

# Circle of Security Parenting

Review: January 2019

**Note on provider involvement:** This provider has agreed to EIF's terms of reference, and the assessment has been conducted and published with the full cooperation of the programme provider.

**Circle of Security Parenting (COS-P) is a parenting programme for caregivers of children between the ages of 4 months and 6 years. It is a targeted-selective programme delivered in a variety of settings (e.g. children's centres, CAMHS units, fostering and adoption units) and aims to improve children's attachment.**

Circle of Security Parenting is based on attachment theory and aims at helping parents reflect on their own attachment experiences and thus reduce their negative mental attributions to the child's normal attachment-seeking behaviours. Parents are then better able to provide a secure base for their distressed child and their exploratory behaviours, which, in turn, improves their child's attachment.

The programme is designed for a broad group of caregivers who may have widely varying levels of risk. This includes but is not limited to parents (mothers and fathers, sometimes couples together), foster carers and childcare providers. Sometimes the programme is delivered with a focus on caregivers with particular risks such as substance abuse or perinatal depression.

The programme is delivered in a group setting where facilitators use videos for reflective discussions about caregivers' own attachment experience and their behaviour towards their child. In eight sessions, parents learn how they can respond sensitively to their child's distress.

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Evidence  
rating: **2+**

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Cost rating: **1**

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## EIF Programme Assessment

Circle of Security Parenting has **preliminary evidence** of improving a child outcome, but we cannot be confident that the programme caused the improvement.

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Evidence  
rating: **2+**

### What does the evidence rating mean?

**Level 2** indicates that the programme has evidence of improving a child outcome from a study involving at least 20 participants, representing 60% of the sample, using validated instruments.

This programme does not receive a rating of 3 as its best evidence is not from a rigorously conducted RCT or QED evaluation.

### What does the plus mean?

The plus rating indicates that a programme's best available evidence is based on an evaluation that is more rigorous than a level 2 standard but does not meet the criteria for level 3.

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## Cost rating

A rating of 1 indicates that a programme has a low cost to set up and deliver, compared with other interventions reviewed by EIF. This is equivalent to an estimated unit cost of less than £100.

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Cost rating: **1**

# Child outcomes

According to the best available evidence for this programme's impact, it can achieve the following positive outcomes for children:

## Enhancing school achievement & employment

### Improved inhibitory control

Based on study 1

This programme also has evidence of supporting positive outcomes for couples, parents or families that may be relevant to a commissioning decision. Please see the 'About the evidence' section for more detail.

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## Key programme characteristics

### Who is it for?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to the following age-groups:

- Preschool
- Primary school

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### How is it delivered?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to implementation through these delivery models:

- Group

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### Where is it delivered?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to its implementation in these settings:

- Children's centre or early-years setting

The programme may also be delivered in these settings:

- Children's centre or early-years setting
  - Community centre
  - Out-patient health setting
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## How is it targeted?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to its implementation as:

- Targeted selective
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Circle for Security Parenting is offered in a variety of different settings such as children's centres, CAMHS units, early help teams, fostering and adoption units, perinatal mental health teams, and schools.

## Where has it been implemented?

Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, United States, Wales

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## UK provision

This programme has been implemented in the UK.

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## UK evaluation

This programme's best evidence does not include evaluation conducted in the UK.

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## Spotlight sets

EIF does not currently include this programme within any Spotlight set.

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## About the programme

### What happens during delivery?

#### How is it delivered?

- Circle of Security Parenting is delivered in eight to 10 sessions of 1.5–2 hours' duration each by practitioners with a university-level degree (QCF-6) to groups of 8–15 caregivers.

### What happens during the intervention?

- Interveners use video to facilitate reflective discussions about caregivers' attachment experiences – more specifically:
  - what they learned from their own parents growing up
  - understanding the importance of a secure relationship for children to be able to manage their emotions
  - reasons why caregivers struggle to meet their children's needs.
- Interveners teach a simple form of attunement.

### What are the implementation requirements?

#### Who can deliver it?

- The practitioner who delivers this programme is a practitioner with QCF-6 level qualifications.

### What are the training requirements?

- Practitioners complete a four-day programme training. Booster training of practitioners is not required.

## **How are the practitioners supervised?**

- Supervision is not required.
- Opt-in supervision arrangements (known as 'fidelity coaching') are available. In supervision sessions, practitioners reflect on their experiences leading the sessions.

## **What are the systems for maintaining fidelity?**

Programme fidelity is maintained through the following processes:

- Training manual
- Other printed material
- Other online material
- Video or DVD training
- Face-to-face training
- Fidelity monitoring.

Additionally, fidelity coaching, a form of reflective supervision, is available.

## **Is there a licensing requirement?**

There is no licence required to run this programme.

## How does it work? (Theory of Change)

### How does it work?

- Increasing caregivers' reflective and empathic responses to their infant or young child's emotional distress decreases prolonged emotional distress in the infant or young child and enhances attachment security. A decrease in negative mental attributions by the caregiver regarding the infant or young child's normal attachment and exploratory behaviours increases caregiver's availability and reinforces the child's capacity to use the caregiver as a secure base to explore the environment and as a safe haven to come to in times of distress. Increasing caregivers' self-reflection regarding the fearful, angry and disengaging emotional triggers evoked by their child enhances caregivers' emotional regulation, self-reflection, and the potential for the caregiver to choose a more secure response to their child.
- The programme aims to give caregivers an easy-to-follow 'roadmap' (the Circle of Security diagram); this roadmap underscores that babies' or young children's behaviour is motivated by their attachment needs and focuses the caregiver's attention on their role in identifying and meeting those needs. Through video review of caregiver–child interactions, paired with the trained facilitator using their manual to ask reflective questions and explore with caregivers how to identify children's needs as they explore and as they return to the caregiver, caregivers develop more reflective and empathic responses to child behaviour or distress.
- In the short term, caregivers are able to identify their infant or young child's attachment needs and respond to those needs. Caregivers are also able to identify which needs on the Circle of Security they most often struggle to identify or respond empathically to and are able to reflect on why those particular needs are a struggle.
- In the longer term, as caregivers identify and manage normal ruptures in their relationships with their young children, they are able to promote secure attachment through recognition and repair of these ruptures.

### Intended outcomes

Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing  
Enhancing school achievement & employment  
Preventing crime, violence and antisocial behaviour  
Preventing substance abuse

### Contact details

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## About the evidence

Circle of Security Parenting's most rigorous evidence comes from an RCT which was conducted in the United States.

This study identified statistically significant positive impact on one child outcome.

This programme is underpinned by one study with a level 2+ rating, hence the programme receives a level 2+ rating overall.

## Study 1

**Citation:** Cassidy et al 2017

**Design:** RCT

**Country:** United States

**Sample:** 141 mothers, with children between 3 and 5 years old (mean age 4 years), where families are enrolled in a Head Start centre (USA).

**Timing:** Post-test

**Child outcomes:**

- Improved inhibitory control

**Other outcomes:**

- Improved maternal response to child distress

**Study rating:** 2+

Cassidy, J., Brett, B. E., Gross, J. T., Stern, J. A., Martin, D. R., Mohr, J. J., & Woodhouse, S. S. (2017). Circle of Security–Parenting: A randomized controlled trial in Head Start. *Development and Psychopathology*, 29(2), 651–673.

Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5543687/>

**Study design and sample**

This study involved random assignment of children to a Circle of Security Parenting treatment group and a waitlist control group.

It was conducted in the USA, with a sample of children aged between 3 and 5 years (average age 4) whose families were enrolled in Head Start centres. These families tend to have a low socio-economic background, to be single-parent households, and to be less educated (one-third of parents have less than a high school education). Exposure to violent crime is increased in these families and mothers have an elevated risk of depression.

Mother–child dyads included in this sample were mainly African American.

**Measures**

Children's attachment security and avoidance, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility were measured using expert observation of behaviour. Children's internalising and externalising behaviour was measured using mothers' reports. Mothers' outcomes were measured using self-report.

**Findings**

This study identified statistically significant positive impact on one child outcome. After participating in the programme, children had significantly more inhibitory control compared to the control group. However, for a subgroup of children whose mothers were low on attachment avoidance, intervention group children tended to be less secure compared to control group children. This finding is based on a limited sample size and has to be treated cautiously.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are limited by methodological issues pertaining to concerns that group differences have been introduced by attrition, hence why a higher rating is not achieved.

## Other studies

The following studies were identified for this programme but did not count towards the programme's overall evidence rating. A programme receives the same rating as its most robust study or studies.

- Horton, E., & Murray, C. (2015). A quantitative exploratory evaluation of the Circle of Security-Parenting Program with mothers in residential substance-abuse treatment. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 36(3), 320–336 - **This reference refers to a pre-post study, conducted in the USA.**
- Kamal, L., Strand, J., Jutengren, G., & Tidefors, I. (2017). Perceptions and experiences of an attachment-based intervention for parents troubled by intimate partner violence. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 45(4), 311–319 - **This reference refers to a qualitative study, conducted in Sweden.**
- Kohlhoff, J., Stein, M., Ha, M., & Mejaha, K. (2016). The Circle of Security Parenting (COS-P) intervention: pilot evaluation. *Australian Journal of Child and Family Health Nursing*, 13(1), 3 - **This reference refers to a pre-post study, conducted in Australia.**
- McMahon, C., Huber, A., Kohlhoff, J., & Camberis, A. L. (2017). Does training in the Circle of Security framework increase relational understanding in infant/child and family workers? *Infant mental health journal*, 38(5), 658-668 - **This reference refers to a pre-post study, conducted in Australia and New Zealand.**
- Risholm Mothander, P. R., Furmark, C., & Neander, K. (2018). Adding "Circle of Security–Parenting" to treatment as usual in three Swedish infant mental health clinics. Effects on parents' internal representations and quality of parent-infant interaction. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 59(3), 262–272 - **This reference refers to a randomised control trial, conducted in Sweden.**
- Rennie, K. D. The effects of the "Circle of Security Parenting" group intervention on a community sample of parents of 1 to 3-year-olds. Unpublished master's thesis. New South Wales Institute of Psychiatry, New South Wales, Australia.
- Gray, S. A. (2015). Widening the Circle of Security: A quasi-experimental evaluation of attachment-based professional development for family child care providers. *Infant mental health journal*, 36(3), 308-319 - **This reference refers to a quasi-experimental design, conducted in the USA.**
- Page, T., & Cain, D. (2010, January). A pilot application of the Circle of Security parenting intervention to child welfare-involved mothers. In Poster presentation at the Society for Social Work and Research Fourteenth Annual Conference - **This reference refers to a pre-post study, conducted in the USA.**
- Haugaard, K., & De Lopez, K. J. (2015). Testing the efficacy of Circle of Security–Parenting programme with Danish at risk career mothers: a pilot Randomized Controlled Trial. In International Attachment Conference - **This reference refers to a randomised control trial, conducted in Denmark.**

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## Guidebook

The EIF Guidebook provides information about early intervention programmes that have at least preliminary evidence of achieving positive outcomes for children. It provides information based on EIF's assessment of the strength of evidence for a programme's effectiveness, and on detail about programmes shared with us by those who design, run and deliver them.

The Guidebook serves an important starting point for commissioners to find out more about effective early interventions, and for programme providers to find out more about what good evidence of impact looks like and how it can be captured. As just one of our key resources for commissioners and practitioners, the Guidebook is an essential part of EIF's work to support the development of and investment in effective early intervention programmes.

Our assessment of the evidence for a programme's effectiveness can inform and support certain parts of a commissioning decision, but it is not a substitute for professional judgment. Evidence about what has worked in the past offers no guarantee that an approach will work in all circumstances. Crucially, the Guidebook is not a market comparison website: ratings and other information should not be interpreted as a specific recommendation, kite mark or endorsement for any programme.

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[How to read the Guidebook](#)

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[EIF evidence standards](#)

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[About the EIF Guidebook](#)

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## EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity and a member of the What Works network. We support the use of effective early intervention for children, young people and their families: identifying signals of risk, and responding with effective interventions to improve outcomes, reduce hardship and save the public money in the long term.

We work by generating evidence and knowledge of what works in our field, putting this information in the hands of commissioners, practitioners and policymakers, and supporting the adoption of the evidence in local areas and relevant sectors.

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[www{EIF.org.uk](http://www{EIF.org.uk) | [@TheEIFoundation](https://twitter.com/TheEIFoundation)

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