

Positive Teacher-Child Interaction

by Stephen Green, Ph.D., & Daniel Valles

The foundation for children's successful development is established early in life. From birth, children interact with others in a variety of contexts that shape who they are as individuals. Two of the most influential environments for young children include the family and the child care environment. The family environment appears to have more influence on children than any other environment in which children interact (NICHD, 2006); however, given the fact that such a high percentage of children are spending substantial amounts of time in non-parental care arrangements, what do we know about the impact of the child care environment on children's development? Moreover, what features of the child care environment appear to have the greatest influence on children's developmental outcomes?



Defining Characteristics of Quality Child Care

The quality of care that children receive during the preschool years contributes to their development in important ways. Studies reveal that children who receive high quality care, as opposed to poor or mediocre care, are more likely to develop better cognitive, language, and social skills (NICHD, 2006). In fact, higher quality care is

linked to greater school readiness as reflected in standardized tests of literacy and number skills.

Early childhood experts have found that the following characteristics or features of a child care program are associated with higher quality care:

- small group sizes with high staff-to-child ratios;
- low staff turnover rates;
- a well-educated staff who have received specialized training in child development;
- programs that have undergone a licensing and/or accreditation process;
- an age appropriate physical environment that provides children with opportunities for safe and enjoyable indoor and outdoor play;
- programs that involve children in a wide variety of activities that promote development in multiple domains (i.e., physical, social, emotional, and cognitive);
- a family friendly environment that encourages regular parental involvement;
- programs that promote the health and safety of children, including proper nutrition and food safety practices; and
- warm and responsive caregivers who meet the needs of each child. (National Center for Early Development & Learning, 1997; ZERO TO THREE, 2006)

While all of the above factors are linked to higher quality child care, researchers have discovered that the quality of teacher-child interactions in child care settings is just as, or

possibly even more important, than many of the other features mentioned above.

Positive Teacher-Child Interaction and Children's Development

The manner in which teachers interact with preschool children can influence children's development across a variety of domains (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive) and, depending on the quality of the interactions, can have a long-lasting impact. Preschool children whose teachers have a warm and respectful attitude toward them are more likely to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers during the school-age years, demonstrate higher levels of competence in school, and exhibit lower levels of challenging behaviors (see Ostrosky & Jung).

While teacher-child interaction occurs across a wide variety of situations, there are certain domains of interaction between teachers and children that appear to be especially important. Four of these domains of interaction are discussed below.

Teacher-Child Interaction and Student Learning

Teacher-child interactions are especially critical during the preschool years because it is through these interactions that children become better equipped to succeed during the formal school-age years. It has been discovered that academic success in the first grade is dependent, in large part, on having children well-prepared academically, socially, and emotionally prior to entrance into school. According to Downer and Pianta (2006), teachers' interactions with children should be sensitive and responsive to the needs of the children and should reflect a positive outlook toward the process of learning. Interactions should involve feedback that helps children expand their critical thinking skills and their understanding of new concepts. Helping children in this way contributes to their comfort level with the learning process and enhances their academic confidence.



Teacher-Child Communication

Conversations between a teacher and a child provide the foundation for the development of a trusting teacher-child relationship and also help to strengthen children's language and literacy skills. Beyond teaching the mechanics of a

conversation, effective conversation stimulates children's cognitive development, including their oral language skills.

Not all conversation, however, is created equal.

Cognitively challenging conversations are conversations in which children are asked to explain ideas, provide personal narratives, analyze ideas, share experiences, and voice opinions. These conversations involve the use of a wide vocabulary and center around concepts that are beyond the "here and now." Researchers refer to such conversation as decontextualized. They contrast this style of conversation with contextualized conversation, which centers on the immediate environment. Contextualized conversation involves language such as, "What color is the duck?" or "Hang up your coat," and does not require the child to summarize, infer, analyze, or engage in thinking not tied directly to their immediate environment. While important, this type of conversation is not as effective at building language and literacy skills. By requiring children to use their language skills to convey information about another time or place, children who engage in decontextualized conversation are using their cognitive skills to represent ideas, which is a key element in reading comprehension.

Teacher-Child Interaction and the Promotion of a Positive Self-Image

Children's self-evaluations begin in early childhood and continue throughout life. For very young children, self-esteem is based primarily on feelings of being loved, accepted, and valued by parents and other significant caregivers. As children age, self-esteem also becomes a product of feelings derived from evaluating oneself against some external criteria (e.g., school performance; physical attractiveness). Therefore, the frequency and quality of interactions that teachers have with children can impact their sense of self-worth. Evidence suggests that children's self-evaluations are particularly susceptible to evaluative comments by teachers. Through consistent positive interactions with children, you can help children develop a love of learning, a sense of competence in their abilities, and a desire to expand their current level of knowledge and skills.

Teacher-Child Interaction and Disciplinary Styles

Just as children are learning new skills and formulating a more comprehensive self-image in the early childhood years, they are also developing character and discipline. As a child care provider, you have a unique opportunity to help children define socially acceptable behavior, understand that unacceptable behavior comes with consequences, and develop positive character traits.

Diana Baumrind, a research psychologist at the University of California, has conducted studies on discipline for over

40 years. Results from her work reveal that parents and caregivers use a variety of disciplinary styles with children. However, it appears that not all styles are equally effective. In her research and writings, Baumrind identifies the following four main parenting/caregiving styles:

1. Authoritative. An authoritative style is one in which parents/caregivers are restrictive and demanding, yet communicative and warm. These adults have high expectations for children, but they also express love and support for the children in their care. These caregivers tend to be flexible, but firm; maintain control and discipline; and have clear expectations for behavior, which they monitor. Researchers have found that the authoritative style of discipline fosters responsibility, cooperation, and self-regulation in children. It is a balanced approach to caring for children and is the most effective style to use with them.

2. Authoritarian. An authoritarian style is one in which parents/caregivers demand submission and obedience from their children without flexibility. They are highly directive and more controlling than authoritative caregivers. Adults who use this style tend to communicate poorly with children and express very little warmth (i.e., nurturing behavior) toward them. Children under the care of authoritarian caregivers tend to be conflicted and irritable.

3. Permissive. A permissive style of discipline is one in which parents/caregivers are not controlling or restrictive. Adults who use this style of discipline do not demand mature behavior from their children. They tend to be warm and accepting of their children; however, they allow their children to pretty much do as they wish. These caregivers make fewer demands, allow children to regulate themselves, using little discipline, and avoid confrontation of problematic behavior. Children raised by permissive caregivers tend to be less assertive, and less cognitively competent. They also tend to show less self-regulation and social responsibility.

4. Rejecting/Neglecting. A rejecting/neglecting style is one in which parents/caregivers do not structure, organize, discipline, attend or supervise their children. This style is characterized by low control and low warmth. Adults who use this style actively reject or neglect the children in their care. Children raised by caregivers who are rejecting cope the worst, and are the least competent of the four groups.



Tips for Promoting Positive Teacher-Child Interaction

The following tips are intended to help you make the most of the regular interactions that you have with the children in your care:

1. Treat each child with warmth and respect. Strong teacher-child relationships are formed over time as a result of consistent positive interactions. Make an effort to treat each child with kindness and respect regardless of the child's gender, ethnicity, or family background. Children need to feel loved and respected by the influential adults in their lives. You can convey this love and respect by interacting with children in a warm and caring manner. Some important questions to consider include:

- Do you warmly greet children when they arrive in your classroom?
- Do you give the children a hug?
- Do you pat children on the back when they have done a good job?
- Do you comfort children who are in distress by providing prompt support and assistance?
- Do you maintain eye contact with children when engaged in a conversation?
- Do you smile often?
- Do you carefully consider your tone of voice when talking with the children?
- Do you acknowledge the children's point of view by actively listening?

2. Create a positive emotional climate. The emotional climate of a classroom is extremely important and is largely determined by the teacher. Both your verbal and non-verbal behavior contribute to children's perceptions of the classroom climate. Questions to consider include:

- Do children enjoy coming into your classroom in the morning?
- Do they feel safe and secure?
- Is the physical environment conducive to learning?
- Are conversations pleasant for the most part?
- Are the expectations you have for children fair?
- Does your non-verbal behavior convey that you are happy to be in the classroom?

3. Make it a priority to get to know each child on an individual basis. Every child in your care is special in the sense that he or she possesses unique talents, abilities, and preferences to go along with a unique temperament, family history, and culture. When attempting to form a trusting

and healthy relationship with each child, it is important to consider the following questions:

- Do you engage each child in one-on-one conversations on a regular basis?
- Do you listen to each child's opinions?
- Do you seek to learn more about a child's likes and dislikes?
- Do you make attempts to get to know the child's family?
- Do you understand the child's cultural background?
- Do you consider each child's unique needs, interests, learning style, and abilities?
- Do you regularly evaluate each child's progress and vary your interactions accordingly?

4. Engage children in cognitively stimulating activities.

One of the most important predictors of children's cognitive and language development is the language used by the caregiver. As you consider the interactions that you have with children in your child care program, do you:



- talk to children on a frequent basis?
- respond to children's questions and requests?
- engage in meaningful and extended conversations with each child?
- read books aloud to children on a daily basis?
- ask children meaningful questions related to the books that you read?
- engage children in tasks and activities that offer children a real challenge?
- provide children with feedback that helps them think and expand their understanding of concepts covered in class?

5. Utilize an authoritative approach when guiding and disciplining children. When it comes to guiding children's behavior, the most effective style of interaction is an authoritative one that carefully balances control and strictness with warmth and flexibility. Children thrive when caregivers are firm and demanding, yet warm and caring. As you consider the manner in which you guide and discipline the children in your care, reflect on the following questions:

- Do you take into account the age, developmental stage, and temperament of each child?

- Do you communicate your expectations for children's behavior clearly and directly?
- Do you hold children responsible for their behavior?
- Do you implement consequences for negative behavior in a fair and consistent manner?
- Are you firm, yet loving toward the children in your care?

Of the many factors associated with quality child care, none are more important than the way in which you interact with the children in your program. When you interact with children in a warm, respectful, and encouraging manner, you establish an environment that is not only conducive to their present development, but will benefit them for many years to come.

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