



Best Practices

In order to learn, young infants need to feel safe and secure. As an educator responds to a baby and engages with her in back-and-forth interaction, they build a special bond—the educator learns to understand the baby’s communications and follow her lead. Their back-and-forth, face-to-face “conversations” with smiles, coos, babbles, and words strengthen their connection and build the baby’s language and cognitive skills. When the educator tells the baby what she is going to do or what is happening (verbal mapping), she helps the baby feel secure. As the educator talks with the baby throughout the day, she helps her discover interesting things to look at and explore. The educator uses their special relationship to help the infant pursue her curiosity and connect with other people.

Build a Special Bond with Each Baby

Babies are learning all the time—everything they do, see, hear, and feel is a learning experience. Babies are unique individuals, with their own personalities, activity rhythms, and ways of exploring the world and engaging with people. When an educator and a baby are in tune, the educator can respond to the baby’s needs and communications in the moment. She can recognize when to engage, when to offer more, and when to pull back. Over time, their bond deepens as they play, explore, and read together. Their loving connection helps the baby to feel secure as he engages with new people and explores his environment.

- **Tune in to the baby’s communications and make an emotional connection.** An educator and a baby get in tune as they take turns looking, vocalizing, and smiling in response to each other.
- **Follow the baby’s lead.** During play, the baby will show the educator what he is interested in, when he wants more, and when he needs a break.

When educators work with colleagues, they may choose to identify a primary caregiver for each baby in their group of children, so that each baby will have his own special person who can get to know him and his family well. As primary caregiver, an educator can help the baby build relationships with her coworkers and with other children in the program, just as his family helps him build a special bond with his primary caregiver.

What does it mean to “be present” with a baby? How can educators handle the challenge of being fully present with one child while maintaining connection with others?

- In the video Kathy says, “The main thing is that you’re interacting with the kids and you’re being present with the kids.” Being present means paying full attention—

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

supporting the baby's agenda (what she is doing or trying to do) and being available to help when needed; noticing a baby's subtle signs that she wants more, doesn't like it, wants to take a break, or has had enough; and keeping the baby physically and emotionally close.

- When caring for more than one child, educators can't be fully present and interacting with each one all the time. With effort, they can stay aware of what each child needs and make sure that they are all happily engaged. Babies need a lot of stimulating one-to-one interaction, but they also need time to initiate their own explorations, make their own discoveries, and explore their increasing interest in other children. They also need some down time (sometimes only for a few seconds) before they are ready to engage again. Educators can balance multiple children's needs by:
 - Using caregiving routines such as feeding and diapering for one-to-one conversations.
 - Taking a moment to clear one's mind and calm personal distractions in order to fully engage with a baby.
 - Using words and body language (smiling, hugging, stroking, holding, etc.) to stay connected with a baby when not making eye contact.
 - Checking in frequently and briefly to make sure a baby is still happily engaged as they engage with other children.
 - Using words and body language to help children connect with each other.
 - Using a baby's name frequently.
 - Helping older children to join in taking care of a baby, including her in their activities, and enjoying her responses.

How do babies tell educators what they need so that educators can respond appropriately?

- In the video, Demetria says, "Each baby needs something different all the time." Babies vary in the amount and type of stimulation they need (both individually and moment-to-moment). Being present with a baby and building a relationship over time helps an educator to understand a baby's signals for when she is tired, hungry, eager to play, or needing to move. Signals might be different cries, fidgeting, reaching out, or wanting to be held. An educator will learn what the baby likes and doesn't like and notice when the baby flinches, fusses, shuts down if there is too much noise or activity or has a hard time settling down when the lights are too bright.

- Families can let educators know how their babies like to be held, carried, comforted, fed, played with, and put to sleep. They can also alert educators to disruptions in babies' daily routines, which may be related to developmental advances, illness, or stress.
- It's easy to assume that a "good baby" who lies quietly doesn't need attention. For a brief period, a baby may be happily engaged in watching fluttering leaves or listening to older children playing nearby. But babies can also get bored. They need stimulation—especially the stimulation of back-and-forth human interaction and attractive things to reach for and explore.

Talk Together—All Day Long

Young babies thrive on their interactions with the special people in their lives. The "conversations" they have with these people strengthen the special bond they share and also build the babies' language and cognitive skills. Decades of research shows that the more words babies hear spoken directly to them in their first few months, the faster and more fully their language develops. By 6 months of age, babies understand the words they hear often, such as their own names and the names of other people, foods, and body parts. Today, we are learning that the more babies respond, the more language they learn.

- **When talking with a baby face-to-face, take turns responding to each other.** During caregiving routines, tummy time, and play times, educators and babies can be face-to-face, or *en face* (pronounced "on fas"). They can make eye contact and get in tune with each other. They might take turns making silly faces, sticking out their tongues, or smiling, but they can also talk. When a baby begins to babble, he may watch the educator's mouth intently, as if trying to learn how she makes speech sounds.
- **Use verbal mapping to let babies know what is happening or will happen.** Verbal mapping includes many kinds of talk. Like a sportscaster narrating a game, an educator might tell a baby what the baby is doing or seeing or what the two of them are doing together, for example, "You are pulling your toes!" Or an educator might tell a baby what she is doing and what will happen, for example, "First I am going to change your diaper. Then I'm going to pick you up and give you a big hug." Educators may also use verbal mapping when singing a made-up song, sharing a hand-clapping game, or giving a baby words for actions or body parts.
- **Have conversations with babies even when you are not face-to-face.** This can be done by checking in with the baby, noticing what she is looking at or doing and how engaged she is, following her lead as you comment, and then giving her a chance to respond to what you do or say.

How can educators recognize when young babies are participating in face-to-face conversations?

- There are a number of signals babies give to let educators know they are getting in tune. Babies may:
 - Move their arms and legs in rhythm to an adult's voice.
 - Watch and listen intently, with wide eyes and obvious interest.
 - Vocalize or babble when an adult pauses.
 - Imitate the adult's actions.
 - Become more alert and pay attention.
 - Reach for the adult's face.
 - Take something that is offered.
 - Smile in response to something the adult says or does.
 - Look away, grimace, cry, or pull back, then reconnect by catching the adult's eye, responding to the adult's attempts to re-engage them, or attempting to recapture the adult's attention.

What are some ways that educators can use words to create verbal maps for babies, especially when they are not face-to-face?

- There are many ways that educators can create verbal maps for babies, including:
 - Giving babies words for objects, actions, or experiences. For example, in the video we heard "It's delicious!" "You dancin'?" "Up... and down."
 - Using "self talk" about what they are doing ("I'm putting on my gloves").
 - Using "mirror talk" that reflects what they assume to be the baby's experience or thinking ("You're telling me about it").
 - Telling babies what is going to happen ("It might feel cold").
 - Narrating the world ("Are they driving?")

What benefits do babies gain from face-to-face talking and verbal mapping?

- Face-to-face talking and verbal mapping provide numerous benefits to babies:
 - They hear how language sounds.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- They enjoy hearing language and interacting with people.
- They build relationships that support their sense of security and trust.
- They learn to communicate back and forth and take turns.
- They associate words with objects, actions, and experiences and begin to learn what they mean.
- They build essential foundations for language, literacy, thinking, getting along with others, asking questions to learn, imagination, story telling, and a positive sense of self.

How can educators find more opportunities to talk with babies that feel right for both the educators and the babies?

- Professor Villegas-Reimers explains that babies enjoy hearing language and that talking with babies all the time builds specific connections in their brains that are important in the development of verbal language and of cognitive skills. To make talking with babies all the time feel more natural and appropriate, an educator can:
 - Take advantage of private moments and caregiving routines.
 - Try different verbal mapping and *en face* conversation techniques and see how a particular baby responds.
 - Talk in her home language or whichever language she feels most comfortable using with a baby.
 - Watch how families engage their babies and how the babies respond.
 - Use a high-pitched engaging voice to capture a baby's attention.
 - Imitate a baby's sounds.
 - Pretend that the baby is using real words as he babbles back at her or smiles, wiggles, laughs, etc., and try to keep the conversation going.
 - Sing songs and play games that she remembers from childhood.
 - Be silly!
 - Whisper close to a baby's ear.
 - Share a book or photo album with a baby. Read or tell a story or just talk about what she sees.
 - Explain the power and importance of talking with babies to families and colleagues.

Help Babies Connect with Their World

For a young baby, the world is a new and fascinating place, filled with things (and people) to investigate and discover. It can also be overwhelming. Babies look to familiar, caring adults to help them understand and to keep them safe. When a baby's primary caregiver is nearby, he feels safe to reach out and explore. He is willing to work to solve a problem, knowing that a person he trusts will encourage his efforts and share in his delight. His primary caregiver also helps him connect with other children and adults and make new friends.

- **Help babies make discoveries and mirror their delight.** Offer just a few interesting objects at a time, so that the baby can focus on one thing or activity. Use verbal mapping and responsive conversation to support babies' investigations. Make emotional connections while mirroring their delight in discoveries and accomplishments. Think about what can be offered next to a baby to provide a new challenge or a new learning experience.
- **Help babies use their emerging skills.** Provide just enough help so that babies can enjoy success as they reach a goal themselves; then celebrate their success together.
- **Help babies connect with other children.** Position babies where they can watch each other. Offer similar toys or experiences, such as a rattle or a scarf that two babies can shake. Use verbal mapping to help them notice and connect with each other—in time, they may start babbling together!

How can educators build special bonds with young babies as they help them explore intriguing objects and practice emerging motor skills?

- There are many ways educators can build special bonds with young babies. They can:
 - Hold the baby or stay close by as the baby enjoys tummy time or works at reaching, rolling, crawling, or pulling up.
 - Get on the baby's eye level and make a connection.
 - Offer one or a few objects at a time.
 - Let babies explore objects in lots of different ways: by batting, shaking, mouthing, kicking, pulling, turning, banging, and so on. Comment on what the babies are doing and discovering. For example, say, "That feels smooth" or, "Round and round it goes."
 - Don't forget board books. Young babies especially like to look at pictures of other babies.
 - Notice what a baby reaches out for and comment using an engaging voice.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- Respond to babies' communications including cues that they are happily engaged, want more, need a break, or are tired, bored, or uncomfortable.
- Use face-to-face talk and verbal mapping to put words to what babies are doing and to prolong their engagement.
- Cheer on babies' efforts and activity!
- Call babies by name.
- Talk all the time! Match a baby's enthusiasm—use a calm, reassuring, understanding voice to soothe a baby who shows signs of distress.

How can educators strengthen their bonds with young babies as they help them learn to be social?

- An educator can:
 - Hold the baby or stay close as she positions him where he can watch or interact with other children.
 - Show affection with hugs and smiles.
 - Talk to the baby in an engaging voice as she points out what other children are doing and invite him to notice or join in.
 - Respond to a baby's moment-to-moment cues that he wants more or less stimulation and involvement.
 - Help a baby to do what others are doing in his own way.
 - Put words to babies' emotions and to those of other children.
 - Teach older children how the baby likes to be touched, talked to, and entertained; what is calming, fun, or funny; and how to stop before the baby gets overwhelmed.

Glossary

attunement: understanding and smoothly responding to a baby's nonverbal signals and communications; getting "in tune" or "on the same wavelength" with a baby as you get to know each other and build a special bond

being present with a baby: giving the baby your full attention so you can get in tune

bonding: the mutual love and trust between a baby and a family member or educator who gets in tune with him

en face: (pronounced "on fas") face-to-face, making eye contact, and attuned (or getting in tune)

open-ended questions: questions that require critical thinking, invite opinion or explanation, and have the potential to result in multiple-word answers

primary caregiver: the educator in an infant room or mixed-age setting 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

responsive interaction: back and forth conversation, play, or interchange in which partners take turns answering each other's words, sounds, actions, or other communications

verbal mapping: putting words to a baby's actions or telling him what is happening or what will happen

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