
Handout 2.4 Responsive Interactions

THINK ABOUT IT

A baby attempts to communicate with an important adult by making a sound or a gesture—and the adult responds.

Learning happens within relationships (Day & Parlakian, 2004). Young children learn from the responses they receive from caregiving adults. When parents and caregivers respond in a positive, attentive way, babies begin to learn to care about others. This is the start of having a conscience.

Effective communication is the heart of positive relationships with babies. Before infants can use words, they use their bodies, facial expressions, and sounds, such as crying or cooing, to express their needs and feelings. They depend on adults to understand these cues and respond quickly to meet their needs. When adults do understand babies and meet their needs, babies learn that they are loved, understood, and important, and that they can *trust* adults to take care of them. Even though babies will not remember these early positive experiences with adults, they will have begun to learn how to be caring adults themselves.

For example, laughing and smiling together with an infant engages brain activity in ways that promote a sense of trust and security (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004). In the same way, infants and children who are talked to, read to, and otherwise involved in lots of talking back and forth show somewhat more advanced language skills than children who are not as verbally engaged by their caregivers (Hart & Risley, 1995). Positive relationships help build healthy brains.

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On the other hand, powerful negative emotions can upset babies' thinking and learning. Chemicals produced in the brain when a child feels stressed or threatened affect the brain's ability to remember and learn. Continued exposure to violence, abuse, and neglect can damage children's ability to learn. Unpredictable responses by adults also can lead to social-emotional and physical problems. Scientists believe that experiencing stress or fear in early life can lead to lifelong problems (Mattmiller, 1999; Perry, n.d.).

Early learning, growth and development happens in caregiving relationships with adults.

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