Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships

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While busy greeting children and preparing for the day, the teachers heard Alan, a 4-year boy, crying in the hallway. Every morning, Alan cried very loudly and refused to come into the classroom from the bus. Mrs. Hannon, the lead teacher, found herself becoming very frustrated with Alan, and she told him to come to the classroom without asking why he was upset. During circle time, Alan repeatedly kicked his feet on the carpet and did not pay attention as Mrs. Hannon read a story to the group. Mrs. Hannon told Alan to stop kicking, but he continued kicking his feet in the air. Exasperated, Mrs. Hannon snapped at Alan, “Stop kicking, I have had enough. You are going to leave circle time. Go over there and sit on the chair. I am going to tell your mom about this.” As Alan moved to the thinking chair, he began to cry. He was very mad at Mrs. Hannon and wished someone would “snuggle him” instead of yell at him.

What Are Positive Teacher-Child Relationships?

In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to build positive relationships with children. Teacher behaviors such as listening to children, making eye contact with them, and engaging in many one-to-one, face-to-face interactions with young children promote secure teacher-child relationships. Talking to children using pleasant, calm voices and simple language, and greeting children warmly when they arrive in the classroom with their parents or from the buses help establish secure relationships between teachers and children.

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This What Works Brief is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

In developing positive teacher-child relationships, it is important to remember to:

- Engage in one-to-one interactions with children
- Get on the child’s level for face-to-face interactions
- Use a pleasant, calm voice and simple language
- Provide warm, responsive physical contact
- Follow the child’s lead and interest during play
- Help children understand classroom expectations
- Redirect children when they engage in challenging behavior
- Listen to children and encourage them to listen to others
- Acknowledge children for their accomplishments and effort

Given the above information, if we “revisit” our hypothetical early childhood classroom, we might observe the following scenario:

During center time, Mrs. Hannon heard Alan crying, while she was helping another child with an art project. Mrs. Hannon, realizing that she was again feeling very frustrated with Alan, decided that she needed to develop some new
relationships with their teachers demonstrated lower levels of tent peer relationships. Moreover, children who had secure contact, treated children fairly) developed positive and compe-
teachers who listened when children talked to them, made eye contact, and smiling behaviors, affectionate behaviors (such as smiles, pats, and hugs), a calm voice, and truly listening to young children help build positive relationships between teachers and children. She found that affectionate behaviors (such as smiles, pats, and hugs), a calm voice, and truly listening to young children help build positive relationships between teachers and children. She realized that she was often so busy managing the group of children that she missed the individual interactions with them. The next day, when Mrs. Hannon saw her students coming down the hall to enter her classroom, she stopped talking with her assistant teacher so she could greet each child with a warm smile and welcome. During circle time, instead of giving attention to children who were not listening, Mrs. Hannon praised children who were listening and engaged in story time. Also, when Ms. Gloria, the teaching assistant, did some finger plays with the children, Mrs. Hannon sat next to Alan. After the finger plays, Mrs. Hannon gave Alan a high five and told him what a great job he did following along with the finger plays. The tone in the classroom felt more positive, and Mrs. Hannon felt she was using her energy to help children become engaged in classroom activities and enjoy their time in the classroom rather than using her energy to constantly nag and attend to challenging behaviors.

Why Are Positive Teacher-Child Relationships Important?

Research has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children’s social and emotional development. In studies of teacher-child relationships, children who had a secure relationship with their preschool and kindergarten teachers demonstrated good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school. On the other hand, children who had insecure relationships with teachers had more difficulty interacting with peers and engaged in more conflict with their teachers. In addition, research has shown that teachers’ interaction styles with children help children build positive and emotionally secure relationships with adults. For instance, teachers’ smiling behaviors, affectionate words, and appropriate physical contact help promote children’s positive responses toward teachers. Also, children whose teachers showed warmth and respect toward them (e.g., teachers who listened when children talked to them, made eye contact, treated children fairly) developed positive and competent peer relationships. Moreover, children who had secure relationships with their teachers demonstrated lower levels of challenging behaviors and higher levels of competence in school.

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Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Teacher-Child Relationships?

Research on teacher-child relationships has been conducted with children from culturally diverse families in child care settings, university preschools, family child care settings, Head Start programs, and kindergarten classrooms. Participants have included children from European American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American families. However, no studies indicated whether children with disabilities were included. When developing relationships with young children, teachers should pay attention to the cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children. The importance of adapting strategies to meet the unique needs of the children and families in a teacher’s care cannot be overstated.

Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uic.edu) for additional resources.

Practical information on teacher-child relationship can be found in journals such as Young Children. See the following articles and books for examples of how to develop positive teacher-child relationships:


We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.


What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have studied teacher-child relationships in early childhood settings:


This What Works Brief was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Contributors to this Brief were M. M. Ostrosky and E. Y. Jung.