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Integrating Social Skills and Competence in the Early Childhood Curriculum

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Jack's mom is at her first parent-teacher conference. Mr. Richard has much to report about her son's progress at school. Since it is the first conference, Jack's mom is not familiar with the customary protocol, so she listens critically to Mr. Richard's amazement with Jack's success with letter writing and number recognition, but before Mr. Richard has a chance to complete his overall comments, she asks, "But does he have friends? I know that he is intelligent, but what about friends? I want to make sure that my son is happy while he is here."

This young mother has honed in on a very specific and important aspect of social development. If children possess the skills to work with others, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and follow the general rules of the group, they will most likely have success in the academic areas as well (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2009). With the recent concentration on academic standards, many teachers are feeling pressured to focus on cognitive development. True early childhood educators realize that the cognitive domain is only one area that

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needs their attention. With so much time and attention focused on reading and math, several other areas are being neglected. This article will remind teachers of the importance of the social domain and how it can integrate all the curricular areas.

What Is Social Competence?

Katz and McClellan (1997) have defined "socially competent young children" as "those who engage in satisfying interactions and activities with adults and peers and through such interactions further improve their

own competence" (p. 1). Kostelnik et al. (2009) define social competence as "the ability to recognize, interpret, and respond appropriately in social situations" (p. 561). Both definitions refer to children as being involved in socially acceptable behaviors; and the Katz and McClellan definition includes that the activity should also be pleasing to the child. One other dimension of social competence is the community in which the child is interacting. Kostelnik et al. (2009) indicate that different cultures may value different attitudes and behaviors. It is important that teachers of young children are aware of various cultural norms, especially the cultures that are represented within their own classrooms. This knowledge will help novice teachers communicate clearly and meaningfully with parents and their children, which may help promote a successful year.



Why Is It Important to Be Socially Competent?

Children who are socially competent will achieve a number of developmental skills. They will develop and use social values, learn about themselves, gain positive social skills, adapt their own actions to the expectations of the people in their surroundings, progress in planning and decision making, and go beyond social competence and recognize and respect other cultures as well. Each of these skills is important for overall social development. When a child develops and uses the values and norms of his society, not only will he naturally accomplish the immediate goal of getting along with others, but he will also be good at it. He will be the child who makes others feel comfortable and safe and the one who is always chosen to

be included in play. He will be popular and sought out among his peers (Kostelnik et al., 2009).

Gardner's work with multiple intelligences has raised educator's awareness of the importance of understanding oneself. He refers to it as *intrapersonal intelligence*, the ability to recognize and understand your own abilities, likes, and dislikes. If children begin to learn these things about themselves, they will be better able to cooperate with others, leading to the third skill – gaining and performing with positive social skills. Gardner would refer to this as *interpersonal skills*, or skills that help an individual interpret another person's needs (Woolfolk, 2008).

The fourth skill, adapting actions to those around you, is how a child "fits in" with others. Bandura's work with the Social Learning Theory explained the importance of mimicking a model (Woolfolk, 2008). Children observe both what adults and other children are doing. If they are motivated or like the action, they will then mimic it. Oftentimes they will mimic with a slight personal variation that essentially shows their own developing style.

The fifth skill of planning and decision making has already been introduced in the last example. Children make a conscious decision whether the action suits them or if they will simply ignore it. Of course, this skill goes beyond this introduction, as children will be forced to make ongoing decisions throughout the day. To illustrate, children know there is a limited amount of outside play time; therefore, they must choose how to spend their time. They may decide to ride the trikes, climb on the jungle gym, or play an organized game. For some children, this may be overwhelming and they may need a

limit of two choices. It is of utmost importance that they have this opportunity to plan and make decisions because as they get older, the decisions are more complex. If they have ample experience in weighing options and making decisions when they are younger, they will have more skills to tackle the peer pressure that junior and senior high students experience (Kostelnik et al., 2009).

The last skill addresses going beyond learning the expectations in the near environment and learning about, respecting, and perhaps partaking in the traditions of societies outside their own. With the ease of travel, today's children may have opportunities to explore the world. Developing an interest and acceptance of other cultures and traditions should serve them well.

Does Everyone Become Socially Competent?

Our society would look much different if the answer to this question was yes; sadly, however, the answer is no. Some children will not conquer these skills. These are the children who will act out in the classroom and disrupt the play of others. They will need much redirection and guidance from teachers and caregivers. Without these skills, it is difficult to perform successfully in school or the workplace. The early childhood years are crucial to aid in the development of the social skills that will lead to social competence so children become productive members of society (Epstein, 2009).

Where Does It Start?

Parents are a child's first teachers and their strongest role models. Children observe the actions and behaviors of their parents and then learn to take these actions as their own. Parents who are aware of this responsibility try to model positive behaviors to their children. They model manners when the family eats together at the dinner table and language skills and tact when they talk. Hygiene procedures are modeled as they take daily



care of their own bodies and respond to the personal needs of their children.

The education goes beyond being a role model; most parents also institute a teaching technique called *direct instruction*. This is when they explicitly explain how something should be done. Direct instruction is also employed when they want their children to understand a safety procedure, or when they are entering a new environment where the children may not know the expectations, such as a fancy restaurant, a library, or a church (Kostelnik et al., 2009). They will explain clearly and even include actions, if necessary, to help children understand expectations.

Another tool that many parents use to teach social skills is literature. Children's books that illustrate appropriate or inappropriate social behavior are abundant. When working on a specific skill, many parents will use a book that addresses the problem situation at nap time or bedtime, instead of sharing an old favorite.

What Is the Teacher's Role?

Like parents, teachers use modeling, direct instruction, and literature to teach skills to children. Teachers can also work on developing social skills in all curricular areas through the use of classroom centers.

Art Center. The art center provides an opportunity for self-expression. In this classroom area, children can learn more about their own learning styles. They also have the opportunity to associate with others, while taking part in a process-oriented activity that will help promote the development of a positive self-concept. Chances are they will be excited and proud of any product they create! Because art is often set up for a small group of children, they will naturally learn to share the materials. At the art table, the foundations of respect and cooperation can be fostered as children share and post their artwork (Herr, 2008).

Science Center. A strong science center should focus on the science process skills, including observing, predicting, hypothesizing, recording, collaborating, and sharing results. The collaborating and sharing of results naturally involves working with others. Thus while children are absorbed in a science activity, they will also be working on their social skills (Carin, 1997).

Math Center. An effective math center emphasizes shape and color identification, spatial representation, number, patterning, seriation, and all sorts of graphing, which will include comparing and contrasting (Charlesworth & Lind, 2010). To foster social skills, the teacher can design activities focusing on partner work, small group, or large group interactions, which will serve as another opportunity to collaborate with others.

Book Center. A well-stocked book center will have some old favorites for children who need some security as well as books that revolve around the theme or unit of study. The teacher should also provide books that promote the development of any social skills children are working on, such as sharing, independence, and manners.

Block Center. The block center offers great opportunities for interaction. Children

who are at the parallel play stage will be content to observe another child's structure and try to reconstruct it on their own. Children at the cooperative play stage will be ready to begin building things together (Jackman, 2009). Through this process, they will soon discover the power and speed of working together. They will also learn to become more accepting of others' ideas and how to negotiate with each other when they do not agree.

Dramatic Play Center. The beauty of the dramatic play center is that it invites children to try on the roles of the adults they observe in their community (Jackman, 2009). Through this play, children can learn about themselves and their peers. Dramatic play also provides rich language development opportunities as well as a multitude of other academic skills that the teacher can embed into the area. For instance, through a restaurant set up, children begin to work with math as they deal with money and consider the number of people they are serving. In the same play scenario, language skills are promoted as children take and "write" down orders, and science skills are fostered as children "make" the food. Endless opportunities exist in most curriculum areas.



What Teaching Strategies Will Help Foster Social Competence?

The following guidelines have been created to help teachers plan their curriculum so it will foster positive social skills and thus lead to social competence (Epstein, 2009).

1. Create a classroom and a schedule that promotes children's sense of efficacy and control.
2. Encourage self-help skills in ways consistent with children's abilities and developmental levels.
3. Scaffold learning by introducing the next level of challenge when children are ready to move on.
4. Promote children's ideas and initiative.
5. Acknowledge children's efforts and accomplishments.
6. Provide opportunities for them to be leaders.



The first guideline is to create a classroom and schedule that promotes children's sense of efficacy and control. Teachers work on this guideline when they establish a set daily routine that fosters a feeling of safety for young children. Children are much more comfortable when they can predict what is going to happen next. With time, children will

be able to feel confident handling situations in this environment, and soon they will gain the confidence to tackle other environments as well. A clear routine establishes order in an environment that might otherwise seem chaotic. Teachers need to establish clear routines so children know the expectations; most will meet or exceed the expectations (Wong & Wong, 2009).

The second guideline is to encourage self-help skills in ways consistent with children's abilities and developmental levels. It expands on procedures and includes a classroom procedure that has built-in responsibilities for children, such as putting on shoes that have Velcro fasteners after a nap. A caregiver would not expect a young preschooler to have success at tying a shoe, but the child should have the knowledge and motor skills to attach a Velcro fastener. When you examine your routine, you will be able to find many tasks that children can do on their own that foster independence. Examples include setting the table for snack, cleaning up their snack or art area, putting away blocks, and washing hands after using the restroom.

The third guideline is to scaffold learning by introducing the next level of challenge when children are ready to move on. This guideline is addressed when teachers break learning tasks into meaningful steps. They are actually scaffolding the child's learning. Scaffolding is helping children attempt a task that they cannot accomplish on their own. During the process, the teacher begins withdrawing support as the child gains competence. Teachers need to be mindful of allowing for success often, as it will be frustrating to young children if they are continually challenged with tasks that are way beyond their reach. It is a difficult balance, but with observation, a skilled teacher will be able to set individual goals within reach of a child, given guided practice. The guided practice can be designed through the classroom setup or it can be verbal. For example, through classroom setup, a teacher might place pictures of where the blocks go in the block

corner; through verbal guided practice, a teacher might give direct instructions during the first attempt at a task (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

The fourth guideline is to promote children's ideas and initiative. This should naturally occur within an early childhood classroom. Children should have an abundance of choices throughout the day, including broad choices such as which center to play in during free choice time, and more specific choices such as what the family will do in the dramatic play center (Epstein, 2009). Both allow children a chance to make decisions and take an initiative in their play.

Pica (2009) also recognizes the need for all children to feel in control during play. She advocates that elimination games, such as Musical Chairs, create pressure and negative feelings in those who do not get a chair. Instead the goal could be to listen to the music and find a chair. Instead of focusing on who could not find a chair, try to focus on the positive. At this point, all the players will feel more confident and want to take part in other learning activities. Many adults still have negative memories of being left out during specific childhood games, yet the practice continues. For young children it is much better to focus on cooperation and eliminate unnecessary competition (Woolfolk, 2008).

The fifth guideline is to acknowledge children's efforts and accomplishments. Most teachers make a conscious effort to recognize each child's accomplishments. They should also, however, acknowledge children's efforts. Many teachers use the technique of reflective paraphrasing, repeating and expanding the child's words, in efforts to build language and vocabulary as well as self-confidence and self-worth (Kostelnik et al., 2009).

The last guideline, to provide opportunities to become a leader, naturally occurs during play as children take on various roles when building or taking part in dramatic play.

Children also take on a leadership role when they choose to share information with or provide an action to the rest of the group at circle time (Epstein, 2009). The teacher can also promote leadership roles through routine "jobs" in the classroom, such as light attendant, line leader, plant caregiver, and weather reporter.



A Sense of Classroom Community Fosters Social Skills

The responsive classroom model has become quite well known for fostering positive social skills with young learners. Below you will find a simple list that can be used to guide your efforts in building a sense of community in your classroom.

1. Know names.
2. Take turns.
3. Share.
4. Make room in the circle.
5. Join activities and small groups.
6. Invite others to join.
7. Be friendly.
8. Cooperate.
9. Solve conflicts.

(Charney, 2002, p. 25)

These nine guidelines are a great place to start when building a community. If you know children's names, it is easier to call on them, and children will soon learn the names of their classmates. Taking turns and sharing materials are two basic concepts that teachers work on throughout the year. Making room in the circle for someone who wants to join goes along with the common manners that teachers model and expect from the children in their care. Children soon learn that a circle is a magic shape that can always be reconfigured to fit one more person. The children already seated feel good for including the new person; the new person feels good because the other children have recognized and invited her to join the group. This follows through with inviting children to engage in activities and small lessons so that all children feel welcome. Inviting others to join in play, being friendly, and cooperating are all skills that children can learn from models.

For some children, these skills will not be so obvious; therefore, their teachers may need to use explicit directions of how another person could easily join in play and also an appropriate way to ask them. When dealing with young children, teachers must keep in mind that children are egocentric. It may be difficult for them to see another child's point of view. As a result, solving conflicts can be difficult. Early childhood environments should be designed to minimize conflicts whenever possible. However, even with a



well-planned environment, conflicts still arise. When conflicts arise, teachers need to help young children sort out their own feelings and use words to communicate their needs to the others. Once there is communication, most children can come up with a workable solution (Woolfolk, 2008).

Conclusion

Social competence has been linked to high academic achievements. Perhaps this is because children feel comfortable with their peers and have the skills to ask their teachers for assistance. With such positive outcomes associated with social competence, it is no wonder that Jack's mom was curious about his social skills. As teachers and caregivers, we need to be mindful of all areas of development: cognitive, language, physical, emotional, and social (Woolfolk, 2008). One developmental area should not dominate the early childhood curriculum; instead all areas need to work in harmony. With a well-balanced curriculum and a nurturing and skilled caregiver, children can develop into socially competent adults who can contribute positively to society.

Children's Books That Foster Social Development

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4. Cooper, H. (1998). *Pumpkin soup*. Great Britain: Doubleday.
5. Cooper, I. (2008). *Jake's best thumb*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.
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The Child Development Associates (CDA) competencies that can be linked to this article are:

- To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance

For more information on the CDA competency requirements, contact the Council for Early Childhood Recognition at 800-424-4310 or visit www.cdacouncil.org.

The Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability areas linked to this article are:

- The ability to enhance the social and emotional development of young children.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at 800-543-7161 or visit www.nccanet.org.



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Building Relationships: The Key to Developing Social Competence in Young Children

By Judy Gifford
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Have you ever wondered when and where children begin to form relationships? Do you remember hearing the phrase, "I'll be your friend if . . .," followed by a specific criteria? Children frequently use the phrase "my friend," even when they are not certain of what it means to be a friend. As adults, we sometimes cringe when we reminisce about our childhoods, a result of hurt feelings or latent guilt from inflicting hurt on another.

According to a recent U.S. Census Bureau News Report (2008), 11.3 million children under the age of five receive child care while their mothers are working. Many are cared for by relatives such as fathers, siblings, and grandparents, while over thirty percent of the children are enrolled in an organized facility such as a preschool or child-care center. Early childhood centers play a crucial role in development of the whole child, including social skills and meaningful relationships among preschool children.

Early childhood centers play a crucial role in development of the whole child

Positive and Meaningful Human Relationships

Positive, meaningful human relationships contribute to happiness and general satisfaction in everyday life. No matter what one's age, humans have an inherent need to relate to others and develop a sense of belonging (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Gregory, & Stein, 2002). In early childhood settings, each interaction provides the opportunity to cultivate meaningful and positive relationships.

All interactions are opportunities to build relationships between teachers and children, among children, and among teachers. Research affirms that high-quality teacher-child relationships influence children's emotional and social development significantly (Ostrosky & Jung, 2003). Research further suggests that teachers who strive to bolster positive relationships with children in their care support cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and language development (Gallagher & Mayer, 2008).

Teacher Response Strengthens Relationships

Glancing around the preschool playground, Miss Luz noticed that Clark, Emily, and Zoe were huddled in an area near the platform often used to create outdoor "forts." Emily was crying and rubbing her eyes. Miss Luz hurried over to the trio, and when she questioned the preschoolers, Emily whined that Clark threw sand in her eye. Clark quickly said that it was an accident – they were both pulling on the fabric for the fort and it slipped, scattering sand everywhere. Miss Luz turned to Zoe for clarification. Zoe confirmed that all three of them were tugging on the fabric and it was an accident. The children were asked to think about how the situation could be improved and how Emily could feel better; Miss Luz said she would come back in five minutes. After the designated time, Miss Luz returned to the group. Clark and Zoe were rubbing Emily's back very gently. With Miss Luz's guidance, the children realized that more outdoor fabric would help. Together with Miss Luz, they searched and located more of the fabric to be used outdoors and went about creating their fort.

Teachers attuned to cues from children are able to quickly recognize and respond to the needs of individuals and groups. In the scenario described above, Miss Luz responded in a manner that facilitated compassion and forgiveness as well as problem solving, thereby strengthening social/emotional and cognitive development. She encouraged the children to use a democratic process for solving the problem and encouraged them to create a solution with minimal teacher direction. Use of a democratic process for social problem solving in early childhood settings promotes social values of equity and justice (Kostelnik et al., 2002).



As teachers respond to children's needs, the teacher-child relationship is able to be continuously affirmed and strengthened (Gallagher & Mayer, 2008). Sensitive and responsive teachers who help children interpret their emotions and focus on solving social problems tend to develop high-quality relationships with the children in their care (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). In early childhood settings, high-quality relationships are not a luxury but a necessity, serving as the foundation for social competence and development of social skills, including prosocial behavior.

Strategies to Build High-Quality Teacher-Child Relationships

While many teachers recognize the importance of teacher-child interactions in helping young children acquire specific concepts and academic skills, they often underestimate their role and significance in promoting positive social skills, prosocial behavior, and social competence. Responsive and sensitive teachers utilize specific strategies to foster high-quality teacher-child relationships. Some strategies include:

- Greeting each child enthusiastically by name as he or she arrives and departs each day.
- Face-to-face interactions and engaging eye contact with children at their level.
- Use of nonverbal encouragement, warm and appropriate cues such as a pat on the back, smile, or nod.
- Frequent use of names of both children and adults.
- Helping children understand expectations and providing reasoning for the expectations.
- Modeling prosocial behavior with other adults and children, exhibiting consideration of others' feelings and genuine helpfulness.
- Modeling negotiation and democratic problem solving with other adults and children.
- Allowing children to "own" the problem and then solve it democratically.
- Demonstrating sincere interest in children's thoughts, conversations, actions, and activities.
- Creating and implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum that enhances development of the whole child.



When teachers use given names or nicknames in a positive context, children respond more readily to teacher's directions and ideas (Miller, 2007). The strategies suggested should be incorporated into daily classroom activities – never forced or contrived, but sincerely exhibited throughout the program. When teachers consistently behave in ways that promote respect and consideration, children frequently seek contact with them (Gallagher & Mayer,

2008). In turn, children who develop secure relationships with teachers appear to have stronger relationships with other children (Howes & Phillipsen, 1998).

Social Competence

Social competence refers to the skills and behaviors children and adults need to succeed socially, emotionally, and intellectually in society. Because social

competence significantly influences how children perceive themselves within a group, our roles as teachers demand that we support children in expanding social knowledge and skills to develop social competence (Kostelnik et al., 2002).

Children who have been described by their teachers as socially competent display

observable characteristics. Children who are socially competent typically approach others, both children and adults, openly and positively. They are usually able to express their needs and wants and can provide reasons for their actions. Socially competent children are assertive but not aggressive in expressing preferences. They are also assertive in expressing their rights in a given situation. A child who is socially competent demonstrates the ability to take turns and interacts with other children verbally and nonverbally in appropriate ways (Kostelnik et al., 2002). For example, socially competent children will express themselves nonverbally through a gesture such as a smile, holding someone's hand, or offering a hug.

Children who are socially competent enter groups at play and work. They contribute to discussions and interactions (Kostelnik et al., 2002). An example might be the child who

scans the room upon arrival, dons a smock, and joins a group already at play in the sensory table, displaying confidence and independence in his or her actions without the need for teacher direction.

Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behavior contributes extensively to the development of social competence.

Key elements of prosocial behavior include cooperation, empathy for others, and altruism (Miller, 2007). Cooperation necessitates working with other children and adults, empathy requires understanding others' feelings, and altruistic behavior promotes the group as a whole. Prosocial behavior is not an inherent trait; young children begin life from a highly egocentric point of view (Gartrell, 2007). Children do not naturally put off their own gratification to recognize that others have feelings and needs similar to their own or to work cooperatively within a group (Miller, 2007).

Behavior described as prosocial requires children to cooperate, adhere to classroom guidelines, resolve conflicts in a peaceful and constructive manner, respond to adult requests and suggestions, and display general helpfulness and friendliness toward others (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children who display prosocial behavior assist others out of concern for well-being; they do so voluntarily, without prompting from adults. Adults often describe such desired behavior as caring, helping, and sharing behavior.

Some preschool children are appreciably more prosocial than others (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). On a recent visit, the director of the preschool described four-year-

old Celeste as "our little diplomat." Celeste was working with two of her friends who were squabbling. Her role as peacemaker revealed observable social competence and promoted prosocial behavior (cooperation, empathy, and altruism) with her peers. After the interaction, the director sought out the group and praised the way the children peaceably resolved their disagreement, smiling and patting them gently on their

shoulders as she spoke. While it continues to foster positive teacher-child relationships, such sensitivity and responsiveness also enhances prosocial behavior among children and promotes ongoing development of social competence.

Children begin to reveal more prosocial behavior between the ages of three

and six. This is partially due to children's cognitive development and increasing social understanding. Shared experiences help children build awareness of their own feelings and the feelings of others. A child may comfort a friend who is crying or might remind a classmate that everyone needs a turn when playing a game. Adults also seem to expect more prosocial behavior from three-year-olds or older children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Strategies to Promote Prosocial Behavior and Foster Social Competence

As teachers, we ask ourselves how we can promote prosocial behavior in order to develop social competence in young children. Although the goal is ongoing, there are specific actions we can take and strategies we can employ to facilitate prosocial behavior (Miller, 2007). We can



design and implement an environment that encourages children's exploration of materials and interaction with one another in small groups. All areas of development are considered in the creation of an effective early childhood classroom. (Herr, 2008). Developmentally appropriate environments for young children are inviting and warm, with clearly defined learning centers to encourage focused attention (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

"Zoom zones," open areas that allow children to run, are omitted as centers and are created within the classroom setting (Marion, 2003).

Once an effective classroom environment has been created, the teacher can implement identifiable strategies that further enhance prosocial behavior and the development of social competence (Miller, 2007). These strategies include encouraging individual responsibility and self-regulation, helping children learn social skills, and teaching children the art of negotiation and conflict resolution.

Individual Responsibility and Self-Regulation

As children begin to see the effects of their actions, they begin to identify with thoughts, feelings, and ideas of others. Individual responsibility gradually develops with this awareness. Even very young children can begin to attain a sense of competence as they hang their jackets in their cubbies, put on their own shoes, or pour water or milk from a child friendly pitcher (Miller, 2007). Self-regulation, the ability to control one's own behavior, slowly evolves as the sense of individual responsibility develops. However, it has two distinct and separate aspects. It involves awareness of what the child should

do as well as what the child should not do (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Teachers can foster the development of self-regulation through clear instruction of expectations ("We'll be cleaning up in five more minutes.") Demonstrating of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors clarifies expectations ("Keep the sand in the sand table, Alexis – like this!"), while demonstrating alternative ways of responding to situations refines the expectations. Other ways in which teachers can foster self-regulation include verbal labeling of actions and integrating emotions, experience, and development into daily activities (Preusse, 2005). For example, a teacher can say, "I'm petting Petey the bunny very gently," or "When

you share the playdough with Johnny and Sandy, it makes them happy too."

Helping Children Learn Social Skills

Provide opportunities for children to work together as partners and small groups throughout the day. Structure your schedule to allow independent choice of activities, but also create a time when learning experience groups are directed by you, the teacher (Gartrell, 2007). You will be able to facilitate interactions between children who are more and less proficient socially and widen their range of contacts.

If children appear reluctant to enter playgroups, actively encourage them to enter and participate. You may need to take a child by the hand and offer an informational statement or question such as, "Basima would like to shop at the grocery store too. Is there a basket for her to use?"





Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

The art of negotiation and conflict resolution can be taught to children even as young as three (Miller, 2007). Adults may need to initially identify the alternatives and possible compromises, but as the process evolves, children may be guided through it. One method utilizes six steps for negotiating resolution of a conflict (Marion, 2003).

- Identify the conflict; define and describe it.
- Invite children to democratically solve the problem.
- Work together to identify potential solutions.
- Discuss each possible solution and how well it might or might not work.
- Assist children with plans for implementing the solution.
- Afterward, follow up by helping children evaluate how well the solution worked.

Looking back at the earlier scenario with Clark, Emily, and Zoe, it is apparent that the teacher followed the six steps fairly closely. Because the children have had experience with negotiation and solving problems, Miss Luz was able to facilitate the resolution of the conflict by encouraging them to solve the problem democratically. Children less

experienced in problem solving will need more direct instruction and guidance as they implement the six steps.

Another commonly used technique is the implementation of a “peace table” or “friendship table,” a designated area of neutrality (Preusse, 2005). Preschool children are encouraged to talk things over at the table, follow the six steps (often posted with picture clues), and resolve the issue (Marion, 2003).

Conclusion

Prosocial behavior and social competence give children the ability to form relationships with others and sustain them, leading to feelings of satisfaction and happiness. Teachers play an enormous role in fostering the development of social competence in the children in their care. As teachers, our responsibilities are clear! First, we must model prosocial behavior in all we say and do as we interact with adults and children. Secondly, we must strive to build meaningful, positive, and caring relationships with individual children. Environment and curriculum must provide opportunities for optimum growth of prosocial skills. Lastly, it is our responsibility to consistently implement strategies and techniques that promote development of social skills and continue to coach children as the skills evolve.

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The Child Development Associates (CDA) competencies that can be linked to this article are:

- To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance

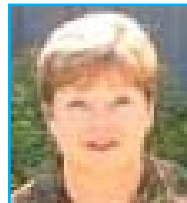
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The Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability areas linked to this article are:

- The ability to enhance the social and emotional development of young children.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at 800-543-7161 or visit www.nccanet.org.

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Creating Optimal Environments for Toddlers

By Jamie Lynch and Kathy Preusse
University of Wisconsin-Stout

Two-year-old Lillian is awakened by her mother at 6:30 every weekday. She is taken from her crib, dressed, and given a sippy cup of milk to drink in the car as she rides 20 minutes to her child-care center. Upon arrival at the center, she is greeted with a smile and seated at the table for breakfast. The room is bright, filled with toys, colors, noise, and children. It is here that Lillian will spend the next ten hours.

According to Greenman (2001), a child placed in full-time care from infancy to age seven will have spent up to 12,000 hours in a child-care setting. Given this fact, providing a safe, stimulating, interactive, and caring environment should be of the utmost importance. Early childhood educators must carefully consider the impact the surroundings have on the child as they create the learning environment. The physical environment influences the children's learning and development; so does transparency. The child needs to maintain contact with his or her caregiver, while exploring and interacting with the surroundings. Likewise, the caregiver needs transparency to supervise the children.

Toddler is a common term for a child between the ages of one and three years

old. Toddlerhood has been referred to as the transitional time between infancy and childhood (Driscoll & Nagel, 2005). Toddlers have special ways of exploring and learning about their environment.

During this period, the child learns about social roles and continuously develops motor skill. Thus, the toddler stage is characterized by enormous growth and learning. Throughout the stage between infancy and childhood, the toddler will learn to walk, talk, solve problems, and attain social

skills. See Chart I for a list of developmental milestones for toddlers.

It is important to recognize that everything that happens in the life of a toddler is significant. With each new skill a toddler masters, a new period of growth begins. During the toddler's amazing development, the brain is growing and changing at a rapid rate. Research shows that there are

Gardner defines intelligence as "an ability to solve problems or create products that are valued in at least one culture."

Chart I

Common Characteristics of Toddlers (in increasing ability)

Domain	Typical Behaviors
Social/Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibits self-conscious expressions of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and pride • Rapidly develops a vocabulary of feeling words • Improves emotional self-regulation; begins to see that others reactions are different from their own • Shows first signs of empathy
Cognitive Development	<p>Piaget's Sensorimotor Stages of Cognitive Development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores the properties of objects by acting on them in new ways • Imitates unfamiliar behaviors • Able to search in several places for a hidden object • Internal representation of objects and events indicated by sudden solutions to problems, deferred imitation, and make-believe play
Physical Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walks alone • Builds tower of two cubes • Scribbles vigorously • Walks upstairs with help • Jumps in place • Walks on tiptoes

*Taken from *Reaching and Relating: A Guide for Early Learning Programs* (Sciarrino & Siegfried, 2009)

key times, or windows of opportunity, when appropriate stimulation is needed for the brain synapses to link easily and efficiently. The window of opportunity for large and small motor development, emotional control and self-regulation, vocabulary and speech, and math and logic are all greatly impacted during toddlerhood. Chart II shows the approximate window of opportunity. These are estimates and can vary according to the individual's development (Herr, 2008).

Understanding Toddlers

Toddlers are full of energy, ideas, and a desire to explore their surroundings. They want to become independent. Although their desired goal is independence, they are still very dependent on their caregivers to meet their needs. Greenman (1998) states, "Toddlers are driven to explore, to discover, to comprehend – in Piaget's terms to 'construct' reality, in Montessori's terms to 'absorb' their environment, Susan Issacs' words to 'realize'

Chart II

Developmental Milestones	
Brain Function	Approximate Window of Opportunity
Motor Development	Prenatal to 8 years
Emotional Control	Birth to 3 years
Vocabulary	Birth to 3 years
Math/Logic	1 to 4 years

themselves" (p. 49). A teacher faces the challenge of balancing the toddler's need for independence with the importance of being cared for in a safe and nurturing environment.

When planning an environment for toddlers, teachers must consider their developmental needs. Young children at this stage are constantly moving by crawling, creeping, walking, climbing, or running. While some young toddlers are just learning to walk, some older toddlers are climbing and running. Observe them. They love repetition and are developing the motor skills they will use for the rest of their lives. They will continue practicing a task until they have mastered it. An important activity that develops during this time is the coordination of the hands and eyes.

Toddlers are becoming more independent and are developing self-help skills. They are practicing such skills as undressing and dressing themselves, brushing their teeth, and feeding themselves. Toddlers are also learning positive actions, including ways to become a friend, related vocabulary, and the needs of friends. During this process, it is also the teacher's goal that they develop self-regulation.

Program Goals and Objectives

Before planning the environment, the developmental milestones for toddlers need

to be reviewed. After this, program objectives need to be defined in relationship to the classroom. A well-designed classroom should provide maximum exposure to people, materials, and equipment. According to Gordon and Browne (2008), there are three general goals for designing early childhood environments.

- Creating soft, responsive environments that help prevent behavior problems.
- Creating a predictable environment that encourages independence.
- Creating a stimulating space for active learning.

After carefully considering the three general goals, learning objectives for toddlers should include promoting skills related to:

- Exploring the environment using the senses of vision, touch, taste, smell, and hearing.
- Developing large and small motor skills.
- Following simple directions.
- Using receptive and expressive language skills.
- Becoming independent.
- Practicing social skills.
- Expressing basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear.

Impact of the Environment

"The physical features of a space for children immediately communicate a view of the child and the value placed on children and their education by the people who created the space" (Wurm, 2005, p. 29). Teachers of young children should provide an environment that stimulates and encourages optimal growth and development (Rushton, 2001). This is important since research indicates that during the first five years of life, brain development is rapid. Optimal learning can take place when young children are allowed to learn by doing within a low stress environment. Children make connections when they touch, think, discuss, eat, and interact with each other in an enriched

environment where they have opportunities to be physically, socially, and intellectually immersed in learning.

Since most early childhood professionals do not have the luxury of designing early childhood facilities, they must work within the existing rooms to provide an environment that best suits the needs of the children in their care. The classroom environment needs to be arranged to promote safety and provide maximum exposure of materials and equipment.

Classroom environment is critical in providing quality care. Safety, accessibility, furnishings, lighting, and color schemes must all be taken into consideration. Curtis and Carter (2003) raise important questions concerning the toddler classroom environment. As you design your environment, ask yourself:

- Is the space inviting and welcoming to families?
- Does the center encourage independence?
- Are we providing a safe environment by allowing children to feel secure, while giving them the freedom to learn and grow?
- Are the furnishings appropriately sized?
- Is the lighting safe and comforting?
- Are the colors calming?
- Are there a variety of appropriate activities available?
- Is there harmony and order?

Each room has its own set of possibilities. By answering these questions and making adjustments to your environment, a desirable space can be created.

Safety Issues

When designing space for toddlers, teachers need to provide young children a safe environment in which to learn. Some organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and state licensing agencies demand a high standard of safety that needs to be implemented in every early childhood classroom. There are also safety standards imposed on the manufacturers of toys and equipment, but the greatest responsibility lies on the caregiver.



Toddlers are natural explorers and can find themselves in unsafe situations. To ensure classroom safety, supervision is essential at all times. Caregivers are responsible for providing a safe

environment for children. The following are basic recommendations for promoting a safe environment (Herr, 2008).

- Supervise children at all times.
- Maintain the minimum staff/child ratio as required by your state.
- Develop safety rules.
- Provide a safe environment.
- Practice fire safety.
- Know emergency procedures for accidental poisoning.
- Develop plans for weather emergencies.
- Recognize signs of child abuse and report any suspected cases.
- Teach children how to protect themselves from sexual assault. (p. 148)

In addition, every toddler classroom should have a choking tube available for identifying choking hazards. If one is unavailable, the

cardboard core from a roll of toilet paper can be used. Any object that can fit inside the core is considered a choking hazard.

An early childhood classroom should offer children an environment that is accessible. Self-help skills are developed when children have the opportunity to help themselves. A feeling of self-worth and a sense of accomplishment will be developed if a child is self-sufficient. As described by Bredekamp and Copple (1997), the following should be made available to toddlers.

- Sink and drinking fountain
- Daily opportunities for exploratory activities
- Age-appropriate supplies and toys available for self-selection
- Artwork displayed at children's level
- Variety of books available/teacher available to read
- Easily identified personal spaces

An environment that offers opportunities for growth and development must also be safe and nurturing.

Learning Centers

Learning centers should be designed to organize space and materials. These centers should be designed to encourage certain behaviors in one classroom location (Watson & Swim, 2008). Learning centers, which are sometimes called *activity areas* in toddler classrooms, are planned based on assessment of the children's needs as well as their desire for independence. There are many details to consider in the placement of centers within the classroom. The first consideration should be the division of wet/dry and noisy/quiet (Herr, 2008). Quiet areas should be clustered away from noisy and active areas.

The physical structure of the room will dictate some of the center placements. For example, the art, science, and sensory areas work best when located on a tile floor near a



sink, allowing easy cleanup. The reading or storytelling area should be located away from the noisy and active areas. The layout of the room must also take into account the need to accommodate children who may be seeking a quiet place to read, rest, or simply be (Greenman, 1998). Conversely, young children by nature are often active and physical, which in turn can lead to an increased noise level. Thus, placing the quiet area away from noisy activities will aid in the reduction of classroom stress.

There are other considerations for learning centers. Supervision of the entire classroom is important. For safety purposes, the teachers should be able to observe all children. Learning centers should also allow for toddlers with varying attention spans to move about the room. Well-planned learning centers help promote a calm, safe learning environment.

Furnishings

There are many factors that need to be taken into account when furnishing a toddler classroom. Size, safety, design, functionality, and durability are all key factors in proper selection. The furniture needs to be child sized to accommodate children's development.

Greenman (1998) writes of scale and perspective in his book *Places for Childhoods*.

It is easy to forget how small infants and toddlers are. Almost everything in their lives goes on under 30 inches. This requires that designers and teachers turn their normal expectations upside down – beneath three feet is the active zone (where the curriculum happens), above three feet is the passive zone (storage, wall-mounted cradles, bulletin boards). (p. 41)

He goes on to say, “The body size of infants and toddlers has implications for laying out spaces and distances within a playroom” (p. 41). By providing properly sized furniture, you are increasing both safety and accessibility.

Although it is important that toddler furnishings are easily sanitized and durable, it is of equal importance that furnishings are soft and responsive (Greenman, 1988). For example, furniture made of natural wood reflects an element of warmth and simplicity. A soft couch or love seat in a natural color provides a cozy place to read, relax, walk around, or hide behind. Furniture that serves many purposes is essential within the limited spaces that are occupied by curious, busy, and active toddlers.

Color Schemes

Color hue and intensity impacts the classroom atmosphere. Color can change the mood or feel of the environment. Curtis and Carter (2003) state, “Warm colors, carefully chosen textured fabrics, artwork, plants . . . have

Chart III

Suggested Materials for Infant and Toddler Classrooms	
Soft Spaces	Messy Places
Quilts Large pillows Couches, hammocks, and easy chairs for adults and children	Safe, non-toxic, age-appropriate art materials Sand and water Note: Plan well for these types of activities; be sure to have adequate time, resources, and materials!
Moving and Climbing Spaces	Eating Spaces
Furniture, lofts, and pits Unbreakable mirrors Climbers and large blocks Push and pull toys Balls Tunnel	Appropriate floor covering Low chairs that allow for toddlers' feet to touch the floor Materials that can allow cleanup to happen easily and quickly
Personal Storage	Outdoor Places
Space for each child's personal items (within children's reach)	Appropriate-sized equipment Proper protection from sun and harsh wind

*Adapted from *Reaching and Relating: A Guide for Early Learning Programs* (Sciarrino & Siegfried, 2009)

been shown to create an atmosphere where people feel emotionally and physically at ease" (p. 26). Greenman (1998) suggests that the colors in nature are beneficial to children. He writes:

A child-care center contains huge amounts of details and motion because of the sheer number of people in the same room. Walls and surfaces should provide a background against which the items that children use stand out. Plain wooden shelves show off toys and materials well. With a backdrop of neutral walls and fabrics, people stand out sharply. (p. 42)

Some experts agree that too many bright colors lead to an overstimulating environment, and in turn, create stress for children and adults. As a result, neutral shades are often recommended for use on both walls and floors.

Lighting

Lighting plays an important role in a child's total development. Due to rapid physical growth and increased brain development, a toddler may be at higher risk when exposed to unhealthy lighting (Rushton & Larkin, 2001). Because of this, teachers and center directors need to be aware of the facts regarding lighting in a classroom environment.

When possible, natural lighting offers the healthiest way to light an early childhood classroom. Curtis and Carter (2003) suggest that in addition to natural light, the use of lamps, track lighting, and a well-lit aquarium offer soft and homelike options to harsh overhead fluorescent

lighting. Regardless of the lighting type, good illumination without glare should be provided to prevent eye fatigue. According to the National Health and Safety Performance Standards (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, & National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care, 2002), glare-free lighting needs to be provided in all areas of the center. Another option is the installation of dimmer switches, which can be controlled throughout the day. For example, the light level can be reduced during nap time.

People

The environment of a classroom is shaped by many contributing factors, but none are more important than the caregivers. It takes many people working together to provide a quality child-care environment, including teachers, children, parents, director, and support staff. To facilitate these relationships while planning the physical space, transparency is important to support connections and relationships.

The relationship between families is of primary importance within the definition of classroom environment. NAEYC accreditation criteria states that in good programs, "teachers and families work closely in partnership ensuring high-quality care and education for children, and parents feel supported and welcomed as

observers and contributors to the classroom" (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004, p. 11). A trusting relationship is a key component in establishing parent, teacher, and child relationships. Within a child-care environment, there are many steps that can be taken to



nurture the relationship between parents and teachers. Communication is an important factor in building a comfortable and trusting relationship. A special bulletin board for parents can be placed in the entryway to the center or the classrooms. Weekly parent letters, pictures, anecdotes, and daily notes can be shared.

Greetings are also important. Greeting families in the morning and saying good-bye in the evening allows parents to connect with their toddlers' caregiver (Greenman, 1998). Teachers who make themselves available to the parents are able to achieve a level of insight that helps nurture and support the child.

Conclusion

An effective early childhood environment has an "I can do it myself" theme and facilitates relationships between children, their families, and their caregivers. There are many important factors that need to be carefully considered during the planning stage – children's developmental level, environmental goals, objectives for children, safety, learning centers, furnishings, color schemes, lighting, and people. The creation of an environment that encourages independence within a safe, nurturing, enriching, and creative environment provides a toddler with a wonderful place to grow and develop. To quote Greenman (2001), "When everything comes together, when we get it right and it truly is a wonderful place to be a child for those 12,000 hours, and a great place to be with a child caregiver – a place in and of the world – we have created a place for a childhood" (p. 41).

Note: See HighReach Learning's *Reaching and Relating: A Guide for Early Learning Programs* to learn more about creating optimal environments for toddlers and for an opportunity to earn additional CEU credits through the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

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The Child Development Associates (CDA) competencies that can be linked to this article are:

- To establish and maintain a safe, healthy learning environment
- To ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participant needs.

For more information on the CDA competency requirements, contact the Council for Early Childhood Recognition at 800-424-4310 or visit www.cdacouncil.org.

The Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability areas linked to this article are:

- The ability to establish and maintain a safe, healthy, and nurturing learning environment.
- The ability to provide effective and nurturing learning environments in response to the individual needs of each child.
- The ability to demonstrate knowledge of child development theory, research, and practice.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at 800-543-7161 or visit www.nccanet.org.

Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers: Relate, Explore, Expand, and Inspire

By Chris Sciarrino
HighReach Learning Inc.

Infant/toddler care and education specialists have been grappling with the answer to the question, "What is curriculum for infants and toddlers?" We have approached this question with caution, fearful that in defining curriculum, we may start down a path that will "push down" practices known to be best for preschoolers. Yet these practices may not be in the best interest of meeting the unique developmental and relationship needs of the infant and toddler. Some professionals think that even discussing curriculum issues for infants and toddlers is inappropriate. It is often believed that infants and toddlers just need a safe, healthy, loving environment and learning will simply happen. There are others who believe that infants must be "stimulated" intellectually in order to grow. The adult plays the role of stimulator, the child the recipient of the planned stimulation (Lally, 1997). These positions lack the depth necessary for providing a "responsive curriculum," the hallmark of an infant and toddler early care and education curriculum that outlines a critical role for both the child and the adult.

In this article, the definition of curriculum is inclusive of an approach that positions the child and the caregiver as co-developers, partners in the "dance," or

process of learning and growing. The following quotes demonstrate some of the ways caregivers commonly answer the question "What is curriculum for infants and toddlers?"

- "We don't do curriculum; we follow the baby's lead."
- "Our babies choose their curriculum."
- "We stimulate babies' brains – that is our curriculum."
- "Our curriculum is about relationships."

Each of these answers includes some truth and points to parts of what is important, yet misses providing teachers of infants and toddlers a complete definition of curriculum that embodies the depth of the issue.

What Infant/Toddler Curriculum Is Not

In an effort to define what curriculum is, it is important to understand what curriculum is not.

- It is not caregivers merely doing isolated activities with infants and toddlers.
- It is not being sure to fill in each box of the lesson plan form with random activities for which the infant/toddler has not demonstrated the motivation or curiosity to learn.

Then What Is It?

Infant/toddler curriculum is an interaction between what the child brings and how the environment (including the people in it) supports and encourages each child. One cannot discuss a day in the life of a child under three without paying attention to the incredibly critical role the social environment plays. Infants and toddlers are born ready to interact, ready to learn, and ready to pay attention to people and things within their environments. Therefore, how people interact with them and support their investigation or exploration of things is critical. You will often hear that infant/toddler curriculum is about relationships or about making the emotional connection. Curriculum is relationship-based; it starts in the context of trusting relationships. In other words, the relationship between the caregiver and the child is not the endpoint of the curriculum; it is the backdrop on which the learning takes place (Moreno, Sciarrino, and Klute, 2007).



Do you remember a time when you enjoyed having a book read to you? Were you sitting in a circle with your own carpet square in a group of 8–10 children or were you sitting near the person reading? Was it a person whom you knew well, who pointed to pictures, laughed, and understood just which picture you were looking at? Was it a person who made you feel important, valued, and was truly

interested in you? You may remember the way that person's perfume smelled or the way their clothes felt as you cuddled, listening and watching, both paying close attention to the book, sharing in the attention to the details.

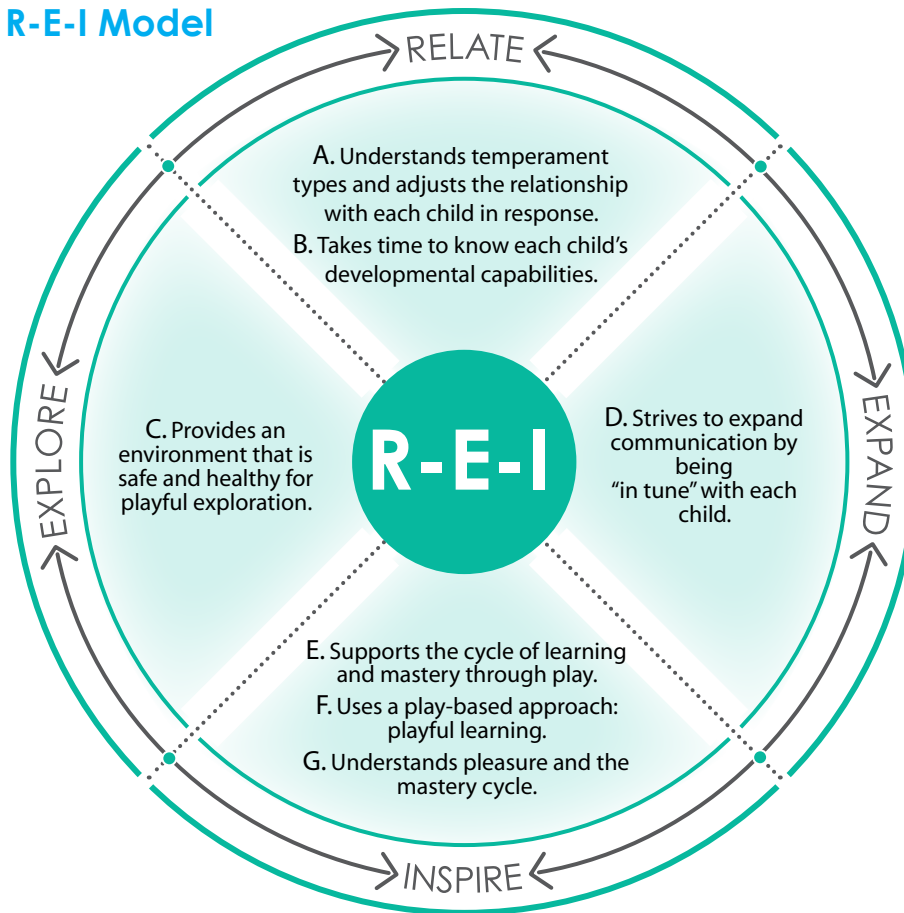
Chances are you remember a situation most like the latter and may not even remember one like the first. That is because our very early learning and memories are those that happen within the comfort of a positive and responsive relationship!

The social environment is critical. Infants and toddlers learn through relationships. They learn because of secure, consistent relationships. They learn because someone knows who they are and can respond and relate to them with respect. They learn by being curious and having someone notice that, respond to it, and wait gently for the next move. The child makes the next move and again, the responsive adult notices, responds, and waits gently for the next move. This is the “dance of learning,” a reciprocal, back-and-forth process with each partner playing a unique role. This is at the foundation of developing curriculum for infants and toddlers.

Curriculum for infants and toddlers “is every interaction and experience that supports the child's natural desire to explore and learn” (Petersen & Wittmer, 2009, p. 5). It happens throughout the day and throughout the many routines that are involved in caring for infants and toddlers. Every interaction or experience is an opportunity as the child is supported to notice something new, put new words with new things, or try a newly developing physical skill.

Lally (as cited by Wittmer & Petersen, 2006), a renowned expert in responsive caregiving for children under age three, poses this definition that also supports the concept that

R-E-I Model



learning requires a caring, responsive adult in active engagement with the infant/toddler: "Responsive curriculum planning focuses on finding strategies to help infant/toddler teachers search for, support, and keep alive children's internal motivation to learn, and their spontaneous explorations of people and things of interest and importance to them" (p. 5).

What does a caregiver need to do to be responsive and provide the type of social environment needed to support learning and development?

Use R-E-I (Relate-Expand-Explore-and-Inspire); a model for relationship-based care (HighReach Learning, 2009). As Lally's definition states, infant/toddler teachers

must use strategies that support and sustain children's motivation to learn and build on their spontaneous exploration. The R-E-I model (above) outlines some simple principles designed to support teachers in using these strategies as they plan to meet infant/toddler needs and provide for this type of exploration. The ultimate goal of the model is to focus on quality time throughout the entire day, including the routine times such as diapering, toileting, mealtimes, and rest times. The model has been presented in a circle dependent upon what is happening for the child, and as we all know, development does not happen in a linear fashion. Nor is a day in the life of an infant/toddler as tidy as 30-minute lesson plan segments might suggest. So a teacher may be using an "Expansion" strategy and then quickly shift to adapting an interaction based on the temperament of the child, a "Relate" strategy.

Let's take a closer look at each of the components of this model.

Relate

In order to provide an environment that is responsive, the caregiver first understands the needs, temperaments, and interests of those children for whom she is responsible. She is actively involved with children, a partner in the dance, and is a keen observer of their cues. She continues to spend time observing and interacting with children and does the following.

A. Understands Temperament Types and Adjusts the Relationship with Each Child in Response

Temperament influences the cues that children give. Infants and toddlers are born with very unique temperament types that typically fit into three categories – Easy, Slow-to-Warm, and Difficult. They show their temperament by their responses to people and things in the environment, such as temperature, strong stimulation, and strange situations, especially during times of stress or change. These reactions help define personality and affect the cues children use to show their feelings and how they approach the world. The responsive teacher is able to understand the fine differences in the temperaments of children and works with each child's reactions to help alleviate anxieties and express emotions (critical to the development of self-regulation). The role of the adult in the relationship then is crucial in helping a child understand himself and develop a strong positive sense of



what he can do to adapt to the people and environmental changes around him (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004).

B. Takes Time to Know Each Child's Developmental Capabilities

Infants come into the world ready to learn, yet their progress depends on those around them. A responsive caregiver guides a child's ability to process, organize, and integrate new information. Through sharing interactions and understanding, the caregiver is aware of the child's feelings and interests. Because of this relationship, the caregiver is in the unique position to put words around the child's experience; help the child regulate, express, and understand emotions; and adjust to the child's level of understanding or developmental skill level. The presence of a responsive caregiver who understands the way development progresses (and

where each child is) provides an avenue for initiation, encouragement, and inspiration for a child to learn (Butterfield et al., 2009).

A caregiver walks a fine line between over-structuring play and "scaffolding" a child to just beyond the comfort level of skills. Focusing too much on getting children to perform at the next level is

self-defeating. If the experiences are beyond the child's ability, which may be the risk in an "infant stimulation" model, the caregiver-child relationship may become instructional instead of playful, "which is less enjoyable for both participants and thus provides fewer opportunities for learning" (Moreno, Sciarrino, & Klute, 2007, p. 12).

Explore and Expand

Responsive teaching also includes a keen eye on observing children closely so you can build on what they know and are intrigued with. If “curriculum for infants and toddlers is every interaction and experience that supports the child’s natural desire to explore and learn” (Petersen & Wittmer, 2009, p. 5), then it is critical that the responsive teacher creates the conditions for this to occur. We must slow down to make time for exploration and expansion to ensure that the interactions that occur throughout the day and within all routines can focus on encouraging curiosity and wonder to unfold. These two ideas, exploration and expansion, are presented together because children continually and actively investigate and add more understanding to their repertoire based on these investigations. They go hand in hand –

“As I explore, I expand. As I expand what I know, understand, and can communicate, I am motivated to explore some more.” The responsive teacher plays an active role in curriculum planning and implementation by supporting this type of motivation and wonder. The responsive teacher encourages exploration and expands upon children’s learning by demonstrating the following.

C. Provides an Environment That Is Safe and Healthy for Playful Exploration

Infants and toddlers spend most of the day on the floor and thus, their exploration focuses on anything and everything found there. The environment includes:

- A variety of materials available for active exploration.

- New and varied materials that provide for provoking and building on children’s natural curiosity.
- Materials that are safe; sanitized daily; and provide variety, interest, and novelty based on abilities of all children in the group.
- An appropriate amount of space for young children to use their newly developing motor skills safely and with the right amount of challenge.

D. Strives to Expand Communication by Being “In Tune” with Each Child

Babies are born hardwired to learn language, yet without relationships, the learning could not progress. Communication is a social endeavor, providing a way to understand and be understood, and it always takes two. Children learn to share their emotions before they learn to use words in order to get their needs met. When caregivers and children have developed a trusting relationship, you will see them interacting “in tune.” In this type of interaction, the caregiver understands the ways that the child communicates, senses how the child feels, and understands what

the child’s cues mean. They look and act like a team and the caregiver acts as “co-regulator.” Co-regulation happens when a child expresses a full range of emotions with the purpose of communication. The caregiver reinforces this yet provides some support such that the child’s display does not become extreme (actually interrupting the purpose of the emotional display) (Moreno, Sciarrino, & Klute, 2007). The caregiver then provides the way for the child to navigate through it. Using playful strategies for interacting in tune



is imperative for children to become good social communicators and develop a strong and positive sense of self (i.e., learning who I am, how the world responds to me, and what I can do with my growing capabilities). As children interact with a playful, in-tune caregiver, the support given provides the opportunity to learn how to handle challenges encountered in play with toys or with peers and provides opportunities to build language and concepts by attaching new words and concepts to the play scenario at hand.



When infants and toddlers have the benefit of a trusting relationship with their caregivers, the stage for learning is set. Caregivers who are in tune with the children in their care use several strategies that help expand language, inspire and support curiosity, and take advantage of the endless opportunities for growth. This happens in contrast to the more traditional view of “infant stimulation.” In the responsive caregiving model, adult and child react and respond to each other, adapting to the current situation and intention of the child. In the infant stimulation model, the adult acts then the child reacts. In this way, the adaptation may be missed, thus limiting the impact on learning (Gonzales-Mena & Eyer, 2007).

It is well researched and proven that children who hear a lot of language, speak more and do better when they enter school. It is also well known that when children are spoken to in interactive ways, ways that help them use language; they do better than children who are not spoken with but are spoken at (Hart and Risley, 1995). Some critical strategies responsive caregivers use to encourage language learning and high-quality interactions are (INREAL as cited by Stahl, 2002):

- Wait time – After making a comment or asking a question, wait a full three to five seconds. This gives the child a chance to listen and respond. As adults, we find this very uncomfortable, yet you will be amazed at how much more a child will respond when given the time to do so.
- Expansion – Depending on the type of verbalization of the child, the adult repeats the child’s language and adds to it. For example, the child says, “Red truck.” The caregiver responds, “Yes, that is a big, red truck.” In doing this, the child is validated for the language used and is able to hear more.
- Self-talk or broadcasting – The adult explains the activity as it is performed. (“I am going to come and pick you up so I can change your diaper.”) Not only does this provide a respectful way of interaction, it allows the child to match your words with what you are doing, thus providing rich, new language to hear and learn.
- Parallel talk – The adult narrates an activity as the child performs it. (“You climbed up all those steps and then you slid down the slide.”) This is another strategy that provides the child with a way to attach language to activity, providing rich language to repeat.
- Mirroring – The adult lets a child know the child has been heard by merely repeating the actions of the child or the words the child has used. In so doing, children are validated and encouraged to add more to what they have done or said.

- Modeling – The adult should be aware of the language used, always being sure that grammar is as correct as possible, using complete sentences and allowing children to hear many types of conversations. Children learn the nuances, inflections, and rules of the language by this type of exposure.

Inspire

Infants and toddlers are born hardwired to learn. Moments after birth, the newborn searches for familiar voices. No one has to tell him to do that – he is motivated to do it. As a musician is drawn to create through sounds and is inspired by the pleasure it gives, so too the infant and toddler learn because it is pleasurable. They are inspired by pleasure; learning is fun. Children learn through play.

Wittmer and Petersen (2006) and Perry, Hogan, and Marlin (2000) all discuss the internal motivation for learning that is possessed by infants and toddlers. They each make a strong case for the role of the teacher as an active partner in setting the stage and supporting the play that further develops it. It is up to the responsive teacher to use the strategies above to inspire or provide the challenge needed for the continual growth and development of motivation. Perry (2000) outlines the cycle of mastery in the young child. We master things because they are pleasurable and fun. Responsive teachers inspire learning and curiosity by:

E. Supports the Cycle of Learning and Mastery Through Play

There are many debates throughout the early childhood community about the correct way to interact and provide curriculum for

young children. One such debate centers around the tug between whether children learn more through play or direct instruction. Further conflict arises when the issue of standards for infants and toddlers is discussed with concern that the standards movement will be a deterrent to an emphasis on play. In a recent article published in *Zero to Three*, the authors point out the benefits of using play intentionally to support children's development of knowledge and skills articulated in early learning standards and recommend a play-based approach to using such standards (Kagan, Scott-Little, & Frelow, 2009).

F. Uses a Play-Based Approach: Playful Learning

The case for play-based approaches is strong and has long been recognized as the vehicle to learning for young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's position statement on developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs has this to say about play. Play is "an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence." It also states that there is considerable research proving there are "links between play and foundational capacities such as memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills, and success in school" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 14).

Most of us would agree with the statements in the above paragraphs, quick to point out that of course we believe in a play based approach with infants and toddlers. But few of us can articulate further than being able to say, "Of course, children learn through play," without giving it much thought. Yet



there are intricacies and complexities to what is happening in the mastery of learning cycle through play that lend much credibility to those of us in strong support of play based curriculum.

G. Understands Pleasure and the Mastery Cycle

A wonderful cycle of learning is driven by the pleasure encountered in play. A child is curious; she explores and discovers. When she discovers, she plays! At the heart of all play is pleasure – if it isn't fun, it isn't play. With play comes the motivation to repeat what brings pleasure. When repetition occurs, so does mastery. Mastery leads to a sense of competence in newfound skills and knowledge of the world and how it works. When a child feels competent, she becomes very comfortable. When a child feels comfortable, she is far more likely to explore. There is more exploration that occurs, the more to discover, master, learn, and so forth as the cycle repeats, growing increasingly complex as children add to their knowledge of the world and themselves in it. So then, play satisfies curiosity as children explore their environment.

As Perry, Hogan, and Marlin (2000) state, "all learning – emotional, social, motor, and cognitive – is accelerated and facilitated by repetition fueled by the pleasure of play" (p. 2). The responsive approach to caregiving builds upon this notion of the mastery cycle within the component labeled Inspire. Responsive caregivers inspire children, thus supporting the mastery cycle by:

- Providing for play that is neither too easy nor too difficult. (Infants and toddlers will make their own play scenarios if the people who are setting the stage for learning are not keyed in to what is challenging to them.)
- Being aware of the interests of each child so as to tap into natural curiosity.
- Using informal assessments to keep informed of the child's current level of developmental skill so as to know how

to best structure the environment and experiences in it to encourage the growth and development of skills.

- Infusing delight and joy into interactions so that the climate of the environment is one that nurtures curiosity, wonder, and pleasure for learning.
- Using the responsive strategies listed in the other two components – Relate, Explore and Expand – to help each teacher set up an environment that nurtures and allows relationships to become the vehicle for learning.

What Does All This Mean About Infant/Toddler Curriculum?

One can conclude that relationships are vital to learning. Learning in turn is satisfying and rewarding to both the caregiver and the child, fueling the relationship. When there is pleasure in the discovery, the relationship and curiosity is built even further, supporting learning and achieving mastery.

Thus, the relationship as the backdrop in which curriculum happens creates a positive learning cycle, constantly growing and changing, constantly building on what a child can master. Any curriculum used by teachers of infants and toddlers must contain flexibility and a focus on both expanding and extending development; building and supporting positive, pleasurable relationships; and utilizing observations and information about each child (temperament and developmental level).

Last but not least, an infant and toddler curriculum is a support that helps a teacher be intentional (act with purpose) about the playful ways she goes through the routines of each day.

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The Child Development Associates (CDA) competencies that can be linked to this article are:

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The Certified Childcare Professionals (CCP) professional ability areas linked to this article are:

- The ability to enhance the cognitive development of young children.

For more information on the CCP certification, contact the National Child Care Association at 800-543-7161 or visit www.nccanet.org.

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