

CONNECTIONS MATTER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD


The Importance of Positive Relationships for Young Children

ATTACHMENTS MATTER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Childcare providers, preschool teachers, and other alternative caregivers shape the future of our children, our community, and our nation. Their work is tremendously important, given that early childhood experiences influence our brains, our health, and our chance to learn and succeed later in life. **53%** of 12-month-olds and **70%** of 36-month-olds receive child care from people other than their parents.¹ The key to healthy brain development is healthy relationships.

TOXIC STRESS IN INFANTS AND CHILDREN

When a child experiences powerful stress without the support of a warm, caring adult—especially if that stress happens often or lasts a long time—it can become toxic, affecting their development and lifelong health. Fortunately, the presence of a caring adult can help mitigate negative effects and teach coping skills and resiliency.

 **1 IN 4** children has experienced a traumatic event by the time they enter preschool. High-risk populations experience even more.

HEALING POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

Positive and secure relationships with alternative caregivers, like childcare providers and preschool teachers, can protect against trauma, promote good behaviors, and improve lifelong health.

Only **42%** of children are securely attached to their professional caregivers.¹ **0 - 3%** of infants securely attach to their parents or guardians in homes where abuse occurs.² Secure attachment to caregivers helps develop body systems that regulate stress.³



EXAMPLES OF TOXIC STRESS INCLUDE:

- Abuse
- Neglect
- Domestic violence
- Separation or divorce
- Substance abuse in the home
- A family member in prison
- A family member with mental illness
- Community violence
- Poverty
- Food insecurity
- Bullying

CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE TOXIC STRESS AND TRAUMA MAY:

							
Complain about physical discomfort or pain	Be confused about what is dangerous	Miss developmental milestones	Avoid contact with others	Fear separation from the familiar	Have behavior issues	Startle easily	Have difficulties with language

LONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH CAREGIVERS

Research shows that the longer a child interacts with the same caregiver, the more secure of an attachment they form, leading to fewer behavior problems and better health. This strategy is called continuity of care.

Although limited resources and staff changes make it difficult to keep caregivers with the same children for years, longer is always better. Sensitive interactions with a consistent caregiver over time can serve as a buffer from the stress caused by frequent caregiver changes in the past. We recommend reaching out to local resources for support and guidance while trying to implement continuity of care practices. (See below for list of resources).

Research recommends that children spend as much time as possible with the same caregiver. Children with the same caregiver for more than 3 months seek their comfort in stressful situations, and the caregivers have more success soothing them.⁴



SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO:

- Better physical and mental health
- Fewer behavioral problems
- Improved performance in school and at work
- Less interaction with social services
- Less interaction with criminal justice

WHEN CAREGIVERS STAY WITH THE SAME CHILDREN LONGER:

- Toddlers have fewer behavior problems
- Caregivers and toddlers have more positive interactions⁴

TAKE ACTION

PROMOTE SECURE ATTACHMENTS

Small changes to the way caregivers interact with children can make a huge difference in their development, health, and behavior.

- Respond calmly, even in stressful situations
- Use positive body language
- Sing songs
- Play imaginary games
- Read aloud
- Smile often
- Give hugs and physical affection
- Help at meal and bedtimes
- Offer comfort to fussy, upset children
- Remain visible while allowing children to explore the room
- Respond to a child's words and sounds with back-and-forth interactions
- Try to understand and describe what the child is thinking or feeling
- Keep caregivers with the same children (i.e., continuity of care) for as long as possible

HELP PARENTS HELP KIDS

When we support children and their parents together, we see far greater results than just focusing on one or the other. This is called the "two-generation approach."

- Tell parents about the child's accomplishments and needs
- Be a cheerleader for both the parent and the child
- Ask how things are going at home
- Provide a reliable parenting resource
- Praise the parent's strengths, as well as the child's
- Encourage parents to:
 - Tune in to the child's behavior and interests
 - Talk more to the child
 - Take turns talking or playing a game
 - Turn off background TV

RESOURCES FOR IOWANS

- 1 Iowa Childcare Resource and Referral Trainings: iowaccrr.org/training
- 2 Iowa Early Learning Standards: iowaaeyc.org
- 3 Iowa Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: promotingmentalhealthiowa.org

SOURCES

- Vermeer, Harriet J., and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg. "Attachment to Mother and Nonmaternal Care: Bridging the Gap." *Attachment & Human Development*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2008, pp. 263–273.
- Troutman, Beth. *Integrating Behaviorism and Attachment Theory in Parent Coaching*. Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2015.
- Clinton, J, et al. "The Importance of Infant Mental Health." *Paediatrics & Child Health*, vol. 21, no. 5, 1 June 2016, pp. 239–241.
- Ruprecht, Karen, et al. "Continuity of Care, Caregiver–Child Interactions, and Toddler Social Competence and Problem Behaviors." *Early Education and Development*, vol. 27, no. 2, 16 Dec. 2015, pp. 221–239.