



## Engaging in Meaningful Interactions

One sign of respectful and responsive relationships is that children and caregivers have a variety of meaningful interactions during their time together. When you have meaningful interactions with infants and toddlers you are:

- ◆ attentive;
- ◆ nurturing;
- ◆ warm;
- ◆ responsive;
- ◆ respectful;
- ◆ guiding, and
- ◆ comfortable following children's lead.

The following are some ways to engage in meaningful interactions with the infants and toddlers in your care.

### Self-Reflection

Taking a moment each day to think about how your communication and behavior affect the infants, toddlers, and adults you interact with is a powerful way to develop your awareness and responsiveness. Think about how your personal interactions might affect your relationships. For example, how do your tone of voice, facial expressions, and body posture communicate messages to the people around you?

### Take the Time to Connect with Children

- ◆ **Slow down.** Life is busy, and you have a lot to do each day. As a caregiver, you provide the extremely valuable service of caring for infants and toddlers. Instead of constantly thinking about what comes next, take a deep breath to help yourself consciously slow down and fully experience what is happening in the moment. For example, rather than rushing through feeding an infant, you might slow down, carefully watch the infant's cues, engage in back-and-forth communication, and feed at the infant's pace.
- ◆ **Be present.** Being present means taking a moment to clear your mind of all distractions so that your focus is only on connecting with children (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2011). With this focus, you can think carefully about responding to individual children's cues and needs in that moment.
- ◆ **Remember that being with children is the first priority.** Helping to support the growth and development of the children in your care is your greatest and most important role, placing all other responsibilities second. When you are faced with many tasks throughout the day, it might be easy to be distracted by doing laundry, cleaning cots, or completing paperwork. It is not easy to be present when other tasks need to be done. Reminding yourself that being present with children is the first and most important role that you play helps you prioritize time and the other tasks that need to be completed. Understandably, there are a lot of tasks to complete as an infant and toddler teacher in a child care center or family child care home. If it feels challenging to balance these tasks with being present with children, you may want to talk with your director or colleagues and develop approaches that will help you keep your focus on the children.



- ◆ **Take time to understand children's individual needs.** When working with infants and toddlers, it is important to get to know them as individuals who have unique interests, needs, and preferences. Working to understand each child's interests, needs, preferences, and culture builds a foundation for connecting with infants and toddlers in meaningful ways.
- ◆ **Support children's learning.** When you are in tune with children's individual needs, you are able to make responsive and sensitive decisions about the next step in each child's learning (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, 2011).

## Resources

[Baby Talks, Webinar 1—Babbling Babies: Early Learning Development](#) (2017) is an hour-long webinar that explores how social interactions support infants' and toddlers' language development and the strategies teachers can use in their interactions with children to support this development. This webinar is part of the BabyTalks webinar series that features current research about babies, developed by the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning.

[Early Essentials, Webisode 8—Responsive Interactions](#) is a 20-minute video that discusses the importance of having responsive back-and-forth interactions. This video is part of the Early Essentials series, which offers key messages and helpful resources to get staff started with the youngest children and their families. The video has a [Quick Start Guide](#) that includes teaching practices and resources.

[Early Essentials, Webisode 8—Practice Moment](#) is a 4-minute video that gives you the opportunity to identify instances of responsive interactions between a home visitor, parent, and toddler. This video has a [Quick Start Guide](#) with teaching strategies and resources.

## Reference

Dombro, A. L., Jablon, J., & Stetson, C. (2011). *Powerful interactions: How to connect with children to extend their learning*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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## Reflective Exercise: Your Interactions with an Infant or Toddler in Your Care

Think about an infant or toddler that you cared for today. Did you connect with this child in a way that was meaningful to you? How did you know it was meaningful? Often if a positive experience is meaningful, you remember it later, you have an emotional response, and you may have the desire to repeat the experience. If you are not sure, or if your answer is “no,” ask yourself the following: What can I do to make meaningful connections with this child tomorrow?

Carefully consider each of these questions and find ways to adjust your own practice to ensure you are doing what is most important each day—spending time building quality connections with children.

### What I Can Do to Support Meaningful Connections

- ◆ How can I slow down and make a conscious effort to be fully present when I interact with the child?
  - What can I do to clear my mind of all other distractions so that my focus is only on this child?
  
- ◆ How can I make time for cleaning and other housekeeping tasks when children are not present?
  - Are there tasks that I can do when children are asleep, before they arrive, or after they leave for the day?
  
  - How can I arrange with someone else to trade off certain tasks so that I can spend more time with this child?
  
  - Are there appropriate ways to include children in any of the tasks I need to do?



- ◆ How can I focus on the needs of this child as an individual and still consider the needs of the group?
- ◆ How can I slow down and make a conscious effort to be fully present with the parent(s) in order to learn more about them personally and about their child?

## My Plan to Support Meaningful Connections

Name two things you will do next week to be more attentive, aware, and responsive in your interactions with this child.

1.

2.

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