

Fostering Connections

Tip Sheet

What is the practice?

Building relationships with children is the first step to creating an engaging learning environment. Connecting with a child involves watching for something significant the child is doing, saying, or feeling and then intentionally creating an interaction with that child about what you see and hear. It is also about getting to know a child on a personal level and then building on the information you learn to sustain a lasting connection.

When educators think about building and fostering connections, they make it a priority to:

- Think about giving planned and meaningful encouragement at just the right time. For example, I'm going to bring out the toys Amir has shown interest in and encourage him to continue working on crawling and grasping toys.
- Show an appropriate level of interest in a child's life outside of the program. For example, I'm going to ask Max about the books he found with his family at the library yesterday.
- Plan to learn a child's home language. For example, I'm going to use the new Spanish phrase I learned with Camilla to greet her.
- Engage in multiple back-and-forth planned and purposeful interactions. For example, I'm going to have a conversation with Makaila during arrival about her new baby sister.

Why is the practice important?

Planned, positive interactions with educators and caregivers play a crucial role in helping young children engage with, think about, and communicate in their learning environment.

Strong educator-child relationships can build a sense of belonging and help children thrive. Here are some examples:

- Children's learning improves when their educator or caregiver displays a positive demeanor, shares activities with them, and makes efforts to connect with their family.
- Children are more likely to take risks when the educator or caregiver reinforces effort, shows excitement and enthusiasm, encourages, gives positive praise, and consistently validates feelings.
- Children's engagement increases when an educator or caregiver plans activities based on their interests, asks questions about their life outside of class, honors their home language, and provides help with new and challenging tasks.
- Children talk and share more when an educator or caregiver listens with eye contact (if culturally appropriate), asks for clarification, asks open-ended questions, and laughs and plays with children.

Sustaining Children’s Cultural, Ethnic, and Language Identities

Relationships are complex, and many of the ways we relate to others are rooted in our cultural background and past experiences. Sometimes subtle biases that we might not even be aware of can interfere with our ability to relate to another adult, infant, or young child. The process of uncovering these implicit biases takes time and reflection.

Educators can intentionally connect with children in meaningful ways. Consider these following statements:

- I made this child feel included today.
- I asked this child a question about themselves or their family today.
- I showed genuine interest in this child today.
- I had high expectations for this child today.
- I let this child, and their family, know how much I enjoyed them today.
- I supported this child to learn a new skill today.

Practices for Children with Disabilities or Suspected Delays

In nurturing and responsive relationships, educators know that no two children are the same. Fostering lasting connections with individual children requires an understanding of each child’s unique needs. To make sure all children feel included and supported, educators tailor the types of support they offer. Children with disabilities or suspected delays thrive from the same responsive relationships and may need additional adaptations; curriculum modifications; or intensive, individualized teaching.

Educators can nurture their relationship with each child by providing them with positive feedback such as a warm greeting, an inviting smile, a listening ear, or the validation of feelings at just the right time. Some sentence starters for giving positive feedback are:

- “Thank you for helping me ...”
- “You almost have it! You can ...”
- “You’ve done a wonderful job at ...”
- “You have really learned how to ...”
- “You have worked so hard ...”
- “You were so patient when you ...”

For children with limited verbal language or understanding of words or children who may not be responsive to words and affirmations, consider offering a high-five or a warm hug instead. If the child has a favorite toy, save the item for special interactions with an adult or peer to help foster connections.

Infants – Early On

Children at an early stage of building and fostering connections are ready to learn how to:

- Interact in predictable ways with familiar adults.
- Try to calm themselves with the support of familiar adults.
- Look for the caregiver’s response in uncertain situations.
- Express and respond to a variety of emotions.

Toddlers – Emerging Skills

Children at an emerging stage of building and fostering connections are ready to learn how to:

- Show emotional connection and attachment to familiar adults.
- Look to others for help in coping with strong feelings and emotions.
- Stop an activity or avoid doing something if directed.
- Sometimes remember and cooperate in daily routines.

Preschoolers – Increasing Mastery

Children increasing their mastery of building and fostering connection are ready to learn how to:

- Interact readily with trusted adults.
- Appropriately manage actions, words, and behaviors with increasing independence and consistency.
- Remember and frequently cooperate in daily routines.
- Behave differently and express feelings in ways that are appropriate to the situation or setting.



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