

# Little Hands, Little Feet, Little Moments:

## Effective Classroom Practices to Create Impactful Caregiver Interactions

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ly significant for children with special needs (Shire, Gulsrud, & Kasari, 2016; Test, Cunningham, & Lee, 2010). These relationships are bidirectional, as the ways caregivers respond to the child change as a child grows from an infant through the preschool years, and how the child responds to caregivers and their developmental needs can influence the caregiver's response.

An increase in intentionality on behalf of the caregiver to cue into a child's non-verbal and verbal communication is important. In addition, attempting and responding accurately to the situation and the child's emotional state is

especially important when a child's communication development may be atypical due to a delay. (Shire et al., 2016) Caregivers can use responsive interactions, which means caregivers are tuned into the child and join in the play, communications, and actions in the present moment to provide individualized support to promote social and emotional competence (Leifield & Sanders, 2007). Responsive interactions during play and daily activities are essential for development as children acquire and apply new information through them (Landry et al., 2012).

*"Ring, ring. Ring, ring," Pamela, a 3-year-old, says as she picks up the toy telephone.*

*"Hello?" asks Frank, a 2-year-old, who picks up a block and puts it to his ear.*

*"Hello, who is on the phone?" says Justina, Pamela and Frank's caregiver.*

*"Heyo! It's me Pama." Pamela says.*

*"Me too. I Frank!"*

*"Hello, Pamela and Frank. I am so glad we could be on the phone together. It makes me happy."*

Talking on the telephone is a common form of play in early childhood that builds children's social and emotional capacities. Since social and emotional development in early childhood is so significant for success later in life and the foundation of the capacity for learning, it is essential for caregivers to build these capacities in young children through everyday moments (Russell, Lee, Spieker, & Oxford, 2016; Turculet & Tulbure, 2014).

Caregivers who provide the child with choices, discuss the child's experiences, and are sensitive to the child's emotional states promote the development of empathy and social and emotional competence (Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). Caregivers who respond to the child's actions and emotions and talk about those of others provide those learning opportunities, which is especial-

### Importance of Consistent Routines: Infants

*Chris picks up Stephanie, a 10-month-old child in his class, and sits in the rocking chair.*

*Chris says, "Stephanie, we ate lunch, washed your face, and brushed your tooth. Now, it is time to read one book and lay down and take a nap. Which book should we read today? How about this one? I'll read the story and you can turn the pages!"*

*Chris then starts reading Mama, Do You Love Me by Barbara Joosse. With each page he reads, he highlights the emotions in the story by emphasizing the different emotional tones. Stephanie slaps the pages of the book as they read. Each time, Chris comments on the action. "Yes, I see the mom in her blue kuspuk. You are also wearing blue. See, you have blue dots on your shirt here and here."*

## Developing and maintaining schedules and routines build predictability and security

Developing and maintaining schedules and routines in early childhood is an essential way for caregivers to build predictability and security in infancy. These social and emotional developmental foundations help infants to know what to expect and what is expected of them. In the example, Chris is supporting Stephanie's social and emotional skill development in multiple ways including: having a predictable lunch and nap routine; discussing the routine with Stephanie to promote understanding; discussing emotion words and applications to real world situations; helping Stephanie to develop self-regulation skills through a calm, nurturing environment; promoting shared attention by reading together; and when Chris puts words to Stephanie's non-verbal communications, he is engaging in contingent responding (Landry et al., 2012). In these little moments, a caregiver helps build a strong attachment and teaches the child that she is important, valued, and worthy of love (Turculet & Tulbure, 2014).

In infancy, when a caregiver engages with the child in play without interruption, he can cue into the child's intentions, communications, and emotional state to provide context, vocabulary, and new understanding (Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2017). Talking with the infant about her schedule and routine engages the child in interactive communication, "First we will get the diaper and wipes, then we will change your diaper." Preparing an infant for what is going to happen to him, "I am going to pick you up now," also furthers this development.

Labeling and identifying an infant's feelings, as she is experiencing them, is another way to promote social and emotional skill development. For example, "I know you are frustrated, you are having to wait for the bottle to warm up, and you are hungry now. Let's sing a song while we wait."

### Utilization of Intentional Communication

Other ways caregivers can engage infants is by having discussions about what the infant is experiencing through his senses. Conversations based on what the infant is hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching puts experiences into context. Caregivers can build these conversations into play times, meal times, bath time, during outside play or on walks, when running errands, and when meeting new people or in new situations. Those little moments in the daily schedule and routines make



long-lasting impacts on infants (Russell et al., 2016).

Caregivers can increase their mindfulness of children's communication attempts when a cognitive, language, or physical delay prevents a child from engaging in social interactions or normative communications. Through play and interaction, subtle communications and gestures become easier to interpret and develop greater meaning between both the caregiver and the child (Fusaro, Vallotton, & Harris, 2014; Vallotton, 2012). As infants grow into toddlers, these communications expand as toddlers begin to more actively explore their environments and demonstrate increased inquisitiveness about the world around them.

### Naturally Occurring Extended Conversations: Toddlers

*Henry, a 2-year-old, and his teacher, Samuel, are walking around the playground.*

*Henry says "ee". Samuel replies, "Yes, Henry, that is a tree. A tall, tall tree. Let's sing our tree song! Are you ready?" "Ye" says Henry. "Okay, one tall, two tall, three tall pine trees. Four tall, five tall, six tall pine trees. Seven tall, eight tall, nine tall pine trees. Ten tall pine trees along the side of the road. Wow! Ten tall pine trees!" sang Samuel and Henry. Henry who is still clapping, says, "ee" Samuel replies, "Oh. Now you want to sing about you?" "Ye" says Henry.*

Henry and his teacher walking around the playground illustrates a common occurrence for caregiver-child interactions as many teachers and children spend a lot of time outside. Engaging children in conversations about what they are seeing is a natural way to make those moments count. Samuel and Henry turn what they are seeing into a song. Using the same basic structure

for the song, Samuel is reinforcing emotions, actions related to emotions, and their emotional states.

As Samuel and Henry sing and engage in play together, they are increasing their emotional competence, being creative, building vocabulary, and generally having fun. Exploring social and emotional skills through songs helps toddlers to examine a wide variety of prosocial actions, feelings, and ideas.

### Responsivity in Playful Interactions

Progressing from peek-a-boo in infancy and early toddlerhood, many older toddlers enjoy playing hide-and-seek with themselves and objects. This type of play builds social and emotional skills, such as following directions, confidence, managing emotions (excitement), and persistence at tasks. A toddler who hides her shoes around the house or repeatedly hides behind the shower curtain is setting the stage for playful interactions. She may find the situation amusing as she watches the caregiver's reaction. When caregivers respond to the "game" with a playful approach, eager toddlers are often quick to reveal their secrets and chuckle with delight.

Cleaning up and getting dressed are also times where caregivers can support these games. Cleaning up with a timer set, to see if the clean-up can occur faster than the timer goes off, is a way to make the routine task more engaging. While getting dressed the caregiver can make false statements about the clothing, such as, "This is a shirt. It goes on our feet." These statements are meant to be playful and elicit involvement in getting dressed, engagement with the caregiver, and reinforce the child's knowledge.

Toddlers seek autonomy yet need intensive emotional supports from their caregivers. Caregivers are their models for how to handle their range of emotions and help to lay the social and emotional foundations for managing emotions. Toddlers need repeated practice to lay the foundation, which is why turning everyday tasks, requests, schedule, and routines into fun and engaging moments, as opposed to arduous chores, is crucial. Responsive interactions through play further this, as the caregiver builds upon the child's prior knowledge and promotes different types of learning and engagement (Marjanovic-Umek & Fekonja-Peklaj, 2017). Additionally, children are susceptible to playing in different ways, based on their gender, and caregiver responses often adjust to meet the actions of the child (Marjanovic-Umek & Fekonja-Peklaj, 2017).

## Curiosity and Interactions: Preschoolers

*Tejas, a 4-year-old, is walking on a trail with his teacher, Peta. As they walk across the bridge, Tejas stops, points to a spider web, and says, "Look, a spider web." His teacher says, "Keep walking, we have to keep up with our friends." Tejas immediately falls to the ground, crying and yelling, "No!" This causes his glasses to fall off and land near the edge of the bridge. Peta stops, takes a deep breath, squats down to Tejas's level and says, "Tejas, you wanted to stop and look at the spider web, and I did not. You didn't like it when I told you to keep going. Would you like to stop and look at the web together?" Tejas, through his sobs, says, "Y-e-s."*

*Peta hands him his glasses and says, "Let's take three deep breaths together, then we can look."*

The story of Tejas helps to illustrate common interactions between caregivers and children. The child is curious and wants to explore something and create his own agenda, which conflicts with the agenda that the adult has set forth. Some situations do not allow for the adult to stop and meet the child at his level; however, many times a caregiver can refocus her attention to the awe-inspiring, captivating situation the child is drawn to. In those little moments, caregivers may be role-modeling patience, self-regulation, tuning in (paying attention), and shared interest, all things caregivers often expect of children.

Role modeling and engaging preschoolers in conversations about what they are naturally curious about helps children practice many social and emotional skills. Through back-and-forth reciprocal interactions, deep breathing, and joint engagement, Tejas worked on relating with others, self-regulation, and sustained attention skills. Peta even tied the conversation back to other types of knowledge to expand his learning.

### Social Emotional Supports Through Literacy

Storytelling is a great way for preschoolers and caregivers to engage in social and emotional conversation. When a caregiver reads books with the child, the caregiver can place focus on both the social and emotional themes of a book as well as the plot and additional pre-reading skill development (Russell et al., 2016). A caregiver can also encourage the child to "write" her own stories and/or draw pictures to promote conversation regarding problem-solving such as drawing an alternate way to solve a problem from a book or a better way to handle a prior conflict with a peer. A caregiver can also describe a make-believe situation where there is a real-life problem, and the child can dictate a story to describe how the situation can be resolved using prosocial techniques. When caregivers and children complete these literacy events together, caregivers are also promoting sustained attention. Throughout the process, a caregiver can reflect on the child's ideas and, as appropriate, provide ideas and suggestions for handling the problem in a new way.

Many times, children receive consequences such as redirection, time away from a friend or item, loss of a privilege, etc. when they display an inappropriate social emotional skill like pushing a child who is first in line, snatching a toy from another child, or breaking crayons when angry. The problem-solving ideas previously mentioned are meaningful because they require children to apply knowledge of the skill, practice the skill, to "try again," and fill the child's problem-solving tool bucket with additional ways future problems can be handled.

### Fostering Development Through Routines

When involved in everyday routines, preschoolers expand their social and emotional competencies. For example, caregivers can allow preschoolers to make choices of which vegetable they are going to have for dinner or have them help with meal preparations. Caregivers support sustained interaction, by asking questions, having conversations about the cooking process, and



providing directions. Children practice following directions when they use a recipe to guide the cooking process. Obvious math and science principles are also learned as preschoolers engage in cooking, but one of the biggest emotional gains occurs as they participate in repeated interactions that allow for sustained attention on completing multi-step tasks. The repeated interactions also build competence and confidence as the children create and share their creations.

Caregiver approaches for responsive interactions with preschool-age children can include an emphasis on sustained interactions, emotion recognition, scaffolding, autonomy, and problem-solving. These types of interactions contribute to the development of self-regulation and provide the foundation for learning (Russell et al., 2016).

## Conclusion

Responsive interactions support children's social and emotional development by providing individualized focus and support to children as they grow and develop. Caregivers can increase their responsive interactions by setting aside time for uninterrupted play and engagement in routines, especially when it comes to individual use of electronics (Reed et al., 2017). Interactions that follow the child's lead and outline the child's thought process, rather than interjecting the caregiver's intentions and disrupting the flow, maximize learning opportunities.

Infants are wired to cue into facial expressions of their caregivers and benefit from nurturing and consistent interactions that recognize the infant's emotional state, promote regulation, and are informative. Toddlers are growing more autonomous but still require intensive supports in managing and learning about their emotions. Caregivers can hold firm limits, set expectations, recognize and label emotions, and address the meaning beneath behaviors, rather than solely focusing on the behaviors observed. Caregivers support preschoolers by assigning responsibility in daily activities, talking through common situations and solutions during play, continuing to recognize and label emotions, and promoting problem solving.

When focusing on meeting the individualized needs of families, teachers and early interventionists can support caregivers in a variety of ways. Caregivers of children with developmental delays often adapt their interactions and play styles to meet the child's needs; however, support may be needed in understanding the meaning of non-verbal communications and actions of a child who has a special need (Childress, 2011; Cress, Grabast & Jerke, 2013). If a manifestation of a special need makes it difficult for a child to communicate in typical ways, intervention strategies that support connection and reinforce prosocial interactions can be utilized (Cress et al., 2013).

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