



Department of Early Education and Care

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EEC Child Care Licensing

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: The Importance of Positive Interactions

Research in recent years has shown that the nature of the relationship between a child and his/her caregivers is very important to that child's development. Nearly every aspect of early human development is affected by the environments and experiences s/he encounters. Beginning before birth and continuing throughout childhood, relationships affect everything from the growth of the brain itself to the child's ability to care about others. Good and bad early life experiences are very important in the child's physical, mental, emotional and intellectual development.¹

Human relationships are the building blocks of healthy development and learning. Caring, nurturing and responsive adults have a positive influence on children's behavior as they develop self-confidence, a positive self-concept, and a sense of safety that can minimize challenging behaviors. There are many things that caregivers and educators can do to help children form the human connections that are essential to learning and success in life.

First, caregivers and educators must focus on each child individually. Greet each child by name as s/he arrives each day. It is important to make eye contact with each child and be at his/her eye level when talking with him, at least some of the time. This can be hard to do when you are caring for and teaching several children on your own! You may be thinking about preparing for the next transition; who needs a substitute meal due to his allergy; and how you will adapt the next activity for the range of learners in your group. Just the same it is important to listen to what each child is actually saying and respond in a way that reflects, mirrors or extends his/her thought, rather than being on "automatic pilot" with an "Oh!" or "Really?" Sometimes it is necessary to pay close attention to non-verbal cues, particularly for very young children, or those who tend to hold their thoughts and feelings inside. Praise each child's efforts throughout the day, and be liberal, but specific in your praise. Saying "you worked hard to finish that puzzle" or "you built that tower all by yourself!" is better than saying "good job!"

For children, everything that happens is a learning experience. Babies are born to learn! Social, emotional and intellectual learning are closely linked because they all take place in the same brain! Child development cannot be separated into individual compartments for the physical, intellectual, social and emotional. Memory is at the base of all higher learning, and often those experiences that are accompanied by strong emotions are the

¹ Executive Summary of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Shonkoff & Phillips, Eds, c. 2000, National Academy of Sciences),

easiest to remember. This is one reason why children who are held and cuddled and read to are more likely to develop a love of reading than children who are never read to at home. Educators can support children's memory development by reminding them of shared experiences, asking specific questions, and giving prompts. Ask about how they felt about their experiences, like a trip to the zoo, or apple picking, or a visit to the firehouse.

Human relationships also include the interactions between the children in your program. Children should be taught to recognize and appreciate the thoughts and feelings of others. Educators can help children do this by describing what they see: (e.g., "You seem happy today because you are smiling"), and by encouraging children to express their own thoughts and feelings. Educators can share their own thoughts and feelings throughout the day ("I'm hungry for lunch. Are you hungry?"; "That was a fun walk, but now I'm tired. Are you tired?"), and can point out different points of view taken by children ("You like red, but Alissa likes blue!") Identifying feelings in themselves and others that happen throughout the day, or using pictures and words to show different feelings helps children learn to understand their feelings, and to express them in positive ways (whether words or actions). In addition, Educators can encourage children to listen to one another and to help or encourage one another.

To be successful in human relationships children must learn to control their own emotions. Children can learn ways to soothe themselves, but what works may be different for each child. For some children a quiet space and a few minutes alone are helpful. For others soothing words or a back rub may help. Some will find that three slow, deep breaths give them the break they need to regain their self-control. Educators should offer options to children and observe what works, and then suggest that each child use his/her own special technique whenever s/he is angry, sad or disappointed. Helping children to label their emotions; letting them know that their feelings are important; and offering acceptable ways to deal with their feelings will help them return to their normal balance and maintain a comfortable and safe child care environment.

As we noted earlier, for children everything that happens is a learning experience. Educators must be sure to model positive interactions as they work with other educators and parents. Cooperating, sharing materials and helping other educators sets a good example for children. Greeting parents by name, showing interest in what they have to say and saying "please" and "thank you" will enhance their participation in your program, and create a learning environment that supports children's growth.

For additional information and resources about positive interactions with children, go to:
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/index.html>.