

FOCUS

on
Early Childhood
Mental Health

helping children soar



PROJECT LAUNCH

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The Impact of Relationships

Developmental Psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner is frequently quoted for his idea that "every kid needs at least one adult who is crazy about him or her". Over 60 years later, this statement still holds true and has been supported through research on the impact of relationships during the early childhood years and beyond. While the primary relationship for infants and young children is the parent/child relationship, relationships with other caregivers also have an impact on a child's development and mental health.

What we know:

- Healthy brain architecture depends on a sturdy foundation built through stable, responsive relationships with caring adults.
- Young children grow and develop through and within their relationships with others.
- Relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral.
- Relationships engage children in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people.
- When relationships are reliably responsive and supportive, they can actually buffer young children from the adverse effects of other stressors that may be present.

What we can do:

- Build relationships through bonding with and nurturing a child; having a loving, reciprocal caregiver-child relationship; setting healthy boundaries.
- Remember each moment that adults and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships.
- Use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration each child's differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities.
- Use some of these relationship building strategies:
 - Engage in one-to-one interactions with children
 - Follow the child's lead and interest during play
 - Help children understand expectations in their environment
 - Acknowledge children for their accomplishments and effort
 - Use a pleasant, calm voice and simple language

Resources

- **Related FOCUS on ECMH factsheets: "Building Resilience in Young Children", "The Importance of Attachment",**
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu2
- Brendtro, L.K. (2006). The vision of Urie Bronfenbrenner: adults who are crazy about kids. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 15(3), 162-166.
- Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), WWB #12: Building Teacher-Child Relationships; http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/what_works.html
- PA ECMH Consultation Program; http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_ECMH

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