

Administrative Practices that Support Children's Emotional Development

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When a family entrusts their child to us, we take on the rewarding, challenging, and complex task of sharing with them the role of supporting their child's emotional development. We commit to a relationship-building process that includes connections between the child and his teacher, as well as between the program and the child's family.

This complex relationship should honor the family's primary role in guiding emotional development, and underpin our supporting role in helping children succeed in relationships at school.



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What Are the Core Capabilities and How Do They Develop?

"Mounting research from neuroscience and psychology tells us that there is a set of underlying core capabilities that adults use to manage life, work, and parenting effectively. These include, but are not limited to: planning, focus, self-control, awareness, and flexibility.

"We are not born with these skills, but we are born with the capacity to develop them through the right experiences and practice. The foundation is built in early childhood: By age 3, most children are already using executive function skills in simple ways (e.g. remembering and following simple rules). Ages 3–5 show a remarkable burst of improvement in the proficiency of these skills."

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/deep-dives/adult-capabilities/>

When we navigate this partnership successfully, we create a situation that benefits everyone involved. And, when relationship-building poses challenges for any of us, we may discover tremendous opportunities to impact the child's emotional development together.

The impact of children's emotional development on their overall development and life success is well documented (www.developingchild.harvard.edu). Early childhood is a critical period for children's developing brains, and relationships characterized by warm, caring responses are fundamental to emotional development. What happens during this period has long-term

implications for children, families, and society.

Neuroscientists are increasingly focusing on core capabilities that adults need to be able to support children's development and learning. They have issued a call to action to support developing core capabilities of all caregivers, including families, early childhood programs, and the community at large (see <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-adult-capabilities-to-improve-child-outcomes-a-theory-of-change/>). Our role in this change model is to help the adults who work with young children and their families in early childhood programs provide

stable, responsive learning environments that support emotional development.

This article identifies four administrative strategies that help directors ensure their teachers have the specialized knowledge and teaching skills needed to be effective in supporting children's emotional development.

Strategy 1: Pay close attention to building relationships with and between teachers

Although directors have many important duties, building relationships with teachers is one that already gets attention. We spend much of our time finding, training, and retaining competent teachers for our programs. We are likely to believe that teachers thrive when they have our ongoing support in building relationships with children and families, with each other, and with us.

In early childhood programs, directors provide this focus on relationship-building. We set the tone and pace, and serve as important role models of ways to form meaningful connections with one another. Our relationships with our teachers can serve as a model for the relationships teachers can develop with children and their families. Such support for relationship building within programs helps teachers support emotional development within their individual classrooms.

When administrators provide systematic and well-planned staff induction and orientation programs, schedule time for teachers to interact with colleagues and experts, and offer many chances to get further acquainted with each other, teachers are likely to begin to build relationships. Fortunately, attention to this process is somewhat intuitive, in part because of the licensing, accreditation, and professional devel-

opment standards under which we operate. Success in systematically implementing these plans helps teachers know we care about them, want them to succeed, and that we will support them in doing so.

Strategy 2: Observe teachers in action; and provide specific feedback and professional development opportunities on how to support children's emotional development

For early childhood teachers, close observation and targeted feedback is almost always a meaningful experience. Teachers report that they want far more constructive feedback than they get (www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/08/19/teachers-want-better-feedback.html). Meeting this desire head-on not only gathers valuable information to inform professional development planning in general, but also provides specific information about how to support individual teachers. It may also open the door for relationship-building collaboration, when an observer discovers which colleagues are ready to serve as role models for supporting emotional development in the classroom.

Responsibility for observations can be shared between administrative staff and peer leaders, among others. The goal is to provide targeted feedback that focuses on identifying specific examples of when teachers supported emotional development. When we identify successful strategies already in use, such as prompt response to distress, sensitive serve-and-return interactions (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/wp1/>), naming and validating feelings, or connecting emotions with appropriate behavior, we validate skills and strengths in the teaching role while reinforcing the importance of them.

Strategy 3: Focus professional development experiences on children's emotional development and ways to support it

Many problems that come to our attention as directors are related to challenging behaviors. When teachers experience difficulty, it is important to provide support and ideas about how to manage the situation.

While teachers may need support in the area of guidance and discipline, this administrative strategy is geared towards relationship-building strategies that support children in developing their internal abilities to manage their emotions and behavior in the classroom. Effective skills for supporting emotional development have been identified, and can be practiced and learned (Forrester & Albrecht, 2004, <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>). When this development is the focus, we are more likely to see improvements in what happens next and a continued strengthening of the teacher-child relationship.

Professional development needs aren't universal. When you collaborate directly with a teacher who is challenged by a child's behavior, it is easier to figure out which strategies might work and fit the situation. Take the time to work together, seek outside resources when needed (such as pediatricians, developmental psychologists, physical, occupational, speech and language, or other specialists), and set measurable goals to inform your next steps.

Include an emotional teaching competency evaluation component in your teacher evaluation process. Because these skills are so important, it makes sense to have a formal way to validate which skills teachers have, identify ones they are still working to perfect, and support progress in doing so. Once you identify competencies to include, they can also be added to induction and

orientation, built into professional development opportunities, and practiced together.

Strategy 4: Think about family engagement from the perspective of relationship-building

When parents and caregivers walk in and out the doors of programs and classrooms each day without engaging with program staff, we may miss an opportunity to tap into their extensive knowledge about their children. It is tempting to think parents have all they can handle managing their busy work and family lives. However, spending time and energy to deepen developing relationships with parents validates our respect for them as the primary educators of their child and has long-reaching benefits for everyone involved.

Although support for relationship-building at the classroom level may not be as institutionalized as it is at the program level, it deserves careful attention. Connections may initially take the form of helping to navigate enrollment, sharing a formal process for getting oriented to the classroom, and offering introductions to the many ways to engage with the program.

Hopefully, this transition to building relationships at the classroom level is buoyed by shared systems and engagement strategies, so families can also learn from each other as they settle in. Some examples include:

- predictable daily/weekly communication strategies to be used by teachers.
- an understanding of the myriad ways to get information from the family to the program or classroom.
- suggested strategies for engagement that accommodate varied needs,

available time, and preferred communication styles.

- opportunities to observe the classroom at work.
- ways to initiate spontaneous and planned conversations with teachers, and opportunities to share information and insights back and forth between teachers and families.
- help with separations at the beginning of the day and reconnections at the end of the day.

It is when problems arise that the full benefits of relationships from family engagement become the most evident. Families that have experienced frequent communication with teachers are poised to collaborate further by providing insights into their children's temperaments, sharing problem-solving strategies, and supporting classroom interventions. These relationship-strengthening experiences open the door for even more engagement in the future. When inevitable challenges arise, considering solutions together is a powerful way to strengthen relationships and an opportunity to learn from each other while potentially benefiting children in both school and home contexts.

Focusing on building relationships holds the promise of improving many aspects of our programs. When we mindfully build our relationships with teachers and help them create relationships with each other, when we observe teachers and provide feedback about supporting emotional development, and when we approach family engagement from a perspective of building relationships, we can better meet the needs of our teachers, as well as the families and children we serve.

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Examples of Teaching Competencies that Support Emotional and Social Development

- Invests time and energy in building relationships
- Responds promptly to children's distress
- Treats each child individually, gives each child what she needs to build a strong relationship with her teacher and peers
- Understands that warm, reciprocal, and caring interactions are required for relationships to grow and deepen
- Is willing to share control with children in emotionally and developmentally appropriate ways. Doesn't have to always direct children or be in charge of what they do
- Focuses on children's strengths and feelings in interactions with them