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RESPONSIVE ROUTINES, ENVIRONMENT AND STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

The key to social and emotional development is strong, positive, secure relationships. Infants and toddlers need consistent, nurturing adults who are supportive and responsive. Caring adults provide safe, stable, and predictable environments that support young children's growing independence. These learning environments promote a healthy sense of self and connections with others.

Observation is the First Step in Responsive Care Giving

Observing children helps us to understand how they are getting along and what kinds of experiences will support their development.

- Look and record what you see and hear without making any guesses. Do not assign meaning to what you see.
- Focus should be on behavior, interactions, and activities of babies and toddlers at different times of the day and with different adults and peers.
- Observing regularly is important either as an individual or as a team.
- Record all observations.
- Share with parents and colleagues to incorporate their observations in order to follow the child's progress.

Information from repeated observations can help determine if a baby's or toddler's actions represent normal ups and downs in growth and development. It is even more important if there is a concern about some aspect of a child's development or behavior.

Schedules and Routines

Routines are the regular and repeated things we do and the way we do them day by day. Responsive schedules and routines are ones that are designed with close attention to the developmental needs of all children in the setting and are adapted to the needs of individual children. Babies and toddlers learn about people and the way the world works through their daily routines. Schedules are the time we do something but it is more the order or sequence for the routine that is important to young infants and toddlers. Older infants and toddlers benefit more from flexible routines and schedules. When creating a schedule it is important to provide a healthy balance for

children, between group times and solitary moments, quiet and noisy activities, indoor and outdoor play. Daily routines include:

- **greeting and goodbye** - The caregiver should stop what she is doing and welcome the child. She should also ask the parent questions to elicit info on the child's morning thus far and show interest in what the child has experienced since she last saw him.
- **feeding and eating** - Smile and talk to the infant or toddler during meals. Go at the child's pace when feeding and allow the older child to finish eating what they want. It takes time to learn how to drink from a cup and eat with utensils! Be sensitive of a child's ethnic and cultural background too. Try to offer foods they like and that are familiar to them. Invite families to eat with their children.
- **diapering and toileting** - Change diapers as soon as they are wet or soiled. Keep the diapering area safe, clean and pleasant. Be gentle during the diapering procedure. Toileting is a necessary social skill that usually starts at age two. It takes time and patience. You can encourage healthy and respectful toilet learning by communicating with families, staying positive and relaxed, making favorable comments on success, handling "accidents" in a calm manner and practicing careful sanitation and good hand washing.
- **sleeping and resting** - This routine should convey warmth and security. It's up to the child whether or not she sleeps, but it is the caregiver's job to create a relaxed and quiet rest time. Restful sleep is an act of trust. Consider that the child may be going through a crisis in their lives, excited about a special event, or they have a temperament that makes it difficult for them to settle down. Create a restful mood for the children by reading quietly, playing soothing music and rubbing backs.
- **transitions** - These times are important because they can make the day seem smooth and well-organized. Allow enough time for children to make transitions gradually to avoid stressful situations. It helps to give advance warning signals before changing activities. Children are more likely to cooperate and help move the process along more quickly when favorable comments are used too.

Responsive Environments:

When babies and toddlers feel emotionally and physically secure, they have the opportunity to freely explore their environment. Caregivers of infants and toddlers create the physical spaces, choose toys and other materials and provide the interactions that make up their learning experiences. A well-designed infant-toddler physical environment can have a major impact on the social, emotional, language, cognitive and motor development. A well-planned environment will include:

- child-size furniture and adult size couch or chair

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- safe and clean spaces
- soft spaces to crawl or sit in
- mirrors to see themselves alone or with others
- things to climb on
- places for one or two children to go to get away
- blanket on the floor for infants
- rocking chairs for one-on-one time
- outdoor space - areas that can be used for running, walking, jumping, to use riding toys, for children to sit and rest alone or together
- visual objects - plants, fish in bowls, pictures and patterned objects
- auditory - many types of music, voices, rhythms, animal sounds
- tactile - soft, hard, smooth and rough
- olfactory - food smells, flower smells, farm and field smells
- language - Engage children in conversation to talk about what they are doing from their perspective. Always give them something new and interesting to think about. Use language to heighten curiosity and develop interest. The child needs good speech models and language patterns. Baby talk does not provide a useful model for children to emulate.

Research shows that children who can regulate their emotions effectively are better equipped to engage in thinking such as problem solving and decision making. The sensitive caregiver uses her presence, her voice, eye contact, her physical proximity or nearness to the child, and her touch to provide security and to assure the child that the world is a safe and interesting place. It is within these relationships that children's social and emotional development and learning is supported and enhanced and children are given the opportunity to reach their greatest potential.

Resources

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University.
Responsive Routines, Environment, and Strategies to Support Social Emotional Development in Infants and Toddlers.

Creating a Responsive Learning Environment for Early Learning. <http://education.com>.

It's the Little Things. www.pbs.org.

Tips for Promoting Social-Emotional Development. www.zerotothree.org