

# Caregiver sensitivity: The capacity to recognize and respond to children's needs

Which of the following fits you? *Life is hard!* Or *Life is good!* If you are like most, it is a little of both. As adults, we are responsible for our own happiness and success. However, for children, the choice is not always up to them.

**Children have far less control over what happens to them. Parents and other caregivers are far more responsible for what actually happens to children than children are themselves.** — Alison Gopnik, 2009

Caregiver sensitivity helps children journey toward the “Life is good” path. Caregiver sensitivity is important to all children, but particularly for those who may be struggling to find stability or experiencing difficult transitions. For example, a military connected child may be facing a family member’s deployment or a child may have a parent who is ill, injured, or absent.

## Defining caregiver sensitivity

Early attachment theorists define caregiver sensitivity as the caregiver’s ability to “be aware of the child’s signals and to evaluate and respond to them in a meaningful, accurate, and appropriate way” (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1974; Journal of European Psychology Students, 2010). Much of the research on caregiver sensitivity focuses on the maternal (mother/child) caregiving. The truth is, caregiver sensitivity benefits all who are vital caregivers; fathers, grandparents, teachers, family child care providers, preschool teachers, relatives, foster parents, etc.



### Think About It:

- What does caregiver sensitivity mean to you?
- How would you describe this to a co-worker?
- What actions and intentions show caregiver sensitivity?

From birth, children send signals to their primary caregiver, such as the infant who stretches and arches his back or cries when hungry. It is how these signals are received and responded to that shape pathways for how the child will in turn react, think, and behave. Caregivers who are sensitive and consistently respond to children set a good foundation.

Concurrent studies of child-caregiver attachment in child care find that caregivers who are rated as more sensitive and observed in more positive interaction with children are associated with children with greater attachment security. (Howes, Galinsky, and Kontos 1998)

Caregiver sensitivity refers to the responsive, sensitive manner of caring; how you react to children’s

cues and respond. A sensitive caregiver recognizes children’s unique temperaments, as well as their likes and dislikes, and reflects on these traits while thinking of how to respond to children. For example, when four-year old Tatia enters preschool, she does not like a lot of attention drawn to her; she is cautious to enter and unsure of leaving her grandmother. Her teacher has planned to greet her by offering a warm smile, and a wave, but decides not to overwhelm her with attention that she is not ready for. She has encouraged Tatia’s grandmother to build a goodbye routine and gives the two their goodbye time before personally greeting Tatia. She also made sure there were materials to choose from that Tatia likes, such as books and play dough. This teacher is attuned to Tatia’s needs and temperament.

## Developing caregiver sensitivity

Being a sensitive caregiver covers a vast range of skills, behaviors, and intellectual understandings.

Build caregiver sensitivity - try the following:

- **Think kinship** – The heart of sensitive caregiving is in the emotional bond between caregiver and child. Kindness, tenderness, and connectedness go a long way in developing kinship. The more time people spend together in happy, interactive experiences, the more affinity they will have for each other.
- **Replace negative affect with positive affect** – When children are responded to with affection and support, particularly in times of stress, they are better able to tolerate negative emotions – the negative affect is replaced with positive affect.
- **Help children tell their inner stories** – Help children identify and express feelings by reading stories, singing songs, and using reflection. Carefully read children's displays of emotion (and behavior) and reflect it back in warm, sensitive conversations.
- **Use non-verbal gestures** – Offer a warm smile, a loving look, a reassuring touch, and eye contact. Using gestures in combination with speech allow people to communicate more than with words alone and help convey abstract ideas. Gestures, along with verbal support, help in regulating emotion and regulating one's self.

Learn More – Preview the module *Giving your Best: Making Secure Attachments* from Penn State Better Kid Care.



### References:

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