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Making it Happen: Building Positive Relationships with Children. HEF601 Participant Guide

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University of Nebraska Lincoln EXTENSION

Know how. Know now.

HEF 601
Participant Guide

Making it Happen: Building Positive Relationships with Children

Tonia Durden, Early Childhood Extension Specialist

Goal:

This program provides information to help adults build positive, nurturing, responsible, and dependable relationships with the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in their care.

Objectives:

After completing this lesson, you will:

- have learned strategies to promote children's social emotional development,
- be able to identify strategies that can be used to build positive relationships with children,
- understand how to encourage children's positive social behaviors,
- have a better understanding of the importance of building relationships with the child(ren) in your care.

Introduction

Did you know that supporting the social and emotional development of young children is key to their overall healthy growth and development, and to readying them for preschool?

This program focuses on ways you can develop supportive relationships with the child(ren) in your care. You will be introduced to several evidence-based practices and resources developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) that will help you establish nurturing and trusting relationships with the children.

The Importance of Relationships

Through trusting relationships with adults, young children learn about their world and their place in it. They learn the world is safe and responsive to their needs. They learn to form satisfying relationships with others, to communicate, to face challenges, and to experience and regulate their emotions.

Supporting a child's healthy social and emotional growth takes commitment from all primary caregivers in the child's life. This includes mothers, fathers, grandparents, child care providers and other key adults in the child's life. It's important to remember that young children observe our relationships, and what they observe shapes their expectations for how people treat each other and, therefore, shapes their developing social skills and emotional competence.

Since relationships are constantly adjusting to changes in development, we need to understand the course of social emotional development.

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The Pyramid Way



The Pyramid Model focuses on the social emotional development and school readiness of young children.

To learn more about the Pyramid Model, visit:

- Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) *http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/*
- The Early Childhood Training Center, *http://www.education.ne.gov/oec/ectc.html*, is part of the Nebraska Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood and provides state leadership for Nebraska's early childhood professional development system.
- Early Childhood FRIENDS *http://www.education.ne.gov/OEC/teaching_pyramid/index.html* — (Fostering Relationships and Emotional Health to Nurture Developmental Success) utilizes the Pyramid Model framework to promote the social emotional development of young children in Nebraska.

Additional Resource

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Resources on Early Childhood Development: *http://child.unl.edu*

What is social emotional development?

According to CSEFEL, the term social emotional development refers to the developing capacity of the child, from birth through five years of age, to:

- form close and secure adult and peer relationships;
- experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and
- explore the environment and learn — all in the context of family, community, and culture.

What key terms in this definition stand out to you as very important?

Relationships vs. Interactions

What is the difference between relationships and interactions? Watch the video clip by clicking on the picture. Observe the interactions between the very young children and their caregivers. Pay particular attention to what the adult does and says. What do you notice?



When positively interacting with young children, adults:

- use a warm, engaging, and comforting voice,
- follow the child's lead,
- are responsive,
- say the child's name,
- respond to child's vocalizations, and
- use good positioning so the child can see caregivers' face or the play objects.

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What are other ways to positively interact with the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in your care?

Repeated interactions lead to fairly predictable relationships because the infant or young child begins to know how you will respond to him or her. This pattern of responses creates the emotional connection the child has to you. Most adults respond to children in predictable ways and they, too, form emotional connections when they repeatedly care for the young child. Therefore, the key to building positive relationships with young children starts with establishing a pattern of positive interactions with the child.

Take a look at the pictures below. What is the child doing that tells us he or she is inviting or participating in a relationship? How are the adults positively interacting with the child?



- Making eye contact
- Speaking to the child or responding to the child's vocalizations
- Holding the child so the child can see the adult's face



- Holding children so they can see each other
- Engaging with children in a fun environment

Forming Close and Secure Relationships

When we consistently and lovingly meet the needs of the young child in our care, secure attachments are formed. Children who develop secure attachments to one or more adults are more likely to develop positive social and emotional skills. They know they can rely on adults to meet their needs, to respond to them, and to comfort them. They feel important and begin to develop a sense of competence and confidence.

When adults are unpredictable, unresponsive, insensitive, or even threatening, insecure attachments develop. Insecure attachments can make children feel badly about themselves and feel they are unimportant. They may feel a lack of control over their environment and may struggle to develop positive relationships with others. Secure and insecure attachments are reflective of the quality of the relationships between caregivers and children.

Take a look at the video clip. What is this mother doing to support attachment?



Building Positive Relationships with Children

Positive relationships with young children support their development of secure attachments. How do you effectively build relationships with children? One way is by making deposits in children's emotional banks.

Emotional Banks

We make deposits when we do things to build relationships, and we make withdrawals when we engage in behaviors that are detrimental to relationship building. For example, when responding to children's behavior, we may say NO!

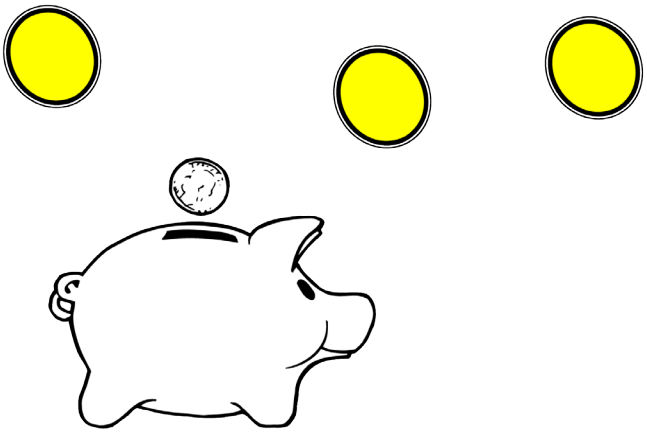
- "No hitting!"
- "Don't run!"
- "No coloring on the wall!"
- "No, no, no!"

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Instead we can use encouraging and positive words to tell the child what *to do* instead of what *not to do*. Here are some tips that will make deposits into children's emotional banks.

- Get the child's attention.
- Be specific.
- Keep it simple (try to avoid combining encouragement with criticism).
- Use enthusiasm to encourage the child.
- Double the impact with physical warmth.
- Use positive comments and encouragement in front of others.

Now take a look at the piggy bank below. For each coin, write how you plan to make deposits into a child's emotional bank.



Here are a few ideas for making deposits:

- Acknowledge children's efforts.
- Find out what a child's favorite book is and read it to them.
- Use descriptive, encouraging comments (examples are provided in Handout 1.7 — Building Relationships and Creating Supportive Environments
- Play with the child(ren); follow their lead.
- Let the child(ren) make "All About Me" books and share them.
- Give hugs, high fives, and thumbs up upon accomplishments and displaying positive behaviors.

Want additional ideas on how to build positive relationships with young children? Read Handout 1.5 — Building Positive Relationships with Young Children.

Review: Making it Happen!

Promoting social emotional development requires a comprehensive approach that includes building positive relationships by:

- positively interacting with young children,
- supporting children's development of secure attachments, and
- making deposits into children's emotional bank.

Consider ways you can continue to build positive relationships with the child(ren) in your care! For additional resources and information on the Pyramid Model, visit *http://child.unl.edu*.

Thanks for participating in this program!

Please complete the evaluation.

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Some Starters for Giving Positive Feedback and Encouragement for Effort, Thinking, and Problem Solving



- "You did a dynamite job of solving that problem…"
- "You have really learned how to…"
- "You must feel proud of yourself for…"
- "Excellent idea for…"
- "You've done a wonderful job at…"
- "See how _____has improved in…"
- "You have worked so hard…"
- "Look how well s/he did at…"
- "That's a resourceful way of…"
- "WOW!! What a fabulous job you've done of…"
- "That's a cool way to …"
- "I'm so appreciative that you…"
- "You put a lot of work in to make that picture the way you wanted…"
- "You've really grown up because you…"
- "You are a real problem solver for…"
- "Brilliant thinking for…"
- "Give me an EXTRA HUGE high five for…"
- "Tell me what you like best about your creation."
- "Class, I have an announcement! Let's all give a hip, hip hooray to _____ for _____"
- "I really appreciate the way all of you have your eye on the story and are listening so carefully so you don't miss any part of the story."

Your favorites here…

-
-
-
-

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Building Positive Relationships with Young Children

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The fundamental importance of building positive relationships with children can be best illustrated by the following scenarios.

Helen and her 30-month-old daughter, Lucy, have a long-standing morning tradition of going to a neighborhood park and playing with other parents and children. They spend anywhere from 1 to 2 hours each day at the park. This day, however, Helen receives an emergency call and needs to return to their home immediately. She and Lucy have been at the park for about 10 minutes, and Lucy is playing "cooks" with her best friend Tito. Helen says to Lucy, "Honey, I'm sorry, but you and Mommy have to go home right now. Everything is O.K., but we have to go." Lucy begins to whimper and says, "But, I was playing with Tito." Helen reaches down and hugs Lucy, saying, "I know. Let's call Tito's mommy when we get home and invite him over to play later." Lucy says, "O.K.," and she and her mom hurry home.

Eric has been a Head Start teacher for 10 years. In that time, he has built a reputation as the teacher for the tough kids. This year, Bill is assigned to Eric's class because of Bill's long history of hyperactivity, negativity, and aggression toward adults and peers. Two months into the year, the Center's administrator sheepishly asks Eric how things are going with Bill. Eric replies, "Great, boy were folks wrong about Bill." Somewhat flabbergasted, the administrator decides to see for himself. What he observes in less that 10 minutes is as follows. Eric says to everyone, "Look at Bill, he is sitting so quietly in circle; too cool Bill!" When Bill answers a question about the story, Eric says, "Bill, that's right, you are really concentrating today." When transition is about to occur, Eric says, "Bill, can you show everyone good walking feet to snack?" At snack, a peer asks Bill for juice, and he passes the container. Eric, being vigilant, says, "Bill, thanks for sharing so nicely."

After completing a functional behavior assessment, Erin, an ECSE teacher, determines that Jessie's long-standing tantrum behaviors in the class are designed to acquire adult attention. Erin institutes a plan to ignore Jessie's tantrums and to spend as much time and attention when Jessie is not having a tantrum. After four days of increased tantrums, Jessie's behavior has improved dramatically.

In each of the foregoing scenarios, adults were successful in achieving improved behavior change in contexts that many individuals might predict would lead to continuing, even escalating challenging behavior. However, in each case, children were obviously attuned to adults, focused on their communication, and prone to value and seek-out adult approval.

In each case, the adults had invested time and effort prior to the events in question, communicating their noncontingent affection and unquestioned valuing of these children. We submit that this prior history of positive relationship building is a prerequisite to effective intervention practices for challenging behavior and thus goal one for adults and caregivers wishing to prevent challenging behavior and enhance children's sense of well-being and social competence. How does one go about the task of relationship building?

Building Positive Relationships

Building positive relationships with young children is an essential task and a foundational component of good teaching. All children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, and responsive interactions. A positive adult-child relationship built on trust, understanding, and caring will foster children's cooperation and motivation and increase their positive outcomes at school (Webster-Stratton, 1999). In a review of empirically derived risk and protective factors associated with academic and behavioral problems at the beginning of school, Huffman et al. (2000) identified that having a positive preschool experience and a warm and open relationship with their teacher or child care provider are important protective factors for young children. These protective factors operate to produce direct, ameliorative effects for children in at-risk situations (Luthar, 1993). Next, we describe some of the key ingredients for relationship building.

First Things First

Utilizing a relationship-building model, proper sequencing of adult behavior is critical. Simply put, adults need to invest time and attention with children as a precedent to the optimum use of sound behavior change strategies. There are two reasons that this sequence is so important. First, it

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should be noted that the protective factors promoted during relationship building can and do function to reduce many challenging behaviors. As such, taking the time to do relationship building may save time that would be spent implementing more elaborate and time-consuming assessment and intervention strategies. Second, as adults build positive relationships with children, their potential influence on children's behavior grows exponentially. That is, children cue in on the presence of meaningful and caring adults, they attend differentially and selectively to what adults say and do, and they seek out ways to ensure even more positive attention from adults (Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1988). It is this positive relationship foundation that allowed Helen with minimal effort to leave the park early with Lucy, for Eric to experience Bill in a much more positive way than prior teachers, and for Erin to alter Jessie's tantrums in such short order.

Getting to Know You

In order for adults to build meaningful positive relationships with children, it is essential to gain a thorough understanding of children's preferences, interests, background, and culture. For very young children and children with special needs, this information is most often accessed by observing what children do and by speaking directly to parents and other caregivers. With this information, adults can ensure that their play with children is fun, that the content of their conversations is relevant, and that they communicate respect for children's origins. Whenever possible, this kind of information exchange should be as reciprocal as possible. That is, adults should be sharing their own interests, likes, backgrounds, and origins with children as well.

It Takes a Lot of Love

For many children, developing positive relationships with adults is a difficult task. Prior negative history and interfering behavior often conspire to make the task of relationship development long and arduous. On occasion then, adults should consider that they will need to devote extensive effort to relationship building. The easiest, most straightforward way to achieve a high level of intervention intensity in the relationship-building domain is to think about embedding opportunities throughout the day (see list below for specific suggestions). While there is no magic number that we know of, we have seen teachers who can easily provide several dozen positive, affirming statements to children each day. For children who have mostly heard criticism, it takes, we feel, a lot of messages to the contrary.

Making Deposits

A metaphor for building positive relationships that we find particularly helpful is that of a piggy bank. Whenever teachers and caregivers engage in strategies to build positive relationships, it is as if they are "making a deposit" in a child's relationship piggy bank. Conversely, when adults make demands, nag, or criticize children, it is as if they are making a relationship withdrawal. For some children, because there has been no prior effort to make deposits in their relationship piggy bank, nagging, criticism, and demands may be more akin to writing bad checks! It may be helpful to reflect on the interactions you have with an individual child and think to yourself, "Am I making a deposit or a withdrawal?" Or, "Have I made any deposits in Bill's piggy bank today?" Figures 1 and 2 represent example deposits (Figure 1) in the relationship bank or withdrawals (Figure 2) from the bank.

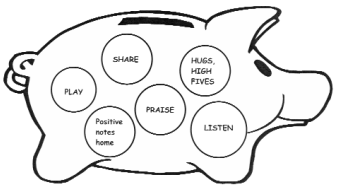


Figure 1. Making relationship deposits

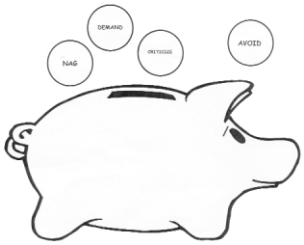


Figure 2. Making relationship withdrawals

Undoubtedly teachers and child care providers strive to build positive relationships with all of the children in their care. Typically, we have the best relationships with children who respond to us, seemingly like us, and go along with our plans. But as you know, it is more difficult to build positive relationships with some children than with others. We have all had experience with children who push our "hot buttons." Maybe they demand more attention than others, are disruptive, unmotivated, oppositional, aggressive, or do not give us the positive feedback we get from others. When our hot buttons get pushed, we may feel frustrated and discouraged, or bad about ourselves as teachers, causing us to get angry, raise our voices, criticize, or actively avoid these children. Yet, the very children we find the most difficult to build relationships with are the ones who need positive relationships with adults the most! It is a natural reaction to feel emotional when a hot button is pushed. However, rather than feeling frustrated, angry, or guilty about it, it is more productive to think of the emotional response as a warning sign that you will have to work extra hard to proactively build a positive relationship with this child. If the adult is simply reacting to a hot

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button being pushed—he or she may consistently become frustrated and avoid the child. We recognize that building positive relationships is far from simple with some children. It takes a frequently renewed commitment and consistent effort. Because this is easier said than done, we have provided some practical strategies for building positive relationships with children throughout the preschool day.

Practical Strategies for Building Positive Relationships

- Distribute interest surveys that parents fill out about their child
- Greet every child at the door by name
- Follow a child's lead during play
- Have a conversation over snack
- Conduct home visits
- Listen to a child's ideas and stories and be an appreciative audience
- Send positive notes home
- Provide praise and encouragement
- Share information about yourself and find something in common with the child
- Ask children to bring in family photos and give them an opportunity to share it with you and their peers
- Post children's work
- Have a "Star" of the week who brings in special things from home and gets to share them during circle time
- Acknowledge a child's effort
- Give compliments liberally
- Call a child's parents to say what a great day she or he having in front of the child
- Find out what a child's favorite book is and read it to the whole class
- Have sharing days
- Make "all about me" books and share them at circle time
- Write all of the special things about a child on a T-shirt and let him or her wear it
- Play a game with a child
- Play outside with a child
- Ride the bus with a child
- Go to an extracurricular activity with the child
- Learn a child's home language
- Give hugs, high fives, and thumbs up for accomplishing tasks
- Hold a child's hand
- Call a child after a bad day and say "I'm sorry we had a bad day today – I know tomorrow is going to be better!"
- Tell a child how much he or she was missed when the child misses a day of school

Beyond the specific strategies enumerated above, we suggest that adults can speed the process of relationship building by:

- Carefully analyzing each compliance task (e.g., "time to go to paints") and, where possible, shifting that compliance task to a choice for children (e.g., "Do you want to paint or do puzzles?");
- Carefully considering if some forms of "challenging" behavior can be ignored (e.g., loud voice)—this is not planned ignoring for behavior designed to elicit attention but ignoring in the sense of making wise and limited choices about when to pick battles over behavior; and
- Self-monitoring one's own deposits and withdrawal behaviors and setting behavioral goals accordingly. Some teachers have easily done this by using wrist golf counters to self-record or by moving a plastic chip from one pocket to the next. A strategically posted visual reminder can help teachers remember to make numerous relationship deposits.

Conclusion

Most of this article has focused on what children get out of positive relationships with adults. However, we contend that adults get something valuable out of the time and attention they expend to build these meaningful relationships too. First, as was mentioned earlier, the children we build relationships with will be easier to teach, more compliant, and less likely to engage in challenging behavior. Second, teachers will feel more positive about their skills, their effort – and we think may like their jobs even more. Third, adults will begin to see the "ripple effect" of relationship building. As children learn in the context of caring relationships with adults, they will become more skilled at building positive relationships with other children. Finally, providing a child with the opportunity to have a warm and responsive relationship with you means that you have the pleasure of getting to know the child as well.

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