

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Teacher-Child Relationships



What You Need to Know

During infancy, secure attachment to caregivers is a foundational building block to healthy development. **Relationships are a primary infant need.** This includes not only the relationship that they have with their families, but also with any familiar adult who regularly cares for them. When infants feel that their caregivers are sensitive and responsive to their needs, they are more likely to feel safe and secure to explore the world around them. For caregivers, this means being able to accurately read infants' cues, consistently respond to their needs, and promote autonomy.

Things to Consider

What it looks like:

- ◆ Ms. Callahan greets a child with a smile and expresses how excited she is to play with them. When they reach for the blocks, Ms. Callahan notices by saying, "You want to play with the blocks!" and moving them closer to the child. When they pick the blocks up and tap them together repeatedly, Ms. Callahan joins in by tapping the blocks along with them.

In this example, Ms. Callahan is expressing warmth, attuning to the child's needs, and joining in their play. Through these small actions, the teacher is strengthening their relationship with the child by showing that they notice and care for them.

Development of Emotional Connections with Adults

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Show recognition of familiar adults by turning head toward familiar voice, smiling, reaching, or quieting when held.	Seek to be close, make contact, or look to familiar adults for emotional support.
Engage with familiar adults for calming and comfort, to focus attention, and to share joy.	Look to familiar adults for assistance and guidance with actions and behavior.
Initiate and participate in reciprocal interaction with familiar adults through expressions, gestures, sounds, or behaviors.	Become distressed when separated from familiar adults.
Communicate needs to familiar adults by using a variety of behaviors (e.g., crying, looking, smiling, pointing, or reaching).	Show understanding of the meaning of familiar caregivers' verbal and non-verbal communication and responds with facial expressions, gestures, words, or actions.

Setting the Stage

Activities, materials, or routines that support the development of a strong teacher-child relationship:

- ◆ Spend a few moments providing quality time with each infant. Give each infant in your classroom your undivided attention (don't multi-task!) and follow their lead during play.
- ◆ Authentically greet infants and their families as they arrive each morning.
- ◆ Join in the play rather than simply standing back to observe. Promote joint attention by attending to the child and their play, getting on their level, sharing emotions, and intentionally engage with infants.
- ◆ Create a purposeful environment that encourages independent exploration by making sure that your classroom is safe, clean, engaging, and child-friendly.
- ◆ Keep routines and materials structured. This helps infants feel that they can trust you and their environment.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Teacher-Child Relationships

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe each infant and your relationship with them. Do they look to you for help? Are there certain infants with whom you feel more or less connected? Are there some who cannot seem to be comforted by you when they are upset?
Tuesday FOCUS	Help Children See You as a Resource Help infants see you as a resource, a helper, and a partner in problem-solving. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Acknowledge and accept feelings.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ “I know it’s hard to say goodbye to Mommy because you love her very much. It’s okay to feel sad. Would you like a hug?”◆ Read cues: Notice the ways that infants intentionally or unintentionally communicate their needs. Remember that every infant has their own unique personalities and means of communicating their wants/needs, so one infant’s cues may not be the same as another’s.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ “You’re rubbing your eyes and yawning! Let’s get ready for your nap a little early.”◆ Respond to needs with flexibility and sensitivity: When you notice an infant expressing a need, be prepared to show flexibility. For example, if you are reading a book together with an infant who then repeatedly points and reaches for the train on the floor, be responsive by taking a break from reading (for now) and playing with the train instead.◆ Partner in problem-solving: Whenever an infant becomes upset or frustrated about a problem (e.g., a toy is not working), be ready to assist and let them know that you can “figure it out together.”
Wednesday SCAFFOLD	Promote Child Autonomy Show genuine interest in infants’ interests. This lets them know that you are attuned and responsive to their needs and desires, while also setting the expectation that you are there to help if they need you. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Let them direct the play: Follow infants’ lead (without taking over).<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ “You are clapping! I can tell that you like this song. Let me clap with you!”◆ Offer assistance without doing it for them: Allow infants to do as much for themselves as possible. For example, when an infant needs help reaching for a stuffed animal, lift them up so that they can grab it rather than getting it for them.
Thursday & Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffold. Find ways to intentionally incorporate strategies to continue building upon relationships with individual children.