

Fostering children's relationships

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No matter what a child's path or experiences in life, good social skills and relationships with others are essential for their overall wellbeing and positive life course. The early relationships that children experience set the foundation for all areas of their development and learning. 'The earliest relationships set the pattern for all future relationships, including friendships.' (Hammer and Linke, 2004, p.23).

Children who connect positively with others and who manage their feelings well, feel accepted and valued and in turn build positive self-esteem and confidence. Conversely, children who struggle to forge positive relationships can experience difficulties that affect their overall wellbeing and happiness. Child care professionals can take an active role in nurturing, supporting and promoting children's relationships and social skills.

Observing children closely and being available to them

Individual children's ability to connect with others and build relationships will vary greatly. From passive and quiet, to boisterous and assertive, children's personalities and social skills play an important part in how they relate to others.

It is important that child care professionals observe how individual children relate to others and form friendships. Child care professionals can develop specific strategies to assist children to form healthy attachments and relationships by closely watching the way they approach and interact with peers and adults. These observations can also then be discussed with colleagues, families and with children themselves.

In particular, arrival times can be challenging and emotional for children as they separate from their families, make the transition from home or school to care, and settle into playing with their peers. By ensuring they are receptive to children's needs and making themselves available to children at these times, child care professionals can help children to ease into play with others and to express their needs and wants appropriately.

It is important to watch for signs that children are becoming isolated or withdrawn, or finding it difficult to interact positively with others and

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 3.3 and 3.4

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.3 and 5.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 - 1.3, 4.1 and 4.2

participate in groups. Child care professionals should be aware that children who stand out as different in some way, such as children with additional needs or challenging behaviour, may need extra support in building relationships. However, it is also important to note that children who appear to be independent and who do not seek adult help may also need support in building good relationships with others. Child care professionals need to be vigilant in observing and talking with all children to ensure they support them effectively in the development of interpersonal relationships.

Child care professionals also need to be 'emotionally available' to assist children. That is, they need to be aware of their own feelings and how comfortable they are in their relationships with children and others. By being clear about their own feelings, child care professionals will be better able to show empathy, and to help children to recognise and manage their feelings.

Babies' relationships

From birth, children begin to develop relationships; first with their parents and families and then with other consistent carers and children. Babies need to develop a secure attachment with at least one consistent caregiver to be able to develop social competence and healthy relationships later in life. Babies use powerful non-verbal gestures such as body movements and facial expressions, as well as vocal sounds to make contact with their carers.

Babies also begin to interact with and relate to other children by reaching out, using physical gestures and facial expressions, and by cooing and crying. Children from a very young age can be observed showing the first signs of kindness and empathy and responding to the feelings and needs of others. Child care professionals need to observe very young children closely to notice and 'read' their movements and sounds. It is essential

that child care professionals' reactions to babies are warm and responsive and that they support children's developing need to connect with others.

Toddlers' relationships

Toddlers' social worlds expand quickly and during this time they further explore relationships with people outside their family and carer attachments. They develop language and understanding at a rapid rate and they can strongly express their needs. Toddlers often play by themselves initially, before beginning to play alongside other children. However, as toddlers are only just learning how to get along with others they often find social skills such as sharing, taking turns and waiting to be difficult. During this time, toddlers need adults to support them and show them how to play cooperatively with others.

Preschool age children's relationships

Preschool age children generally show more interest in playing with others than by themselves, and they are often starting to engage in structured games and play involving rules that they negotiate with others. Friendships between preschool age children begin to form and their social skills develop further. The social competence of preschoolers emerges through skills such as understanding rules for behaviour, understanding others' perspectives and using words to negotiate and express their needs and wants. Child care professionals should observe children closely and develop strategies for assisting individual children to form relationships with others and to participate successfully in groups.

School age children's relationships

As children get older their social skills continue to develop enabling them to further build and sustain relationships with others. School age children are becoming more aware of peer differences and are generally more empathetic and aware of their personal responsibilities towards others. Being accepted is highly important to older children and fitting in with a group can create challenges and conflicts. To assist school age children to develop the social skills needed for healthy relationships, child care professionals can help them to express themselves appropriately, understand and respect differences, show compassion and care for others, and to negotiate and resolve conflicts.



Social skills for positive relationships

To build positive relationships with others, children need to develop 'social competence'. Social competence is the foundation that allows children to understand their own emotions and to manage their interactions with others. Children often need help to make sense of feelings such as anger, sadness, disappointment and jealousy as these can be intense and confusing. By helping children to understand and manage their own feelings, child care professionals can assist them to build friendships and to participate and express themselves appropriately with individuals and in groups.

'In programs that teach about feelings, children learn to recognise, name and take ownership of their feelings and behaviour; to recognise and empathise with others' feelings; and to express feelings in ways that lead to satisfactory outcomes for all.' (Sorin, 2004, p.1).

To foster children's relationships, child care professionals can encourage the following skills for social competence:

- taking turns
- sharing
- listening to others
- including others in play
- appropriately expressing feelings and needs
- respecting the views of others
- respecting differences in others
- using appropriate words rather than physical aggression to express anger and frustration.

How can child care professionals promote children's relationships?

To foster children's relationships, child care professionals can create physical environments, programs and routines that allow children the time and resources needed for positive interactions with their peers. An environment that allows a balance of play experiences such as individual and group, quiet and noisy, active and passive experiences will encourage children to choose experiences and groups that they feel comfortable participating in. Child care professionals can also arrange the daily program and routines to allow extended periods for children's small and large group play to develop and continue.

To help isolated children or children with challenging behaviour to build relationships, staff need to convey a sense of nurture and protection, and actively show them how to join in with others. By spending time with children as they interact with peers and giving specific verbal prompts, child care professionals can support children who have difficulty developing relationships to interact positively with others.

Conclusion

Good relationships early in life help children to connect with others, build positive friendships and develop social skills that will assist them in all areas of life. By watching children closely and assisting them to build relationships with others, child care professionals help children to feel accepted and valued and set the foundations for all areas of their future development and learning ■

Practical strategies for fostering children's relationships

Child care professionals can use the following strategies to promote children's positive relationships:

- role model positive communication and interactions
- set rules for acceptable behaviour with children and reinforce these regularly
- discuss emotions with children and acknowledge their feelings
- encourage children to think about the feelings of others and to see things from their perspective
- encourage children to appreciate the strengths and talents of others
- allow older and younger children to play separately some of the time
- help children to solve problems and resolve conflicts
- develop strategies to actively prevent and deal with bullying and teasing
- give shy and quiet children strategies for talking and interacting with others such as through asking questions, and sharing information about themselves
- use equipment that encourages sharing such as balls and parachutes
- introduce group games to encourage structured participation with others.

References and further reading

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