

Building Relationships with Parents and Young Children

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BACKGROUND: Children form attachments to important adults in their lives, and these relationships are important for children's later social and cognitive skills (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006), Children's prior relationships influence the way they react to new caregivers, including early childhood educators; those who typically have their needs met tend to respond more positively to new educators compared to children whose needs are not met. It is important for educators to be sensitive to children's reactions and use multiple strategies to build secure relationships (Ritchie & Howes, 2003). Similarly, educators need to build strong relationships with parents. We present strategies to support these relationships.

Strategies for building relationships with children

- Be *available* and *responsive* to children throughout the day, learning how their verbal and nonverbal actions provide cues as to how to meet their needs
- *Observe* children's interests and *join or initiate* conversations and play around those interests
- Be *patient* and allow the children to come to you as they are ready

Strategies for building relationships with parents

- Engage parents in social *conversations* to show that you are interested in them as well as their children
- Offer parents multiple ways to *communicate* about their child, such as in person, by email, or by phone
- Ask parents about their children's *preferences and routines* at home to provide *consistency*
- Relay *anecdotes* about things the child has done throughout the day, assuring parents that their child is engaged throughout the day

APPLICATION: In the scenarios below, Jess builds relationships with two new families in her classroom.

*Leah is 8 months old and this is her first time in child care. At morning drop off, Jess invites Leah's mom to explore the classroom and explains their routines and activities. Jess **asks about comfort items** such as a pacifier/blanket or what calms Leah when she's upset to ease the morning transitions. Once mom leaves, Jess **walks with Leah** around the classroom and gives her a variety of materials to explore. Leah gravitates towards the musical instruments so Jess begins to **sing songs and clap her hands to engage Leah** more. Jess decides to **create a music list** for Leah with pictures of songs to choose from during circle time. At pick up, Jess **describes Leah's first day** and how intrigued she was by the music shakers. Mom informs Jess that they listen to songs in Russian and would be glad to give the names of the songs to listen to at school. Jess happily agrees and lets mom know that she values **incorporating home routines and families' cultural traditions**. Jess tells mom that she can always **email** teachers with questions, concerns, or to update teachers on any new interests Leah gains.*

*Robert, a 2-year-old, runs into the classroom on his first day and begins working with the tool set in dramatic play. **Jess talks to Robert's dad** about the class schedule and what activities they'll engage in for the day. Robert sees his dad getting ready to leave and runs over crying for him to stay. Jess asks Robert if he would like to give his dad a big hug good bye and then go back to work with the tools. Robert agrees, hugs his dad, and returns to playing. In the dramatic play area, Jess asks Robert **if he would like to play together** with the hammers and nails. Robert says, "No, I don't want to play with you." Jess tells Robert, "Okay, that's a choice if you don't want to work with me" and **she goes to another center**. Robert initiates play with a peer close to his age while working in dramatic play. At pick up, Jess tells dad how Robert is adjusting to his new school and peers. Later that week, Robert and a peer are working with the tool set and pretending to build a car. Robert runs up to Jess with a hard hat and **asks if she wants to help** them. Jess puts on the hat and asks Robert what tools will they will need and how she can help.*

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REFERENCES:

- NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2006). *Infant-mother attachment: Risk and protection in relation to changing maternal caregiving quality over time*. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 38-58.
- Ritchie, S. & Howes, C. (2003). *Program practices, caregiver stability, and child-caregiver relationships*. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 24, 497-516.