

Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships

Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships with the important people in his or her life; both within and outside the family. Even the development of a child's brain architecture depends on the establishment of these relationships.

Growth-promoting relationships are based on the child's continuous give-and-take ("action and interaction") with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world can offer – experiences that are individualized to the child's unique personality style; that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness and that stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind.

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral. The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself.

Stated simply, relationships are the "active ingredients" of the environments' influence on healthy human development. They incorporate the qualities that best promote competence and well-being – individualized responsiveness, mutual action-and-interaction, and an emotional connection to another human being, be it a parent, peer, grandparent, aunt, uncle, neighbor, teacher, coach, or any other person who has an important impact on the child's early development. Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people.

In the words of the distinguished developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner: . . . *.in order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody's got to be crazy about that kid. That's number one. First, last, and always.*

Nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults are essential to healthy human development beginning from birth. Early, secure attachments contribute to the growth of a broad range of competencies, including a love of learning, a comfortable sense of oneself, positive social skills, multiple successful relationships at late ages, and a sophisticated understanding of emotions, commitment, morality, and other aspects of human relationships. Stated simply, establishing successful relationships with adults and other children provides a foundation of capacities that children will use for a lifetime.

The initial emotional duet created by mother and baby – with their complementary interweaving of smiles, gestures, and animated vocalizations in social play – builds and strengthens brain architecture and creates a relationship in which the baby’s experiences are affirmed and new abilities are nurtured. Children who have healthy relationship with their mothers are more likely to develop insights into other people’s feelings, needs, and thoughts, which form a foundation for cooperative interactions with others and an emerging conscience. Sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships also are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school, which illustrates the connection between social/emotional development and intellectual growth.

Young children also learn a great deal from each other. They learn how to share, to engage in reciprocal interaction (e.g., taking turns, giving and receiving), to take the needs and desires of others into account, and to manage their own impulses. Just being around other children, however, is not enough. The development of friendships is essential, as children learn and play more competently in the rapport created with friends rather than when they are dealing with the social challenges of interacting with casual acquaintances or unfamiliar peers.

The warmth and support of the caregiver in a child care setting also influence the development of important capabilities in children, including greater social competence, fewer behavior problems, and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills at school age. Young children benefit in these ways because of the secure relationship they develop in such settings, and also because of the ways in which the caregivers provide cognitively stimulating activities and support for developing positive relationships with other children.

Relationships are important to school adjustment. Children who develop warm, positive relationships with their kindergarten teachers are more excited about learning, more positive about coming to school, more self-confident, and achieve more in the classroom. Relationships with peers also are important. Children who experience greater peer acceptance and friendship tend to feel more positively about the school experience and perform better in the classroom.

Children have different ways of interacting with their peers. Some are gregarious, others are too shy to get involved (although they want to), some need time to “warm up,” and others are not as interested in being sociable. All of these variations fall within a normal range, and it is essential to differentiate among the many potential reasons (both biological and environmental) that a young child may have limited or difficult interactions with others. Playing cooperatively making friends, and sustaining friendships over time are not always easy. Any child with severely limited peer involvement is at considerable risk for significant adverse-developmental consequences.

Secure and stable relationships with caring adults assure that young children are adequately nourished: protected from dangerous illnesses, exposure to toxins, and hazards that can lead to preventable injuries; provided preventive health check-ups

protected from excessive stress; and afforded predictable daily routines that convey a sense of security. These influences contribute significantly to healthy brain development and depend upon the care and support provided by individuals in the community as well as in the family.

Young children are highly vulnerable emotionally to the adverse influences of parental mental health problems and family violence. One of the most extensively documented of these vulnerabilities is the negative impact of a mother's clinical depression on her young children's emotional development, social sensitivity, and concept of themselves, effects that have been demonstrated in both developmental research and studies of brain functioning. Young children who grow up in seriously troubled families, especially those who are vulnerable temperamentally, are prone to the development of behavioral disorders and conduct problems.

Animal studies have shown that the quality of the mother-infant relationship can influence gene expression in areas of the brain that regulate social and emotional function and can even lead to changes in brain structure. The nature of the relationship also can have long-term influences (into adulthood) on how the body copes with stress, both physically and emotionally.

Science indicates that the quality of early parent-child relationships can be strengthened, but successful interventions are more difficult to achieve when relationships are significantly troubled or disturbed. Preventive interventions also can produce a variety of positive outcomes.