



Child Care Technical Assistance Network

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Relationships: The Foundation of Learning and Development



Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development—intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral.

—National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004, p. 1)

Babies' brains are wired to be in relationships from birth—not just any relationships, but relationships that are responsive to their interests and needs. The infant brain literally grows within these supportive, nurturing relationships. Interactions with people and the environment cause connections in the brain to form and strengthen (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). When adults are responsive in their interactions and meet an infant's or toddler's needs, then a strong foundation is created in the child's brain that supports later learning, relationships, and development.

Devoting time and effort to building respectful and responsive relationships with the infants and toddlers in your care brings positive results for children. High-quality caregiver-child relationships influence children's development in a variety of powerful ways (Raikes & Edwards, 2009; Schore, 2001). There is no doubt that the time you invest in developing strong relationships with the infants and toddlers in your care will be time well spent.

All significant relationships in infants' and toddlers' lives affect their development. Your relationships with parents, parents' relationship with their children, and children's relationships with each other can contribute to and support children's healthy development (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). What you do to foster these relationships in your environment, interactions, and routines can have a long-term positive impact on infants' and toddlers' development.

Program administrators also play an essential role in establishing a program that supports positive relationships with children and families. Program administrators provide important guidance and support your capacity to build and sustain relationships, and they make decisions about policies and program practices that help you engage in relationship-based care (Sosinsky et al., 2016). For example, program policies that support continuity of care—the practice of an infant and toddler care teacher remaining with the same small group of infants and toddlers until they turn 3 years—offer a structure in which caregiver-child, caregiver-family, and child-child relationships can develop and deepen over time (Sosinsky et al., 2016). Rather than having repeatedly to form new relationships, infants and toddlers can dedicate more energy to exploring

their environment and deepening existing relationships. When you can engage in sustained relationships with infants, toddlers, and their families, you can develop a deeper understanding of each child's unique interests, needs, cues, and temperament, which increases your ability to give sensitive, high-quality care.

In the following video clip, notice how the caregiver is connecting with the children and bringing them close physically and emotionally.

View the video example, [Relationship Building \(/infant-toddler-resource-guide/learning-suite/child-care#itrg-video-25656\)](#). Access the [Video Clip Series \(/infant-toddler-resource-guide/learning-suite/child-care\)](#).

Ask yourself the following:

- What do you see happening in this video?
- How would you describe the relationship between the two toddlers and the teacher?
- What did the teacher do to support the children's emotional needs?
- How do the toddlers respond when the teacher asks about their families?
- How would you feel in this interaction as the teacher? Why?

As you read more about this topic, keep the following questions in mind to help guide your thinking:

- What approaches have you used to develop respectful and responsive relationships with infants, toddlers, and their families?
- How do responsive interactions and meaningful relationships support the development of infants and toddlers?
- What kind of program policies and practices support the development of relationships among you and the children and families you work with?

Resources

[Infant/Toddler Teacher Time, Episode 3—Let's Talk About It: Teacher-Child Interactions](#)

(<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/playlist/infanttoddler-teacher-time-coffee-break-episode-3-lets-talk-about-it-teacher-child>) (2018) is an hour-long video about how responsive interactions support children's brain development. The video is part of the Teacher Time series, which is a web-based professional development series for Head Start and Early Head Start staff, teachers, and family child care providers made available through the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. This video has a [Viewers Guide \(https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/it3-teacher-time-viewers-guide-ep-3.pdf\)](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/it3-teacher-time-viewers-guide-ep-3.pdf) that summarizes the content discussed in the video and provides additional teaching strategies and resources.

[News You Can Use—Foundations of School Readiness: Early Experiences Build the Brain](#)

(<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/nycu-brain-development.pdf>) (October 2012), by the Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, discusses different aspects of early brain development, including the impact of responsive interactions.

[Text4Teachers \(https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/article/text4teachers\)](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/article/text4teachers),

made available through the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, is a service that child care providers can sign up for to receive two free texts a month that include professional development opportunities and "information, tips, research, and resources to strengthen and support ... teaching practices" (Office of Head Start, n.d., para. 1). Texts are available in English and Spanish and include information about building responsive relationships.

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