

Building Relationships

Young children's development flourishes when they have close, supportive, and trusting relationships with the adults in their lives. Such relationships between children and teachers are the core of quality care. Knowing that you will meet their physical and social/emotional needs, children are able to explore and get to know the other people and objects in their environment. Your relationship fuels children's curiosity and desire to learn. Their connection with you allows them to feel safe enough to move, to explore, to experiment and, thereby, to learn.

Strategies for Building Trusting Relationships

Every interaction you have with children is an opportunity to build relationships that help them thrive. Here are some strategies to try.

Delight in the children who are in your care. Greet them affectionately each day. Show that you enjoy them. Laugh with them as they take their first halting steps, fall, and get up again. Smile at the toddler's emerging sense of humor. Celebrate each new accomplishment as you watch a child learn to roll over, sit up, walk, run, and jump. Delight as they coo and babble, speak their first words, and string words together to form sentences. Enjoy the closeness of holding a young infant in your arms and the special time you have reading a favorite story to a 2-year-old.

Relate in ways that build trust. Be dependable. Let children know that they can count on you. Be at the door to greet them each morning. Respond promptly to a child who is crying. Tell children when you are going to leave the room. Keep your promises: "Yesterday I said you could help make playdough today. Are you ready?" Remember that building relationships is a central part of your work. Slow down and spend time with children individually, every day.

Use caring words to let children know that they are respected, understood, and valued. Think about what you say and how you say it. Even infants who cannot yet talk and who do not know the meaning of your words are sensitive to the tone and volume of your voice. Use the child's home language whenever possible. Practice using caring words and a caring tone. For example, when comforting an upset child, you might say, "You are having a hard time. I can tell by your tears that you're feeling sad. Let's sit in the rocking chair together and figure out how to help you feel better."

Build relationships with all children, including those with whom you have more difficulty building positive relationships. As a professional, you need to figure out why you do not bond with some children as easily as with others. Perhaps you and the child have very different temperaments and personalities. As a first step, look for and focus on the positive characteristics of each child. Share your feelings with a colleague if you think this might help, or even ask a colleague to observe you and a child together.

Adapt daily routines to meet individual needs. Offer an infant a bottle when she is hungry, regardless of whether it is time for a scheduled snack or meal. Give a toddler time to finish his puzzle before you change his diaper. Handle children's bodies respectfully, even if it means that a routine will take longer. Explain to an infant, "I'm going to pick you up now so I can change your diaper." Ask a toddler, "Will you please help me take off your wet shirt?" Make daily routines into learning times.

Offer children opportunities to make decisions, whenever possible. Give children clear alternatives when a choice is theirs to make. For example, at snack time, ask children to choose among slices of banana, peach, or pear. This shows that you respect their tastes and their developing decision-making skills. You can even talk with young infants about choices: "Do you want to be rocked or rubbed? Let's see."

Be careful not to overstimulate children. Watch for signs that children are becoming overwhelmed, such as when an infant turns his head away during a conversation or a toddler is not able to sustain attention the way he usually does. Respond by changing your behavior or adjusting the environment so that the child can become calm and engaged.

Observe children closely to help you decide how best to respond. Give a child your full attention. Observe the child's facial expressions and body language. Learn to distinguish an infant's cries, so you will know whether the child is hungry or needs comforting. Learn how to calm an upset toddler. Use the *Developmental Continuum* to help you get to know and appreciate individual children and to decide how to respond to each child. Be aware of each child's personal style and how it might be culturally based. Respect each child's style of interaction. Some children jump into activities immediately and enthusiastically. Others need time to watch and may need some gentle encouragement.

Know yourself. Self-awareness requires a willingness to ask questions such as, “Why am I acting this way?” For example, you would want to identify why you are becoming overly involved with one child or shying away from another. Recognize that your feelings shape your interactions. Being aware of your feelings will help you form relationships and respond to children individually. Take a few minutes each day to take care of yourself so that you will have the focus and energy you need to give the children your full attention.

Helping Children Get Along With Others

The trusting relationships you build with each child help form the foundation for other relationships. When you treat children in loving, respectful, and consistent ways, you promote their positive attitudes toward others. Nevertheless, life in group care can be stressful for children. Interacting with individual children and with very small groups of children will give you and the children a break from the intensity of a larger group. One-on-one and small-group interactions also allow you to give each child more attention and to make more intimate connections than are possible in a large group.



Limit group activities for infants and always be flexible to respond to individual needs. Although they still need you to respond to their individual needs, toddlers in groups may begin to follow the same schedule for meals and naps. Toddlers and twos tend to group and regroup themselves throughout the day as they play at the water table, enjoy a painting experience that you organize, play in the rocking boat, or listen to a story. Twos often enjoy the addition of a very short morning greeting time.

Here are some strategies for helping children get along with others and manage life in a group setting.

Remember that children look to you as a model. The infants, toddlers, and twos you care for are very aware of what you do. The way you interact with each child, with colleagues, and with families teaches children more powerfully than anything you might say directly about how to get along with other people.

Arrange your environment so that children have opportunities to be in small groups when they want. Time away from the whole group offers a chance for social interactions that might not take place when everyone is together. Physical spaces that give children a break from group life and promote one-on-one interactions include a large cardboard box or a comfortable chair with room for two persons. You and one or two children can enjoy being together as you play peek-a-boo or prepare a snack.

Mirror the behavior of infants and toddlers. When you smile at an infant who is smiling at you or imitate the funny expression on a toddler's face, you acknowledge his experience and confirm that relating to others is worthwhile.

Acknowledge children's positive interactions. Comment when you see children engaging positively with each other. For example, when two 8-month-olds are sitting on a blanket together, you might say, "You are getting to know each other. You touched her face very gently."

Matthew (22 months) is drawing a picture for his new sister. Mercedes comments, "You are drawing a picture for your sister. You must be thinking about her."

Chapter 4: Caring and Teaching

Give children opportunities to help you. Children begin to understand how to contribute positively to group life when you invite them to help you.

Barbara asks Leo (18 months) and other children to carry a letter to the mailbox. She also asks them to help set out their mats at nap time. She encourages their understanding that these are ways to help other people.

Encourage children to help one another. Throughout the day, offer children opportunities to assist each other. For example, you might have occasions to invite one child to help look for another's missing sock. Acknowledge when a child uses words or gentle acts to comfort another child.

Read books about helpfulness and friendship. There are wonderful books for toddlers and twos, such as *The Enormous Turnip* and *Bear's Busy Family*. Children also love homemade books about familiar events and people they know, such as *Valisha Helps Jonisha Find Her Sweater*.

Offer interesting materials and experiences throughout the room. Purposeful room arrangement and thoughtful displays of toys and materials will help avoid the inevitable pushing and shoving that happens when too many toddlers are together in a small space.

Include equipment and materials that promote interaction and cooperation. Provide a wooden rocking boat that two or more children can rock together, offer large sheets of butcher paper for children to color or paint on together, and provide opportunities for group water and sand play.

Arrange the environment to help children begin to experience turn-taking and sharing. Placing three chairs around a small table helps children figure out whether there is a place for them or whether they have to come back when fewer children want to sit there. Providing duplicates of toys minimizes conflict over sharing, which is an unreasonable expectation for most toddlers and twos.

Allow children time to work out their differences, but be ready to step in if you are needed. For example, when you wait a few minutes before stepping in, you give two toddlers a chance to discover that there is room for both of them to sit on the sofa together. Watch closely so you can intervene if you see that one is about to be pushed off!

A Structure That Supports Relationships

Program policies and procedures can promote the ability of staff members to develop trusting, responsive relationships with children. Three factors help support relationship building.

Group sizes and teacher-child ratios are key to implementing high-quality programs. Small groups allow teachers to interact with children individually, take the time needed for daily routines, observe and respond to each child, and follow the child's lead. Group care can feel chaotic and overwhelming to very young children. Small group sizes help them feel safe and more secure.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends limiting group size to no more than eight infants ages birth–15 months. If there are six infants in the group, there should be at least one teacher for every three children. If there are eight infants in the group, there should be at least one teacher for every four children.

NAEYC also recommends limiting group size to no more than 12 children ages 12–36 months. For children ages 12–18 months, there should be 1 teacher for every 3 children when there are 6 children in the group and 1 teacher for every 4 children when there are 8–12 children in the group. For children ages 21–36 months, there should be 1 teacher for every 4 children when there are 8 children in the group, 1 teacher for every 5 children when there are 10 children in the group, and 1 teacher for every 6 children when there are 12 children in the group. The term *teacher* includes teachers, assistant teachers, and teacher aides.²⁵

When a **primary caregiver** is assigned to each child, children and families benefit. This person has the major responsibility for a child's care and education, although other teachers participate as well. He or she is often the family's primary contact with the program.

By providing regular and consistent care, a primary caregiver becomes a child's secure base in child care. Children learn that they can trust this person to comfort them when they are tired, upset, or frightened and to help them as necessary as they explore and learn. Their relationship with a primary teacher helps children feel secure enough to relate to other adults.

Continuity of care refers to a program philosophy that supports children's staying with the same teacher for all—or at least most—of their first 3 years. Children under age 3 need continuity of care to feel safe and secure. It takes time for a child and teacher to form a secure attachment. They are less likely to form secure attachments when children change teachers frequently. Despite this knowledge, program policies often require that infants and toddlers move to new groups and new teachers when they reach a certain age or begin to walk. This transition is often very difficult for the child, as well as for teachers and families.

Here are some ways that programs can promote continuity of care:

- Children of the same age and teachers stay together in the same space until the children are 3 years old.
- Children are cared for in mixed age groups and remain with the same teachers and children until they are ready for preschool.
- Children and teachers move together to a new space as children grow older.
- Groups divide. Some children from one group move with one teacher to another room, where they join a new teacher and a few children from her original group.
- Children remain with the same teacher until they are 18 months or 2 years old. They then move to a toddler or twos group.
- Children change teachers but visit their previous teachers whenever they wish.

Helping Children Transition to a New Group or Preschool

While infants, toddlers, and twos make many transitions throughout the day, major transitions occur when children move to a new group within your program and when they move to a new program, perhaps to go to preschool. By making these major transitions as smooth as possible for children and families, you help children build on their successes in your setting as they move to a new one. Change is harder for some children than for others, but some additional support is helpful for everyone. Children, families, and teachers may all feel sad about leaving the strong relationship you have built together over time. Introducing a child and family to new arrangements before the actual change gives them the opportunity to experience the new situation from the base of trust and security they have established with you.

Separation can evoke children's deep feelings. You may find that, during the last weeks or days before the change, a child becomes restless or more easily upset, tests limits more than usual, or may even get angry or frustrated with you. A child may cling to you or want to spend all of his time by your side. Even challenging behaviors show how much the child cares for you. Here are some ideas for making transitions easier for children, families, and you.

Think about transitions ahead of time. Develop program-wide plans for handling internal transitions. When possible, forge relationships with external preschool programs. Share information with the new program about your center, about *The Creative Curriculum*, and the *Developmental Continuum*. Lay the groundwork for a new teacher to get to know a child by sharing information and the insights you gained by using the *Developmental Continuum*. Be sure that your program's director and the child's family approves of taking this step.

Talk to families about how their child handles change and about the strategies that they use to help their child cope with change.

Plan to have the child and family visit the new group or program. Encourage them to visit more than once if possible. Invite the new teacher to visit the child in your setting so she can observe the child in a familiar place. If a child is changing teachers and rooms within a center, it is easy to make numerous visits. During these visits, take photos of the child in the new setting and with the new teacher. Make a book with photos from the new and old settings.

Talk about the change, beginning about 2 weeks before the transition. Take care not to convey your sorrow or concerns or to make too much of a planned change. Integrate your mention of the new setting or new teacher into your everyday interactions.

Celebrate the child's last day with a special snack or by singing a song you made up about the child. This gives you an opportunity to acknowledge the change through a small, low-key ritual. Be sure to say good-bye. Your acknowledgment is a sign of respect to the child, family, and the relationship you have worked so hard to build during the time you spent together.

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