

The Role of Relationships in the Primary Years

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Supporting a child’s healthy social and emotional growth takes commitment from all primary caregivers in the child’s life. This includes mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, and other key adults.

For many years, researchers have discussed the importance of attachment in early childhood. It is widely accepted that relationships are an important part of healthy developmental processes.

A wealth of research supports the need for strong, safe, and secure teacher-child relationships. We know that relationships are essential to learning, and that developmental achievements are the result of interactions with other people and with objects. Forgoing attention to the quality of the teacher-child relationship disputes the evidence from brain research regarding effective practice, which indicates that teacher-child interactions are a key element to learning academic skills.

One of the functions of the limbic system is that of the “relationship center” of the brain (Figure 1). The limbic

system drives children’s motivation, emotion, and feelings. Thus, a child who has a good relationship with his or her teacher will feel safer and is more motivated to learn.

The authors of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (2000) say this about the role of relationships in the lives of young children:

“Despite their diversity, however, all young children seem to require certain things from early abiding relationships. These include:

- a) *reliable support that establishes confident security in the adult,*
- b) *responsiveness that strengthens a young child’s sense of agency and self-efficacy,*
- c) *protection from the harms that children fear and the threats of which they may be unaware,*
- d) *affection by which young children develop self-esteem,*
- e) *opportunities to experience and resolve human conflict cooperatively,*
- f) *support for the growth of new skills and capabilities that are within the child’s reach,*
- g) *reciprocal interaction by which children learn the mutual give and take of positive sociability, and*
- h) *the experience of being respected by others and respecting them as human beings.*

In these ways, relationships shape the development of self-awareness, social competence, conscience, emotional growth and emotion regulation, learning and cognitive growth, and a variety of other foundational developmental accomplishments.” (pgs. 264-265)

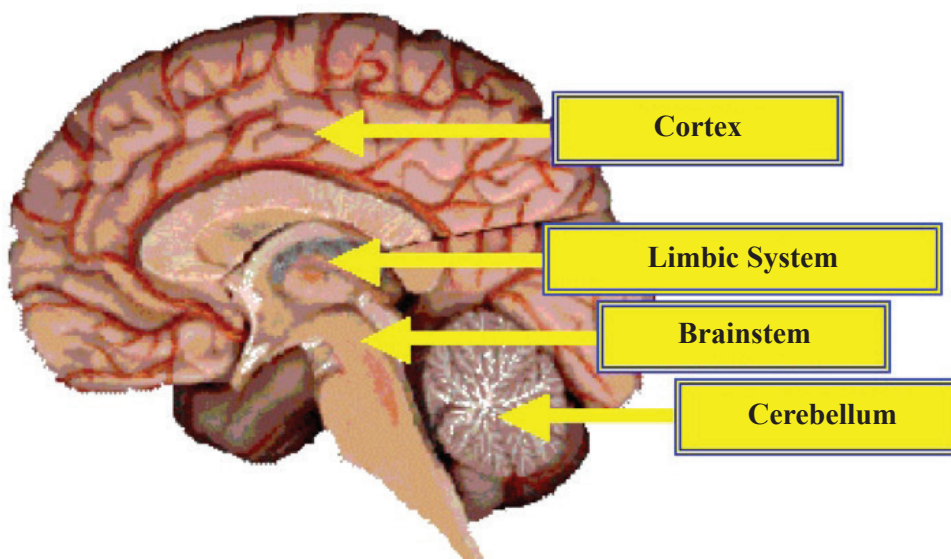


Figure 1. The parts of the brain associated with children’s learning.

Supporting Relationships in the Primary Years

Adults must support children's emotional and social development in addition to their cognitive skills. They also must assist children to navigate conflicts with peers, easing the transition from home to school each day, and helping children identify their feelings and needs. An adult who is responsive to the emotional needs of a child will be rewarded with a child who is excited, interested, and engaged. Adults who support the development of relationships encourage and support positive interactions among children. This includes encouraging children to negotiate their own solutions to problems through a conflict resolution approach.

The following are specific ways adults can help build relationships with children:

- Greet every child by name.
- Hang up children's work and talk about it.
- Tell other people about the positive aspects of the child when the child is present.
- After a difficult day, say, "I'm sorry we had a tough day today. I know tomorrow is going to be better!"
- Give hugs, high fives, and thumbs up upon accomplishing tasks.
- When you've been away from a child, tell him or her how much he or she was missed while you were gone.
- Write on a T-shirt all the special things about a given child.
- Find time to read to a child.
- Find out what a child's favorite book is and read it.
- Learn about what the child is interested in and then ask him/her about those things.
- Take time to play with children, follow their lead.

Putting It All Together

Promoting social and emotional development requires a comprehensive approach that includes building positive relationships with children. Through trusting relationships with adults, children learn about their world and their place in it. Trusting relationships also teach children that the world is safe and responsive to their needs. Additionally, they learn to form satisfying relationships with others, to communicate, to face challenges, and to experience and regulate their emotions.

Supporting a child's healthy social and emotional growth takes commitment from all the primary caregivers in the child's life. This includes mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, and other key adults in the child's life. It's important to remember that children in the primary years observe our relationships. What they observe shapes their expectations of how people treat each other and, therefore, influences their developing social skills and emotional competence.

Resources

- A Kindergarten for the 21st Century: Nebraska's Kindergarten Position Statement: <http://www.education.ne.gov/oec/pubs/KStatement.pdf>
- Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL): <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- The Early Childhood Training Center: <http://www.education.ne.gov/oec/ectc.html>
- Nebraska Early Childhood Pyramid Model for Supporting Social/Emotional Competence (EC-PBIS): http://www.education.ne.gov/OEC/teaching_pyramid/index.html
- Texts4Teachers: <http://extensiontexts.unl.edu>
- The Learning Child: www.extension.unl.edu/child

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