



Child Care plus+

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Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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+ 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:

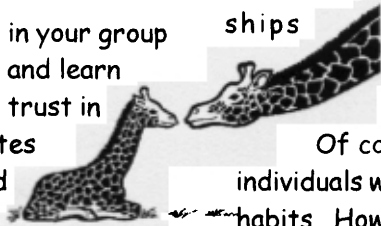
* Making positive connections with each child in your group forms the foundation children need to thrive and learn in group settings. Children develop a sense of trust in a consistent, loving relationship that motivates them to explore and learn about the world around them.

* 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 relationship 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. + SHW

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+ IN FOCUS

Many early childhood professionals love children and often have the expectation that they will be able to "love them all." However, there are times in almost everyone's early childhood career when it seems difficult to develop a positive connection with a particular child. What should you consider if and when this happens to you?

First, "loving every child" is simply an unrealistic goal to start with! More realistic goals would be to a) value and respect each child and b) consistently try to maintain a similar level of connection with each child.

Second, listen to your inner voice when you are having a difficult time connecting with a child. Find out where the difficulty is coming from. Ask yourself, *what is getting in the way?* Identify and closely examine the beliefs and expectations affecting your reaction to this child.

Third, commit to taking steps to strengthen the relationship and making adjustments where you can. Find out about the child's interests and explore one or two of them together. Learn more about the child's culture. Conduct a home visit. Work with the family to gain better insights about the child.

You may not feel the same way about every child, but you can build a positive relationship with any child. + SHW

+ 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.* + SHW

X X X X X

+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Forming ongoing and positive connections with children's family members is a critical step in building positive relationships with both children and their parents. Parents and other family members are a valuable resource for information about the child in the context of the family and the community. Is there a big/little brother or sister? What did the child do over the weekend? What is important to this family and this child? What foods, songs, and games does this child especially enjoy? The answers to these questions provide meaningful conversation starters and often explain the child's interactions with toys and play materials or verbal or emotional response during group activities.

Sharing information with parents about the child's daily activities during the time he or she is in your program further enhances these warm connections. When you are connected, you become more attentive and you know what the child did all day. Perhaps you can describe her enthusiasm for the music activity or his eagerness to help you set the table for lunch. You can make copies or tapes of songs and finger plays to send home, provide copies of books you have read to the children, and give them the recipe for the snack their child likes so well. By giving parents real examples of their child's interests, you connect with them and give them familiar ways for their child to connect with them as well.

When you show interest in their family, children feel valued and important. Your positive regard for one another models for children the patterns for appropriate social interactions and developing interpersonal relationships. Hearing you tell Mom or Dad or Grandma about the highlights of the day helps children feel that what they are doing is significant and provides a seamless transition from the child care setting to the home setting. + SLM

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Developing genuine connections between adults and children takes thoughtful planning and ongoing effort. You will more readily achieve this goal in your program when you use effective strategies for developing meaningful connections with each child and purposefully find multiple opportunities for one-to-one connections.

~ STRATEGIES ~

Engage the family. The child's family is both the starting point for getting to know the child and the conduit for your relationship with the child. Spend time talking *with* parents at enrollment time (rather than only focusing on communicating program policies) to get a beginning understanding of the family and the child. Not only will you learn a lot about the child, but you will also plant the seeds for a positive home-school relationship.

Find one-on-one time. Children need direct connections with you to form a relationship. One-on-one time needs to include quiet time to talk and be together, but can also include a smile or wave from across the room, attention and closeness while the child is interacting with materials or with other children, a warm greeting any time you see the child in other settings, or a home visit. In fact, a home visit is probably the most powerful way to build and honor your relationship with a child.

Observe regularly. Spend time watching the child interacting with family, at play, and with other children. What does the child do well? What does the child "love" to do? What are the child's interests? How fast or slow does the child warm up to new people or situations? How sensitive is the child to noise, attention, activity levels?

Be responsive. One size does not fit all! Use what you learn about the child's interpersonal style and temperament to tailor the way you nurture the relationship. If you are particularly boisterous for example, tone down the volume or enthusiasm of your interactions, if necessary. Watch carefully for cues about how the approach you are taking is working and adjust accordingly.

Make interactions natural and meaningful. Natural interactions respond to the child's comments, facial expressions, or actions, and express sincere interest and acceptance. Natural interactions also require being at the child's level. Meaningful interactions respond to what the child is doing or interested in at the moment, and include listening, commenting, questioning, nodding your head, or simply gazing into the child's eyes with appreciation.

Cultivate genuine positive regard. Look for and believe the

best about all children. Learn to separate a child's behavior at any given moment from your acceptance of them as a significant, important member of your group.

~ OPPORTUNITIES ~

Early childhood professionals who work in group settings have a lot of demands on their time. While developing meaningful connections with each child requires time and energy, it may help you to keep in mind that relationships thrive on the quality of the interactions, not the quantity.

Be prepared. Program planning and activity preparation needs to occur before children arrive so you can be fully engaged with each child as he or she enters the door.

Welcome each child. Offer a warm, personal greeting to each child and parent. If children arrive all at the same time, start with a "puzzles and play" time so children can be independently engaged while you greet each one. If a few children arrive later in the day, ask parents to seek you out so you can provide a warm welcome for their child.

Check your pace. With pace, less is truly more. When you continuously plan and introduce new activities, use activities that require a great deal of supervision, or schedule numerous "special" events like music or yoga, you give away valuable opportunities for making connections.

Balance your schedule. Optimize time for one-to-one connections with individual children. Provide a rich play environment that responds to your curriculum goals and children's needs and allows you to schedule ample amounts of child-directed activity time. When children are meaningfully engaged, they are learning *and* you can readily find opportunities for one-to-one interactions.

Track your interactions. Most teachers find that some children get most of their attention and a few get almost none. Know how you are spending your time and planfully adjust so your one-to-one time is more evenly distributed.

Keep track of the larger group. Learn to give attentive one-to-one time without losing sight of the larger group. As you kneel by a child, position yourself facing the rest of the children. Put a hand on the child's shoulder or knee to assure the child that you are "with him" even though you occasionally glance away to survey the room.

Encourage children to build relationships with each other. There may be moments when you are not able to respond or make immediate connection with a child. Children who have seen your model will start making connections with one another. +

SHW

+ 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 sepa-

rated. 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 helps you both meet standards and enhance children's learning. + SHW

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

I Love You Rituals: Activities to Build Bonds and Strengthen Relationships With Children by Dr. Becky Bailey includes seventy-nine interactive activities based on positive messages. Each interaction is based on the latest in brain research. All activities help children increase their attention spans, reduce hyperactivity, build self-esteem, and facilitate language development. The interactions teach children how to be kind and caring using gentle touches. Use with demanding children and watch cooperation replace opposition. Cost is \$14.00. Call 1-800-842-2846 or visit www.beckybailey.com.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 8.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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