. At every level of organization:

- Consider our personal history, how it shapes our stress responses
- Be mindful of how those patterns show up in relationships at work
- Let personal reflections strengthen our empathy & compassion for those we serve

... Think of this STEEP mom who looked at her newborn and thought, I have no idea how to be a mom. All that I can do is look into his eyes and say to him,



“Here I am, here I am.”



With our whole selves, we need to say to each family,



“Here I am, here I am.”

