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Emotional and social development during the early childhood years - helping teachers support strong emotional foundations and successful social relationships

Kay M. Albrecht
President, Innovations in ECE Press, Texas USA

Jennifer C. Fiechtner
Editor in Chief, Innovations in ECE Press, Texas USA

Michelle M. Forrester
Clinical Psychologist, Texas USA

This article discusses some of the developments of neuroscience research over the past 10 years in relation to emotional and social development of young children. Based on recent research on the topic and a synthesis by the authors of research findings into action based, applied teaching techniques, seven strategies are suggested to allow early childhood teachers to improve their support of the emotional and social development of children in their centre in everyday practice.

Introduction

No one in early childhood education will be surprised to hear that there have been important new developments in neuroscience over the last 10 years, or that these findings impact our work with young children. The purpose of this article is to apply neuroscience and child development research to what early childhood teachers *do* with children to support emotional and social development. This knowledge informs the work of early childhood teachers, and is briefly summarised here, highlighting some of the most important findings related to emotional and social development in children under eight.

The process of brain development is viewed as "nature dancing with nurture over time" (Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). Rapid development begins prenatally and continues through early childhood before it then decreases as children enter middle childhood. Although a child's genetic makeup has dramatic influence early in the developmental process, it is the interaction between genes and experiences that shape the developing brain. During this period, severe stress factors, such as extreme poverty, abuse or neglect, and illness or injuries can cause significant interruptions of the work of building the brain (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

An intense and sustained back and forth process between children and the important adults in their lives, called serve and return interaction, is the predominant way brain growth is supported during the early childhood period (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Further, specialised brain cells in

children's brains, called mirror neurons, are activated both when children observe others in action and when children perform similar actions (Stamm, 2016). An understanding of mirror neurons and how they function supports the idea that imitation is an important learning strategy for young children.

There is also a growing understanding of the interconnected roots of lifelong health, learning, and behaviour. Many benefits may accrue to children throughout their lifetimes as a result of positive early childhood experiences with caring adults. This presents a unique opportunity to widen the view of who can impact children positively to include not only families and early childhood teachers, but also medical practitioners, and other adults who interact with children in their communities (Shonkoff, et al, 2011). There are strong connections between emotional wellbeing, social competence, and cognitive abilities in early childhood. These intricate connections not only influence future emotional and social development but also form the foundation of human development, influencing health, educational outcomes, employment stability, educational attainment, and successful social integration (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011).

Questions that arise in this context for early childhood practitioners would be: What does this information mean? How does it apply to teachers of young children? Findings from research related to emotional and social development during the early childhood period confirm that the adults who teach young children have unique opportunities to support emotional and social development, simply by the way they interact with them (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014). But how can one be sure that one's interactions with children have a positive impact on their emotional and social development? The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) provides guidance with this simple statement: "All early childhood programs … must balance their focus on cognition and literacy skills with *significant* attention to emotional and social development" (p. 4, emphasis added).

A question that arises following this statement is: What does this attention look like? One answer could be that emotional and social development is best supported by early childhood teachers when they offer emotional and social curriculum with the same level of intensity, thoughtfulness, and time as they do to literacy, technology, and mathematics curriculum.

Based on research undertaken over the last years, this article suggests seven teaching strategies to assist teachers in building relationships with young children in ways that are likely to support emerging emotional and social development. The strategies, which have been developed in a Northern American setting but might be of interest for practitioners in other national and cultural contexts as well, begin with taking a careful look at our own core capabilities (Center on the Developing Child, 2016), and move on to the action part of supporting young children's emotional and social development in your classroom. We also offer a series of vignettes to help illustrate what these strategies might look like in action.

> *Tasha is an early childhood teacher in charge of a classroom of pre-k children. She has several years of experience. Lately, her classroom has not been running as smoothly as it has in the past, and she's looking for new strategies to try. Based on her reading about emotional and social development, she has decided to focus her attention on relationship building and connection with the children in her classroom. She believes*

that if she can help children to manage better emotionally and re-establish a peaceful classroom environment, children will be more successful in other aspects of their learning.

Strategy 1: Be aware of one's own emotional health, core capabilities, and threats to them

The first strategy we want to propose is to be aware of your own emotional health and how to assess the core capabilities that allow you to be able to support children's emotional and social development. Core capabilities include:

> being able to focus, plan ahead, avoid distractions, and shift behaviour according to differing demands and the rules of work and family. We need to remember important information and follow multiple-step processes or instructions. We need to be able to stop ourselves from acting impulsively and persist in tedious tasks in order to achieve long-term goals. … We know from science that it is never too late to help adults build up their core capacities and that we can have life-long intergenerational impact if adults support these skills in children. (Center on the Developing Child, 2016, pp. 3-4)

Most teachers of young children will find that these core capabilities resonate with them. We also know that these capabilities can be compromised by a whole host of human experiences, particularly when adversity or challenging circumstances were present during childhood or are present in our adult lives. External factors, such as life stress, work environment, relationship difficulties, family moves, or financial challenges may also have an influence on the strength of core capabilities.

A good place to start is to reflect on your core capabilities. Consider your own family history, identifying those who have influenced your emotional and social development in the past. As a reflective activity, we suggest to consider the family diamond in Fig.1 to help think about who these influencers might have been for oneself, including people who had very positive influences on one's own emotional and social development as well as others who may not have been as positive.

> *Tasha has been under a great deal of stress outside of school lately. Her spouse started a new job, and his responsibilities keep him away from home in the evenings several days a week. She has less help managing dinner and bath time with her own young children, and her one-year-old has been waking at night due to the combination of teething and the transition at home. She has less time to prepare for the next day at school, and she's not getting as much sleep as she needs, leaving her frazzled and unprepared more often than she'd like.*

> *While Tasha has managed similar challenges in the past, this particular set of circumstances is causing her a good deal of difficulty. With some introspection, she realises how much the situation reminds her of her own childhood, when her mother was often alone, overworked, and unsupported. During that time, many of the household duties fell to Tasha, even though she was quite young to be responsible for them.*

Family Diamond

Me

Key
- Me
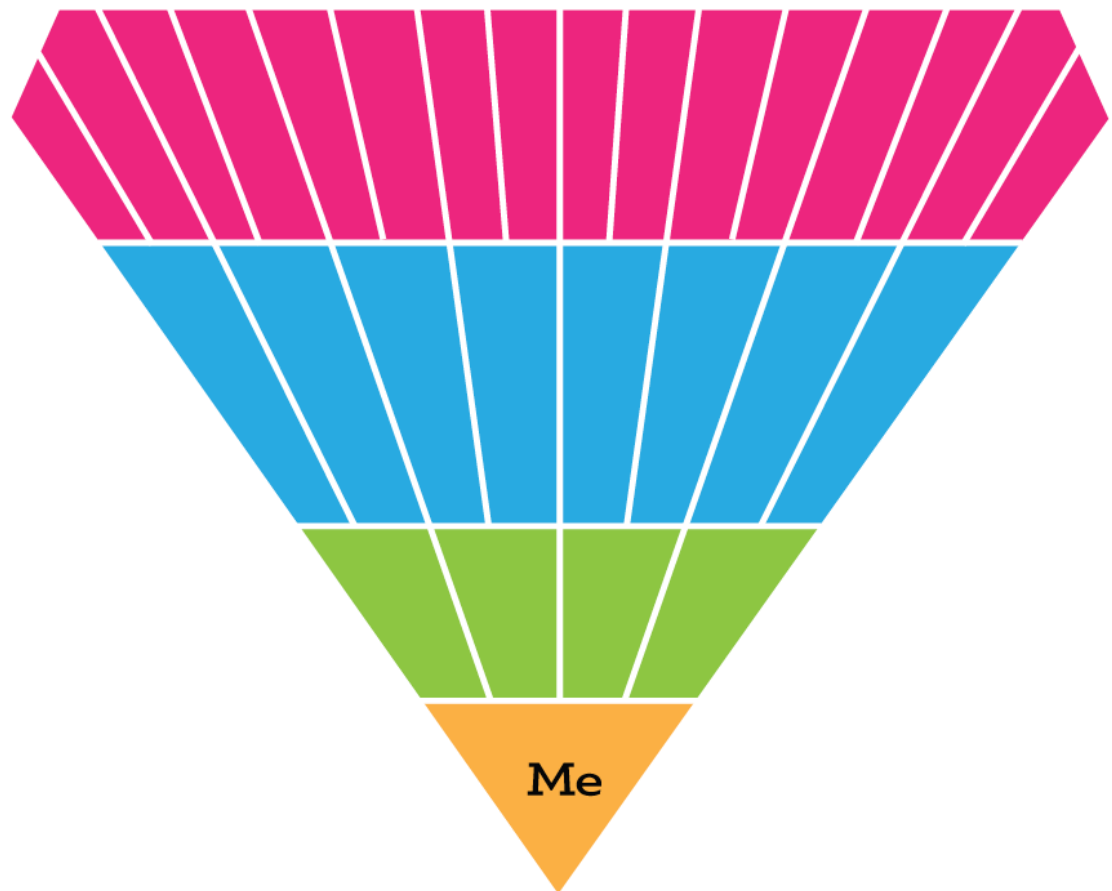- In my household
- Close to me
- Other important people

Figure 1. Family Diamond

Excerpted from Forrester, M.M, & Albrecht, K.M. (2014). *Social emotional tools for life: An early childhood teacher's guide to strong emotional foundations and successful social relationships.* Houston, TX: Innovations in ECE Press. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

When interacting with young children, we draw upon these early relationships and experiences. Being aware of those with whom one had positive relationships will likely help to draw on positive emotional experiences as we help young children develop emotionally and socially. Insight into relationships that may have been less positive, or even had negative influences on our emotional development, can be helpful to be aware of, when we are trying to support children's emotional development without the benefit of previous experiences of our own on which to base teaching decisions. Such insight can lead us to continue to learn about the capabilities one feels that could be strengthened through supportive coaching and practice (Center on the Developing Child, 2016)

> *As Tasha considers how stress at home may be impacting her teaching, she makes a list of factors that make doing her job harder, and starts brainstorming ways to mitigate them. She talks to her husband about her concerns about her effectiveness at work. He offers to take over some household tasks (like grocery shopping, bath time, and some of the laundry). They also decide on a night-time schedule that will allow them to take turns getting up with the baby, so neither of them gets too exhausted as they wait for his night-waking phase to pass. She reaches out to her sister, who helps her talk about some of the sadness and worry she experienced during her early years when resources in their family were so scarce. Receiving emotional support from her spouse and her sister, along with knowing she'll be able to get more rest and have less on her plate, helps Tasha to go into her upcoming work week feeling calmer and more prepared.*

Strategy 2: Provide immediate, caring responses to distress

Neuroscience has explained some of the impact stress can have on children's developing minds. It suggests, children experience different kinds of stress - some of which threatens neurological, emotional, and social development. It has also helped child development scientists hone in on the adult behaviours that mediate stress, regardless of its severity.

The first kind of stress that has been identified is **positive stress -** the kind of stress that causes brief increases in heart rates and slight increases in stress hormones in the body (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). A traveling parent, frustration at having to comply with adult requests when the child does not want to, new toys that are hard to figure out, or confusing experiences in the social world (such as trying to be a friend), are examples.

Tolerable stress is stress caused by serious yet temporary stress responses that are quickly tempered by positive, supportive relationships. Serious illnesses in the family, parental divorce, a natural disaster, or hospitalisation are all examples and the length of time of this level of stress is a key factor (O'Neil, 2015).

Toxic stress is the prolonged activation of stress response systems that is not mediated by protective relationships. This kind of stress can disrupt the development of brain architecture, the development of other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years. Example of experiences that fall under this level of stress include family violence that is witnessed by the child or involves the child, abusive adult

behaviour that threatens a child's feelings of safety and security, and long term malnutrition (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). The take away from these findings is that caring adults can mediate stress when they provide caring responses to distress.

> *In a pre-K classroom, Tasha knows a fair amount of conflict and emotional outbursts are to be expected, but lately, it feels like someone is always upset. In the past few weeks, she has felt less patient and more drained by the emotional demands of the children in her classroom. As she begins refocusing on maintaining an emotionally supportive classroom, she resolves to direct her energy more specifically towards attending right away to children in distress. She thinks that if she can start to meet children's needs more immediately, she can help them develop the resilience they need to learn to manage on their own with her support.*

Sometimes it is easy to know how to respond to distress, as it can be highly visible in group settings. Children cry, yell, scream, and pull on teacher's hands, and so forth, to tell the teacher that they need help. However, stress can also be invisible, particular when the stress is induced by anxiety or fear. Regardless of the nature of the stress or the intensity of the distress, prompt and compassionate responses by a familiar, caring adult is what is needed (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

Prompt response to distress can build resilience in young children as they become confident that their calls for help receive attention and response. This resilience allows children to access their emotional and social skills and can ameliorate the long term effects of stress (Wright, 2013). When children are aware of teachers' support and know that they will help them when they need them, children are likely to be able to access and build their own coping strategies.

> *Tasha has an opportunity to try this strategy out almost immediately on Monday morning. Oscar is usually happy to come to school, but since the birth of his new sister, he has been more anxious and less flexible to classroom challenges. This morning, his father has to peel a wailing Oscar off his leg as he leaves. Tasha asks her assistant to take over greeting the other parents and children as they arrive, and sits down on the floor next to Oscar, who is sobbing.*
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> *She rubs his back gently, saying softly, "You look very sad that Papa had to go to work this morning! You wanted to stay with him! I will stay with you while you're feeling sad. You can sit in my lap if you think that would help, or I can just sit next to you." Oscar climbs in her lap. Fairly quickly, his sobs turn to sniffling, and he begins to look around. She tells him, "When you're ready, I think Kai might like to show you the book he's looking at."*
>
> *In a couple of minutes, Oscar joins his friend in the cozy corner. Throughout the day, he returns to Tasha for a few extra hugs and to reconnect and get additional reassurance. By the end of the day, he is playing happily, and is excited to see his father when he arrives to pick him up.*

Strategy 3. Spend your time with children, individually, or in small groups, specifically for the purpose of developing your relationship and emotional connection with each child

This strategy is inspired by and adapted from an idea called *Floortime* (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006), initially used in therapeutic settings by psychiatrists, psychologists, and play therapists. This relationship building strategy has been around since the late 1990's and its goal is to support developmental growth through relationship building. In educational settings, this time together gives teachers an opportunity to talk *with* children, rather than talking *to* them. Teaching agendas are put aside as interactions flow from the child to other children and/or to the adult, rather than the more typical flow from adults to the children.

During this special time, the children are in charge and it is the teacher's role to participate without directing, instead noticing and commenting on what is happening. This special time (which we would suggest to last about 20-30 minutes a week per child) focuses the attention on relationship building, supporting emotional development, and facilitating social interaction between the teacher and the child or a small group of children. If this special time is implemented in a small group, it is important to rotate who is in charge, offering each child a chance to lead the play experiences so that every child gets a turn to be in charge.

For this time to be of particular value for the child it is important to be fully present - to stay in the here and now, attending to children's emotions, actions, reactions, play, and language. This close observation offers opportunities to uncover ways to fully align teaching choices with children's needs in the future.

> *Tasha decides that spending time with individual children should become part of her weekly routine. She tells the children during their morning meeting that, over the next month, each child will get a chance to play with her one-on-one during activity time. She posts a list to help her keep track, and so the children will know their turn will come.*
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> *She is excited about this new opportunity to spend special time with each child. She starts with John, who reluctantly joins her. She offers him a few suggestions of things they could do together, but he doesn't want to choose one. After a few minutes, he asks if he can go play with his friends. Tasha is disappointed he isn't responding, but she tells John he can go.*
>
> *She tries again with Maia, who is next on the list. Maia is excited to join Tasha. She chooses the doll house, and assigns Tasha the "sister" doll and herself the "mommy" doll. Tasha follows Maia's lead, and they play sister and mommy for the next twenty minutes. Later in the week, Tasha invites John again, and he joins willingly after seeing several of his friends enjoy their special time with Tasha.*

Regular time with each child is a big commitment. Some children may need more time than others and they may let you know that their need for attention is not being met with their behaviour (or misbehaviour). Experience tells us that children will get that time and attention, one way or another, either through well-planned, child-directed activities such as this special time, or through increasingly inappropriate behaviour.

Children who demand more and more of your time responding to inappropriate behaviour are telling us what they need, and they are getting it in demanding ways. Giving it to them in positive, relationship building ways, such as having special time together, allows teachers to modify their interactions to fit the individual child rather than expecting the child to control and manage his or her behaviour without the support he or she needs (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014).

Strategy 4: Understand how self-regulation skill levels might affect interactions between teachers and the children they teach

Children are highly individual. Individual differences in the developmental progress of acquiring self-regulation are common. Early self-regulatory progress is seen when a child is successful in communicating needs through crying and then being able to soothe oneself during the inevitable wait between communicating what they want and getting it. Later, self-regulation is more about the conscious control of feelings, behaviour, and thoughts (McClelland & Tominey, 2014). Each child acquires these skills at his or her own pace.

As early childhood teachers, it is important to understand how self-regulation emerges and how they can support it. For young children, self-regulation is supported when they have frequent opportunities to *co-regulate* with the important adults in their lives. Co-regulation is defined as warm, responsive interactions that provide the support, coaching, and modelling that young children need to regulate themselves (Gillespie, 2015). When children have such support from a teacher who can help them manage their emotions, behaviour, and thoughts, a positive developmental trajectory is more likely (Murray, et al., 2015).

To regulate emotions, children must first understand what they are feeling - learning for themselves the names of emotions and how different emotions feel to them. In the early childhood classroom, the vocabulary of emotions is ongoing curriculum that can be addressed though children's literature, classroom materials (such as an emotions chart), talking about emotions, and validating how children feel.

> *Every day after snack, Tasha's class lines up to go outside to play. She keeps a rotating list of whose turn it is to be line-leader so she won't forget whose turn it is. She also knows that Samuel loves to be first in line. Today, it is not Samuel's turn, but he rushes to the front of the line anyway. Tasha walks towards Samuel to redirect him, and she sees that his eyes are already welling up with tears.*
>
> *Previously, she might have moved him to his proper place in line, despite his tears, since he knew it was not his turn and he pushed ahead of other children anyway. But with her new knowledge about emotional self-regulation, she realises that he can't manage his disappointment in not being line leader on his own right now.*
>
> *She kneels down in front of him, puts her arms around him, and says, "You look disappointed! You really want to be first in line. You will be first in line on Wednesday - today it is Katie's turn. Would you like to hold my hand while I help the other children line up?" Samuel nods, and leans into*

her leg. He's still sad, but he's able to stay in control and join the other children outside after a few minutes of attention from Tasha.

When emotions vocabulary is in place, children are likely to be ready to connect what they are feeling to appropriate behavioural responses, particularly when adults help them understand acceptable responses before being overwhelmed by the emotion itself. As children gain skills in tolerating frustration, waiting, and making plans to get what they want, emotional self-regulation matures (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014).

Strategy 5: Help children develop friendships

Denham (2005) points to the development of enduring and reciprocal friendships as a crucial developmental task for children during the early childhood period. Children generally learn how to make friends, be a friend, and keep friendship relationships going through practice.

So often adults focus their attention on social interactions when they are problematic – when children are not able to make friendships work. A change in perspective from managing children's failed social interactions to resourcing peer interactions can turn peer conflict into an opportunity to support emerging friendship skills.

During activity time, Tasha is watching Sophie and Olivia as they play together at the water table. Olivia finds a boat in a nearby basket, and Sophie squeals with excitement, reaching for it. Olivia snatches it away, holding it close to her chest. Seeing the brewing conflict, Tasha steps in and says, "You found a boat, Olivia! That looks like fun! You girls are really enjoying the water table together. Sophie, are you wanting a turn with the boat, too?" Sophie, hopping up and down with excitement, says, "Yes!"

Tasha turns her attention to Olivia, who is still holding the boat protectively. She says, "You both want the boat. You can take turns." She asks Olivia, "How many minutes will you need for your turn - three minutes, or five minutes?" Olivia chooses five minutes, and Tasha sets a timer, letting both girls know that when they hear the timer go off, it will be Sophie's turn. She also lets them know she'll be close by if they need her help to make another plan after this turn is over.

Teachers are models for friendship for children. When we join children in their play and invite other children to play, and then help them join in successfully, we are modelling social skills. When we encourage effort, even when success is elusive, we help children know we see them trying and may encourage them to persist and try again.

Commenting on positive social behaviours and compliance with classroom rules creates peer models and encourages children to play successfully with each other. We can also show children how to use strategies such as asking if they can play (and accepting both yes and no responses), figuring out a variety of ways to find playmates, and most importantly, to find ways to make a plan to play with favourite playmates another time.

Tasha notices three children in the library area, poring over the same big book about space. She's impressed with how well they are sharing the book, so she decides to take a moment to let them know. She crouches down next to them, and says, "Liam, Max, and Zoe, you are working together to explore our new book! You are taking turns looking at the pictures, and you are talking together about what you see. I can tell you that I really like what you are doing together." The children beam at her, and go back to reading with renewed enthusiasm.

This active teaching role expands to helping children learn social problem-solving skills such as calling for help, trading something you have for something you want, taking turns, sharing resources, and making plans to get what to do what you want (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014; Marion, 2015). Helping children in early childhood classrooms learn the skills they need to get what they want, wait a little while, manage their own frustration, and make a plan with others to accomplish their goals can free children from adult intervention in their play and increases their opportunities to practice to succeed with each other (McClelland & Tominey, (2014).

Strategy 6: Schedule blocks of time in child-directed play

Play is essential for children during this period of development and is crucial for young children. Its benefits for children during the early childhood period are well documented (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Oliver & Klugman, 2002). Play is how children learn to socialise, think, solve problems, and experience the range and variation of emotions that accompany interacting with younger children, same age peers, and older playmates.

More than an ancillary activity, play creates a foundation of social success with peers. Piaget (1962) and Parten (1932) already identified various types of play and Vygotsky (1978) theorised that play was a primary learning strategy for young children, particularly as they played with others. Offering long periods of uninterrupted, child-directed play creates the optimal environment for friendship to mature.

For play to reap developmental and learning benefits, it must be freely chosen, initiated, and controlled by children (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014). When given such opportunities regularly, play skills, particularly those that involve social interactions, grow over time.

Play contributes to emotional and social development. Contributions vary based on the setting and the children who are playing, of course, but include:

- Listening to conversations in order to discover what other children are thinking;
- Resourcing each other's play with materials;
- Asking each other for help and support in implementing plans;
- Participating in conversations with each other;
- Experiencing the give and take of successful communication; and,
- Suggesting play ideas to expand or explore further.

Tasha has decided to try out a different way of scheduling in her classroom to allow children longer stretches of self-directed play. She re-evaluates her activity areas, rearranging materials in new and engaging ways, and she extends time outdoors when the weather permits. She also commits to spending more time observing children while they play by asking parents who regularly volunteer in her classroom to take over some routine tasks (refilling art supplies) so that she has more time to focus on what's happening with and between children.

One thing she notices as she implements her plans is how many children are fascinated with the caterpillars on the trees outside. To help them explore their interest further, she enriches activity areas by adding butterfly wings to the dramatic play area, along with some books about caterpillars and butterflies to the library area. She introduces the life cycle of the butterfly by reading Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar, spends time with children who are drawing pictures of caterpillars and butterflies with sidewalk chalk, and encourages children as they play imaginary games about mommy butterflies and baby caterpillars. Pretty soon, several of the children are very familiar with the life cycle of a butterfly! More importantly, Tasha feels like she is building stronger relationships with the children as she watches them in action and joins in their play more frequently.

Strategy 7: Support clear communication

Conversation provides a window to children's experiences: creating opportunities to get to know children better, discover how they respond to different situations, learn what is on their minds, and what interests them. Conversation is different from giving instructions, guiding children's actions and behaviours, and many other teaching functions. It requires a give and take, and an awareness and sensitivity to both non-verbal and verbal communication.

> Clear communication is a key to building successful relationships. What we say, and how we say it helps shape all of our relationships, from our deepest friendships to our most casual encounters. (Forrester & Albrecht, 2014)

Early childhood teachers typically study how children learn language and language development milestones. When we consider the role of language in relationship building, knowing about how language develops is foundational, but not enough, particularly when children are pre-verbal. It is important to be able to support children's emerging language at different developmental moments. One of those important moments is when children's language vocabularies are growing and another one is when children are learning about being active participants in conversation.

An emphasis in adding vocabulary to children's conversations emerged when Betty Hart and Todd Risely published *Meaningful Differences in the Lives of Children* in 1995. Then, the focus shifted to the social nature of language (Hart & Risely, 1999). Further research has led to a more nuanced understanding of how adults support and shape children's language development (Hoff, 2006; Gardner-

Neblett & Gallagher, 2013), and concludes that both the communicative experience of the child and having familiar, responsive language models are important supports for language development during the early childhood period.

Children's interest in conversation is as individual as each child. Some need almost constant non-verbal and verbal connections, while others are less interested in frequent verbal exchanges. Still others are connected by just a smile or a brief verbal encounter. These nuanced connections between the teacher and child create a communicative experience that fits each child.

> *Tasha has a new child in her classroom who appears to have limited expressive language. Every day when he arrives, William hides behind his mother's legs and avoids making eye contact. Tasha knows from experience that it may take him some time for William to settle in, but she wonders if she can help the process move along more smoothly by finding more time to spend with him to build their relationship. She hopes to open the door to conversation between herself and William. She decides to watch for opportunities to join him as he plays during the day.*

> *One morning, she sees him building alone in the construction area. She sits on the floor next to him, and begins to stack blocks herself. She narrates what he is doing, saying, "You built a tall tower. It has a lot of blocks in it."*

> *He looks up at her hesitantly, but doesn't say anything. She continues, "These big blocks might make a big tower, too. I'm going to stack them up." As she stacks the big blocks, William says quietly, "I'm making a big house." She tells him she'd like to know about his house, and he shows her where the windows and doors are, becoming more animated as he talks.*

> *As the days go on, Tasha looks for more moments like this with William. After a while, she finds he's having an easier time talking to her. He's also interacting more with his classmates, some of whom have learned they have to listen carefully to hear his soft voice.*

A familiar early childhood teacher is a great source of vocabulary and a model for communication and sustained conversation. Adding vocabulary comes naturally easily as you send and receive non-verbal communications, narrate what is happening, describe emotions and interactions that succeed as well as those that are difficult or did not work out, and introduce new toys, materials, and educational experiences.

Creating opportunities to participate in the give and take of conversation is a vital part of emotional and social curriculum. Your relationship with children is strengthened when you are willing and able to stay present and wait for nonverbal or verbal responses from children. Such opportunities cannot always be scheduled – it is important to seize the chance to converse with children when the moment arises.

Conversation is also a window to understanding what children are experiencing. Such conversations create opportunities to get to better know children, discover how they respond in different situations, explore their thinking, and identify what

is of interest to them. Conversation is different from giving instructions, guiding children's actions and behaviours, and many other teaching functions. It requires a give and take, and an awareness and sensitivity to both non-verbal and verbal communication.

Creating opportunities to participate in the give and take of conversation is also emotional and social curriculum. It is a great relationship building strategy when teachers are willing and able to stay present and wait for nonverbal or verbal responses from children. Such opportunities must be leveraged when the child is ready, not on a schedule or within particular planned activities.

> *After seeing how successful her intervention with William was, Tasha decides to take a more mindful approach to conversation with additional children in her classroom. She starts by adding regular walks outdoors, listening for their interests and questions, pointing out interesting things they might not have noticed before, like the kereru in the trees, pointing out the swallow's nest under the traffic light, and alerting the children to the swooshing sound the leaves in the trees make in the wind. Following their lead, she labels the world around them. Soon the vocabulary she uses on the walks begins to show up in conversations between the children.*
>
> *Tasha is excited by all the new words they are learning. She's so tickled when William points out the birds flying in a V-formation that she writes a note to his parents about it.*

Moving conversation away from 'when there is time' into a more planful and carefully considered relationship building approach is a shift worth considering. Such opportunities can easily be embedded in classroom activities such as reading to individuals and small groups of children, following children's lead during planned activities when they initiate conversation, commenting on children's work, conversing with children as they play, and picking up on non-verbal cues that a child is interested in talking with you as they play.

Summary

Supporting emotional and social development has the potential to impact children's lives beyond the immediate benefits for children and their early childhood teachers. Thompson (2002) puts it this way: "Because young children's social and scholastic lives are linked in kindergarten, early social and emotional development is an important determinant of school readiness" (p. 10).

When the strategies early childhood teachers use with young children are based on what we now know about brain science and insights from child development research, we increase the likelihood that our relationships will support emotional and social development.

> *After several weeks of implementing a few new approaches and strategies, Tasha realises that her classroom is indeed running more smoothly. She also feels less overwhelmed by her personal life, as she and her family have settled into their new routine. She still has challenging days where her plans don't work out, but overall, she feels more*

connected with the children she teaches and more satisfied with her work life in general. Her ongoing learning helps her to continue to grow as a teacher, and she is optimistic about the upcoming months and years in her profession.

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