



Center for Early Education
and Development



Relationship-Based Teaching With Young Children

Tip Sheets

Relationship-based Teaching: Challenges and Benefits

In recent years early childhood teachers, administrators, and researchers have focused attention on reports of increasing rates of aggression and other challenging behaviors in very young children. A relationship-based approach to teaching begins with the understanding that relationships are central to development and that the child is best understood within the context of the important adults in his or her life. The social and emotional development of young children is tied to their social and emotional connections with caregivers.

Benefits of Relationship-Based Teaching

Since children learn best within a relationship with a caring adult, relationship-based teaching offers a child experiencing difficulties a much needed chance to increase her capacity to manage emotions and behavior and master developmental tasks.

Relationship-based teaching can be a scaffold for the child. Adults can serve to support the child's emerging abilities until these are solid enough to stand alone. For a relationship to work, the child needs the adult to be reflective (observing, mirroring, paying attention to possible reasons for distress) and in tune with her needs. *Attunement* is a child development concept that is useful: "the child needs the adult to get *in tune* so that the natural rhythm of care can serve both their needs.

The child also needs adults to know how to *emotionally* read them: to put into words what is happening, both inside the child and in the situation (relationship and setting). This ability to *read a situation* is beyond most children's capacities. Emotionally responsive adults provide this social/emotional information.

Challenges to Relationship-Based Teaching

There may be obstacles to relationship-based teaching. These are elements you may need to assess and respond to as you begin to implement reflective, relationship-based practice.

The Setting

Is there time and permission to reflect in your setting?

Are adult-child and child-child relationships valued?

Community and Staff Attitudes

Can staff be engaged to think about difficult children in a different way?

The Population of Your Setting

How do the number of children, staff to child ratio, and staff turnover impact your efforts to implement reflective practice and relationship-based teaching?

Family Instability

Does a family stay long enough for you to become truly helpful and engaged with the child?

How long is “long enough?” How do you think about your effectiveness when children leave before you feel you have had “long enough?”

The Appeal of External Control

Just as children are more reactive than reflective, it is easy for adults to act in that way too.

How can we avoid going that familiar route and engage our reflective perspective?

Teacher Burn-out

Does the program structure support or deplete staff? Do teachers have enough time, resources, training, and support to maintain their energy for teaching?

Many challenges contribute to teacher frustration and despair. We must keep our focus on what we know children need for healthy development as we face these challenges.

References

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A relationship-based approach to teaching begins with the understanding that relationships are central to development and that the child is best understood within the context of the important adults in his or her life. This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students in their home and classroom. This Tip Sheet was published by the Center for Early Education and Development, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and was authored by Julie Nelson of Lifetrack Resources and compiled by Mary Nienow of the Center for Early Education and Development.

For additional information on this topic, please see CEED's web site at <http://education.umn.edu/ceed>.

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