

Relationships matter: The power of relationships in early childhood development

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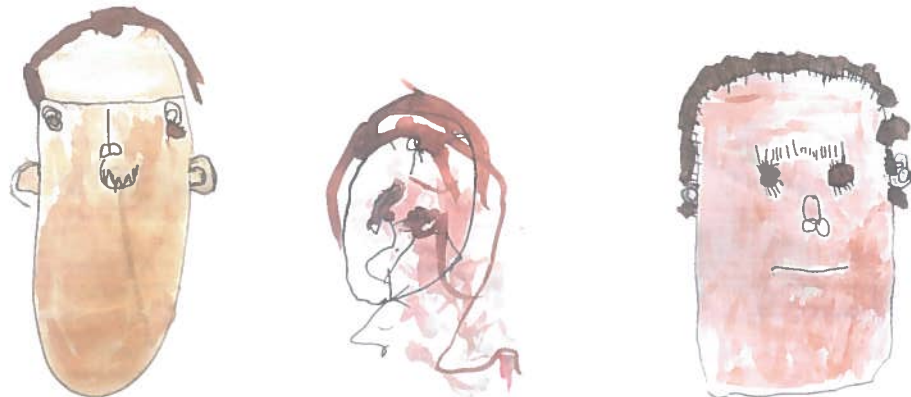
There is strong evidence that the relationships are foundational for the development and well-being of those involved. Relationships play a vital role for young children, as it encourages risk taking and exploration. But relationships also matter for adults, helping them to gain the confidence and support needed for their well-being.

Over the past 40 years of research from fields of inquiry as diverse as neuroscience, pediatrics, developmental psychology or sociology, one of the clearest findings is that early brain development is directly influenced by day-to-day interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Shonkoff, 2012). Children's well-being and development are not based exclusively in the genetic or biological disposition, but are strongly influenced by social, economic and social conditions environmental conditions in which they are born and grow (Moore, McDonald, Carlon & O'Rourke, 2015).

Development involves a dynamic transactional process whereby the child shapes the environment at the same time as the environment shapes the child (Sameroff, 2009). Thus,

young children and adults bring distinctive characteristics to their exchanges, but each also changes as a result of their interactions with one another, and both therefore enter the next interaction as changed individuals.

Young children develop through their relationships with the important people in their lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). From early infancy, children naturally reach out for interaction through behaviours such as babbling, facial expressions, and uttering (Harvard). Babies come into the world as a curious, motivated, imitators, interpreters, explorers, communicators, meaning seekers, and relationship builders (Lally & Mangione, 2017). Children develop best when provided with safe, interesting, and intimate settings where knowledgeable caregivers sustain secure and trusting relationships and are responsive to their needs and interests (Lally & Mangione, 2017). For the brain to grow robustly, children need a context of caring relationships that simultaneously provide emotional predictability and stimulating novelty



(Lally & Mangione, 2017). Conceptual models emphasize the influence of reciprocal child–adult interactions in the developmental process, thereby underscoring the importance of stable and nurturing relationships, as well as the recognition that young children play an active role in their own development.

The environment of relationships in which a young child develops—requires attention to a continuum from nurturing, responsive caregiving to neglectful or abusive interactions. This includes both family and nonfamily members as important sources of stable and growth-promoting relationships as well as critical buffers against significant threats to development and well-being (Shonkoff, 2010). Research in child development has taught us that families, ECEC services, and communities play the central role and bear most of the costs of providing the supportive relationships and positive learning experiences that young children need for healthy development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Reciprocal, warm and close teacher–child relationships helps children to feel secure, thereby encouraging them to take risks and to actively explore the environment. Simply stated, the relationships a child experiences each day are the building blocks of development. These relationships are what has been called the ‘active ingredients’ of the environment’s influence on healthy human development (Shonkoff, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

It is evident that a child’s interaction with their caregiver is perhaps the most powerful determinant of their future health and well-being. Regardless of the diversity of family structures, what is most important is the quality of care that the child receives. This is true for all children, but particularly so for

children with temperaments that make them more susceptible to the effects of parenting. When a child is exposed to persistent trauma in the first 1000 days, regardless of their temperament, they are significantly more likely to experience a lifetime of poor health and well-being. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the role of countless interactive influences on development outcomes, which highlights both the futility of seeking simple solutions to complicated problems and the difficulty in choosing which variables to include and which to omit when designing a policy, specific program, or research project (Shonkoff, 2010).

Children’s emotional base is the foundation for all other learning, as it influences how children understand their environment, relate to others, and engage in learning. Risk taking and motivation are at the core of learning processes.

A key feature of strong relationships is responsiveness, that is, when adults respond promptly and appropriately to children’s signals, communications and changing states. Responsiveness takes the form of adults recognising the signals the children are sending, making sense of them, and then communicating and responding to the children (Siegel, 2001). In Bridging, all partners value the importance of strong relationships with children. Throughout the project, there were many instances where we could observe caring and enriching relationships among caregivers and children, and also between services and families, including families in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations.

Social conditions, known as social determinants, can determine the health and well-being and include socioeconomic status, education of parents / caregivers, their situation professional and employment, poverty, geo-

graphic location, others. Social determinants play a critical role in the first two years of life, as it is during this period that various skills develop (Moore, Arefadib, Deery, & West, 2017).

While responsive relationships in childhood help building a lifelong foundation for development, they continue to be important throughout lives. The relationships that adults have with one another have a significant effect on their ability to relate responsively with children. Relationships help adults deal with stress, support self-regulation, and promote positive attitudes for the future. For adults, healthy relationships are also crucial for their well-being, as relationships can provide the instrumental and emotional support that strengthens their confidence. In other words, not only do children develop through relationships, but relationships continue to be of central importance to everyone’s well-being. In addition, relationships affect other relationships. Parents and teachers’ capacity to relate to others is supported or undermined by the quality of their own support relationships. When the multiple, interrelated capacities of caregivers and communities reinforce each other, the foundations of well-being become stronger. This points to the importance of strong, reciprocal and consistent cascades of relationships, from governments and societies through communities and services to teachers, parents and children. In Bridging, building strong connections among all partners was a crucial goal. This meant building bridges across disciplines, service providers, and countries.

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