

Importance of Relationships in Infancy and Early Childhood during Challenging Times

Many children have experienced changes in their lives during the COVID-19 outbreak and the protests that resulted from the killing of George Floyd. Most children have had routines and schedules disrupted. Some have had family members become sick and perhaps die. Some have watched the mounting stress of their parent(s) and family members as they try to balance working from home, family responsibilities and distance learning supports. Many children are missing other significant relationships with educators, extended family members and peers. Others have experienced, heard about or watched violence on TV. And still others have had family members lose their jobs. Each child will react to the stress they feel themselves, or absorb from those around them, in their own way.

Now more than ever, children need relationships with adults who support, nurture and help them navigate what they are experiencing. Children who do well in the face of hardship typically have a biological resistance to adversity *and* strong relationships with the important adults in their family and community. These important relationships are responsive, individualized and caring. They can help buffer children from the negative effects of stress. Information on resilience can be found at [Harvard's Center on the Developing Child](#).

Any adult with a strong personal relationship can be a part of a community that supports infants, toddlers and young children in their learning and development. Those caring for and educating children in these early years are positioned to provide an additional level of support needed during challenging times. To do this well, educators need to be grounded in knowledge of child development as well as the competencies and vulnerabilities of infants, toddlers and young children. They need knowledge of how families develop and to be able to support healthy parent/family-child relationships. In addition, there are many unique aspects of this period in a child's development of which those who care for and educate children need to be aware.

The term family has been chosen to use throughout this paper to include the adults and family members who play a significant role in a child's education and emotional development. These family members might include parents, guardians, grandparents, older siblings, extended family or others. Educators can work with whoever it is playing this important role in the child's life.

Unique Characteristics of Early Development

The following unique characteristics of early development are adapted from Minnesota's [Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Educators](#).

The early years represent a period of rapid growth and development. Development is cumulative and is a product of the interaction between genes and experiences, beginning before birth. From birth, children are

active participants in their own development as they learn to select, engage and interpret even their earliest experiences.

Development is sometimes described in terms of domains or areas of learning. These categories make it easier for adults to discuss its complexities but in reality, all domains are interrelated. Multiple abilities and skills are developing simultaneously during the early years. As these abilities and skills emerge, each affects the development of others.

Children develop in the context of their families, cultures and communities. While family members are the most important and influential, children's relationships with others also impact their development. Nurturing and responsive care and education helps children develop secure and trusting relationships which, in turn, facilitate exploration and development.

This time of robust development is also a time of profound vulnerability. Development can be seriously compromised not only by delay or disability, but also by chronic stress or trauma. Nurturing and responsive care and education for children whose development is at risk can help a child develop resilience and skills needed for success in school and in life.

Working with young children and their families can bring up many emotions. Educators need to reflect on their own feelings, reactions, and behaviors as well as those of others in order to be most effective.

Changing Landscape

In order to continue to support our youngest learners, the role of the early childhood educator needs to shift. In addition to supporting children in their growth and development educators will need to do more to partner with and support family members. As family members step into the role of distance learning partner, it is essential that we build relationships that embrace and support family members.

As children transitioned from school and childcare communities to full-time family members, they have been isolated from friends and extended family. Children have had fewer interactions with their educators and their interactions became virtual. Recognizing what this means for children and families has become a challenge for which we were unprepared and will take time to embrace. Acknowledging and developing an understanding of obstacles families face is key to supporting new ways for families to "be with" children as learning partners and emotional guides.

The pressure of distance learning has emerged as a significant parental stressor. It is important to recognize that schools and childcare programs are relatively new in terms of our human evolution. Family systems were the original structural support for learning and emotional regulation. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown us back into a way of being (depending on family systems) that many cultures have moved away from. With this in mind, it is helpful to recognize what was embraced by generations before us. Examples being, healthy relationships are integral to survival, learning happens in the context of experiences (often play), mastery requires experience, guidance, and repetition.

It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.

-Leo F. Buscaglia

As families are being asked to step into the role of educators it is important to keep in mind that they are not educators. They are loving partners who can embrace opportunities to explore and learn as daily events unfold. They are the loving partners who can provide the predictability and safety that children need in order to explore on their own and develop self-confidence. Learning requires risk, a loving partner in exploration and protection enables the development of the confidence needed to take the risks learning requires.

The most important learning in infancy and early childhood is about social and emotional readiness for success in relationships and learning. These skills include being curious and exploring the environment, regulating emotions, communicating with others, following directions, getting along with peers and learning to ask adults for help. Emphasizing to families and caregivers the importance of these skills and how they are learned in everyday moments validates the importance of their role.

Engaging with Families

Early childhood educators sometimes aren't as comfortable working with family members as they are with children. Creating and sustaining relationships not only with children but truly honest and meaningful relationships with family members is paramount. There are many ways to build and maintain relationships with families. A few suggestions are listed below.

- Set up times and methods that work for each family for intentional interactions
- Empower families during a time when many feel powerless by offering choices
- Invite families to share their concerns about their children; assure them that their children will be ok
- Remind them their number one job is to be a loving family member
- Remind them the interactions that they have with their child are important
- Help them recognize time as a family is critical to love and nurture their child
- Support families with hard issues around behavior, sleep and fears
- Allow family members to share thoughts and feelings without judgement
- Embrace differences and learn from them
- Ask families what they need or worry about and respond with resources or support. For example do families need access to meals, medical care, internet or financial supports? Help them locate and if needed provide support to sign up
- Acknowledge the family members understanding of the child by asking open ended questions: these invite more information than simple yes/no questions. For example, "What have you tried and how did that go?" or "What do you think she's trying to tell you when she does that?" Or "What's it like for you when that happens?"

Families Engaged in Learning

Partner with families in their teaching their child. Share information about early brain development and how young children learn best through interactions. As you partner, recognize the meaningful, real-world learning that takes place in everyday moments and routines such as cleaning, sorting laundry, washing dishes, making beds, cooking and yard work. Find information about early brain development at [the Center for the Developing Child](#).

- Reassure families that children learn through play and don't let them fall into the belief that sitting at a table doing worksheets is necessary

- Encourage unstructured playtime. For example, if a child seems particularly interested in an activity provide families with ideas to build on it
- Let family members know its ok to take breaks, to cuddle and to have fun
- Ask family members to work with you in making program decisions
- Ask families for help with planning activities
- Before planning a group activity, check in with families about basic household materials that can be used in learning activities (do all children have matchbox cars?)

Putting Ideas into Practice

One educator took special care to create activities out of things her families have in their homes. For example, one activity she suggested was to find a bed sheet and roll up some socks. Take the sheet and socks outside. Use the sheet like a parachute and put the socks on the sheet—then start shaking it. Try to shake it in all sorts of ways such as fast, slow and in a wave. She explained to her learning partner, how this activity touches on all sorts of development: social development when they worked to move the parachute together; gross motor when the child used his muscles to shake it; and cognitive skills when they counted the number of sock balls that fell on the ground and when they predicted what would happen if they shook the sheet faster or slower. The next time the educator and learning partner spoke, the learning partner described how she and her daughter had made pancakes together. The learning partner pointed out that the child had counted, stirred and used lots of language as they worked together.

- Invite families to bring something to the first conversation or meeting that represents something they love (or something like that).
- Invite families to participate in a virtual “art exhibit.” Ask families to create art using items and materials in their homes (flour, TP rolls, milk cartons...).
- Learn about all family members, especially those living in the household.
- Ask them to tell a favorite family story or share family photos.

Putting Ideas into Practice

Telling family stories together is a great way to build relationships. There are many ways that stories can be told and remembered. Favorite stories are often started using pictures, well-loved traditions or by describing family rituals (like the annual family picnic). The stories can be captured on video, by making audio recordings, taking photographs, or drawing pictures. Someone can write the words while someone else draws the picture. The stories can start with one person’s viewpoint and change as others add details or events that make the story even better. The stories can be retold over and over adding props, puppets or actors.

- Support families to focus on love and kindness (instead of fear and frustration).

Putting Ideas into Practice

One school district early learning program decided to focus on community resilience. They invited families to join in several activities. Some families planted “victory gardens” in the community or on their porches. Children shared photos and stories of their gardens as they watched them grow. Some families engaged in a letter writing campaign to make sure people in their community who were isolated, received a personal contact through the mail. Others helped put together a community quilt with 2x2 squares of fabric decorated by different families.

The quilt will be displayed in the lobby of the school. Families were encouraged to do what they were most interested in. At the center of all activities were relationships within families, community and the program.

A variety of people support early learning when there are other adults or mentors in a child's life. Find out if who might be the most appropriate learning partner for each child. Build your relationship with that individual.

Putting Ideas into Practice

The educator learned that Fortuna and her Grandma spent a great deal of time together. Fortuna's educator built a relationship with Grandma and worked with her to be Fortuna's learning partner. The educator learned that one of their favorite games was a version of hide and seek. Grandma would hide a stuffed toy animal while Fortuna counted to 10. Then she would run off to find it. In the educator's conversation with Grandma, she asked if they had a flashlight and suggested that they use it to shine the light on the animal when it was found. Another time, she suggested that they take or draw a picture of where the animal was hiding. Finally, she suggested that Grandma hide all the stuffed toy animals they had and ask Fortuna to find all six, counting as she went.

Connect with Families and Children through:

- Social media
- Care packages
- Keep a systematic communication system open (one that families can predict)
- Write letters, post cards, short stories about the child or send information about something the child is interested in
- Create a newsletter
- Hold virtual picnics or dinners

Putting Ideas into Practice

One Head Start program dropped off a variety of materials for families to use for math games. When the educator called families she learned about the fun children and their families were having as they counted cotton balls as they placed one in each section of an egg carton. The children showed her the patterns they were making with squares of fabric. She heard about the contest one family had to see who tossed the most rolled up sock balls into the laundry basket. One family sent a picture of the counting game they had made out of stickers placed on a file folder. The enthusiasm the children and their educator shared when talking about the learning activities helped the educator, child and families connect. As the family members described what they had done, the educator could suggest ways to expand the learning next time they got the math materials out.

Building Relationships with Children

Children need adults who know them and understand their individual developmental needs. They need adults who accept mistakes and turn them into opportunities for growth. Children need adults who see and listen to them. They need adults who ask real questions to get to know them and listen to their answers and ideas. During challenging times, they need reassurance and responses to stressful situations. They also need adults to

recognize special events in their lives by sending birthday cards, personal mail, hosting a parade or writing sidewalk chalk messages as well as intentionally building supportive relationships with them.

Ideas to Help Build Your Relationships with a Child

- Use openers such as “Show me the toy you were playing with before I called.” Or “Show me what you were doing before I called.”
- Ask open ended questions like “I’ve been thinking about you since we last talked.” Or “Tell me more about...” Or “Tell me about a time when...”
- Play a video game together.
- Follow the child’s lead.
- Respond positively to the child’s behavior and learning to build trust and expand learning.
- Identify a toy or material you both have and pretend to pass it back and forth.
- Ask the child to give you a tour of their house or their room if the family seems open to it.
- Provide sensory materials to fidget with such as playdough, slime or squishy stress balls.
- Design learning experiences that can be done with the educator first and then expanded at home. Talk about it the next time you meet. Or flip it where you suggest an activity to do at home and it is repeated with the educator. Discuss with the learning partner how the child responded.
- [Growing, Moving and Learning: infant, toddler toolkit](#) provides activities that teach healthy patterns of physical activity and nutrition. This resource contains suggestions for activities to do at home.
- Record videos of the educator reading or telling a story that the child can watch over and over.
- Help each child feel “seen” through touch points such as using a child’s name when talking virtually.
- Set up your screen so you and the child are side by side.
- Share your screen and watch a story together; pause it to ask questions and connect it to the child’s experiences.
- Create a picture book of educators and friends.
- Send photos back and forth.

Putting Ideas into Practice

One educator decided to connect with the children in her class by mailing out a cutout picture of herself and encouraged the children to take their “educator” on adventures. The children who were able, were asked to send pictures back to the educator of all the things they did together. Some children took their educator to the beach and sent pictures of their educator relaxing in the sand or in a chair. Some families took pictures of their children playing with building blocks, playing outside or going to the grocery store with their educator.

The Importance of Reflection

Because children develop within the context of relationships, being intentional about our relationships with them and their caregivers is central to our work. Our relationship with family members and other caregivers can influence the quality of the relationships they have with the children in their care. This “relationships-based work” requires us to engage both our thinking and our emotions. Reflecting on our feelings, reactions, implicit biases and intentions as well as those of others is necessary to be effective in relationship-based work.

Reflective supervision/consultation (RS/C) is a form of professional development, a safe relationship for learning that supports our strengths and partners around our vulnerabilities for growth. It enhances our capacity to

recognize the feelings, thoughts and intentions in ourselves and others to link meaning to behavior. RS/C has been shown to reduce educator's stress levels and staff turnover, improve communication with families, reduce the negative impacts of implicit bias and improve the social and emotional skills of children. RS/C can be offered to individuals or groups and must be collaborative, relationship-based, regular and reflective to be effective. Learn more about RS/C through [Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health](#), [Center for Early Education and Development](#) and other partner organizations.

Conclusion

Learning about emotions, communicating with others, following directions, getting along with other and learning to ask for help are important skills children glean from interactions with others. Emphasizing with families the importance of these skills and how they are learning in everyday moments validates the importance of their role as a child's first learning partner. Educators can support that role and build on it. During challenging times, educators can become an additional supportive relationship that helps a child learn to cope and thrive even in the most difficult times. When these relationships are sustained over time, children and families learn that there are supportive adults that help hold them up when challenged. Engaging families in guiding a child's learning enhances the learning that is taking place. In addition, building relationships with families during infancy and early childhood sets them on a positive path for future learning opportunities.

Contributing Authors

Debbie Hewitt, Minnesota Department of Education

Teya Dahle, Minnesota Department of Human Services

Michele Fallon, What About the Baby, LLC

Molly Harney, University of Minnesota, Duluth

Melissa Mack, Mahube Head Start

Cory Woosley, Child Care Aware MN

June Reineke, Minnesota Department of Education