

Putting relationships centre-stage: Strategies for developing positive relationships with children



ECE resources

A curriculum for young children must have strong relational connections at its centre. Close and caring ongoing relationships which promote trust and security for children support all aspects of children's learning and development. Young children benefit most from interactions and relationships in which teachers are present, focused and responsive. A version of this resource which is more specific to the specialised nature of building relationships with infants and toddlers can be found [here](#).

Positive relationships between teachers and children are strongly related to positive outcomes for children who attend early childhood education settings. Recent neuroscientific research demonstrates that caring and responsive relationships with teachers, as well as strong connections between teachers and children's families and home life, are crucial to brain development. Strong relationships with teachers also have a significant influence on children's social and emotional development, with children who have secure relationships with their teachers demonstrating more positive interactions and relationships with teachers and peers at primary school, as well as fewer challenging behaviours and greater competence and achievement. Children who have insecure relationships with teachers engage in more conflict and negative interactions with teachers and peers at primary school. Similar findings for ongoing positive relationship-building are found for children who experience warmth, affection and respect in their relationships with teachers. Research has found that negative early childhood experiences characterised by unresponsive, inconsistent and unstable relationships within stressful environments have a negative effect on brain development, the immune system, emotional wellbeing and cognitive skills, both immediately and later in life.

Strong, attuned relationships support children's resilience and security. The sense of safety provided by a warm and secure relationship promotes children's investigation and exploration, and enables them to gradually establish multiple relationships with others. Relationships with a child's first teachers provide a model for relationships with subsequent teachers and also set the foundations for adjustment, development and learning across a child's education. Through relationships, young children learn how to be empathetic to others' feelings, to grow and manage their will, to stand up for their own needs and rights, to negotiate, manage and express their feelings, and to develop conflict resolution skills.

Learning is also thought to be enhanced when it takes place within the context of warm and secure relationships. When relationships between teachers and children are strong and well-developed, teachers have a deep understanding of children's interests and motivations, are able to interact with children in meaningful ways with awareness of children's intentions, imagination and thinking. Teachers can support learning in respectful and playful ways that suit each individual child, and use their strong relationship with a child to encourage children's participation in a widening range of learning opportunities and interactions. Feeling safe, secure and connected underpins children's **positive learner identities** and sense of themselves as competent and confident learners.

It is important to bear in mind that there can be contextual constraints that prevent the development of positive relationships between children and teachers, including high ratios of children to adults and larger groups of children. Teachers are found to provide more sensitive, frequent and positive care, to act more responsively, and to be increasingly nurturing and warm when they are responsible for fewer children.

Small group sizes and low ratios of children to adults, as well as the presence of supportive relationships, are features of low-stress environments that support healthy brain development.

Pedagogical strategies that strengthen the quality of relationships

Quality relationships in the context of early childhood education involve reciprocity, joint involvement, respect, trust and security, shared meaning-making and listening, following children's leads and initiations, and deep knowledge of children which supports intuitive understandings.

Calm, respectful and unhurried environments

Meaningful and intimate relationships develop in environments that are unrushed, peaceful and tranquil. Teachers should be particularly aware of sensitive times for children, such as their transition into the setting each morning, and ensure that processes for supporting children are prioritised to ensure children's feelings of security and safety. Environments should be amiable and calm, with a flexible and relaxed pace or rhythm to the day, so that interactions and relationships can be given the time, focus and support required. Teachers respect children and ensure that their mana and positive sense of self is upheld in all interactions.

Consistency and security

Teachers should aim to ensure ongoing, consistent and stable relationships and attachments, taking particular care to support children's connections to different teachers. 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 colleagues have similar approaches and pedagogies to children's care and education. Positive behaviour guidance strategies, consistent approaches to challenging behaviours, and clear expectations can also contribute to the kind of **positive emotional climate** that promotes children's feelings of safety and security. Children are more likely to feel secure when they can rely upon teachers to give them physical and verbal comfort when they are upset, and when teachers keep commitments or promises to children.

Many settings advocate a primary caregiver or key teacher as a strategy for achieving attentive relationships. Continuity in teacher-child relationships builds up more secure and trusting relationships between teachers, children and parents, and also is related to resilience in children. Building an attentive relationship over time will provide many opportunities to observe the child across a variety of experiences, enabling teachers to learn what excites, amuses, upsets and frustrates the child and become increasingly sensitive to the child as an individual. It will also allow teachers to come to know what the child knows, understands and is interested in.

Developing deep knowledge of children

Teachers can use a variety of strategies to get to know about children's interests and motivations, home experiences, strengths and needs. For example, teachers can focus their interactions with each child on getting to know the child, and try to find out something unique about each child. This might involve asking children about their home experiences and family life, seeking to make connections with their own lives and communities, and sharing their own stories and experiences with children. Attentive observation and reflective **documentation** can support teachers to really know and understand children well. Teachers will be able to recognise and celebrate children's accomplishments, effort and strengths, enabling children to feel noticed, known and appreciated, and enhancing their mana and positive sense of self.

Relationships with families

Relationships between teachers and parents influence a child's view of their teachers, as they rely on their parents and family members as important referees. They are more likely to accept and build a relationship with a new teacher 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 children's development takes place in varied family, cultural and linguistic contexts, relationships with families help teachers to understand the lives that children and parents lead. Developing a solid relationship base requires getting to know the child's context and family. In this way teachers 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, trusting relationships and open, pleasant and relaxed communication with families enables teachers to work collaboratively with families to provide the best care and learning experiences for children. A very important part of the teacher's role is to value and support relationships between parents and children. Teachers can use their relationships 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 teachers can facilitate ongoing information-sharing and collaboration with families through home and centre visits, and daily written and verbal communications and dialogue. It might be useful to discuss relationship goals and how the child's relationships are developing to see how families might be able to contribute to this.

Interactions that build relationships

Research shows that teachers' relationships with children can be strengthened when teachers focus on improving their daily interactions with children. In their everyday interactions and activities with children, teachers can develop the foundations for strong relationships that support children to feel safe, secure and connected. To build strong relationships, interactions with children need to involve the teacher's sensitivity, presence and active involvement in the child's experiences and actions. Generally one-to-one or small group interactions which allow for particular kinds of exchanges including episodes of joint involvement are most important. Teachers' interactions with children have the potential to deepen relationships and improve learning.

Connection through daily interactions

Children form relationships more readily with teachers who show an interest in them and have a positive outlook, a responsive style of interaction and strong non-verbal communication skills. Secure relationships are promoted when each child experiences many one-to-one, face-to-face interactions with teachers.

To ensure positive daily interactions that build connection, teachers should ensure to greet each child every day, and take care to connect with each child throughout the day. This is particularly important for those children who are less likely to seek teacher time or attention. Personal interactions take place at the child's level and involve eye contact, positive tones, and affectionate words and gestures. Joining children in their play, having fun and being playful, is an effective way to connect with children, and offers the greatest opportunities for teachers to have sustained conversations with children. Teachers should aim to offer children lots of positive attention and express warm feelings towards children, for example, by spending time with children and enjoying their company.

Teachers need to be physically available to children, making space or access for children to be near them or on their lap, but also 'being there' requires them to actively make eye contact, display appropriate body

language, and respond to children's verbal and non-verbal communications. It involves teachers being fully attentive and receptive to the child, and allowing time and space for interactions and for reflecting on and interpreting what they are learning about the child. It is important that teachers listen attentively to children: if they are unable to give children their full focus, they can explain to children and reassure them that they will connect with them at a later point.

Reciprocity and responsiveness

A teacher's relationship with a child should be reciprocal, in that each seeks out the other and adjusts in response to the other. Intersubjectivity is a special quality of responsive and reciprocal interaction and relationships which occurs when there is a connection between two people who attend to each other's cues about their emotions, thoughts and interests. In reciprocal relationships, the teacher and the child are both involved in maintaining and developing the relationship. Learning and teaching become reciprocal when teachers learn from the children as the children learn from teachers. Often, the child will take the lead, and the teacher's role is to be observant, reflective and responsive. Reciprocal dialogues are important.

Joint involvement

Joint attention and joint involvement occur when the teacher and the child pay joint attention to, and perhaps jointly act upon, some external object, activity or idea, and it strongly supports intersubjectivity between children and teachers. Children have a strong inclination, desire and ability to engage adults and others in satisfying communication and joint involvement, and will often initiate these interactions. Engagement in a shared activity or focus is enjoyable, provides a sense of delight and emotional connection, and supports the development of strong relationships. At the same time, teachers 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 the 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 the adult's collaboration with the child in regarding those objects and activities.

To engage in a greater number of intersubjective interactions and episodes of joint involvement with children, teachers can aim to follow the child's lead in play. Teachers should intentionally seek ways to become jointly involved in children's activities by observing their play and finding ways to participate in and contribute to the play, in a way that **doesn't overtake children's play** but maintains it as a shared endeavour. Teachers might show interest, ask questions, offer help or negotiate a role in the play, for example.

Shared meaning-making and listening to children

Strong, positive relationships are best supported when interactions and activities in early childhood settings focus on shared meaning-making rather than knowledge construction. This means inviting, respecting and really listening to children's ideas, theories, feelings and beliefs. This might involve practices such as providing lots of wait time and allowing children to finish talking or asking questions before teachers reply, or encouraging children to listen to and question each other about their ideas. Pedagogues in **Reggio Emilia** also advocate for listening to children using all of the senses, not just listening but also looking with attention to pick up on the cues and communication conveyed through children's body language, action and movement. Shared meaning-making both depends on and deepens relationships between teachers and children. It also offers children and teachers a foundation on which to co-construct meaningful learning experiences for their shared participation.

Further reading

Hedges, H., & Cooper, M. (2018). Relational play-based pedagogy: Theorising a core practice in early childhood education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4), 369-383. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564

McLaughlin, T., Aspden, K., & McLachlan, C. (2015). How do teachers build strong relationships? A study of teaching practices to support child learning and social-emotional competence. *Early Childhood Folio*, 19(1), 31-38.

Ostrosky, M. M., & Jung, E. Y. (n.d.). Building positive teacher-child relationships. *What Works Briefs*, 12. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Retrieved from: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb12.html>

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Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.