Interactions matter: What research says and what you can do!

“Research indicates the ways teachers interact with children is crucial in determining how children develop over time.” (Curby and Brock 2013)

Responsive, warm and supportive interactions between caregivers and children build the foundation for learning. Interactions include how an educator approaches, responds to, communicates with, and supports children in all domains.

All interactions an educator has with children can influence 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.

The research behind quality interactions

Research shows the importance of stimulating and focused interactions between caregivers and children starting in infancy. Researchers share that boosting children’s thinking skills and knowledge through intentional, emotionally supportive, responsive interactions, and instruction, is critical to children’s learning.

“Children benefit most when teachers engage in stimulating interactions that support learning and are emotionally supportive. Interactions that help children acquire new knowledge and skills provide input to children, elicit verbal responses and reactions from them, and foster engagement in and enjoyment of learning.” (Yoshikawa et al. 2013)

Early care and education (ECE) professionals support children’s development when they consistently participate in and initiate reciprocal conversations with children throughout the day, and provide stimulating learning experiences. Engaged, interested children who interact with the world around them are more likely to gain skills, and to do better as they enter school.
Relationships are the foundation for learning

Research in early childhood education stresses the importance of building positive teacher-child relationships in a sensitive and responsive way. Sensitive and responsive caregivers offer children positive support consistently throughout the day. They give children multiple opportunities to learn and explore in a predictable, engaging and stimulating environment.

Sensitive and responsive caregivers acknowledge children’s individual differences, and respond to children quickly and in a way that matches their needs. For example, if a child feels happy because she finishes a block tower, the teacher responds to the child in a way that shares that happiness and enthusiasm. If a child becomes frustrated with putting a block tower together, the teacher responds to the child in a calming way, in order to help the child calm down. When children feel cared for, safe, and secure they are better able to interact with others, engage in their world, and learn.

Effective strategies promote meaningful interactions

The ability to nurture relationships and interactions is one of the most valuable skills an ECE professional can develop. What educators can do:

Use sensitive and responsive caregiving

- Include nonverbal gestures, such as a warm smile, a wave hello, or a reassuring touch, and eye contact that convey, “You are welcome here.”
- Use a calm tone of voice and body language that welcomes the child. This is important for all children, but particularly important to children who may not speak the language of the program, or to children with developmental delays.
- Recognize children’s signals, cues, and unique temperaments, as well as their likes and dislikes. Use that information to inform how to respond collectively to the group and to each individual child.

Putting it all together...

Lilith walks into the classroom. Her teacher, on the other side of the room, smiles and waves hello (uses nonverbal gestures that welcome and reassure). Her teacher recognizes a distressed look on Lilith’s face. Knowing that Lilith likes to paint, she walks over and bends down to her eye level and asks, “Hi Lilith. Would you like to help mix the paints to put out at the painting easel?” (recognizes signals, knows likes, uses calm tone). Lilith nods her head yes. The teacher uses information that she knows about Lilith to inform how she sensitively interacts with Lilith.
Use rich language

• Talk with children to support language skill development. Have reciprocal, or back and forth, conversations with children about things that interest them in order to keep them engaged and to provide learning opportunities.

• Introduce new vocabulary during conversations, and use it throughout the day. Children who build language skills are better able to express themselves and connect with others.

• Expand on what children say to stimulate children’s thinking and provide a platform for continuing conversation.

• Ask open-ended questions to support children’s thinking and comprehension skills.

Putting it all together…

A preschooler says, “The brontosaurus is eating.” (continue talking about the brontosaurus since the topic is interesting to the child). The teacher responds, “That brontosaurus is chewing on green leaves.” (expands on what the child says to keep the conversation going) “What do you think he’ll do next?” (asks an open-ended question to encourage the child’s thinking)

Spark engagement and joy in learning

• Follow children’s leads and choose phrases that build on what the children wonder about and want to investigate.

• Use prompts that help children connect to developmental skills they are working towards. Stretch the experience and encourage children to think more as they experiment. Notice, name, and highlight what you notice.

Putting it all together….

“Ethan, I heard you telling Conjay about the computer game you created. You were a good friend to share your ideas with Conjay. Your game sounds so fun and interesting! I noticed you used lots of drawings of owls, both tiny drawings and very large drawings, and I wondered how you created them. Can you tell us more about your owl drawings and computer game?”

References


Any setting that intends to advance development and learning outcomes for children and youth must carefully craft the nature of experience it provides…” (Pianta, Hamre, and Allen 2012)