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INFORMATION MEMORANDUM [See Attachment at the bottom]

TO: Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies

SUBJECT: The Importance of Teacher-Child Relationships in Head Start

INFORMATION:

Positive interactions between adults and children, and between children and their peers are among the key elements of overall classroom quality. Teaching teams can be instrumental in fostering the development and maintenance of positive social interactions and a pro-social environment. Strategies that support such interactions are well-researched and documented in early childhood research and other publications. This Information Memorandum (IM) highlights the importance of promoting strong, positive interactions with young children and offers specific examples of some successful strategies.

Building strong adult-child relationships is foundational to young children’s school readiness, future achievement, and success later in life. Strong positive relationships with teachers and other adult caregivers within environments that validate the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children foster positive opportunities for the development of social competence and academic growth.

Promoting positive adult-child relationships is vital for three interrelated reasons:^{1,2,3}

- social relationships form the bases for life-long learning
- social competence is integrally related to academic success
- prevention of social and academic difficulties is more effective than remediation

/ Patricia E. Brown /

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Endnotes

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ATTACHMENT

Overview

Providing experiences that allow children to become autonomous and independent is a general description of one of the key roles adults play in the early childhood years. The quality of teacher-child interactions and relationships impacts child outcomes in various ways in early childhood and the primary grades. Positive teacher-child relationships may serve as “buffers” or protective factors for children.^{2,3,4} For example, positive, caring and supportive adult relationships (e.g. parent, mentor or others) have been associated with children being able to defy the odds of living in poverty.^{5,6} Positive teacher-child relationships have been linked to many positive child outcomes in the early school years such as being involved in school and low levels of aggression.^{7,8} For primary age children, negative teacher-child relationships have been associated with lower scores on standardized tests, language arts and math grades, less school engagement, increased classroom misbehavior, high levels of aggression and social withdrawal.^{4,9,10}

The complex developmental tasks of relationship building, self-confidence and self-regulation are best accomplished during the preschool years. Building social skills and healthy emotional relationships in young children is much easier than trying to remediate later adjustment problems.

The current knowledge base about child development and learning reinforces practices and approaches that integrate cognitive learning and social development. These include:

- Close teacher-child relationships and quality classroom practices are related to higher social skills of preschoolers.^{11,12} Researchers have found that teachers who provided positive communication, warm affection and opportunities for children to be in charge, tended to have students with high levels of social skills such as completing work, tolerating frustration, and interacting with peers.¹³
- Close teacher-child relationships in preschool and kindergarten have also been found to predict lower symptoms of anxiety, depression and social withdrawal in first grade.¹
- High conflict teacher-child relationships in kindergarten and first grade have also been linked with lower social skills in the areas of responsibility, cooperation, self-control and assertion in first grade.¹
- Preschoolers who have close relationships with teachers tend to know more letters, have higher math scores and advanced language and literacy skills while in preschool.¹¹ Researchers have also found that close teacher-child relationships and quality classroom practices are related to better language and cognitive skills among preschoolers.¹²
- Children who had close teacher-child relationships in preschool and a structured and disciplined environment at home had higher reading skills than children whose parents were not as firm.³
- Close teacher-child relationships were related to better receptive language for all children, but this was even stronger for children of color than for white children. Further, the connection between positive teacher-child relationships and children’s language was even stronger for preschool children than early elementary school children.³

What programs can do to help build positive teacher-child relationships

The early years (birth through five years of age) represent a crucial stage of development when adult-child relationships can have a significant impact on emerging social, behavioral, and readiness skills. Most importantly, children learn better when they feel emotionally secure and close in their relationships with caring adults, including teachers.¹⁴

To improve interactions and foster the development of positive relationships, directors and education managers can:

- Create a warm, nurturing, welcoming physical environment that fosters the development of trusting relationships¹⁵
- Understand that trust is foundational to positive interactions and the development of relationships¹⁵
- Establish a working environment that reflects respect for individual teachers and children
- Model communication that is direct, supportive, and respectful of parents, teachers, and children
- Re-visit the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework and emphasize practices and approaches that integrate cognitive learning and social development
- Promote the understanding that social competence is culturally determined
- Identify strategies that accommodate and support culture and language backgrounds of staff, families and children
- Understand that meaningful relationships require content

Practitioners can:

- Provide learning environments that are positive, sensitive, responsive and include frequent individualized interactions
- Structure the physical environment, equipment and materials in ways that promote quality social interactions among children, parents and teachers
- Implement an engaging curriculum that includes opportunities for each child to participate
- Respect and validate children's cultural and language backgrounds
- Plan and implement experiences that are of interest to children and include content that promotes and sustains the development of positive child-child and adult-child relationships
- Provide classroom routines that are consistent and predictable
- Use effective well-timed transitions that include warnings about transitions that preview what is going to happen next, and communicate clearly what is expected of children
- Provide positive attention that encourages each child

- Find ways to validate how children are feeling and what they are experiencing
- Be actively engaged in learning new things with children
- Identify ways to reinforce children's positive behaviors and learning
- Maintain high expectations related to children's behavior and learning across all developmental domains identified within the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework and state and local curriculum standards

Endnotes

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