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THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Social Emotional development begins at birth and progresses throughout a child's lifetime. It provides the building blocks for meaningful relationships and learning throughout life. The process by which infants and toddlers become emotionally competent is filled with challenges - challenges that occur in normal development, challenges that signal unmet needs, and challenges that are particularly difficult for children themselves.

When young children encounter difficulties in acquiring social emotional skills, it puts them at greater risk not only emotionally and developmentally, but also academically! Infants and toddlers rely heavily on adults to help them experience, regulate and express emotions. It is in the comfort and security of nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers that infants and toddlers begin to develop emotional wellness.

Social emotional development refers to the ability of a young child to:

- form close and secure relationships with peers and adults
- experience, regulate and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways
- explore their environment and learn.

Key components of relationships are that they:

- have emotional connections
- endure over time
- have special meaning to both people
- create memories and expectations in the minds of both people

Repeated interactions lead to fairly predictable relationships because the infant or young child begins to know how the other person will respond to him/her. Prior relationships create feelings, expectations and behaviors that we bring to each new relationship. If the child (or caregiver) has a history of supportive or satisfying relationships, they have an expectation that future relationships will be similar.

However, if the child (or caregiver) has a personal history of emotionally difficult or traumatic experiences, it is harder to manage new experiences and relationships.

Research Findings on Early Social Emotional Development:

1. Nature and nurture combine to define who we are as individuals.
2. Nature has provided humans with what some scientists call early infant competencies or motivations.
3. Babies are born to connect with other humans.
4. They discriminate sounds of language very early.
5. They recognize their parents' voices.
6. They can match emotional voice tone to emotional facial expression.
7. Babies prefer looking at faces.
8. They seek physical and emotional equilibrium.
9. Babies are predisposed to signal their needs to someone who will help them survive.
10. Babies are an emotional trigger for adults.
11. Babies are born with the desire to master and explore their environment and are active participants in their own learning.
12. The infant's early brain development is designed to connect the newborn with other human beings around him who will provide care.
13. The brain grows through the experiences the infant has with the world. (Parents and other adults are that world).
14. The family's culture influences all areas of a baby's development, including the social realm.
15. Many factors can affect social emotional development, including developmental delays or serious health issues with the baby, or an environment with multiple risk factors (ex. poverty, substance abuse, adult mental health issues, domestic violence).

Child Temperament and Ability to Form Relationships

Each infant or toddler's ability to form relationships and regulate his/her response is dependent in part on his/her own biology (temperament) and in part on how sensitively adults in their life are able to provide support. Each child is born with his/her own temperament (individual way of approaching the world). Some aspects of temperament are noticeable from birth and continue throughout life. Children engage with the world according to these inborn characteristics. A large part of the caregiver's job is to adapt his or her own temperament to meet the needs of the infant or toddler. The sensitive adult adapts his or her behavior in such a way as to not require the infant to adapt. Each

child is born with his/her personal style of approaching or reacting to the world. Understanding a child's temperament can help us begin to anticipate what situations may be easy or more difficult for him/her. It can also enable us to be better caregivers!

The following traits are considered to be key components of a child's temperament:

- Activity level: always active or generally still
- Biological rhythms: predictability of hunger, sleep, elimination
- Approach/Withdrawal: response to new situations
- Mood: tendency to react with positive or negative mood, serious, fussy
- Intensity of reaction: energy or strength of emotional reaction
- Sensitivity: comfort with levels of sensory information: sound, brightness of light, feel of clothing, new tastes
- Adaptability: ease of managing transitions or changes
- Distractibility: how easily a child's attention is pulled from an activity
- Persistence: how long a child continues with an activity he/she finds difficult

Temperament Types

There are three temperament types into which many children fall. Each of these is characterized by a trait that may dominate a child's behavior. It is important not to use these to label children in your care, but to help you become a better observer of a child's unique needs. The three temperament types and characteristics of each are as follows:

1. The **FLEXIBLE/EASY** child is generally easy to care for, adapts quickly to new situations, is biologically regulated, is optimistic and generally has a positive mood. This child tends to enjoy new people and places, potty trains easily, sleeps through the night, and even when unhappy, shows only mild signals of distress.
2. The **FEISTY** child is often the opposite of the flexible/easy child. This child may be hard to get to sleep, and biological patterns may be more irregular, possibly leading to more difficult toilet training. He/she may fuss or cry at loud noises, and is often wary of new people/situations. This child is often slow to warm up and may escalate to temper tantrums quickly when frustrated. He/she may have frequent unhappy moods and be very loud even when slightly unhappy.
3. The **FEARFUL** child adapts quite cautiously to new situations and may require the support of a trusted adult figure to help them engage with new

people or experiences. He/she may withdraw or respond negatively to new situations, but reactions gradually become more positive with continued exposure.

The child's ability to develop and behave in acceptable ways is greatly determined by nurturing adults in their lives who work at identifying, recognizing and responding appropriately to the child's unique temperament. Parents and caregivers have a wonderful opportunity to be positive guides and role models in children's natural ways of responding to the world around them.

Caregivers can promote healthy development by:

- Working to support social emotional wellness in all young children
- Making every effort to prevent occurrences of escalation of social emotional problems in children at risk
- Identifying and working to fix problems that surface
- When needed, referring families to appropriate support service

Specific ways to foster social emotional development through relationships in the child care setting:

1. Teachers should listen to and respect parents' wishes regarding their beliefs, values, culture and concerns. This includes things like: routines, feeding, holding, naps, play, holidays and language. Any conflicts should be resolved as soon as possible using a system involving listening, negotiating, and problem solving. Always involve your Director and/or Assistant Director in this process.
2. Support the relationship between each child and his/her family by: displaying photographs of the child and their family where the child can easily see them; having books or photo albums with family/child pictures available for the child to look at; taping a family member reading or singing to their child.
3. Make family members feel welcome in the program by: having an open door policy and a welcoming attitude, having a family-friendly bulletin board listing opportunities to visit or volunteer, providing a private area for Mom to breastfeed her child or a family member to spend time alone with their child, providing resources for families on topics such as discipline, normal growth and development, reading, and suggestions of age appropriate activities and play with their child.

4. Involve families in your program in order to build a partnership between your program and families by: surveying parents on areas of desired involvement, planning social events with family input that include the entire family, offering age appropriate activities for family members to work on with their child at home (i.e. sock puppets, bean bags, picture books etc.), developing a sense of community with monthly newsletters with information re: your program, city or community family friendly events etc.
5. Utilize a system for daily exchange of information between child care staff and families by: having a special place in your center where information concerning the child's needs/activities can be written and shared mutually between caregivers and families, providing a conversation corner where caregivers and families can have a private place to talk.

Experiencing the safety and comfort of early relationships helps infants and toddlers learn that others can be trusted and counted on. Early social emotional wellness develops within the context of these relationships. Caregivers and parents use themselves to help young children express and regulate emotion, form close and secure relationships and explore and learn about the world around them. Every day is a new opportunity to support the young children in your care to achieve the highest level of social emotional health possible, leading them on to a productive and satisfying adulthood.

Resources:

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University. Social Emotional Development within the Context of Relationships.

Parlakian, R., & Seibel, N L. (2002). Building strong foundations: Practical guidance for promoting the social -emotional development of infants and toddlers. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE Press.