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A Culture of Relationships: Early Care  
for Italian and American Children

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## **A Culture of Relationships: Early Care for Italian and American Children**

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### **The Culture of Childhood**

A culture of childhood is a shared vision – an agreed upon vision – of the needs and rights of children, including ideas about how the people of the community can collectively nurture them and at the same time be renewed by them. In other words, it is a set of values, beliefs, and practices that people have created to guide their way of nurturing young children and their families. The vision is about investing in young children and investing in the supports and relationships that children need to learn and grow, both for the reason that children carry our future and because they carry our hopes and dreams for the future.

These hopes and dreams begin with birth. Sensitive, emotionally available parents create the framework for interaction with their children by responding to the baby's cues, engaging the baby in mutual gazes, and imitating the baby. The baby, born with a primary ability to share emotions with other human beings eagerly joins the relationship dance. The intimate family circle soon widens. Providers, teachers, and directors of early childhood programs become significant figures in children's lives—implicit or explicit partners in a "relationship dance" (Edwards & Raikes, 2002).

These close relationships are believed to be critical to healthy intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development in childhood and adolescence as well. These conclusions have been documented by diverse fields of science, ranging from cognitive science to communication studies and social and personality psychology. Close relationships contribute to security and trust, promote skill development and understanding, nurture healthy physical growth, infuse developing self-understanding and self-confidence, enable self-control and emotion regulation, and strengthen emotional connections with others that contribute to prosocial motivation (Dunn, 1993; Fogel, 1993; Thompson, 1996). Furthermore, many studies showing how relationship dysfunction is linked to child abuse and neglect, aggression, criminality, and other problems involving the lack of significant human connections (Shankoff & Meisels, 2000).

In extending the dance of primary relationships to new relationships, a childcare teacher can play a primary role. The teacher makes the space ready--creating a beautiful place that causes everyone to feel like dancing. Gradually, as the dance between them becomes smooth and familiar, the teacher encourages the baby to try out more complex steps and learn how to dance to new compositions, beats, and tempos. As the baby alternates dancing sometimes with one or two partners, sometimes with many, the dance itself becomes a story about who the child has been and who the child is becoming, a reciprocal self created through close relationships.

## **The Primary Components of Relationships**

Given children's requirements for human support, we educators could surely use a better vocabulary for talking about children's emotional health and well-being. According to Josselson (1996), there are 8 such needs whose satisfaction contribute to fostering skills of relatedness. As each new "need" emerges within the life course, it is at first concrete and elemental, but then it becomes more symbolic and complex. We will describe each need (summarizing Josselson's descriptions), suggest how satisfaction of this need relates to positive outcomes for the child's development, and finally describe how the child care environment (physical and human) can satisfy this need in an appropriate way.

Certainly, we would not claim there to be only one right solution. Just as there are many styles of dancing, so throughout the world, cultures embed their children in close, rhythmic relationships with caring people in many ways. The language and customs may vary, but their essence is similar and the primary needs the same (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). It is only necessarily for the caregivers and cultural community to "hear" the child and "speak" back.

## **The Dance of Relationships**

From the beginning of life, babies are eager to engage and interact with the people around them. Even at such a young age, they are capable of directing their attention and interest beyond the family toward any adults and children who seem friendly and exciting or loving. Although their parents mediate their child's early interactions and relationships, infants actively reach out for relationships and want to manage their pace, content, and degree of closeness. In today's world of child care and working parents, these babies have new opportunities to become part of social groups beyond their immediate families. They want to be participants in the community (Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 2001).

Thus, nonparental adults such as providers, teachers, and directors of early childhood programs become significant figures in children's lives—implicit or explicit partners in what we have called a "relationship dance" (Edwards & Raikes, 2002).

Sensitive, emotionally available parents create the framework for interaction with the infant by responding to the baby's cues, engaging the baby in mutual gazes, and imitating the baby. The baby, born with a primary ability to share emotions with other human beings and the need to join in and "learn a culture," eagerly joins the relationship dance (Thoman, 1987). The child depends on the nurturance and concern of others in order to survive, so that, right from the start, relationships are crucial to existence. Attachment, which forms as a result of the first satisfying relationships, organizes further development by providing the child with the foundations and motivations to move forward and get to know, interact with, and trust meaningful people. The intimate family circle soon widens to include peer friends and teachers thereby extending the dance to include new relationships.

Close relationships first within and then reaching beyond the family are believed to be critical to healthy intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development in childhood and adolescence as well. These conclusions have been documented by diverse fields of science, ranging from cognitive science to communication studies and social and personality psychology. They also include many studies showing how relationship dysfunction is linked to child abuse and neglect, aggression, criminality, and other problems involving the lack of significant human connections (Shankoff & Meisels, 2000). More positively, in recent years, developmental scientists have also explored the facets of relationships that contribute to security and trust, promote skill development and understanding, nurture healthy physical growth, infuse developing self-understanding and self-confidence, enable self-control and emotion regulation, and strengthen emotional connections with others that contribute to prosocial motivation (Dunn, 1993; Fogel, 1993; Thompson, 1996).

In extending the dance of primary relationships to new relationships, a childcare teacher can play a primary role. The teacher makes the space ready--creating a beautiful place that causes everyone to feel like dancing (Edwards & Raikes, 2002). For a new baby who is just entering, she must take the initiative

and become attuned and get into rhythm with the baby by following his lead. Because the newcomer enters the program “in the arms” of parents, the teacher enfolds them also into this process.

Gradually, as the dance between them becomes smooth and familiar, the teacher encourages the baby to try out more complex steps and learn how to dance to new compositions, beats, and tempos. The dance partnership can also widen as both infant and adult try out new partners, and as new peers or teachers are added to their group. As the baby alternates dancing sometimes with one or two partners, sometimes with many, the dance itself becomes a story about who the child has been and who the child is becoming, a reciprocal self created through close relationships.

This chapter describes the kinds of benefits of these widening relationships can provide for such very young children and outlines some specific steps that teachers in Reggio Emilia and a relationship-oriented program in Ontario, Canada, have taken to ensure the best, most "amiable" environment.

We will describe each need (summarizing Josselson's descriptions), suggest how satisfaction of this need relates to positive outcomes for the child's development, and finally describe how the infant-toddler environment (physical and human) can satisfy this need in an appropriate way.

Certainly, we would not claim there to be only one appropriate solution. Just as there are many styles of dancing, so throughout the world, cultural communities embed their children in close, rhythmic relationships with caring people in many ways. The language and customs may vary, but their essence is similar and the primary needs the same (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). It is only necessarily for the caregivers and cultural community to “hear” the child and “speak” back.

### **Holding**

Holding is the most primary need but not easy to describe. It involves our earliest interpersonal experience of being encircled and contained safely by protective powerful arms. Clinical psychologist, Erik Erikson (1985) called the resultant sense of safety and predictability "basic trust," and David Winnicott (1965) described the “good enough” mother who provides an adequate "holding environment." In the absence of such basic caregiving, exemplified by feeding, carrying, calming, protecting from too intense stimuli, babies are overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. The developmental outcomes of adequate holding are sense of safety, confidence, optimism, and a general expectation of support. Children can open up to the world when they know that someone will be "there" when needed—not smothering them but also not letting them flail around and become exhausted and desperate. Thus, the caregiving environment must provide safety, protection, nourishment, and comfort.

Well-being, or “being at ease,” is promoted in Reggio Emilia through beautiful, orderly, harmonious, "amiable" spaces (Gandini with Bondavalli, 2001; Rinaldi, 2001), as well as through adult readiness to hold and touch children and use endearing terms to soften moments of interaction.

### **Attachment**

Attachment is the second relational need and the one most substantiated through research. Attachment arises from the child's need for proximity, security, comfort, and care. John Bowlby (1969) spoke of the child's "bond" or "tie" to the mother and argued that attachment constitutes a primary biological system. Attachments provide the child with relief when distressed and with security to explore. When attachments are disrupted, children may enter the separation cycle of first protest, then sorrow and despair, and finally indifference. The developmental outcomes of secure attachment are emotional regulation (the capacity to feel, express, and control emotions in culturally appropriate ways) and competence motivation (the desire to learn and move forward in development)

Educational supports for attachments in Reggio Emilia involve devoting attention to delicate beginnings, satisfying celebrations, and careful endings as children and families move through the centers; harmonious separations and reunions each day; and close communication and continuity of care between home and center over time. Skilled, attuned caregivers know how to establish rapport and empathy with

children and families and bring children into the life of the center and the new circle of relationships there (Gandini with Bondavalli, 2001; Edwards & Raikes, 2002).

### **Recognition and Validation**

When the child looks into a special adult's eyes and is looked at in return, this creates an emotional meaning between them (Trevarthen, 1995). Each receives the sense of being recognized, or "seen." Eye-to-eye contact with babies is something natural and universal, but all the senses can play a part in the experience of being recognized and appreciated, as when babies are "heard," "touched," and "noticed." Through such moments, the child begins to realize that he or she, and everyone else, is a "self," with a subjective inner life. The developmental outcomes of adequate recognition are self-identity and the beginning of empathic understanding of others.

Educational supports for recognition and validation are a human and physical environment that makes visible each child and family. Instead of feeling impersonal and anonymous, the environment individualizes the experience of coming into the center. The children find their names, faces, personalities, connections, favorite things, and preferences reflected through the ways that teachers speak to them, display photographs about them, and organize routines and activities. Reggio Emilia has embodied the philosophy of "education as relationships" (Malaguzzi, 1993) through particular ways of communication and documentation (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). These welcome the child to social life in the group and mirror and interpret each child's and family's place and contribution to that life. The process is well summed up by Carlina Rinaldi when she said, "You cannot have a school in which the child doesn't feel right, in which the teacher doesn't feel right, in which the family doesn't feel right. It is essential to create a school and infant-toddler center in which all the subjects feel welcomed, a place of relationships" (2001, p. 53).

### **Mutuality and Companionship**

Mutuality, being with others and joining in, is first seen in the infant's joint attention ("looking together"), that then evolves into pointing and sharing. The psychologist, Colwyn Trevarthen (1995) has written of the child's desire to produce meaning through emotional joining, and the great pleasures the child feels when moving or communicating in synchrony and rhythm with others, thereby creating a "space of we." The developmental outcomes of experiencing adequate mutuality are capacities for cooperation and companionship.

The educational supports for mutuality are easy to provide. Children need time and space for involved, ongoing peer relationships and rituals, such as are portrayed in The Little Ones of Silent Movies (Reggio Children, 1996), a story of make-believe with the children and fish at the Rodari infant-toddler center in Reggio Emilia. As children mature, they also develop mutuality by participating in group games and expressive activities involving singing, shouting, clapping, and hand motions. They eagerly join in with dancing, chanting, marching, and chasing. These ancient and joyful forms of play create heightened emotion through the use of synchrony, rhythm, and/or patterned turn-taking and alternation.

### **Passionate Experience**

Passionate connections involve intense feelings and create a drive to be with the other person, touch them, and overcome separation. Young children do feel passion—for parents and for peers. They then must learn to express their feelings in socially acceptable ways. It helps them to work through their feelings if they can play out scenarios that attract and fascinate them and talk through their thoughts and feelings. Symbolic and verbal behavior carry them beyond the real world into the realm of imagination and then back again. To do this emotional "work," children need spaces that invite complex pretend play; and sometimes enclosed places that provide a sense of seclusion and privacy from the larger group, where imagination sometimes flourishes best. The developmental outcomes of passionate feelings are capacities for intense and tender relationships, and heightened imagination, fantasy, and rich symbolism.

Educational supports include allowing and encouraging children to have intense friendships and attractions to particular "special friends." At the Diana preschool in Reggio Emilia, the 5-year-olds set the table for lunch leaving aside a little table for two, where "sweethearts" could sit together (Diana Hop, Reggio Children, 1990, unpublished). The book, Tenderness (Reggio Children, 1995), tells the story of two 5-year-olds at Villetta preschool. Daniele has known Laura since they were little; he feels that he "loves" her and wants to marry her when he grows up. She says he is her "bestest" friend ("it's like my heart almost explodes"). The story presents some of their conversations about heaven, birth, the beginnings of the world, and the future.

### **Identification**

Identification is a process that draws us to observe and imitate those whom we admire and want to be like. Through identification, the child takes the admired other into the self and participates in adult power and competence. Sigmund Freud (1969) was a great theorist of identification, but Albert Bandura (1971) and other social learning theorists have operationalized the concept and validated the theory. Identification provides the child with moral guidance and helps her make choices based on what she thinks the admired adult would do. The developmental outcomes of adequate internalization are the establishment of conscience and faith in the goodness of adults.

Educational supports include caring adults who act as moral models and support ethical behavior and discussion in age-appropriate ways. The project narrative, A Journey into the Rights of Children (Reggio Children, 1995), portrays children's own concepts of their rights in discussions at the Diana preschool in Reggio Emilia.

### **Embeddedness**

Embeddedness has to do with being part of a social group—a community of place, kinship, values, or memories and shared experience. Children's early experiences of group belonging have to do with group experiences that usually extend beyond the nuclear family. Belonging to a group provides the child with an important part of self-identity, especially in traditional or collectivist societies, but also in individualistic ones, even though people may be less aware of its influence. Rituals, literature, history, myths, and folk tales are the cultural expression of embeddedness—as are such negative outcomes as exclusion and ethnocentrism. The cultural psychologist, Barbara Rogoff (1990), believes that "participation" and "apprenticeship in thinking" are the means by which children appropriate the cultural tools and skills of language, communication, and interaction. They become embedded in a particular cultural community.

In Reggio Emilia, educational supports for group belonging are provided by documentation, project work, and group decision-making. These group activities create a sense of classroom community and bridge children to the wider world around the school. The project narrative, Theater Curtain: The Ring of Transformations (Reggio Children, 2002), portrays how children from the Diana Preschool designed and created a glorious new house curtain for the Ariosto Theater. The book, Reggio Tutta: A Guide to the City by the Children Themselves (Reggio Children, 2000), began with a survey of the children in the infant-toddler centers and municipal preschools and presents their collective portrait of the city identity and advice to visiting and living there. This unique "guidebook" demonstrates that even young children can have a strong sense of place and embeddedness. Another way that children also learn symbols of group life is through folktales, drama, and puppetry. Puppetry is especially important in Reggio Emilia, and a professional puppeteer serves all of the schools. An old saying about children and storytelling goes, "Adults listen to stories with their heads but children with their hearts."

### **Giving Care**

The philosopher, Nell Noddings (1984), has written about the ethic of care and responsiveness as organizers of experience. The roots of care and responsibility lie in the first, simple socially valued behaviors seen in most toddlers, when they share and show, try to help with household work, try to help someone in distress, and imitate and seek others' attention to prolong pleasure. Being helpful and kind allows the child to feel competent, powerful, and grownup. Prosocial behavior moves the child from

dependence to interdependence, and its developmental outcomes are dispositions toward kindness, helpfulness, responsibility, and leadership.

The educational supports for giving care are opportunities to help, give care, show kindness, and take the lead. The anthropologists, Beatrice and John Whiting, showed how nurturance and prosocial responsibility are fostered in a multitude of cultures where children share in the subsistence work and sibling care in large, multiage households (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

In Reggio Emilia centers, children become part of a community where they are inducted into the life and rituals by the oldest children, then gradually grow themselves to become the "big kids" teaching the little newcomers. Children participate in the ordinary routines of daily life, such as setting the table and preparing cots for naptime.

Even small children have occasions to give as well as receive care, as illustrated by Bondavalli's story about Francesca, a girl aged 24-months, who helped another toddler, Mattia, settle in at the Peter Pan Infant-Toddler Center. When Mattia was distressed over being separated from his mother, Francesca watched closely and then came over to him and said, "Come on, Mattia, don't cry! You will see your mommy will come back." Mattia accepted this and began to really like Francesca and to feel comfortable in the group (Gandini with Bondavalli, 2001).

## Conclusions

Children need more from their child care program than just the possibility of secure (secondary) attachment. They also need human relationships that provide safety, recognition, friendship, intensity, identification, belonging, and opportunities to be helpful and caring. Educators can look at the quality of their programs and services through a "relationship lens" so that practices support rather than undermine relationships. There are many ways to support and strengthen relations between each child and all of the others--peers and adults--at the center. Through acting on the insight that all children can form multiple connections and enter a group life, teachers can support them in moving out with skill and confidence.

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