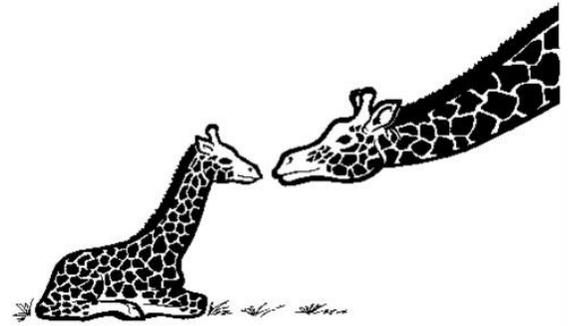


Making Connections

The phrase “early care and education programs” is often being used to refer to the many different types of early childhood programs in the world today, such as child care, Head Start, and public school kindergartens. This powerful phrase offers wisdom to guide your decisions in daily practices—caring comes first. Positive human relationships are an essential component of early childhood programs for many reasons, including the following three:



- ❖ Making positive connections with each child in your group forms the foundation children need to thrive and learn in group settings. Children develop a sense of trust in a consistent, loving relationship that motivates them to explore and learn about the world around them.
- ❖ Strong connections with each child also support your professional practice. Knowing each child and what supports his or her success is fundamental to selecting toys and arranging the environment. Understanding the child, his or her temperament, strengths, and needs keeps you tuned in as you guide behavior. Building partnerships with parents becomes more natural as you work together to support the child's success.
- ❖ When you have developed meaningful relationships with the children in your care, you are more likely to have a stronger commitment to the important work you are doing. You will also feel a greater sense of satisfaction with the outcomes of your work as you watch children grow and learn. When professionals lose sight of human connections in their everyday practice, they often leave the field or find themselves just “going through the motions” and counting the minutes until closing time.

Although the ongoing process of building and sustaining connections with each child is somewhat unique and directly related to children's individual characteristics, the following beliefs and skills can guide your efforts: 1) An overall sense of optimism about children and the belief that each child is competent. That is, believing that each child has the desire as well as the right to be successful in your program. 2) A desire to discover each child's unique strengths, interests, and needs. 3) The ability to use an understanding of each child to guide everyday actions—from how you greet a child each morning to the kinds of play materials and activities you plan each day. 4) The extension of the preceding principles to the child's family. Knowing and valuing each family and individualizing your interactions with them according to their culture, interests, and needs is essential to the development of a positive relationships with children as well as with families.

Personal qualities also play a role in the development of positive relationships with children. Of course, early childhood professionals are unique individuals with differing personalities, temperaments, and habits. However, any professional is capable of developing and strengthening the following characteristics and become more:

- Consistent: uses same voice tone, response to problems, and degree of warmth from one day to the next.
- Self-reflective: aware of tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and emotional triggers.
- Effective as a communicator: listens more than speaks.
- Curious: desires to learn about each child.
- Caring: sees the child first, even on trying days and during challenging events.

The rewards for putting time, energy, and heart into connecting with each child come back to you in many ways. When children are immersed in a caring environment, they learn to treat one another with care. You can develop a classroom community that children, families, and YOU look forward to being part of every day.

Try It Out

There are many ways to build relationships and make connections with young children as they play and learn in your program. Here are a few that fit right into the daily routine.

- X Greet each child. Greet every child warmly each day as the child enters your program or group. Get down at the child's level or look into the child's face, and use his or her name.
- X Join a child at play. Quietly ask, "Can I sit by you for a minute while you paint?" And then pay attention.
- X Write a short note. "I had fun watching you build castles in the sand box today."
- X Follow up on a child's interest. "Yesterday, you told us about your boat. I found this book on boats for you to look at (or for us read together)."
- X Respond. When you catch yourself ignoring a child or a child's request, don't let the moment pass. Take a deep breath, relax your facial expression, bend or kneel down, and say, "I think you have something to tell me and I want to listen."

X X X X X

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *Our program has new guidelines that require a lot more paperwork about what we are teaching and how much each child is learning. Where do human relationships fit in with all of this focus on "standards"?*

ANSWER: As you look at balancing your new program standards with your commitment to connecting with each child on an individual basis, it may be helpful to take a look at the interconnectedness of your efforts. Developing a positive relationship with each child in your group impacts learning outcomes for each child and their family—and at the same time, supports your efforts to meet standards! When considered in this light, the one-to-one time you spend connecting with children continues to be at the top of your list of responsibilities rather than an "add-on."

Child outcomes are enhanced when children feel safe, cared for, and connected. In fact, positive human relationships are essential for all learning. When children feel a positive connection with you, they take greater advantage of the learning opportunities you provide. They will explore more freely and be more willing to take the risks that active learning demands—such as writing the letters of their name, knowing they might make a mistake but trusting you to accept their efforts and

guide them in learning each next step.

Family satisfaction is also enhanced through your connections with each child. Parents want professionals to be tuned into and care about their children as individuals. Your efforts build a stronger home-school bond that strongly supports the child's success in your program.

Finally, your job of teaching and caring cannot be separated. As you observe, listen, and interact with each child, you are gathering the information you need to develop and individualize your daily activities. Positive relationships with children help you both meet standards and enhance children's learning.

