



## Best Practices

Caring relationships with adults provide the essential support for all areas of a child's development. They nurture the roots of language, literacy, and STEM, like rich soil nourishes a plant. When family members and early educators provide infants and toddlers with dependable relationships, love, back-and-forth play, and learning opportunities, they grow and thrive.

Infants and toddlers develop language through back-and-forth conversations that build on their natural curiosity and their desire to connect with the people they care about and who understand and care about them. Children learn through play—with their bodies, with objects and materials in the world around them, and with people. As they play with objects and materials and try to make interesting things happen, they explore concepts that are fundamental to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). They also learn how objects, materials, and living things behave and how they can relate to one another in the world.

By offering intriguing challenges, supporting children's thinking, and sharing in their excitement and discoveries, adults help prepare children to be good readers and writers as well as logical and creative thinkers. Together, these activities and conditions help build children's vocabulary, language, love of books and stories, and ability to ask questions and make connections.

### Build Strong Relationships

Strong relationships develop through shared experiences that build emotional connections, security, and trust. These relationships begin with respect for each other's feelings, priorities, values, and ways of engaging with the world. They deepen over time as two people come to appreciate and trust each other.

Strong relationships with babies and young children begin with respectful, welcoming relationships with their families. Knowing a child's family helps an educator to know the child. The family can supply much of the information the educator needs in order to successfully connect with their child. Family members can show an educator what makes their child happy and how they comfort her when she is upset. They can share their cultural practices, values, and beliefs. They can also help the educator appreciate their child's unique personality and ways of approaching new situations, people, and experiences.

When a parent and educator have a good relationship, they can work together to support each other's goals for the child. They can share information and ideas about the child's day-to-day activities, mood, and behavior; work out an approach together when they disagree about what is best for the child; and celebrate together when the child does something wonderful. When a

child sees that her family and her educator feel good about each other and that they both feel good about her, she feels safe, secure, and confident.

- **Identify a primary caregiver for each child.** As primary caregiver, an educator can get to know both a child and the child's family well. The family can help build a special bond between the child and the primary caregiver, who in turn can help the child build relationships with other educators and with other children in the program.
- **Partner with families.** By establishing good communication in both directions (from the family to the educator and from the educator to the family), educators and family members can help each other. An educator can get to know what matters to each family and what their hopes and dreams are for their child. She can learn from them how their baby likes to be held, comforted, introduced to new people and experiences, and what his favorite activities are at home. She can also share with families the behaviors, preferences, and learning experiences their child has in the program. An educator can invite each family to bring family photos, songs, and stories into the program and provide all children with culturally meaningful experiences. She can help children do special things for their families (for example, showing a new skill or making a simple gift) and support each child's connections to family as they say hello and goodbye each day.
- **Get in tune with children.** When an educator and child are *in tune*, they have an emotional connection. An educator and a young baby get in tune as they take turns looking, vocalizing, and smiling in response to each other. An educator and an older infant or toddler get in tune as they engage in play together and as the educator listens intently to what the child wants to say. Even a young baby can sense when an adult is attentive and when he is distracted. An educator can't give every child his full attention every minute, but he can stay aware of her needs and find opportunities to get to know her. As their relationship grows, the two can begin to have *powerful interactions*—interactions in which the educator uses his knowledge and observations to make mutually satisfying connections; then purposefully extends the child's learning as they play together.

### Why is it important for educators of infants and toddlers to build strong relationships with the children's families?

- It is important because:
  - Families are the primary and enduring supports for children's learning and development.
  - Families know their children best.
  - Knowing a child's family helps an educator to know the child.

- Families can help educators understand how a child is used to being cared for, the language(s) she is used to hearing, how she is learning to communicate, and the values that are important to her family and in her cultural communities.
- Families and educators can work together to support each other's goals for the child.
- A child feels safe, secure, and confident when she sees that her family members and her educator have a positive, trusting relationship.

### **How can educators reach out to families and make them feel welcome?**

- Educators can:
  - Make child care centers or homes personal, comfortable, and inviting with seating for guests, attractive displays, and a relaxed approach.
  - Invite families to visit any time and to stay as long as they want.
  - Offer to visit families in their homes.
  - Reach out to families and initiate conversations. (Recognize that some family members may be shy or uncomfortable at first.)
  - Share something wonderful about a child with her family, as often as possible.
  - Keep families informed about their child's daily activities, preferences, learning discoveries, and significant events or concerns.
  - Find out each family's communication preferences (when and how often; by phone, email, etc.) and provide their own contact information. Encourage communication in both directions (family to educator as well as educator to family).
  - Display photos and descriptions of children's activities and creations for families to see.
  - Invite families to contribute family photos and artifacts to classroom displays.
  - Invite families to share words, songs, stories, nursery rhymes, games, and recipes that will remind their children of home.
  - Show interest in family members' lives—as individuals and as parents. Find out what matters to them: their needs, worries, and how the program and community might be able to support them.

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- Support the child's connections to his family as they say goodbye and hello again each day. Recognize and share how much their child loves them and the important roles they are playing in supporting his learning.
- Help children do special things for their families (such as showing a new skill or making a simple gift).

### **How can educators get in tune with individual children as they talk and play together? How can they make powerful connections and purposefully support children's learning?**

- Educators can:
  - Watch a child's face and adjust their tone, pace, and facial expressions to hold his interest.
  - Respond to a child's communications and get him to respond to theirs.
  - Match a child's smiles, laughter, or excitement. Mirror his serious focus when he is working hard at something. Offer calming reassurance when he is upset.
  - Watch what a child reaches out for, what fascinates him, and who he likes to play with or near. Notice and acknowledge his interest, then help him explore it further.
  - Empathize with a child's feelings and put his feelings into words.
  - Take cues from a child's family about what a child may want to do, explore, or talk about.
  - Give the child full attention. Understand his agenda and find a way to make a connection and support what he is trying to do. Then add something that relates to his goal or activity but will also extend his learning.
  - Listen intently to what toddlers have to say and to what they communicate without words. Educators can help toddlers tell their stories by supplying missing words and details and by asking questions to check or further their understanding.

### **Offer Interesting Learning Opportunities**

For babies and toddlers, everything is a learning opportunity. Unlike adults, young children don't set out to master particular skills or learn a particular subject. They learn through play. Babies and toddlers are drawn to anything that is surprising or that offers them a chance to discover something new. They practice physical skills such as reaching, rolling over, and standing. They

experiment with how to make things move, how to fit things together, how to find what they can no longer see, and how to use tools to reach their goals. As they connect with people, they learn to communicate with gestures, words, and eventually with sentences, questions, and stories.

Trusting relationships, a well-arranged environment, and a daily rhythm that is both flexible and comfortingly familiar enable babies and toddlers to play and learn with confidence. In a calm and orderly setting, they can pursue their own investigations without distracting interruptions. By offering learning opportunities that are stimulating (but not overwhelming), caring adults help babies and toddlers engage in the activities and interactions that shape their rapidly developing brains.

- **Support children's investigations.** Offer children interesting opportunities to explore and investigate. Put out just a few materials at a time to help children focus. Notice what children are trying to do and what holds their interest; then offer support and encouragement. When a child succeeds, share in his delight.
- **Use language to expand learning.** Talk with children about what they are doing. Give them words to go with their discoveries. Share books that introduce new words and concepts, expanding their horizons. With toddlers especially, use language to help them make connections between known and new experiences and between related events or ideas.

### How can educators help babies and toddlers focus as they pursue interesting learning opportunities?

- Educators can:
  - Make sure that the overall environment is orderly and calm. Reduce background noise, clutter, and visual stimulation, which may be distracting.
  - Provide protected spaces where children can pursue investigations without too much interruption from others.
  - Minimize transitions so children have time to finish what they are doing. When a transition is necessary, give a few minutes' notice so that a child is not taken by surprise when he needs to end an activity.
  - Arrange play materials in an organized way so that children know where to find them and can see and get what they want to use, without being overwhelmed by too many choices.
  - Offer only a few, well-chosen items at a time.
  - Offer just a bit of help when children seem to lose focus.
  - Talk about what they notice children doing.

- Use a child's name to get her attention and let her know that their talk is meant for her.

### **How can educators support and encourage babies' and toddlers' investigations?**

- Educators can:
  - Make a connection with a baby or young toddler by playing alongside, imitating what she does, and then doing something new that she can imitate.
  - Set up interesting problems for children to solve, such as getting an object that is out of reach or partly or fully hidden, getting things into and out of containers of various sorts, making things “go,” and fitting pieces together.
  - Show toddlers how you use tools to accomplish goals and let them use them in their own way.
  - Provide just enough help so that a child can have the thrill of solving a challenging problem.
  - Talk with children to encourage their efforts and suggest new possibilities. Share the joy of children's discoveries and their pride in their accomplishments. Use specific words and an encouraging or appreciative tone. (“Wow! You made the ball go really fast down that steep ramp!”)

### **How can educators use language to expand learning for babies and for toddlers?**

- Educators can:
  - Use “I noticed” statements to talk with children about what they are doing.
  - Use “I wonder” statements to provoke children's thinking.
  - Talk about the tools and materials children are exploring and the strategies they might use to try to solve problems they encounter.
  - Share songs and rhymes; make up songs about what children are doing or what they have learned.
  - Talk with children, back and forth, responding to what they say and giving them time to respond with words, sounds, or actions.
  - Share books with children in ways that engage their active participation. Talk about the pictures as well as the story. Encourage children to point to and name

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- pictures, make sound effects, repeat words and phrases, and ask questions. Help them connect things in the book to their own experiences.
- Tell children stories and give them more information about things they show interest in.
  - Use specific, interesting words in conversations with older infants and toddlers, for example, delicious, daffodil, ramp, smaller, wood shavings, and collected.
  - Talk with toddlers about what they remember, plan to do, think may happen, or imagine.
  - Help older infants and toddlers to tell their own stories about something that happened. Listen intently. Use questions, prompts, and nonverbal responses to show interest and better understand what happened.
  - Ask toddlers questions that make them think or explain their thinking.
  - Use language to direct toddlers' attention to something that is happening and to help them make connections between steps in a process.
  - Talk with a child in their native language (or in other languages they speak fluently), where they naturally use a lot of interesting words. Talk with a child in his home language too, if possible. Babies and toddlers can learn multiple languages and gain many benefits from doing so.
  - Talk with children all the time! The more language they hear and respond to, the stronger their language will grow.

### **What makes “I noticed” and “I wonder” statements good conversation starters?**

- They are good conversation starters because:
  - “I noticed” statements help to make a connection. They reflect your focus on what the person you want to talk with is doing or on what you are looking at or doing together.
  - “I noticed” statements open the door to understanding the other person's perspective. They help speakers avoid interpretations (that might be off base) and judgments (that might be argument starters or conversation enders).
  - “I wonder” statements invite two people to think and wonder together.

## Glossary

**getting in tune:** making an emotional connection with a child; paying full attention to her verbal communications and nonverbal signals and responding in ways that strengthen your relationship; also known as *synchrony*

**powerful interaction:** an interchange between an educator and a child in which the educator uses what she knows and observes about a child to make an emotional connection and purposefully extend the child's learning

**primary caregiver:** the educator who has primary responsibility for a particular baby, builds an enduring relationship with him and his family, and can help him connect with others in the program

**STEM:** science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as interrelated areas of learning; for babies and toddlers, STEM means learning how the world works and developing concepts like cause/effect, space and time, how much and how many, order and sequence, and how to use tools and strategies to accomplish a goal

**whole-child approach:** providing learning opportunities that support children's development and their pursuit of their own learning agendas, rather than teaching particular subject matter; focusing on a child's interests, feelings, and physical, social, and emotional development along with his cognitive and language skills

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.