

## Chapter 1

# Build Strong Relationships with Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers in thriving relationships with special adults feel safe, protected, appreciated, and loved. When an infant establishes a relationship with a sensitive and responsive caregiver, the infant learns whom to trust and turn to when needing support (Howes & Spieker 2008). Children use adults as secure bases from which to explore their world and to return to when they need to feel safe or desire food, attention, or a hug (Kaplan 1978; Vaughn et al. 2016). Young children who experience secure relationships are happier, kinder, more social, less anxious, and better learners than those children who do not feel secure (Brumariu & Kerns 2013; Groh et al. 2014; Panfile & Laible 2012).

Infants and toddlers show that they are developing secure and close, caring relationships with their teachers in many ways (Brumariu & Kerns 2013; Feldman, Bamberger, & Kanat-Maymon 2013; Kok et al. 2013; Lickenbrock et al. 2013; McElwain et al. 2008). Compared with children who do not feel secure, infants and toddlers who feel secure

- › Express contentment and often joy when they are with you
- › Mold on your body, draping on your shoulder or your tummy
- › Feel less stressed
- › Feel comfortable expressing many different emotions
- › Are better able to manage intense feelings with your help
- › Demonstrate more empathy for others who are looking sad or upset
- › Experience a greater sense of self-worth
- › Are more prosocial in play with peers—kind, loving, helping, and empathic
- › Experience more turn-taking friendly interactions with adults and peers
- › Expect fewer hostile responses from peers

- › Are more cooperative and compliant with adults they know well
- › Demonstrate fewer behavior meltdowns and defiance at age 3
- › Are better able to problem solve and tackle challenging tasks
- › Are more likely to tell an adult that they broke a rule (e.g., “I hit him”) (older toddlers)

When the important adults in a child’s life meet his needs for protection, affection, and emotional connections, they create a thriving relationship that affects how the child feels and thinks about himself and others and the way he learns. You are not spoiling children by meeting their needs. You are not pampering children or ruining them by showing them affection and admiration. You are not creating tyrants when you gently teach them what *to* do rather than what *not* to do. Rather, you are supporting children’s inner strength, a desire to be with others, and emotional skills that will enable children to successfully meet challenges.

Relationships that meet infants’ and toddlers’ needs are supported through

- › Mutually rewarding interactions between teachers and children and between peers
- › Program practices that contribute to children’s and teachers’ well-being

## Mutually Rewarding Interactions

Infant and toddler learning occurs within the context of mutually rewarding adult–child and child–child relationships that are equally satisfying to each partner. When an infant makes soft sounds and you respond with soft sounds while smiling and looking into the infant’s eyes, you are engaging in a mutually rewarding interaction with the child. A toddler experiences a rewarding interaction with you when she shows you something she has discovered and you respond with enthusiasm.

Children are born primed to become capable learners. The ability of infants and toddlers to figure out patterns of behaviors, the goals of others, and how to solve problems is nothing short of amazing. They can only become capable learners, however, when their physical, emotional, and social needs are met through rewarding interactions and relationships with trusted adults (Cuevas et al. 2014; Mermelshtine & Barnes 2016). Those needs include the following:

- › Secure protection and caring emotional connections
- › Love and affection
- › Adults who are mindful and sensitively attuned
- › Empathy and compassion
- › Contingent responsiveness
- › Adults who value them as unique individuals

Following are ways to nurture relationships to meet these needs.

## Provide Secure Protection and Caring Emotional Connections

When children feel safe and protected by the adults in their lives, they can use their energies to learn rather than for staying alert for danger or threats (Ebbeck, Warriar, & Goh 2018; Posada et al. 2013). You help an infant or toddler feel safe when you hold or comfort him when he is distressed. You help him feel safe when you respond to his communication cues, no matter how subtle, in kind ways, such as saying, “I want to keep you safe,” as you take his hand to help him down from standing on a chair (Lieberman 2017). Staying with children for several years rather than moving them every year to a new room with new teachers also provides them with a sense of safety and trust.

You will know that an infant emotionally connects in a healthy way with you when she settles in to your body as you comfort her or when a toddler comes to you for emotional refueling (Biringen 2008; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman [1975] 2000). Emotional refueling occurs when infants and toddlers need your touch, smile, or holding to gain emotional energy for their next adventure slightly away from you. You provide emotional refueling when you are the one children return to when scared, tired, or in need of assurance and affection.

Pay close attention to children who do not appear to feel emotionally connected to you or other adults in your program. If infants and toddlers avoid or seem angry at you or are wary of you, you may feel frustrated, puzzled, or discouraged that the child is not responding to your

efforts. These children need your special attention. They do not yet feel safe with you. Their experiences with adults may have led them to expect that adults are inconsistent in their interactions with them—for example, warm and loving one minute and harsh with them the next (Kerns & Brumariu 2014; Pallini et al. 2019).

Work closely with the child’s family and other staff to gain the infant’s or toddler’s trust. For example, always greet this child by kneeling down so that you are at her eye level and opening your arms to help the child feel protected, emotionally connected, and special. Consistency in your interactions and in the program schedule are critical.



## Nurture Love and Affection

Love and affection are nutrients for a young child's soul, enabling them to become socially adept humans who care about others. Children love and give love when they *feel* loved.

The first ingredient in attachment is love. The idea that paid caregivers “love” the children in their care may make some uncomfortable. Yet, no one would disagree with the idea that caregivers must have warm, nurturing feelings toward the babies in their care. Call it what you will; its essence is love. (Honig 2002, 25)

The term *affective mutuality* describes what happens when there is harmony between the adult and child. There is mutual affection. While teachers may not feel the same degree of love or affection for all children, each child needs to feel a teacher's warmth, tenderness, and positive regard.

Children who deeply trust that their favorite adults love them and think they are lovable trust themselves to try tasks even when they encounter great frustrations. Children who feel loved despite garbled speech, juice spills, toileting accidents, and loud wails when they are upset can devote their energies to growing into capable, hardworking, and joyous individuals. They can concentrate on relating well to others and learning language, how to navigate environments, how to manipulate toys and use materials to create, and how to feel comfortable with reasonable social rules (Honig 2014, 16).

## Use Mindful and Sensitive Attunement Strategies

When you consider what a child is thinking and feeling in a particular situation, you are using *mind-mindedness* (Meins 2013). You are trying to read the mind and mood of the infant or toddler. For example, consider the following:

- › What is an infant who grabs your hair thinking? Is he trying to hurt you? Most likely he is not. Could he find your beautiful hair glowing in the sunlight fascinating? Was his intent to *touch* your hair, but his hand *grasped* it instead?
- › What is a toddler thinking who shoves another child? Is she feeling angry, or is her goal to express her desire to play with her peer?

Thinking about what is in the mind of the child requires a belief that children have goals. They are actively trying different strategies to accomplish those goals. Very young children generally are not intentionally hurting others. Rather, they have a desire to connect to others but often do not know how. They may hit or punch to try to relate to a peer. That behavior usually does not achieve the toddler's goal of playing with a peer, unless an understanding and empathic teacher understands the meaning of the child's hitting behavior and helps that child try another strategy that is more likely to be successful.





To understand what a child may be feeling or thinking, offer a comment. You might say, “It seems like you are feeling sad,” or “You were trying to get Callie’s attention, weren’t you?” When you express what you think a child may be feeling or thinking, you may get it wrong. If so, the child will let you know! Keep trying to understand and verbalize what she is feeling or thinking. When infants and toddlers feel understood, they often smile, look satisfied, or continue relating and learning.

Teachers who use mind-mindedness offer comments that support children’s language and cognitive development (Kirk et al. 2015). For example, when you tell a toddler, “You are smiling! You seem happy,” she learns words to describe emotions. Using mind-mindedness comments also helps children learn to manage their behavior. If an infant appears to be gazing at a toy horse on a shelf and you say, “You really want the horse. I’ll move it closer so you can reach it,” you are both providing vocabulary and helping the infant understand how to think about his actions. Children who gain these tools show fewer behavior difficulties at 3 and 5 years of age (Meins et al. 2013).

It’s helpful to talk with other teachers about what *they* think children are thinking. Take pictures and videos of the children, share them with families and team members, and talk with them about what they think the children are feeling and thinking. Together, you can get a more complete picture of each child.

Mind-mindedness involves *sensitive attunement*. Attuned teachers engage in nonverbal and verbal turn-taking “dances” with an infant or toddler. These dances require tuning in to children’s body cues, sounds, or words and responding effectively. They require giving infants and toddlers time to take a turn in the interaction. The children feel acknowledged and like star communicators. This sensitive, attuned dance contributes to children’s social and emotional functioning (Shai & Belsky 2017) as well as other areas of development.