

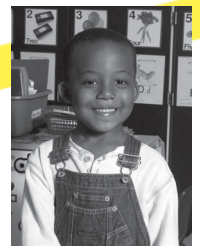
# Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



Project funded by the Child Care and Head Start  
Bureaus in the U.S. Department of Health and  
Human Services

## **Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships**

*M.M. Ostrosky • E.Y. Jung*



# 12

**SERIES**

## **WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**

# Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers, parents, and other

caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

*While busy greeting children and preparing for the day, the teachers heard Alan, a 4-year boy, crying in the hallway. Every morning, Alan cried very loudly and refused to come into the classroom from the bus. Mrs. Hannon, the lead teacher, found herself becoming very frustrated with Alan, and she told him to come to the classroom without asking why he was upset. During circle time, Alan repeatedly kicked his feet on the carpet and did not pay attention as Mrs. Hannon read a story to the group. Mrs. Hannon told Alan to stop kicking, but he continued kicking his feet in the air. Exasperated, Mrs. Hannon snapped at Alan, “Stop kicking, I have had enough. You are going to leave circle time. Go over there and sit on the chair. I am going to tell your mom about this.” As Alan moved to the thinking chair, he began to cry. He was very mad at Mrs. Hannon and wished someone would “snuggle him” instead of yell at him.*

them through warm, responsive, physical contact such as giving pats on the back, hugging, and holding young children in their laps. For preschool children, teachers encourage mutual respect between children and adults by waiting until children finish asking questions before answering them, and by encouraging children to listen when others speak. In addition, teachers’ use of positive guidance techniques (e.g., modeling and encouraging appropriate behavior, redirecting children to more acceptable activities, setting clear limits) helps children develop trusting relationships with their teachers.

It is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children’s differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities.

## What Are Positive Teacher-Child Relationships?

In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to build positive relationships with children. Teacher behaviors such as listening to children, making eye contact with them, and engaging in many one-to-one, face-to-face interactions with young children promote secure teacher-child relationships. Talking to children using pleasant, calm voices and simple language, and greeting children warmly when they arrive in the classroom with their parents or from the buses help establish secure relationships between teachers and children.

In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships.

It is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children’s differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities. For example, with infants and toddlers, teachers respond to their cries or other signs of distress. Teachers let children know they care about

In developing positive teacher-child relationships, it is important to remember to:

- ✓ Engage in one-to-one interactions with children
- ✓ Get on the child’s level for face-to-face interactions
- ✓ Use a pleasant, calm voice and simple language
- ✓ Provide warm, responsive physical contact
- ✓ Follow the child’s lead and interest during play
- ✓ Help children understand classroom expectations
- ✓ Redirect children when they engage in challenging behavior
- ✓ Listen to children and encourage them to listen to others
- ✓ Acknowledge children for their accomplishments and effort

Given the above information, if we “revisit” our hypothetical early childhood classroom, we might observe the following scenario:

*During center time, Mrs. Hannon heard Alan crying, while she was helping another child with an art project. Mrs. Hannon, realizing that she was again feeling very frustrated with Alan, decided that she needed to develop some new*

strategies when interacting with him. The next day, when Mrs. Hannon heard Alan coming toward the classroom, she went out into the hallway and bent down to his level, greeting him warmly and smiling at him. As Alan entered the classroom holding Mrs. Hannon's hand, he did not cry; he even smiled. During circle time, Alan listened to Mrs. Hannon read *The Very Quiet Cricket*, and he responded when she had the class rub "their wings together" by flapping their arms up and down in response to the book's repeated phrase "Nothing happened, not a sound." At the end of the day as she considered all that had happened, Mrs. Hannon was pleased with how well the day went for Alan. She decided to look for resources on developing positive relationships with young children. She found that affectionate behaviors (such as smiles, pats, and hugs), a calm voice, and truly listening to young children help build positive relationships between teachers and children. She realized that she was often so busy managing the group of children that she missed the individual interactions with them. The next day, when Mrs. Hannon saw her students coming down the hall to enter her classroom, she stopped talking with her assistant teacher so she could greet each child with a warm smile and welcome. During circle time, instead of giving attention to children who were not listening, Mrs. Hannon praised children who were listening and engaged in story time. Also, when Ms. Gloria, the teaching assistant, did some finger plays with the children, Mrs. Hannon sat next to Alan. After the finger plays, Mrs. Hannon gave Alan a high five and told him what a great job he did following along with the finger plays. The tone in the classroom felt more positive, and Mrs. Hannon felt she was using her energy to help children become engaged in classroom activities and enjoy their time in the classroom rather than using her energy to constantly nag and attend to challenging behaviors.

## Why Are Positive Teacher-Child Relationships Important?

Research has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development. In studies of teacher-child relationships, children who had a secure relationship with their preschool and kindergarten teachers demonstrated good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school. On the other hand, children who had insecure relationships with teachers had more difficulty interacting with peers and engaged in more conflict with their teachers. In addition, research has shown that teachers' interaction styles with children help children build positive and emotionally secure relationships with adults. For instance, teachers' smiling behaviors, affectionate words, and appropriate physical contact help promote children's positive responses toward teachers. Also, children whose teachers showed warmth and respect toward them (e.g., teachers who listened when children talked to them, made eye contact, treated children fairly) developed positive and competent peer relationships. Moreover, children who had secure relationships with their teachers demonstrated lower levels of

challenging behaviors and higher levels of competence in school.

---

Research has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development.

---

## Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Teacher-Child Relationships?

Research on teacher-child relationships has been conducted with children from culturally diverse families in child care settings, university preschools, family child care settings, Head Start programs, and kindergarten classrooms. Participants have included children from European American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American families. However, no studies indicated whether children with disabilities were included. When developing relationships with young children, teachers should pay attention to the cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children. The importance of adapting strategies to meet the unique needs of the children and families in a teacher's care cannot be overstated.

---

## ★ Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources.

Practical information on teacher-child relationship can be found in journals such as *Young Children*. See the following articles and books for examples of how to develop positive teacher-child relationships:

- Bredenkamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (Rev ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. (2003). *Promoting the social-emotional competence of children. Training modules* [Online]. Champaign, IL: Author. Available: <http://csefel.uiuc.edu/modules/facilitatorguide/facilitators-guide1.pdf> [2003, August 12].
- Elicker, J., & Fortner-Wood, C. (1995). Adult-child relationships in early childhood programs. *Young Children*, 51(1), 69-78.
- Kontos, S., Howes, C., Shinn, M., & Galinsky, E. (1995). *Quality in family child care and relative care*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kontos, S., & Wilcox-Herzog, A. (1997). Teachers' interactions with children: Why are they so important? *Young Children*, 52(2), 4-12.



---

**We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.**

---

Spodek, B., & Saracho, O. N. (1994). *Right from the start: Teaching children ages three to eight*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.



### **What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?**

**For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have studied teacher-child relationships in early childhood settings:**

Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1998). Children's interpersonal behaviors and the teacher-child relationship. *Developmental Psychology*, 34(5), 934-946.

Howes, C., & Hamilton, C. E. (1993). The changing experience of child care: Changes in teachers and in teacher-child relationships and children's social competence with peers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8(1), 15-32.

Howes, C., Philips, D. A., & Whitebook, M. (1992). Thresholds of quality: Implications for the social development of children in center-based child care. *Child Development*, 63(2), 449-460.

Kontos, S. (1999). Preschool teachers' talk, roles, and activity settings during free play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 14(3), 363-383.

Pianta, R. C., Steinberg, M. S., & Rollins, K. B. (1995). The first two years of school: Teacher-child relationships and deflections in children's classroom adjustment. *Development and Psychopathology*, 7(2), 295-312.

Webster-Stratton, D., Reid, M. J., & Hammond, M. (2001). Preventing conduct problems, promoting social competence: A parent and teacher training partnership in Head Start. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 30(3), 238-302.

Zanolli, K. M., Saudargas, R. A., & Twardosz, S. (1997). The development of toddlers' responses to affectionate teacher behavior. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(1), 99-116.

**This What Works Brief was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Contributors to this Brief were M. M. Ostrosky and E. Y. Jung.**

---

This material was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Cooperative Agreement N. PHS 90YD0119). The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial projects, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. You may reproduce this material for training and information purposes.

---



### **Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships**

## **WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**

