



Intentional Interactions

Relationships are the active ingredient for learning. Children's relationships with adults, peers, and the world around them are the foundation for all growth.

Overall development in the areas of social and emotional, cognitive, language, and physical growth is affected by the relationships children have with others in their lives. Children learn best when they experience positive relationships. They are more engaged and interested, more confident, and ready to learn when the relationships with adults in their lives are supportive, caring, and responsive.

To learn, children need opportunities to engage in meaningful activities that support development, such as play and interactions with adults and others. Interactions include how an educator approaches, responds to, communicates with, and supports children in all areas of learning. The way that early care and education professionals interact with children and provide instruction matters to children's growth and development. Every interaction between an ECE professional and children influences how children learn, grow, and feel about themselves. Positive, intentional, and reciprocal (back and forth) interactions contribute to best outcomes for children. Children are happier, healthier, more confident, and excited to learn when adults nurture relationships and interactions.



Children need stimulating and focused interactions to learn. Quality interactions happen when teachers intentionally plan and respond thoughtfully to children. Research finds that boosting children's thinking skills through quality, intentional interactions is critical to children's learning.

Intentional interactions happen when a teacher carefully thinks about how she approaches and responds to children.

continued...

Emotionally supportive interactions help children develop a strong sense of well-being and security. For example, an ECE professional talks with a three-year-old child and says, “I know that it’s hard to wait for a turn. How about if you, John, and I play a game while you wait for your turn on the swings?”

Responsive interactions are ways to respond and communicate with children that meet their needs in the moment. For example, a two year old feels sad that a parent is leaving at morning drop-off time. The ECE professional gives the child a hug, acknowledges the child’s feelings, and then gets the child involved in an activity the child enjoys.

ECE professionals support children’s development when they have reciprocal, or back and forth, interactions and conversations with children throughout the day. In addition, they support development when they provide stimulating learning experiences for children. For example, with infants and toddlers, the caregiver responds to the infant’s coos by talking with the infant in a back and forth exchange.

As children grow and become more verbal, reciprocal interactions include the child and teacher as partners. Together, they talk, share, listen, and learn. Reciprocal interactions provide a base to build positive teacher-child relationships. These interactions become a platform to boost language, and to help children connect to new ideas and develop new skills.

Through adult-child interactions, adults engage and interact, and support learning. This means that ECE professionals think carefully about how they intentionally interact with children to boost thinking skills and nurture positive learning experiences. The ECE professional’s intentionality is a key factor in providing quality interactions for children.



References

- Burchinal, M. 2017. “Measuring Early Care and Education Quality.” *Child Development Perspectives*. doi: 10.1111/cdep.12260
- Hamre, Bridget, Bridget Hatfield, Robert Pianta, and Faiza Jamil. 2014. “Evidence for General and Domain-Specific Elements of Teacher–Child Interactions: Associations With Preschool Children’s Development.” *Child Development* 85(3): 1257–1274.
- Pianta, Robert C., ed. 2012. *Handbook of Early Childhood Education*. Guilford Press.