



ECE / OVERVIEW

What matters in infant and toddler pedagogy?



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What matters in infant and toddler pedagogy?

Essential pedagogical qualities

- calm, unhurried environments
- consistency over time
- listening
- presence
- interactions that build relationship
 - responsiveness
 - reciprocity
 - imitation
 - joint attention / inter-subjectivity
- connections with families

Close and caring ongoing relationships support all aspects of infants' and toddlers' development and learning. The learning and development of infants and toddlers takes place only through, in, and for, relationships. These early relationships are primarily with other people but also with places and things. Experiences of responsive, attuned caregiving in the first years of life also facilitate emotional and cognitive well-being. The curriculum for infants and toddlers must have strong relational connections at its centre.

This means infants and toddlers need adults who are willing and able to engage with them in attuned interactions, and to promote relationships that are characterised by intimacy, sensitive responsiveness, synchronous interactions and focused presence. Infants and toddlers need constant and affectionate company provided by an intimate relationship with their caregivers. The sense of safety provided by a warm and secure relationship promotes children's investigation of the world and enables them to gradually establish multiple relationships with others.

Experiences of positive relationships in infancy have far-reaching consequences. First relationships with a caregiver provide a model for relationships with subsequent teachers and also set the foundations for adjustment, development and learning across the child's education. Strong, attuned relationships support children's resilience and security. Through relationships, young children learn how to be empathetic to others' feelings, to grow and manage their will, ask for needs to be met, stand up for their own needs and rights, negotiate, manage and express feelings, and develop conflict resolution skills.

Research shows that negative early childhood experiences, characterised by unresponsive, inconsistent and unstable relationships within stressful environments, have a negative effect on brain development. Low quality care and an inadequate relationship with an adult are sources of stress, especially when infants and toddlers have no control over events and no access or support from a soothing caregiver. Stress is toxic and has a negative impact on brain development, the immune system, emotional well-being and cognitive skills, both immediately and later in life. Some areas of the brain that are dependent on emotionally attuned relationships do not activate, and these "holes" in the architecture of the brain can remain across the child's lifetime. Without the experience of emotionally attuned relationships in early life, infants and toddlers show an impaired ability to regulate emotions, and without the opportunity to learn socially acceptable behaviours from caring and responsive interactions, infants and toddlers internalise negative patterns of interaction. These effects have a negative impact on future relationships.

For teachers, this research highlights a need to:

- focus on the infant-caregiver relationships as a major component of their practice
- build firm relationships by increasing one-to-one interaction opportunities and being positive and responsive while allowing time for relationships to develop
- develop strong non-verbal communication skills (particularly listening)
- reflect on practice and the quality of relationships
- build positive relationships with other caregivers and parents that enable collaboration.

Research shows infants form relationships more readily with teachers who show an interest in them and match behaviours to theirs, who have a positive outlook and belief in their ability to form relationships with infants, a gentle and responsive style of interaction, and strong non-verbal communication skills. It is important to bear in mind that there can be contextual constraints that prevent the development of positive relationships between infants and caregivers, including high ratios of children to adults and larger groups of children. Teachers are found to provide more sensitive, frequent and positive care, and to act more responsively and be increasingly nurturing and warm when they are responsible for fewer children. Low-stress environments that support healthy brain development are also related to the structural qualities of small group sizes and low ratios of children to adults, as well as the presence of supportive relationships.

What are the essential pedagogical qualities caregivers should develop to improve relationship-focused care and education?

To strengthen the quality of relationships, pedagogical strategies include:

- calm, unhurried environments
- consistency over time
- listening
- presence
- interactions that build relationship
 - responsiveness
 - reciprocity
 - imitation
 - joint attention / inter-subjectivity
- connections with families

Calm, unhurried environments

Research shows that the quality of infant and toddler environments has a marked impact on children's development and learning. Meaningful and intimate relationships develop in environments that are unrushed, peaceful and tranquil. Environments should be amiable and calm, with a flexible and relaxed pace or rhythm to the day, so that your interactions and relationships can be given the time, focus and support required. This also enables you to give infants and toddlers time and space (without interruption) to play and lead their own learning. Calm environments can promote harmony, openness and transparency, and enable you time and space to reflect on the quality of interactions and on relationship development.

You should also monitor the environment for noise level and the balance of opportunities for quiet rest as well as energetic play. Young infants may benefit from safe spaces in which to lie on their backs without fear of toddlers stumbling over them. You should engage in constant observation and reflection moment by moment to ensure that environments continually support children to feel content and curious.

Consistency over time

Continuity in relationships, and consistent caregiving by one teacher or a very small number of teachers, enable caregivers to form warm relationships with infants and toddlers in which you can sensitively respond to their changing needs and preferences, as well as celebrate achievement and learning. Many settings advocate primary caregiving as a strategy for achieving attentive relationships. An infant's learning flourishes inside a strong and enduring relationship with a main caregiver. Continuity in the caregiver-child relationship builds up more secure and trusting relationships between teachers, children and parents, and also is related to resilience in children.

Research shows that the amount of time that an infant or toddler has spent in the care of the same teacher is significantly related to their security of attachment, and that the history of relationship is the most significant component of an effective relationship that supports learning. Relationships become strong when they are constant over time, as it takes time for you and the infant or toddler to come to understand each other's cues and behaviours. Time with the same teacher gives infants and toddlers feelings of trust, predictability and control.

Building an attentive relationship over time will provide many opportunities to observe the infant or toddler across a variety of experiences, enabling you to learn what excites, amuses, upsets and frustrates the child. This enables you to fine-tune interactions, and become increasingly sensitive to the child as an individual. Time in relationship is also necessary for you to come to know what the child knows, understands and is interested in, so you can promote inter-subjectivity (link to section) within your interactions and thereby promote further development. Inter-subjectivity requires a shared context of meaning and history of experience. This is especially important during the infant and toddler years because children's communication requires more careful observation and interpretation.

As your relationship develops over time, the infant or toddler begins to view you not as a stranger, but as a main caregiver, then as a play partner, and finally as a secure base, safe haven and source of learning and information. Your relationship becomes multi-dimensional. Your perspective on the infant will change too, from the infant as stranger, to a key infant, to a source of learning, joy and satisfaction.

You should aim to ensure ongoing, consistent and stable relationships and attachments. This means considering how decisions about the programme, room changes or teachers' schedules or leave will affect relationships, and seeking solutions that support rather than undermine existing relationships. Consistency can also be promoted through daily routines that build a sense of security and familiarity, and by ensuring that you and your colleagues have similar approaches and pedagogies to the care and education of infants and toddlers.

Listening

Infants and toddlers communicate in many complex and subtle ways, and with each child you will need to develop an awareness of their communicative patterns and idiosyncrasies. Self-awareness is also a useful skill for beginning to recognise patterns between your communications and those of the infant or toddler.

Listening to infants and toddlers requires you to develop a "watchful attentiveness" and be very aware of the vocal and body language of infants and toddlers, watching all their signals and listening for their cues. Infants in particular use all the resources they have available to communicate - nuances of sound, volume and pitch, as well as dramatic whole body movements such as arching the back or waving their arms and legs about. Listening involves all your senses, not just listening with your ears but also looking with attention to pick up on the cues that infants and toddlers use to express pleasure, contentment, sadness, anxiety, trust, wonder and surprise. You need to be especially aware of, and sensitive to, infant and toddler gestures and body

movements, given that infants and toddlers are very physical. You need well-developed observation skills, and also heightened interpretive skills. In particular, listening involves a lot of waiting on your part, giving infants and toddlers time, space, and support to express themselves, as well as giving yourself opportunities to get to know and understand their behaviours and cues.

Paying attention to infants and toddlers, and offering them genuine opportunities to have their views heard and considered, shows them that you care about them and respect them as people who can contribute to ideas, events and relationships in their environment. This has an impact on the developing identity of the infant or toddler, and a strong sense of self and awareness of their capacities helps them to embrace learning and living enthusiastically, persist with challenge and take increasing responsibility.

Presence

Being able to listen to and read the cues of infants and toddlers is the first step towards developing emotional attunement with children. Attuned interactions with infants and toddlers also depend on your physical and emotional presence, and your ability to orient yourself towards the child's experience, rather than focus on strategies, techniques or rosters. Presence is an important component of a caring relationship — it makes infants and toddlers feel safe and nurtured and has a significant impact on their emotional well-being.

You have to be physically available to children, making space or access for children to be near you or on your lap, but also 'being there' requires you to actively make eye contact, display appropriate body language, and respond to infants' and toddlers' cues. It involves being engrossed in the infant or toddler, as well as being receptive to them, paying close and full attention to them in the moment. This attentiveness means that you are still and quiet, actively present but not actively doing. You need to trust in the child and in yourself that this attentive presence, this 'doing by not doing', is part of sound pedagogical practice, and give time and space just for being present, and for reflecting on and interpreting what you are learning about the child by being present. Prescribed routines and expectations that are external to the relationship make achieving presence more difficult.

Interactions that build relationship

In interactions with infants and toddlers you can show sensitivity, presence and an active involvement in, and attunement with, the child's experiences and actions. Attuned relationships with infants and toddlers consist of specific types of responsive and reciprocal interactions, that are individualised, sensitive and timely in response to infants' and toddlers' verbal and non-verbal cues. Generally, these are one-to-one interactions which facilitate the effective reading of infant and toddler cues and that allow for particular kinds of exchanges including episodes of joint attention. In particular, imitation, joint attention (or inter-subjectivity) and empathetic understanding are three skills that are developed in infancy which serve as foundations for social development, and enhance the learning of the infant or toddler. Repeated experiences of positive interactions help infants and toddlers develop the ability to trust others.

The nature of your interactions with infants and toddlers has the potential to improve or limit learning. While low ratios of children to teachers and smaller group sizes provide important conditions for positive interactions and more individualised attention, they do not guarantee them.

Certain actions encourage positive interactions, including:

- physical and emotional presence
- warm and responsive caregiving
- sitting, kneeling, bending down at the child's level as much as possible
- copious amounts of positive, respectful and responsive verbal and non-verbal communication, narratives and explanations
- appropriate use of warm and sensitive touch
- respect, acceptance, delight and acknowledgement of interests and strengths

Responsiveness

Sensitive and responsive caregiving supports infants and toddlers with emotional regulation and promotes the development of neural pathways necessary for learning. Being responsive to the infant or toddler's communications enables you to move forward in your understanding of them and, equally, enables the infant or toddler to develop their understanding of you. When you respond to a distressed infant, he or she will begin to generalise your presence as providing a sense of well-being and security. Even the youngest of infants can encode implicit memories before they develop conscious attention of the experience.

Responsiveness involves you being attuned to the infant's or toddler's subtle cues across diverse cultural contexts, having a regard for the child's perspective, and matching your care to cues, temperaments and stage of development. For example, some toddlers might require a sense of "autonomy with connected-ness", so you might offer choices to empower infants and toddlers to make a contribution to their caregiving. Strong relationships support continuities, which are important, but responsive interactions also incorporate change and challenge which promotes growth in children's abilities.

Routines, rosters and imposed expectations can serve to disrupt the time and intimacy needed to achieve the high levels of mutual understanding that are necessary for responsive care. Similarly, attitudes and assumptions regarding the lack of capacity of infants and toddlers to contribute to interactions can also mask young children's messages.

Reciprocity

Your relationship with an infant or toddler should be two-way, and reciprocal, in that each of you seek out each other and learn from each other, and each of you adjust in response to the other's behaviour, development and change. In reciprocal relationships, you and the infant are both involved in maintaining and developing the relationship, but often you and the infant will perform different roles and behaviours. Often, the infant or toddler will take the lead, and your role is to be observant, reflective and responsive, in order to develop mutually pleasurable experiences. Developing reciprocity in interactions means that you stop, look and listen for the infant's or toddler's response. Learning and teaching become reciprocal when you learn from the children as they learn from you.

Reciprocal dialogues are important, and are developed at an early age often through eye contact and the use of gaze, or mutual eye-to-eye contact which lasts more than a second. It is important to respond to the 'look' initiations of infants. You might use a similar form of look back to the child. This form of interaction might be described a "serve-and-return" interaction.

You can also enable reciprocity in your relationships with infants and toddlers when you:

- tell infants and toddlers what you are going to do before you do it, which means they can anticipate what's coming and participate in the event with you.
- ask infants and toddlers for their co-operation, offering a gesture of invitation, such as holding out your upturned hand. Wait for them to process your request. For example, say "I want to put this T-shirt on. Will you give me your hand?" and touch his or her hand gently. Wait, and then say "I am going to take your hand and put it in the sleeve" and wait again. Even a very young infant might begin to co-operate by putting their hand in yours.
- Offer choices: "Would you like the blue t-shirt or the dinosaur one?"

Imitation

Reciprocal imitation is an important interactional and intentional strategy which encourages infants and caregivers to delight in interactions with each other. Infants in particular are fascinated by seeing you respond to the rhythm, intensity and style of their movements and vocalisations through imitation, or in some other way matching your response to theirs or building on their communication. Infants enjoy the familiarity and sense of complicity associated with seeing their own behaviour returned to them.

Joint attention / inter-subjectivity

Good pedagogical practice involves the development of a shared inter-subjectivity that is maintained over time. Inter-subjectivity is a special quality of interaction and relationships which involves connectivity or communion between two people who attend to each other's cues about their emotions, thoughts and interests. It evolves within meaningful relationships established through sensitive practice and attuned interactions over time, and rests upon your attempts to approach and understand the child and his or her world. These are intimate moments which depend on your presence, sensitivity and responsiveness to the interactional cues of the infant and toddler, which help establish joint attention, synchronous interactions and attunement.

It is important to ensure a rich social environment and multiple opportunities to participate in reciprocal interactions of joint attention with adults. Joint attention occurs when you and the infant or toddler pay joint attention to, and perhaps jointly act upon, some external object, activity or idea. Infants as young as eight or nine months are capable of brief moments of joint attention, and episodes of joint attention become much more frequent by 15 to 18 months of age.

Research shows that infants and toddlers have strong inclination, desire and ability to engage adults and others in satisfying communication and joint involvement. Engagement in a shared activity or focus is enjoyable and provides a sense of delight and emotional connection. Engaging joyfully in joint activities with you supports the release of hormones in infants for the development of brain cells and neural pathways. At the same time, as an inter-subjective partner for the infant or toddler, you can optimise opportunities for learning and development, for example, by providing language and a frame of meaning for the child, appropriate to his or her understanding and your shared context. Research links joint attention to the development of a range of cognitive and social skills, including increased abilities in language and communication. This means that it is not the activity or objects per se that constitute valuable curriculum experiences, but the extent of your collaboration with the infant or toddler in regarding those objects and activities.

Infants and toddlers are active partners in developing inter-subjective interactions, although research shows that adults have a key role in establishing cognitively stimulating interactions in attunement with the child's interests and emotions, and that the amount of joint attention in which infants and toddlers participate depends to a great extent on the skill of the teacher. Most often, joint attention episodes will be initiated by the infant or toddler and start from their experience, but be developed and maintained by you. Joint attention is found to be more successful when motivated by a child's point of interest, but by effectively listening to and observing the child you can develop inter-subjectivity and demonstrate that you share their experience, whether it be marvelling at a plane in the sky or joy on hearing a familiar piece of music.

Research shows that inter-subjective interactions are more likely within relationships characterised by emotional engagement, alertness, presence, active listening and orientation towards the child's perspective, as well as respect, reflection and dialogue. Positive attitudes and feelings, communicated by body language, touch and tone of voice, also help to establish inter-subjectivity. Low ratios of children to teachers and practices such as primary caregiving systems are also important conditions for the emergence of inter-subjectivity, in allowing the time and relationships needed for the teacher to get to know the child.

Relationships with families

Your relationships with their parents influences an infant or toddler's view of you, as infants and toddlers rely on their parents and family members as important referees. They are more likely to accept and build a relationship with a new caregiver when they sense that he or she meets their parents' approval, so building relationships with families is an important part of the transition and settling process for a new child. In addition, because infants' and toddlers' development takes place in varied family, cultural and linguistic contexts, relationships with families help you to understand the lives that children and parents lead. Developing a solid relationship base or history requires getting to know the child's context and family. In this way you can develop sensitivity and understanding towards diverse values, beliefs, expectations and aspirations, and draw on the expertise of the parents who know their own child and his or her communications and routines very well.

Developing warm and trusting relationships, and open, pleasant and relaxed communication with families enables you to work collaboratively to provide the best care and learning experiences for children. A very important part of your role is also to value and support relationships between parents and children. You can use your relationship with parents to promote the pedagogical value of parents enjoying their children's company and spending time in reciprocal interactions with them from a very young age.

There are many ways in which you can facilitate ongoing information-sharing and collaboration with families, including through home and centre visits, as well as daily written and verbal communications and dialogue. It might be useful to discuss relationship goals, and how the child's relationships are developing, with families, to see how families might be able to contribute to this. Look for ways in which you can strengthen parents' relationships with their child, as well as with you.

A portrait of an infant/toddler-caregiver relationship

Mia is Cole's primary caregiver, and they have a strong relationship. As a baby, she responded to his cues, imitated his gurgles and coos, moved in synchrony and engaged him in mutual gazes. She responded sensitively to his distress and cries, and followed his parents' routines and customs for bottle-feeding, finger foods and naps. She tried to understand situations from his perspective. She knew their connection was developing when one day he rolled over to the other side of the room and then looked back at her, holding her gaze for a second or two. Because she was continuously available and present to him, he began to recognise her as a trustworthy caregiver and became more co-operative with her during caregiving routines. He increased his responses to her and interactions with her when he was in a good mood. Rather than initiate interactions, she followed his lead and cues, and tried to extend play based on these.

These days Cole sees Mia as his secure base. It is Mia that soothes and helps him when he is hurt. She also shares in his discoveries, pausing to look up at the sky with him when he seems excited by an aeroplane going by. Mia says "Aeroplane," and Cole repeats "A- plane," and they exchange smiles. In general, they keep track of each other, and Cole's behaviour changes when Mia steps out of the room. Cole likes Mia to cuddle him and rub his back at naptime. When Mia arranges the classroom before the children arrive in the morning, she chooses some toys she has seen him just beginning to explore. Cole's parents and Mia work closely together; they hand over to one another every morning so each day goes smoothly.

Adapted from Edwards, C. P., & Raikes, H. (2002). Extending the dance: Relationship-based approaches to infant/toddler care and education. *Young children* 57 (4), 10-17.