

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Expressing Warmth and Affection to Children

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS



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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 for in-service providers and others who conduct staff development activities. Those who are responsible for professional development should find them useful in sharing information with professionals and parents to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. The

Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments. The strategies described in the Briefs are most successful when used in the context of ongoing positive relationships and supportive environments. The strategies are most successful for an individual child when developed based on observation and assessment of the child including information from the family, teacher, and other caregivers.

While eating breakfast with her 3- and 4-year-olds, Mrs. Foster’s glance falls on Marcus who has been absent for several days. When he briefly looks up from his plate, she smiles and says, “I’m happy to see you this morning, Marcus. We missed you.”

Mr. Cavendish is reading to three toddlers in the book area. Catherine leans against his shoulder and strokes his hair while peering at the book. Julio and Carl are snuggled at his sides. He reads in an animated tone, occasionally asking or answering questions in a gentle, soothing tone of voice.

Amanda needs a diaper change, but she is engrossed with a ball. Mr. Hareem approaches and gently strokes her head while saying, “Hey, Amanda, my girl, I need to change your diaper.” As Amanda looks up at him, Mr. Hareem smiles, takes the ball, gently picks her up, and begins to sing.

Ms. Morton is coping with a rainy day by organizing a strenuous activity for her 4- and 5-year-olds under the covered outdoor area. She and her assistant, Mrs. Kim, cheer, clap, laugh, and shout out encouragement as groups of children move across the area by first walking backwards, then running, hopping, and jumping. Soon, the children who have finished first begin to do the same for their peers.

What Are Warmth and Affection?

Warmth and affection are aspects of positive teacher-child relationships that are critical for children’s well-being in early education settings (see *What Works Brief #12: Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships*). Expressions of warmth and affection occur as teachers and other caregivers protect, guide, communicate, teach, and play with children. They help set the tone for all of these interactions, can reassure and comfort children, and may help them to relax. Teachers who are warm and affectionate show children that they like them, enjoy being with them, are having fun with them, and are pleased with their efforts and accomplishments. Expressions of warmth and affection are most effective in the context of an ongoing positive relationship between a child and a caregiver; they also contribute to making that relationship positive and authentic.

Sometimes people think about affection primarily in terms of holding, hugging, or stroking. While touch is a very important means of communicating positive feelings to children, warmth and affection also can be conveyed through facial expressions,

laughter, and voice tone; words of endearment (e.g., “little one,” “I missed you”), encouragement, and playful teasing; and a wide range of physical contact such as a brief tickle, leaning against, a quick pat on the head, or a special handshake. Smiling is a particularly effective way of conveying positive emotion from earliest infancy and may help children appreciate other forms of

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teacher affection. When interacting with older preschool children, teachers typically smile and use affectionate words more than touch. The fact that there are so many different ways of expressing affection means that teachers can adjust their styles to the needs, preferences, family and cultural background,

temperament, and disabilities of each child, as well as communicating warmth in ways that are comfortable for them.

Setting the Stage for Expressing Warmth and Affection

Teachers' styles of expressing affection are certainly influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, and feelings, but classroom organization and the relationships teachers have with one another help determine whether or not they actually will express affection to the children. Warmth and affection do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of daily routines, activities, and interactions. If these are organized to promote children's appropriate engagement with their surroundings, teachers will be more likely to interact warmly; if they are not, teachers may spend much of their time responding to children's inappropriate behavior with directions, reprimands, threats, and yelling. As a result, there will be very few opportunities for the type of relaxed interaction that sets the stage for the expression of affection (see *What Works Brief #3: Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules*, and *What Works Brief #4: Helping Children Make Transitions between Activities*).

Accept the fact that you will not feel as affectionate toward some children as you do toward others. You will probably be able to express warmth in some way to each of them because there are so many ways of doing so.

In the examples provided at the beginning of this Brief, teachers' expressions of warmth and affection and children's responses occur within activities, such as a meal, reading, or an outdoor game. These are organized to give teachers a chance to respond to individual children in a personal way. Mrs. Foster, for example, is sitting at the table eating breakfast rather than serving plates and moving around wiping up spills, making it more likely that she will think about warmly welcoming Marcus back to class. Mr. Cavendish is in the book area where he and the toddlers need only reach out for another book to prolong the affectionate warmth of this storybook reading session. If his colleague is taking responsibility for the other children in the classroom, then he will not need to break away from the affectionate physical contact before the children are ready.

Why Are Warmth and Affection Important?

Ample research supports the roles that affection and warmth play in children's social and emotional development. Warmth and affection contribute to secure relationships between children and adults; provide models of positive, gentle behavior; are linked with children's ability to interact positively with peers; and can help integrate withdrawn children and children with disabilities into the peer group. Moreover, children reciprocate teachers' affection with smiles, hugs, and kind words of their own that can make teachers feel appreciated and enjoyed too.

More Tips for Teachers

Expressing warmth and affection to children in group care requires sensitivity and thoughtfulness. Below are some additional points to consider when addressing this issue:

- ✓ Be sensitive to children's reactions to your warmth and affection. Some children may prefer brief rather than lengthy physical contact; may have a disability or history of abuse that influences their reactions to touch, facial expressions, or voice tone; or may come from a cultural background that guides emotional expressiveness in ways that may be unfamiliar to you. When in doubt, communicate with parents about such issues.
- ✓ Accept the fact that you will not feel as affectionate toward some children as you do toward others. You will probably be able to express warmth in some way to each of them because there are so many ways of doing so. It is important to remember that children who are the most challenging are often those who need warmth and affection the most.
- ✓ Think about whether your positive feelings and dedication to teaching are being communicated effectively to children. If you are a reserved person, you may want to experiment with being a little more expressive and watch the effect on the children. For example, you could choose a book that describes people being warm and affectionate and then act out the parts with the children.
- ✓ Avoid being overly warm and affectionate while providing guidance and discipline after a child has been disruptive or aggressive. You do not want to encourage children to misbehave in order to experience individualized, warm attention.
- ✓ Recognize that frequent expressions of negative emotion toward children make it more difficult to feel and express warmth and affection. Avoid criticism, nagging, yelling, and reprimands as much as possible, and try to be tolerant of children's spontaneity. If the overwhelming majority of the comments you make to children are positive, you will be contributing to the emotional warmth of the classroom.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Warmth and Affection?

Typically developing children and children with disabilities have participated in research on the expression of warmth and affection. The research was conducted in both community and university early education settings and in homes, and included children of European American, African American, and Asian American heritage. The importance of individualizing this strategy to meet the unique needs of the children in a teacher's care cannot be overstated.



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.



Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

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

Carlson, F. M. (2005). Significance of touch in young children's lives. *Young Children*, 60(4), 79-85.

Shreve, C., Twardosz, S., & Weddle, K. (1983). Development and evaluation of procedures to encourage teacher affectionate behavior in day care centers. *Behavior Therapy*, 14(5), 706-713.

Twardosz, S., Botkin, D., Cunningham, J. L., Weddle, K., Sollie, D., & Shreve, C. (1987). Expression of affection in day care. *Child Study Journal*, 17(2), 133-151.



What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have studied warmth and affection in early childhood classrooms and homes:

Kontos, S., & Wilcox-Herzog, A. (1997). Teachers' interactions with children: Why are they so important? *Young Children*, 52(2), 4-12.

McEvoy, M. A., Nordquist, V. M., Twardosz, S., Heckaman, K. A., Wehby, J. H., & Denny, R. K. (1988). Promoting autistic children's peer interaction in an integrated early childhood setting using affection activities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 21(2), 193-200.

Mill, D., & Romano-White, D. (1999). Correlates of affectionate and angry behavior in child care educators of preschool-aged children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 14(2), 155-178.

Nordquist, V. M., Twardosz, S., & McEvoy, M. A. (1991). Effects of environmental reorganization in classrooms for children with autism. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 15(2), 135-152.

Tracy, R. L., & Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1981). Maternal affectionate behavior and infant-mother attachment patterns. *Child Development*, 52(4), 1341-1343.

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.

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