

Chapter 3: Relationships and Interactions

Opening

Infants and toddlers learn and develop across many contexts. This chapter discusses key considerations and practices to support learning and development in the context of relationships and interactions in **early learning and care settings**.

Relationships and Interactions as a Context for Learning and Development

Relationships and interactions are at the heart of early learning and development. Children learn and grow through interactions with adults and peers. These interactions usually take place as part of ongoing, meaningful relationships. When infants and toddlers are in the care of individuals outside their family, secure primary relationships with **responsive infant–toddler care educators** (care educators) support their development. Through consistent and responsive interactions, care educators build children’s self-confidence and support their learning. Although every child learns and develops through interactions with others, each child’s learning and development varies based on their lived experiences, cultural identity, home languages, and racial-ethnic identity, among many other factors.

The term *interactions* refers to times when children engage with other people. Interactions might occur during daily **routines**, indoor and outdoor play, or any moment in the day when the child is alert and responsive. Within each of these situations, care educators interact with children in a variety of ways:

- communicating back and forth, like in a conversation. This communication can be verbal, nonverbal, or both.
- observing a child who is engaged in play and exploration alone or with others while remaining emotionally and physically available to the child. In this situation, the care educator watches for cues, such as a look, a vocalization (coo, babble, or whimper), or a gesture from the child that indicates interest in interacting with them.
- providing **modeling** or **scaffolding** for children. Scaffolding is intentional support or help that care educators provide to children to help them learn new skills. Scaffolding can involve giving guidance, providing encouragement, or modeling when needed. Care educators gradually reduce this help as children become more capable.

- initiating playful experiences, such as songs or fingerplay, games like peek-a-boo, picture books, or indoor and outdoor physical play.

As part of caring, respectful relationships, care educators strive to be responsive to what children communicate about their experiences, interests, ideas, wants, or needs. Care educators who are intentional about planning and engaging in responsive interactions with infants and toddlers support young children’s understanding of self and their relationship with the people and things in their **environment** (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).



Key Considerations for Interactions to Support Learning and Development

Caring, consistent, and responsive interactions support children’s learning and development in the domains of Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development, Cognitive Development, and **Perceptual** and **Motor Development**. Care educators support learning and development through interactions:

- **Interacting with children in ways consistent with family preferences and priorities.** Interactions vary from family to family and from **culture** to culture (e.g., Jukes et al., 2024; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). Conversations between care educators and families about preferences, expectations, and priorities around child care practices and culture support a shared understanding. Through conversations and observation, care educators learn how families interact with their children and work to provide responsive interactions that are consistent with families’ preferences and goals.

For example, 6-month-old Etta’s family has communicated that when they arrive in the morning, they would like the care educator to hold Etta or greet her with a hug. In contrast, a care educator might observe that the family of 9-month-old Soleil stands back with Soleil to wave hello in the morning, then puts her down and waits for her to approach her care educator. Adopting family practices, when possible, provides respectful and familiar experiences for children in the early learning and care setting.

- **Individualizing interactions for each child.** Personalizing interactions is necessary because each child has different strengths, needs, interests, and lived experiences. Children also may be experiencing another language for the first time when they enter a care setting, which can influence the ways they interact with others. Rather than automatically responding to the same cue or communication from different children in the same way, care educators individualize interactions based on what they have observed and know about the child.

Children’s engagement in interactions also differs based on their **temperament tendencies**: the ways in which infants and young children relate to people, things, and situations. Temperament tendencies include how active children often are, how reactive they are to unexpected situations, and how attentive they are when there are distractions. For example, a care educator might observe that a 34-month-old child is very joyful and exuberant in their reactions to exciting experiences. In response, the care educator can establish a calm tone and introduce potentially exciting learning opportunities in a low-key manner that allows the child to regulate their response to the situation (Virmani et al., 2023).

Another factor that influences how children engage in interactions is whether the child has experienced **trauma**.



Research to Practice

Approaching Interactions With Trauma-Informed Practice

In the context of interactions with care educators and peers, children who have experienced trauma—such as abuse, neglect, or loss of a family member—may exhibit behaviors activated by trauma experiences in play or other interactions. Children who have experienced trauma may indicate a heightened stress response to specific events, changes, or transitions during the day. For example, a child who has experienced trauma may withdraw from care educators and peers, have intense emotional reactions, or show sudden increased clinginess. Care educators can learn about children’s behavior as well as the circumstances and experiences of the child to understand why they are indicating possible signs of traumatic stress. Care educators may find that a child acts out emotional experiences or traumatic events during play to cope with their feelings (Kurtz, 2023; Nicholson, Kurtz, et al., 2023).

Infant mental health resources can help care educators learn how to individualize interactions to support children in regulating their behaviors and reactions to stress. Care educators can seek out infant mental health resources, as needed, to recognize children’s differences, appreciate their assets, and understand the factors that may activate a traumatic stress response in individual children (Bartlett, 2021; Martin et al., 2021). Care educators can take a trauma-informed approach to interactions with infants and toddlers by listening, observing children’s behavior, developing and maintaining safe and secure emotional connections with children, and engaging in **coregulation** to manage children’s intense emotions and behaviors (Kurtz, 2023; Nicholson, Perez, et al., 2023).¹ These strategies also support children’s social and emotional development.

¹ For additional resources and practices for trauma- and healing-informed care, care educators can refer to Head Start’s resources on implementing trauma-informed practices, the *Safe Spaces: Foundation for Trauma-Informed Practice for Educational Care Settings* training, available from the Office of the California Surgeon General, and materials available online from the Positive and Adverse Childhood Experiences (PACES) Connection Resource Center.

- **Supporting full participation through inclusive interactions.**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that care educators use to support every child’s full participation in interactions. UDL invites care educators to provide multiple ways for children to engage in interactions and support children’s communication and expression. Some children may require additional supports or adjustments—such as accommodations, adaptations, and modifications—to ensure their full participation in learning opportunities (CAST, 2024).

- **Engaging in sensitive and responsive interactions.** Infants and toddlers communicate using facial expressions, gaze, gestures, vocalizations, and words. Observing, responding to, and building on these cues allows care educators to provide children with warm, respectful, and responsive interactions. Responsive interactions can mean taking action (such as noticing a 6-month-old’s interest in an object and moving the object to a place where the

child can grasp it), communicating about the child’s needs (such as acknowledging that a toddler is hungry and noting that snack time will be soon), or simply observing and being available to the child to provide a sense of security. These interactions support infants’ and toddlers’ growth across all domains of learning and development (Wittmer & Honig, 2020).

- **Centering playful and joyful interactions.**

Joyful, playful interactions with care educators and peers promote infant–toddler development across all domains. When a care educator playfully interacts with a 4-month-old infant—for example, repeating their coos and mimicking their facial expressions—the care educator builds and strengthens the relationship and contributes to the child’s earliest sense of self and belonging. Similarly, young children’s interactions with other infants and toddlers foster early relationships, which build children’s connections with the community, social understanding, and **empathy** (NAEYC, 2020).

Planning Interactions

The planning cycle of observing and documenting, studying and interpreting, and developing and implementing plans allows care educators to continually adapt and engage in responsive interactions that support children’s learning and development. Observing means being present and attentive while children interact with care educators, family members, other children, **materials**, and their environment. The primary objective of observation is to better understand children’s interests, ideas, strengths, and needs; the focus of their explorations; and the skills they are learning. Observation may be focused on an individual child or on the interests and interactions of a small group of children. Care educators document their observations in various ways, including taking notes, making video and audio recordings, taking photos, and saving samples of the creative items children produce. Documentation allows care educators to reflect on their observations at a later time.

As care educators study their observations and share them with colleagues and children’s families, they develop ideas for future interactions that will expand children’s exploration, learning, and development. Care educators then plan learning experiences that extend or add complexity to a child’s or a small group of children’s interests. They work to understand how a child demonstrates interest; explores their world; and communicates their thoughts, wants, and needs. Care educators also study and reflect on their own feelings and behaviors as a way to develop empathy and understanding. They use all this information to support and respond to the child in ways that foster engagement and learning during future interactions.

Interactions may be planned in advance or may occur in the moment. Even in-the-moment interactions are informed by previous observation, documentation, and reflection. All interactions, planned or spontaneous, are most effective when they are responsive to the child during back-and-forth communication.

Interactions may be planned in advance or may occur in the moment. Even in-the-moment interactions are informed by previous observation, documentation, and reflection.

Care educators plan for varied learning opportunities and interactions throughout the day. These include opportunities for children to engage in interactions with peers, playful and open-ended exploration, **literacy** experiences, and physical activity. Incorporating connections to children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds through books, games, and traditions is an important part of planning interactions. Examples of planned interactions include inviting a child to read a book together, offering a child interesting materials to extend exploration of an idea alone or with others, or playing a game together.

Observing, reflecting, modifying, and adapting are key to planning interactions that connect with each child. For example, a care educator

caring for a 3-month-old might become familiar with behaviors that indicate the child is tired and ready to transition to a nap. A care educator of a 24-month-old might learn the child’s favorite song and plan to incorporate that song as part of interactions in daily routines. Another care educator might observe a 32-month-old’s interest in construction vehicles and invite the child later in the day to explore related picture books together. For a child who has just learned to throw, a care educator might invite the child to toss a soft object back and forth while they communicate about the shape and trajectory of the object and the child’s movements.

When offering planned interactions, care educators observe how children engage in the learning experience and respond accordingly. For example, a care educator might plan to introduce a new story or song with the use of props or might prepare materials with a general idea of how children might engage with the materials. Children may not respond with interest, or they may take the learning experience in a different direction. These situations can be an opportunity for care educators to understand what idea or hypothesis the child would like to pursue in the moment and to pivot to the child’s interest. These collaborative moments of exploration can be delightful for both children and care educators.



Areas of Practice

Information on supporting relationships and interactions is organized into six areas of practice. Each area of practice is further organized into specific practices, with accompanying explanations and examples. Table 1 provides an overview of practices that are addressed in this chapter.

Table 1. Areas of Practice for Relationships and Interactions

Areas of Practice	Practices
<p>Partnering With Families to Support Interactions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observing how families interact with their children and communicating shared understandings Collaborating with families to plan ways to support learning and development Working with families to support children’s development in their home languages Collaborating with families to engage in culturally responsive and affirming interactions with children
<p>Individualizing Interactions to Meet Each Child’s Needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing a variety of choices for interactions Providing additional supports or adjustments for children with disabilities
<p>Being Sensitive and Responsive to Children’s Cues and Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responding to children’s verbal and nonverbal communication Acknowledging children’s emotions Providing encouragement

Communicating During Interactions to Prompt Thinking and New Learning

Connecting language to people, things, and actions in the child’s environment

Prompting children’s thinking and expanding on ideas

Engaging in back-and-forth interactions

Communicating about expectations and transitions

Centering Play and Social Interactions

Engaging in joyful, playful interactions with children

Creating opportunities for peer interactions

Scaffolding and Modeling New Skills and Behaviors

Embracing children’s tendencies to imitate

Learning through interacting with others

Scaffolding children’s acquisition of new skills

Many of the practices are accompanied by short examples. In addition, In-Practice Examples throughout the chapter illustrate how care educators support infant and toddler development through relationships and interactions. Although most of the speech of the children and adults is represented in English in the examples, the communication during actual interactions in an early learning and care setting may occur in any language. Care educators who share the child’s home language support the child’s language development and strengthen the child’s connections to their family and community when they communicate with the child using the home language.

Area of Practice

Partnering With Families to Support Interactions

Families provide children’s most significant relationships, and families are most knowledgeable about their children. Building and sustaining warm, positive, and respectful relationships with families is an essential part of supporting children’s learning, development, and trust. Care educators use what they learn from families to plan, initiate, and engage in interactions with children. Enriching relationships with children and families support children’s learning and development in all areas (Mason et al., 2025; Murphy et al., 2021).

Practice

Observing how families interact with their children and communicating shared understandings

Because each relationship is unique, there will be differences between the interactions in a **child’s home** and the interactions in the early learning and care setting, especially in the ways young children and adults interact with each other. Care educators can attend to the ways families interact with their children to learn valuable information about cultural and linguistic experiences and practices in the child’s life. When noticing family interactions, care educators learn how family members interact with their child and learn about their preferred care behaviors. Much can be learned through observation even when the care educator does not share the language spoken by the family.

When care educators develop a relationship with each family, the care educator and family members work together to arrive at a shared understanding of the child’s experiences in the home and in the early learning and care setting. Part of developing this relationship entails care educators reflecting on their own **biases** and perspectives. Doing so helps care educators understand each family’s perspective, develop empathy for families, and connect with each family. Below are some ways care educators interact with families to come to shared understandings with them:

- letting families know that they look forward to collaborating with them in the care and education of their child. This includes inviting family members to share information about their child and about their family, culture, and language. This information will help the care educator get to know the family and provide high-quality care for their child. Care educators also communicate that they look forward to an ongoing dialogue with the family about the child’s experiences, learning, and growth, both when the child is with the family and in the early learning and care setting. It is important for care educators to share with families the various ways they might communicate (such as through text, in-person conversations, email, or phone calls) and learn each family’s preferences.
- sharing information about what their child experiences in the care setting. Care educators can describe how they interact with the children in their care. For example, a care educator might explain how they respond to a child who is crying or the ways they observe and communicate with children who are engaged in exploration and play. It is equally necessary for care educators to share with families the reasons *why* care is provided the way that it is. During this conversation, it is also important for the care educator to invite questions and to be sensitive to areas where there might be different perspectives to discuss.
- working together to identify and minimize adjustments children make between home and the early learning and care setting. When possible, care educators make adjustments to provide care that is more consistent with the family’s care. When the care is different between settings, care educators work to provide continuity across settings for the child and acknowledge any differences to the child in a way that shows respect for both the family and the early learning and care setting. For example, a care educator might say, “I know at home your papa rocks you, holds you close, and sings to you until you fall asleep. Here we put you in your cozy bed and sing a song to you while you fall asleep.”
- working toward shared understandings around behavior and expectations around self-regulation, limits or boundaries on children’s behavior, and the ways in which children are supported in their behavior. These agreements and understandings may minimize adaptations children are making between settings and may increase children’s sense of security and predictability. For example, the family and care educator of a 28-month-old can discuss how they typically respond when the child is experiencing strong emotions. These conversations provide an opportunity for care educators to examine their practices, remain open-minded while sharing their perspective with families, and work to understand families’ perspectives.

Practice

Collaborating with families to plan ways to support learning and development

Families and care educators can work together to plan learning experiences for children and strengthen the partnership between the family and care educator. Engaging in regular conversations with family members allows the care educator to learn about everyday experiences in the child’s life that can enrich the interactions between the care educator and child. Some ideas for collaborating with families include:

- sharing information with each other about how the child communicates, such as whether the child primarily communicates nonverbally or also uses words (whether spoken, signed, or expressed through **augmentative and alternative communication [AAC] devices**). Care educators can also learn from families if the child has their own ways of expressing certain concepts. For example, a 16-month-old might ask for yogurt, their favorite snack, by saying “dogo.”
- communicating with families about how the child experiences and expresses their feelings, including the typical duration and intensity of emotions, and the level of stimulation at which different emotions are activated. For example, one child may become easily upset and quickly return to feeling calm while another child remains relatively calm through minor irritations or frustration.
- sharing back and forth what the family and care educator have noticed about the child’s interests and explorations to help plan learning experiences with the family and in the early learning and care setting. Care educators can learn about activities the family enjoys together, experiences the child has with the family, and the child’s visits with relatives. In turn, care educators can share what they notice about the child while the child is in their care. Care educators can also learn about families’ cultural heritages and plan interactions with children that reflect their families’ cultural practices and activities.
- sharing picture books from the early learning and care setting with families. Family members can use the language with which they feel most comfortable to read the books or describe the pictures. Care educators and families can also work together to create simple, sturdy books containing photos of family members for children.

Practice

Working with families to support children’s development in their home languages

The languages infants and toddlers learn with their families shape their development long before they say their first words. When the language used in the early learning and care setting is different from the language the child uses at home, care educators learn about the languages children experience at home by partnering with families and reaching out to other community members if needed. By working together, care educators and families can support children to develop their home languages and the languages used in the care setting, whether those languages are the same or different. Some ways care educators work together with families to support children’s home language development include:

- providing books and other written materials in children’s home languages in the early learning and care setting. If the care educator does not share the child’s language, they might communicate with the child’s family to find recordings of songs, rhymes, or audiobooks for the child to experience. Care educators can observe and document the child’s interest in particular songs, rhymes, or audiobooks and learn from families about their child’s particular interests in order to find similar items to build on those interests.
- encouraging and supporting the family in using their home language with their child both at home and in the early learning and care setting. When possible, family members or other community members who speak children’s home languages can be invited to the early learning and care setting to sing songs, read books, or share stories with the children.
- learning and using a few key words around caregiving practices, like words for *bottle* and *diaper*, or familiar lullabies. Learning key words makes connections to the child’s home language and can help the child transition from home to the early learning and care setting. Demonstrating respect for, honoring, and showing interest in families’ languages communicates to the children and families that they and their languages are important and valued.

Practice

Collaborating with families to engage in culturally responsive and affirming interactions with children

Care educators have a profound influence on infants' and toddlers' emerging racial-ethnic identities. It is important for care educators to be intentional about listening to and observing families and learning ways to engage in identity-affirming interactions that are consistent with each family's practices. Care educators also work to understand and honor individual families' cultural practices. Ideas for supporting children's racial-ethnic identities and cultural practices include:

- learning how to correctly pronounce each child's name and the names of all the family members who will interact with the care educators. It is also helpful for care educators to learn the names children use for their family members, such as *mama*, *baba*, *tía*, and so on.
 - planning learning opportunities that invite children to learn about and express their racial-ethnic identities and cultural practices. This can include sharing books that reflect the diversity of children and their families or inviting children to express themselves through art or movement. Care educators also learn and use each family's preferred racial and ethnic labels.
 - inviting families to share materials, songs, or stories that reflect the family's culture and incorporating the materials, songs, and stories into daily interactions with children.
- Families can also be invited to review materials, songs, and stories that are being used in the early learning and care setting. However, care educators need to respect families' decisions not to share or review materials if they choose not to.
- observing and documenting how children respond to care educators' efforts to support their developing identity. When reflecting on observation and documentation of how children express their racial-ethnic identity and cultural practices, care educators may reach out to families with questions or for ideas about how to support the child's identity. It is also important for care educators to keep in mind that each family will have their own preferences and practices, regardless of their cultural, racial, or ethnic background.

In-Practice Example

Chloe’s Sleep Time Book

Miss Veronica, an infant care educator who operates a family child care home, observes that 15-month-old Chloe is having a difficult time settling down for her nap. Chloe has recently joined Miss Veronica’s family child care home. Chloe’s family members speak both English and Mandarin but use only Mandarin when interacting with Chloe. She is adjusting to the new environment and routines, and she is experiencing English for the first time in her new early learning and care setting. During an interaction at nap time, Miss Veronica observes Chloe crying and repeatedly saying a word that sounds like “jia-shoo” while gesturing with her arms, but Miss Veronica is unable to understand what Chloe is communicating. She speaks to Chloe in a quiet, calm voice as she reassures her, “We’ll ask *Bàba* [what Chloe calls her Daddy] when he comes today. *Bàba* can help us. We will solve it together,” while holding Chloe and patting her back to help her fall asleep.

That afternoon, when Chloe’s father arrives to pick her up, Miss Veronica informs him, “At nap time, Chloe was saying something that sounded like ‘jia-shoo.’ I wasn’t sure what she was telling me. Do you know what it might have been?” Chloe’s father tells Miss Veronica that the family has an item they call “睡觉觉书” (sleep time book), which they often call *jiào jiào shū* during their nighttime routine with Chloe. The 睡觉觉书 is a small felt photo album with pictures of family members who live far away. Before Chloe goes to sleep each day, she and her father look through the photo album and name the family members together. Miss Veronica invites Chloe’s father to bring in the 睡觉觉书 to ease Chloe’s transition to napping in the early learning and care setting. Miss Veronica also practices pronouncing “*jiào jiào shū*” with Chloe’s father. She asks if he can tape notes of family members’ names, along with their pronunciation, next to the pictures in the album so Miss Veronica can talk to Chloe about the family members Chloe sees in the album.

Reflection Questions

Think about the following questions by yourself or with a colleague:

1. What did you find meaningful about Miss Veronica’s communication with Chloe’s family and the actions she takes after that communication?
2. What are your thoughts about the ways Miss Veronica supports Chloe in regulating her emotions and developing relationships with other people?
3. If you were caring for Chloe, what else would you do over the next weeks or months during interactions with Chloe to support her abilities to express herself and regulate her emotions?

Area of Practice

Individualizing Interactions to Meet Each Child's Needs

Every infant and toddler is an individual who is constantly learning and developing a wide variety of skills. Care educators individualize interactions by building relationships with children; carefully considering each child's perspectives, preferences, strengths, and needs; and tailoring their interactions based on those considerations. For example, a care educator might adjust the complexity of the language they use, their physical proximity to a child, their eye contact, the pace of the interaction, or the types of games they play with a child. Observing a child's responses to these interactions gives care educators information about how to further individualize interactions and strengthen their relationship with the child. Individualizing interactions requires ongoing observation and documentation of each child's development as well as ongoing communication with that child's family (California Department of Social Services & WestEd, 2024; NAEYC, 2020; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).



Connections With Social and Emotional Development

- Interactions are at the heart of infants' and toddlers' close relationships with their **caregivers** and peers. Sensitive, responsive interactions support the development of secure **attachment relationships** with caregivers, both those who primarily care for the infant or toddler in the family and those who primarily care for the infant or toddler in the early learning and care setting. A warm, caring emotional climate supports early friendships with peers.
- Engaging interactions that are responsive to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds promote a **sense of belonging**, which contributes to a child's identity development. These interactions can include using familiar songs, communicating about books and other visual materials that reflect children's families and communities, and providing opportunities for children to interact in their home languages.
- From the first moments of life, interacting with caregivers, other adults, and peers is essential to children's development of emotion awareness and **emotion regulation** skills. Social understanding skills, including empathy and caring, are also developed through interactions with others.
- Through back-and-forth interactions, caregivers support children's developing **sense of identity** and **agency** to make things happen and the emerging recognition of their abilities.

Practice

Providing a variety of choices for interactions

Children take part in interactions based on their preferences, developmental levels, moods, and temperament tendencies as well as many other factors. Temperament tendencies include a child’s activity level, response to the unexpected, attention and regulation, and emotional tendencies—including anger, irritability, frustration, exuberance, enthusiasm, and cheerfulness. Ideas about engaging in interactions that reflect thoughtful consideration of each child include:

- providing multiple ways for children to participate in interactions and learning experiences. For example, when singing a song together, a care educator might provide different ways for children to participate by suggesting the children sing the words, shake a noisemaker like a maraca, or stomp during parts of the song. It is also important for care educators to encourage and plan for children to interact using all of the languages they are developing.
- focusing on each child’s strengths, interests, and areas of growth without comparing their development to the development of other children. For example, if a child has recently learned to drink from a cup, a care educator might celebrate the child’s perseverance by saying, “You worked really hard on learning how to drink from your cup! That is a big job that took lots of practice!”
- considering the range of ages and developmental levels of children in a group and ensuring that individuals or smaller groups can participate at their ability and skill level. For example, if a mixed-age group of children is exploring putting balls on ramps, a care educator might model how to place the balls for a 10-month-old who is unfamiliar with the materials or who is still developing the necessary motor skills. For a 28-month-old in the group, the educator might support the child’s understanding of **cause and effect**, understanding of space, problem-solving skills, and curiosity by asking questions about new steps, such as “What do you think will happen if you tilt the ramp like this?” or “What might happen if you use this small ball instead of the big one?”
- using past observations of children’s temperament tendencies to plan future interactions. Some children, for example, may have high activity levels and prefer interactions during outdoor play rather than when engaging with books or stories. However, modifying a plan might be necessary, for at any given moment an infant or toddler may engage in an interaction or learning experience in a new and surprising way.



Key Consideration Multilingual Children’s Use of Language

Children express themselves in the language they use with their family, the language they use in their care setting, or a mix of languages. **Multilingual children** draw on all the languages they are developing to communicate (Espinosa, 2015; García, 2011). When a care educator shares the child’s home language, using that language in the early learning and care setting helps the child develop important foundations of language, promotes a sense of belonging, and connects the child to their family and community. When a care educator does not share the child’s home language, it is especially important to communicate with families or community members to learn key words around caregiving practices.

Many infants and toddlers experience another language for the first time when they enter an early learning and care setting. From a young age, children are able to distinguish between the languages they experience (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2010). In some cases, when a care educator speaks to an infant or toddler in a different language from the child’s home language, the child may respond in their home language or through nonverbal communication (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Acknowledging and responding to a child’s communication, even if the care educator does not share the language, contributes to a sensitive and respectful relationship and shows the child they are a valued participant in the interaction.



Practice

Providing additional supports or adjustments for children with disabilities

Like all children, infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays participate in interactions based on their temperament tendencies, preferences, strengths, and needs. Care educators need to ensure that every child is supported in participating in daily interactions or learning experiences, including interactions with peers (Phillips et al., 2022). For example, a care educator might interact with a 2-year-old who is especially talkative and another who does not yet speak. Both children need to be supported to engage in back-and-forth interactions; answer questions; and communicate their interests, wants, and needs, whether they use words, other vocalizations, gestures, gaze, or AAC devices. Examples of inclusive practices that help all children engage fully in interactions include:

- adapting interactions and learning experiences based on children’s strengths and additional support needs. For example, some children may take longer to sit without support and may need extra support to stay upright. When providing extra support, a care educator can arrange the situation so a child can see the care educator’s face while they are talking or singing to the child. The care educator can also ensure that they provide the child with opportunities to explore objects by holding, viewing, and **mouth**ing them when appropriate.
- ensuring all children are effectively supported to engage in interactions with peers and care educators. Because children with disabilities or developmental delays can be at risk of being excluded from interactions, intentional action on the part of care educators is necessary to reduce this risk. For example, when caring for a 30-month-old who is not yet using words to communicate, a care educator might provide materials such as blocks, which children can engage with together, so that the child is included in play with others while experiencing the language the other children are using. The care educator can support the child in using gestures or AAC devices. For example, the care educator might encourage the child to choose a picture of a simple block structure they want to build, which can support an interaction with another child. The care educator encourages back-and-forth interactions such as “Jaime is showing you the bridge picture. Do you want to build a bridge with Jaime? What blocks do we need?”
- working closely with the family and early intervention specialists who are providing services through the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) to incorporate supports and adjustments they are using into the early learning and care setting.

For children who may benefit from early identification and intervention services, care educators often play an important role in the referral process. If a care educator becomes concerned about a child's development, connecting with the child's family and collaborating in making a referral for a comprehensive developmental assessment is the recommended approach. An important benefit of building a trusting relationship with the family is that it will lead to better understanding of the child's individual development and ways to support the child. If the child is found eligible and an IFSP is developed, care educators communicate with the family about what actions the care educators can take to ensure that they provide the additional supports and adjustments needed for the child to participate fully in interactions. The family may be able to share the IFSP or other information from the specialists with the care educator. It is also appropriate to ask the family if the early intervention specialists can visit the early learning and care setting to provide additional guidance.

In-Practice Example **Flora and Julian's Musical Adventure**

Mr. Ray snaps a photo of 7-month-old Julian sitting in his aunt's lap and wobbling his head and shoulders while listening to music. Later in the week, Ms. Juana records a video of 28-month-old Flora twirling and stomping as a peer plays notes on a xylophone. During their planning time, Mr. Ray and Ms. Juana explore ways to plan interactions around music and movement for their mixed-age group. They decide to set aside times when they include both recorded music and developmentally appropriate musical instruments for the children. After sharing with the families their observations of children's movements with music and their plans to extend this learning experience, they ask the families for suggestions for a playlist that reflects the children's or families' favorite songs.

For their first musical learning experience, the care educators spread musical instruments around the play area and play a song they've selected from the playlist, loud enough so the four children can hear but not loud enough to be overwhelming.

Ms. Juana makes a note that Julian responds to the music by moving his body and smiling broadly when he catches the rhythm. She smiles back, moves a maraca to within his reach, says "Maraca," and shakes a similar object herself. Flora picks up a tambourine, taps it against a table, and then shakes it vigorously while she dances. Mr. Ray documents Flora's movements with a video recording and makes a note that she holds the tambourine for several minutes. He then joins the children and sings along with some of the repeated lyrics. Ms. Juana encourages the children as they make music and move their bodies, commenting on their creativity and enthusiasm. When the song ends, some of the children continue exploring the instruments while others transition to other interests.

In a conversation that afternoon, the care educators reflect on and discuss the ways Flora and Julian engaged with the learning experience. Ms. Juana notes that both children practiced their

gross motor skills during the learning experience and agree that adding scarves for Julian and the other nonmobile children to wave and a big bouncy ball for Flora and the other mobile infants to pat or push could invite the children to engage in additional whole-body movements. The care educators plan to continue including music throughout their week and choose a new song for tomorrow. They plan to observe how the children respond to the new music and use the things they've added to the learning experience.

Reflection Questions

Think about the following questions by yourself or with a colleague:

1. What stood out to you about the way the care educators engaged in the cycle of observing and documenting, studying and interpreting documentation, and planning and implementing?
2. What are your thoughts about the way the care educators worked together to plan new learning experiences?
3. What are some additional ways the care educators could have built on their observations about the children's interest in music and movement?
4. Thinking about your own practice, how would you continue engaging Julian, Flora, and the other children in music and movement?

Area of Practice

Being Sensitive and Responsive to Children’s Cues and Communication

High-quality interactions and strong, caring relationships with infants and toddlers start from a place of sensitivity and responsiveness. This means paying attention to what the child communicates through their expressions, gestures, words, and actions and providing a response that connects with the child’s cues (Bornstein, 2012; Masek et al., 2021).

At times, responding means taking action, such as talking to the child or providing something the child needs. For example, if a care educator notices a child becoming frustrated while trying to put their sock on, the care educator might communicate to the child, “It looks like you’re feeling frustrated with that sock. Can I help hold it while you slip your foot in?”

At other times, being responsive means communicating that the care educator is aware of the child’s interest, want, or need and asking the child to wait until the care educator is available. For example, if a child tugs on a care educator’s arm and babbles while holding up their sock, the care educator might respond, “I see you want me to help you with your sock. I’m changing Benjamin’s diaper right now. I will help you when I’m finished.” These kinds of interactions validate the child’s agency and support their social and emotional development, language development, and ability to manage their impulses and behaviors (**inhibitory control**; Dombro et al., 2020).

Finally, responding sometimes means simply continuing to observe. For example, a care

educator might notice a child trying different ways to put on their sock. If the child appears to be engaged in the action, the care educator might choose to allow the child to persist on their own, staying nearby in case the child eventually communicates that they want help. Documenting the child’s effort may help the care educator understand more about the child’s **persistence**, response to frustration, motor skills, perceptual skills, **cognitive flexibility** (which direction do I hold the sock so it will go on my foot?), and communication skills, among others. Engaging in an ongoing process of observation and documentation, followed by study and interpretation, allows a care educator to understand the child’s temperament tendencies and level of development, which can help the care educator respond in a way that works for the child in the moment.

When an infant or toddler is beginning to use words, the care educator may have difficulty understanding the child. In this case, it is still important for care educators to let the child know they are interested in what the child is saying and that they do not understand the child yet. Care educators can also communicate that they will keep paying attention to see if they can figure it out. If the child is mobile or can point, care educators can ask the child to show them what the child is talking about. Care educators can also share what the child said with the family to ask if the family knows what the new word is. Careful attention and interest demonstrate to the child that the child’s ideas are important.



Connections With Approaches to Learning

- Responding to children’s verbal and nonverbal communication reassures them about when and how their interests, wants, and needs will receive a response. By providing this assurance, care educators support children’s developing abilities to adapt to changes and manage their behaviors and impulses (inhibitory control).
- Acknowledging children’s emotions and scaffolding them as they acquire new skills support children to persist through challenges.
- Engaging infants and toddlers in back-and-forth interactions about their environment helps care educators to understand and support children’s curiosity about the world around them and to offer children new ideas related to their interests.
- When leading infants and toddlers in interactions such as songs with simple hand movements, care educators support children’s **working memory**. Children remember the sequence of the song and often are excited to participate in the hand movements.

Practice

Responding to children’s verbal and nonverbal communication

While many toddlers use words, young children of any age often communicate nonverbally through vocalizations, gestures, gaze, and facial expressions. Acknowledging and responding to children’s communication recognizes and validates their participation in interactions. For example, a 15-month-old might move toward a cabinet and look back toward an adult after the adult has said that it is time for a snack. A reply to the child such as “Yes, that’s where we keep the cereal!” acknowledges the child’s understanding that snack time comes next and that the child remembers where the snack food is stored. Responding to children’s verbal and nonverbal communicative efforts strengthens their growing conversational, cognitive, and relationship skills and their sense of agency. Some aspects to consider when responding to children’s communication include:

- paying attention to a child’s curiosity and **initiative** with a particular person, object, or action. For example, a 6-month-old might explore a pillow by patting it and attempting to mouth the fabric. Noticing this while observing the child allows a care educator to follow the child’s lead by touching the fabric and commenting, “You’ve found such a nice big pillow. That part is very soft and smooth, isn’t it? How does it feel when you touch it?” In this in-the-moment interaction, the care educator has responded to the child’s curiosity and initiative, invited the child’s reflection, and provided new vocabulary by labeling the object and describing its size and texture.
- responding to a child’s communication. For example, if a care educator observes that a 3-month-old turns their gaze away after the two have been interacting face-to-face for several minutes, the care educator might recognize that the infant is communicating that they need to take a break from the stimulation. At a later age, a child might stretch their hands out toward a banana while making sounds to indicate they would like a banana. Acknowledging and responding to the child’s request—even if the response is that right now is not time to eat a banana—supports the child’s engagement and social understanding skills. For example, a care educator might respond, “I know you love bananas. I’m putting some in a bowl now, so you can eat them soon.”
- using observations to inform whether an active response is needed or whether being emotionally and physically available is enough in the situation. In some situations, allowing a child to engage with a task on their own or with other children supports the child’s perseverance and problem-solving skills. Even when a child is frustrated with a task, they may not seek or want help. Staying close and calmly acknowledging the child’s feeling and their effort communicates that frustration and struggle can be important parts of learning something new. A care educator might say, “You have tried so many ways to fit that baby doll in the basket, and he keeps falling out. Trying to solve a problem like that can be frustrating.”
- recognizing that children’s behavior, even behavior that a care educator considers challenging, is a child’s way of communicating. The child may be

communicating an idea, a feeling, a need, or a request. Working to understand what the child is expressing can help the care educator acknowledge the child’s idea and find the reason. In this way, the care educator is responding to the child and helping to solve the problem rather than just trying to stop the behavior. When a care educator recognizes and responds sensitively to a child’s behavior in the same way that they would respond to another way of communicating, the care educator contributes to the child’s early social interaction and relationship skills.

For example, a care educator can recognize that an 8-month-old is crying more often and wanting to be held because they feel distressed by multiple unfamiliar people coming into the early learning and care setting. The child is conveying their new ability to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people and is expressing the need for consistency and safety. In response to the child’s behavior, the care educator can reduce the child’s exposure to unfamiliar people and offer reassurance and comfort if the child becomes upset.



Key Consideration **How Infants and Toddlers Communicate**

Infants and toddlers communicate verbally and nonverbally in varied ways. For example, they communicate through spoken language, sign language, AAC devices, vocalizations (such as coos, babbles, or whimpers), gestures, gaze, and facial expressions. AAC devices can encompass many different objects or devices, including picture card communication systems, visual choice boards, or tablet-based communication systems.

When care educators acknowledge and respond to a child’s communication cues, they let the child know that the child is a valued participant in the interaction. They also strengthen the child’s conversation skills, cognitive development, and relationships with others.

Learning Story: “Let’s Be Friends!”

A Learning Story is one way that care educators might observe, document, and then share their reflections with a child and their family. A Learning Story includes documentation of an observation, often including photos of what a care educator or family member has seen a child or children doing in an early learning and care setting or at home. In a Learning Story, the adult adds their interpretation of the child’s competencies and dispositions toward learning, such as the child’s peer interactions, relationships, and communication cues. The following Learning Story illustrates how one care educator, Janelle, observes and documents 12-month-old Jerrick’s learning and development.

Dear Jerrick,

This morning you were sitting outside on a mat with some balls, scarves, leaves, and bowls. You were carefully putting the leaves inside a bowl and then gleefully dumping them out, making a “yeee” sound as they came cascading out of the bowl. After you repeated this a few times, Shawntika, who was lying on her back close to you, repeated a similar sound. You looked over and laughed and made your “yeee” sound again. Shawntika responded with her sound again. You then reached for one of the scarves and draped it over your head. Shawntika watched as you pulled the scarf off and said, “Ah-boo!” Shawntika kicked her legs, smiled, and responded with her own “ooh” sound. Smiling, you repeated covering and uncovering your head with the scarf as Shawntika watched and responded with her own excitement.

Jerrick, over the past months as I have been getting to know you, I have seen your interest in the people around you. Sometimes you quietly observe. When there is a group of people together, I notice that you look carefully at each child and adult in the group. I sometimes call this “taking roll.” It is as if you are observing and learning about the people around you. You also invite people to engage with you through your expressions and your vocalizations. You began smiling at me soon after I met you, and when I smiled back, your whole face would light up. When a new person comes into the room, you are the first to notice, looking in their direction and watching with curiosity. When I shared this observation with your *meme* (grandmother), she laughed and said she has observed that when someone comes into the room and doesn’t greet you, you will vocalize in their direction, as if to say, “Hey, I’m here!” Today I observed you in “conversation” with Shawntika. I saw that when you noticed that she was responding to your sounds, you invented a game and invited her to play, and she responded. You used your memory of a fun game of peek-a-boo that I’ve seen you play with your auntie. You invited Shawntika to play and improvised with the scarf nearby. I watched as you formed a prediction that Shawntika would respond if you disappeared under the scarf and reappeared again. I saw your delight when your prediction came true!

Jerrick, I look forward to watching you continue to develop your own ways of engaging in communication, relationships, playful interactions, and learning about the people around you. I'm also curious to see how you will continue to use observation and make and test your predictions to learn all about your world.

Your care educator,
Janelle



Practice

Acknowledging children's emotions

Communicating to children that all emotions, including anger and frustration, are important and valid supports children's emerging emotional understanding and self-regulation. Through sensitive, affirming interactions, children learn that all emotions are a healthy part of life and can be expressed in safe and satisfying ways.

Through coregulation—the process by which care educators provide calm, caring, and supportive interactions that help children regulate their emotions and behaviors—children learn strategies for self-soothing and emotional regulation. Care educators support children's emotional regulation by remaining calm and empathetic, providing comfort, and offering simple words for the child's emotions. This coregulation with the care educator helps young children begin to understand, manage, and express their emotions and seek comfort when needed. Through these interactions, children gradually learn ways to regulate their emotions and behaviors with less support (King & La Paro, 2018; Schoppmann et al. 2022).

Some general guidelines for acknowledging and attending to children's emotions include:

- providing **wait time** and following the child's lead. Each child will experience emotions in their own way and at their own pace. When a care educator aligns their response to the child's behavior, it provides the child with reassurance that the care educator is there to help the child manage any emotions that might feel overwhelming. Waiting and following the child's lead also helps build the child's ability to manage their behaviors and impulses (inhibitory control).
- acknowledging all emotions as part of caring and responsive interactions. Respectfully describing children's behavior and suggesting a likely emotion without directly labeling their feelings helps children begin to identify their emotions. For example, a care educator might say, "I see you are crying and hugging your stuffed animal. It looks like you're feeling sad," instead of saying, "You're sad."
- validating all emotions and providing reminders of acceptable behavior when needed (keeping in mind the child's age and development). Validating their emotions and guiding their behaviors may help children learn ways to regulate their emotions and contribute to their understanding of emotions. For example, if a 15-month-old child expresses anger while transitioning from outdoor play, a care educator might respond, "It looks like you're upset that we're going inside. I know it's hard to leave the sandbox. Would you like a hug to help you feel calmer?" If a care educator observes a 35-month-old throwing markers on the floor, the care educator might say, "I see you throwing markers on the floor. It looks like you're upset. When you're upset you can scream into a pillow." It can be helpful to follow up with the child, once they are

feeling calmer, to try to understand the cause of the frustration.

- modeling and engaging in developmentally appropriate ways for children over age 2 to regulate their emotions and behaviors, such as slow breathing, redirection, or snuggling. Between about 24 and 36 months, when children are often learning how to regulate their emotions and behaviors with less help, care educators demonstrate and support children in learning strategies to manage their emotions.
- communicating about emotions and supporting children’s emotion regulation as part of spontaneous interactions throughout the day as children are playing, exploring, and testing new things. In addition to these spontaneous opportunities to support emotional regulation, communicating about emotions, reading books about emotions, engaging in role-playing, using puppets, and practicing emotion regulation strategies can be helpful.

Observing and documenting when children are experiencing strong emotions helps care educators understand children’s emotions and behaviors. When observations include information about the situation, time of day, people involved, responses the child is receiving, and what type of guidance effectively supports them, care educators can better understand the child and the child’s emotions and behavior. Reflecting on the documentation can help care educators in planning how to support children’s emotional regulation.



Research to Practice Child-Directed Speech

Sensitive, responsive interactions often include a type of language known as **child-directed speech**, which supports early language learning. The term *child-directed speech* applies to both spoken and sign languages. Care educators using child-directed speech will speak or sign at a slower pace than when communicating with an adult, with very expressive intonation, simpler vocabulary, and exaggerated facial expressions. Child-directed speech also contains shorter sentences that are usually repeated several times (Schick et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2009; Song et al., 2010).

In nearly every culture around the world, caregivers naturally use child-directed speech when communicating with infants and toddlers (Hilton et al., 2022). When care educators pay attention to the child’s cues—how the child is engaging and responding during the interaction—they will shift to using child-directed speech, which helps the child attend to and understand language and supports the child’s participation in the interaction.

Practice

Providing encouragement

Positive and encouraging interactions assure children that they are safe and secure as they test new skills and explore their world. Feeling safe to explore helps children to test new motor skills; supports their cognitive development; and encourages them to develop curiosity and initiative, persistence, and problem-solving abilities. Care educators provide encouragement during interactions when they:

- respond positively through words, touch, or behaviors when children demonstrate new skills. For example, a care educator might clap when a 5-month-old successfully finds their own foot, or they might smile and communicate encouragement while an older child carefully practices climbing stairs. When a care educator responds to a child’s accomplishments, they communicate that the child is seen and can offer language about the child’s accomplishment. For example, a care educator might say, “You’re holding your foot! You’ve been watching and reaching for it and now you have it!”
- follow children’s leads in responding to their accomplishments. The timing of the care educator’s responses is important. Waiting several moments allows a child who has just accomplished something to enjoy and reflect on their achievement. Waiting and watching for the child to invite a response by looking or vocalizing to the care educator ensures that the child is ready for interaction.
- use in-the-moment observations supported by reflections on past observations and documentation to gauge how much support is needed. Providing just the right amount of support—not too much, and not too little—promotes perseverance and is a balance that depends on the child and their development. By offering new opportunities for children to challenge themselves while providing appropriate support, care educators allow infants and toddlers to explore freely and enthusiastically to develop new skills. Care educators can stay close enough to offer acknowledgment and encouragement of children’s efforts and feelings to let children trust their abilities and interest in self-initiated challenges.

Area of Practice

Communicating During Interactions to Prompt Thinking and New Learning

Using language, gestures, and facial expressions to narrate, describe, and provide prompts supports children’s development in all domains of learning and helps them make sense of their world (Daneri et al., 2019; Deák et al., 2018; Shablack & Lindquist, 2019; Vouloumanos & Waxman, 2014). Care educators and children engage in language-rich interactions throughout the day. These types of interactions can include having a conversation, making observations about something in the environment, or providing comfort. Through relationships based on language-rich interactions, children learn about themselves, about others, and about the world around them. In an early learning and care setting, rich interactions may take place in a child’s home language when the care educator and child share the language, or they may take place in a language the child is developing in the context of the early learning and care setting. Regardless of the language of the interaction, infants and toddlers need wait time to process the language they experience and to come up with a response.

Care educators draw on past observations of a child’s developmental level, interests, and **attention cues** when interacting with the child in the moment. For example, a care educator who has observed and documented a child’s attention cues may notice when the child is demonstrating that they are attending to an object in their environment and talk with the child about that object. Conversely, they may notice when the child has lost interest in an object and adjust their conversation and actions to respond to the child’s cues.

**Connections With Language Development**

- Back-and-forth interactions support children’s developing conversation skills with others. Even infants who do not use words yet learn to take turns communicating back and forth with another person through vocalizations, facial expressions, or gestures. Care educators can use vocalizations, facial expressions, and gestures in addition to spoken or signed language.
- Clear, developmentally appropriate language when interacting with infants and toddlers supports their ability to understand an increasing number of words and sentences.
- Responsiveness to children’s communication—whether their communication is verbal or nonverbal—supports their developing abilities to express themselves and communicate with others.



Practice

Connecting language to people, things, and actions in the child's environment

Describing the people, animals, events, and objects in the environment introduces children to new vocabulary and helps them understand the meaning of new words. For example, care educators connect language to specific aspects of the child's environment when they:

- describe what children are experiencing or exploring in simple terms. For example, a care educator might communicate to a child, "I'm going to put away the plates with flowers," holding up the plates and then putting them in a cupboard. The care educator can also describe the child's actions, such as "You are picking up the leaves! I see you have a red one, a brown one, and a yellow one."
- use nonverbal and verbal communication together. While dressing a 6-month-old, a care educator can hold up a shirt while saying, "Now let's put on your *shirt*." A care educator interacting with 2-year-olds might ask, "Where is the bucket?" while holding their arms out in a questioning gesture and looking around to help children understand that they are being asked to find something.
- point out the size, number, location, or other qualities of objects that infants or toddlers are exploring or manipulating and introduce related vocabulary. For example, a care educator might say, "You are holding a *big* teddy bear and putting it *under* the blanket."

Practice

Prompting children’s thinking and expanding on ideas

Care educators can initiate interactions with infants and toddlers that prompt children to explore and observe. By communicating with children about their environment, care educators spur curiosity and encourage children to notice aspects of the world around them, such as space, color, size, or cause-and-effect relationships. These interactions also provide natural opportunities to expand children’s back-and-forth conversation skills as well as their understanding and use of new vocabulary and sentences. Observing and documenting what about the environment particularly interests children can lead to reflective planning of interactions that build on their interests. Some suggestions for prompting children’s thinking and expanding on ideas include:

- asking children simple questions. For example, as a 10-month-old watches a cat walking behind the couch, the care educator might ask, “Where did the cat go?” As a 26-month-old is building with blocks, the care educator might ask, “What do you think will happen if you add another block?” to expand their curiosity and support their ability to think flexibly. To encourage children to notice properties of objects or engage in mathematical thinking, a care educator might comment, “You’ve collected so many big pinecones! I wonder if they will all fit in that basket you’re filling?”
- asking children questions about what peers or other people are doing and what they might be feeling—such as “Karlynn is scooting toward the lunch table. What do you think she’s so excited about?”—to encourage social relationships and knowledge about emotions.
- repeating and expanding on what children communicate. For example, if a 20-month-old holds up several dandelions and communicates, “Wawa” (an approximation of “flower”), a care educator can respond, “You have three flowers! One, two, three!”



Research to Practice

Technology's Impact on Interactions With Infants and Toddlers

Infants' and toddlers' learning and development is optimally supported by responsive, caring, individualized interactions. Electronic media, toys, and apps are common in daily life. When considering options of screens and technology, it is important to consider what the technology is replacing—for example, whether it is replacing time that would otherwise be spent interacting with peers or care educators. Because infants' and toddlers' brains are still developing, they do not learn from media in the same way that they learn from interactions with other people, and they are not fully able to apply what they experience from media to their own lives (Kirkorian et al., 2025; Strouse & Samson, 2021). Care educators are encouraged to provide children with opportunities for supportive interactions that center around relationships, respond to children's emotions, include varied language and communication, and encourage children to explore the physical world around them.

In some situations, technology is an essential tool. Children with disabilities, for example, may use tablet-based programs to communicate. However, whether or not a child communicates through the use of technology, their development is best supported when the communication takes place in the context of an interaction with a responsive care educator.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2002) has provided guidelines, based on recent research, regarding screen time for infants and toddlers. The chapter on Environments and Materials in this resource provides an overview of these guidelines.

Practice

Engaging in back-and-forth interactions

Even before infants are able to communicate using words, they can participate in “conversations” when they coo, giggle, or babble back and forth with a care educator (Bornstein et al., 2015). Learning how to converse back and forth with another person provides the foundation for children’s developing abilities to interact with adults and other children. The developing infant eventually shares interests, emotions, and desires, which helps them to connect with others.

Consistent, predictable interactions with care educators provide comfort and contribute to the development of secure relationships. They also help infants develop the ability to participate in back-and-forth communication. Through sensitive, responsive interactions, infants learn to trust the relationship. For example, when an infant crawls away from a care educator to explore, it is important for the infant to know that when they look back, the care educator will be present and will respond in a familiar way such as making eye contact or smiling. Some considerations when engaging in back-and-forth interactions include:

- acknowledging and responding to children’s communication during conversations, even before the child uses words. When an 8-month-old pats the page of a book and babbles, “A-ga,” a care educator might respond, “I see, there is a polar bear in this book!” The pair can continue this conversation, with the infant babbling and the care educator waiting for their turn to respond.
- encouraging children to engage in back-and-forth interactions using their home language, even if the care educator does not share the child’s language. For example, when a care educator suggests in English, “Let’s go outside,” a child might reply in Spanish, “Pa” (an approximation of *pájaro*, meaning bird) while pointing out the window. Even if the care educator does not share the child’s language, they might respond in English with, “I can see you’re excited about something outside. Why don’t you show me?”
- providing wait time. Young children process information at a slower rate than adults. When communicating with an infant or toddler, it is important for a care educator to give the child time to process what the care educator has said and additional time to process what they will communicate in response.

Consistent, predictable interactions with care educators provide comfort and contribute to the development of secure relationships.

In-Practice Example

An Everyday Moment With Darius

Imara, who cares for her 5-month-old great-nephew Darius during the day, cradles Darius after a nap. Because Imara has previously observed that Darius is calm and attentive after nap time, she uses these moments to engage in a back-and-forth interaction with Darius. Imara sits on the couch with her legs propped up, placing Darius on her legs so the two are facing each other. Darius reaches for Imara’s hand, and Imara holds it out to him. “These are my fingers,” she tells Darius, wiggling her fingers as she speaks. She allows Darius to pull on her fingers and bring them up to his mouth. After a moment, Darius looks back at Imara’s face, and Imara gently wiggles Darius’s hand. “Let’s see your fingers,” she says. “Oh! I found them! Look at these very small fingers!” She holds Darius’s hand up in front of Darius’s gaze, and Darius smiles. She comments, “You can wiggle your fingers,” as Darius excitedly waves his hands. Imara gives Darius time to look back and forth between his hand and hers. “Would you like me to count how many fingers you have?” She waits a moment, and Darius bobs his head and babbles, “Ga.” “You’d like to count them?” Imara asks, and Darius replies, “A-ga.” “Okay, let’s see. I see one little finger ... two little fingers ...” Imara counts Darius’s fingers slowly, touching each one as she does.

Reflection Questions

Think about the following questions by yourself or with a colleague:

1. What did you find meaningful about Imara’s back-and-forth interaction with Darius?
2. What interested you about Darius’s developing attention and sense of curiosity?
3. What parts of this example might be useful to you in your own interactions with infants and toddlers?

Practice

Communicating about expectations and transitions

Communicating about expectations and transitions as part of interacting with children provides them with a sense of predictability and stability. This sense of security in turn creates an environment where children feel safe in exploring, learning, and trying new things with their minds and bodies. Knowing what happens next also helps children manage their behaviors and impulses and shift their focus between learning experiences. Examples of how care educators communicate about expectations and transitions include:

- communicating with children about what is about to happen to show respect and allow them to prepare for interactions and transitions. A care educator who observes that a child needs a new diaper might kneel down, ensure they are in the child’s view, and communicate, “It’s almost time for a diaper change. After you put that next block on your tower, I’ll pick you up,” while holding out their arms to help communicate the message. Some children with processing differences may use tactile communication cues. A care educator might softly brush a child’s hand before guiding them to a picture on a communication board, helping the child transition into the interaction.
- planning learning experiences that provide children with information on social and behavioral expectations. For example, a care educator who observes a 30-month-old attempting to pull a peer’s hair out of a feeling of frustration may invite the children to explore ways to say “stop” without hurting others. It is also very powerful to acknowledge appropriate behavior when it is demonstrated. For example, a care educator might communicate, “You used such gentle touches when playing with Nathan.”

Each child will respond to expectations and transitions in their own way. Observation and documentation of individual children’s behavior during transitions will help with individualizing the support each child needs.

Area of Practice

Centering Play and Social Interactions

Outside of daily routines, young children’s interactions revolve primarily around play. Infants and toddlers are strongly inclined to learn and develop through play (Shin, 2024). Growing out of relationships and social interactions with others, young children’s play is also influenced by their families and cultures (Hännikäinen & Munter, 2018).

Children enjoy opportunities to interact one-on-one with a care educator or peer, in small groups with a care educator and other children, and in small groups with other children. Each type of interaction offers infants and toddlers different ways to learn about themselves and others and ways to collaborate and problem-solve. Infants and toddlers benefit from opportunities to play in indoor and outdoor settings and take part in learning experiences, including gross motor play, **fine motor** play, **sensory play**, **dramatic play**, and

social play. These experiences give infants and toddlers a chance to practice and develop a wide range of skills and support all aspects of children’s development (NAEYC, 2020).

Young children are motivated to learn through curiosity and novel interactions and experiences. They also find safety and comfort in familiar interactions and experiences. Studying and interpreting past observations of children’s interests in different types of interactions and building on their curiosity when planning and implementing future interactions are key to offering engaging learning experiences. When offering a planned learning opportunity to children, it is important to remain flexible and respond to their cues. Children may take the interaction in a surprising direction that is more interesting to them and rich in learning.



Connections With Cognitive Development

- Through consistent, ongoing interactions that include rich language input, care educators support children in noticing aspects of their environment, such as **spatial properties**, color, size, or quantity. As care educators observe, they notice what each child is exploring and can offer each child appropriate descriptive vocabulary, such as numbers, size words (e.g., *big* or *small*), or words to describe spatial positions (e.g., *in* or *under*). Descriptive vocabulary about objects' color, texture, or shape can also support children's developing abilities to notice similarities and differences and **classify** objects into groups.
- By asking children questions, care educators prompt children's thinking and exploration, even if they do not expect the child to answer. For example, a care educator might prompt children to think about cause and effect by asking, "What do you think will happen if we tap this drum very lightly?"
- Providing encouragement and engaging in joyful, playful interactions allow children to feel secure in testing and exploring their environment.



Practice

Engaging in joyful, playful interactions with children

Infants and toddlers learn primarily through exploration and play. Through joyful, playful interactions, young children engage their curiosity, solve problems, think flexibly, collaborate and interact with others, and explore their environment, among many other skills. Infants and toddlers often take delight in singing or hearing a song many times in a row or playing the same game multiple times. Below are some considerations when engaging in joyful, playful interactions:

- playing games such as peek-a-boo or hiding games (such as hiding a toy under a sheet or cup) as a way to engage children in using their developing memory, understanding of patterns, and their ability to sustain attention. For example, when playing a hiding game, an infant learns to understand a sequence of steps in the game and practices using their working memory as they remember where an object is hidden.
- including singing, storytelling, and reciting rhymes to engage children with language and literacy in one-on-one situations or as part of a small group of children. Children learn about words and sounds and use their working memory and attention skills to anticipate parts of songs or movements associated with sounds. Children also have opportunities to engage in playful physical activity by singing or chanting with finger play, dancing, or moving along to rhymes. Care educators also make up songs or rhymes as they narrate children’s experiences or play. For example, a care educator who is holding an infant while searching for the child’s stuffed toy might sing, “Bear is hiding, where’s she hiding? Is she under the pillow? Is she on the chair? Is she over there? Bear is hiding, where’s she hiding?” while moving to the rhythm of the made-up song.
- offering children a manageable selection of developmentally appropriate choices to support children’s initiative, self-directed learning, and decision-making skills. For example, a care educator might offer a child the opportunity to choose between two or three toys or objects.

By studying and interpreting observations of children’s choices during interactions, care educators can learn about children’s interests and plan future interactions around those interests. For example, if a child frequently requests a particular song, the care educator can plan to incorporate that song in the child’s play or daily routines.

Practice

Creating opportunities for peer interactions

Young children are often drawn to other children and may smile or initiate interactions with them. Care educators build on this natural interest by providing opportunities for children to enjoy playing with each other and as a way for children to interact with and understand their world. When infants and toddlers interact with each other, they have opportunities to develop language, collaborate, solve problems, and build social understanding and relationships with peers. Over time, they develop abilities such as initiating an interaction, taking turns, helping, negotiating, and collaborating (Hay et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2010). Some ideas for creating opportunities for peer interactions include:

- placing nonmobile infants near one another so they can see and hear each other. From the first weeks of life, infants show interest in their peers. As infants grow, they notice and respond to the emotions and behaviors of other children, which is foundational for developing empathy. They are also learning about social interactions and developing peer relationships.
- offering materials and environments where infants and toddlers can explore their interest in peers and start engaging in meaningful social interactions with one another. Infants and toddlers may engage in **parallel play**, where they are doing the same thing but not directly interacting with each other. They may observe, follow, or **imitate** another child.
- offering more organized learning opportunities to children beginning at around age 2, including learning opportunities that require taking turns. Small groups of three or four 2-year-olds can work cooperatively in dramatic play, building, or art. By the age of 2, children are often capable of simple collaborative efforts—engaging in shared actions to reach a common goal. For example, they may all work together to fill a cart with sand or pretend to feed a baby doll with flower petals.
- supporting early social understanding and relationship skills by allowing two children to safely interact and negotiate—verbally or nonverbally—with one object. Young children who are seeking to engage with a peer around an object have the most success when they offer an object to the peer, use positive communication with the peer, or gently touch an object the peer is playing with that they are interested in.
- observing whether children can solve social conflicts before introducing ideas to help the children with problem-solving. Offering children the opportunity to resolve conflicts on their own supports their social, peer relationship, and problem-solving skills.

In-Practice Example

Jun and Lucas Paint Together

Ms. Helene has been observing and taking notes on the social interactions taking place among the children in her care. She has observed 32-month-old Jun approach other children engaged in play and grab materials or interrupt their pretend play. As she reflects on her notes, Ms. Helene wonders if Jun might benefit from more opportunities to enter into one-on-one play with the other children. Ms. Helene then plans to create and introduce on Monday morning a painting center with an easel and roll of paper, multiple paint brushes of various sizes, and small cups of paint. Like the other parts of the environment, she will post a visual guide suggesting that the space is limited to two children at a time.

On Tuesday afternoon during free play, Ms. Helene observes Jun near the easel where Lucas, another child of the same age, is busy painting. Ms. Helene knows that Jun and Lucas share a home language of Cantonese, and she recognizes that this is an opportunity for the two to interact in their home language. She remarks, “Jun, I see Lucas is painting. Would you like to join him?” She moves closer in case her help is needed but reminds herself that Lucas and Jun seem to get along well and that Jun sometimes mimics Lucas’s words and behaviors.

Lucas notices Jun and asks in Cantonese, “畫畫? 一齊畫?” (Paint? Wanna paint?). When Jun grabs a paintbrush and reaches for Lucas’s cup of paint, Lucas reminds him to put on a smock and helps him pull it over his head.

Ms. Helene jots down a note that Jun has accepted Lucas’s help and continues to observe the interaction. Lucas picks up the cup of red paint and a thin brush and returns to painting. Jun says, “要畫畫” (Wanna paint).

“Okay. 邊個?” (Okay. Which one?) Lucas replies in Cantonese and English, gesturing at the cups of paint. “呢個 red” (This one red), he comments, gesturing to the red paint. After Jun chooses the cup of blue paint, Lucas says, “And a brush,” holding up his own brush as a way of communicating that Jun should choose a brush too.

As Jun and Lucas navigate painting together at the easel, Ms. Helene reflects on what other opportunities she can create for the children to support each other in trying new experiences and learning new ways of relating to one another. She wonders if pairing children up for small tasks would work or if it would just cause more tension.

Reflection Questions

Think about the following questions by yourself or with a colleague:

1. What did you find inspiring in Ms. Helene’s approach to supporting Jun’s social and emotional development?
2. What stood out to you about Jun and Lucas’s peer interactions when they were supported by Ms. Helene?
3. Thinking about your practice, what actions might you take to support children’s social–emotional and peer interaction skills?

Area of Practice**Scaffolding and Modeling New Skills and Behaviors**

Through interactions, care educators often engage in scaffolding—intentional support that guides children’s learning and development to the next step. The purpose of this kind of support is to allow the child to do as much of the task as possible themselves. This gives them the opportunity to experience their own sense of accomplishment.

Scaffolding includes understanding what new skill a child is trying to learn and creating a context that allows them to accomplish or try to accomplish it on their own. Scaffolding can take many forms, including prompting children with **open-ended questions**, inviting children to play with materials, and modeling. Examples include reminding a child of each step of a handwashing process, showing a child where the neck hole in their shirt is when they are trying to put it on themselves, or gently tapping a child’s leg when asking them to lift their legs on the diapering table.

Modeling is an important part of scaffolding because young children observe, study, and imitate others as they learn and implement the social norms of the world around them (Hardecker & Tomasello, 2017; Over & Carpenter, 2013). Modeling can offer a child an idea or a way of doing something, but without the expectation that the child imitates exactly what the adult models.

Care educators need to be aware of their words and actions and be intentional about what children are learning from them. For example, when a 2-year-old has spilled water on the floor, a care educator can identify the problem (“Oops! There’s water on the floor”) and their concern (“I don’t want anyone to slip on the wet floor”). After giving the child time to process the information, the care educator could suggest, “I’m going to get some towels to clean it up. Would you like to help?” and hold out their hand to invite the child to follow. By interacting calmly

and respectfully, the care educator models for the child how to manage their emotions and solve problems.

Ongoing, careful study and interpretation of observations and documentation allows care educators to identify areas of learning and development that are almost within a child’s grasp and plan appropriate interactions to scaffold the child’s development. For example,

a care educator who observes that a child has been showing interest in categories can model and narrate sorting as they put away bibs and washcloths: “This is a bib. I’m going to put it with the other bibs. This one is a washcloth. Where shall we put the washcloth?” The child may attend to the language the care educator is using or the actions they are performing or attempt to imitate the care educator’s actions on their own.



Connections With Perceptual and Motor Development

- Scaffolding and modeling different motor skills during everyday interactions allows children to observe and practice fine motor and gross motor skills, such as using utensils, turning on a faucet, or putting on a hat before going outside.
- Using language with children as they move their bodies such as “Oh, look at how you stacked that!” communicates interest in the child’s actions and prompts them to continue to explore.
- Infants’ and toddlers’ bodies are rapidly changing and growing. Being mindful of what infants can actually perceive—such as making sure they are able to see the face of someone talking to them or making sure an object is within their reach—supports their perceptual and motor development.

Practice

Embracing children’s tendencies to imitate

From their first days and weeks of life, infants observe and imitate others. **Imitation** supports infants’ and toddlers’ development of the foundations of **symbolic thinking**, memory and recognition, communication, social understanding, and empathy. Below are some ideas on how to support children’s development:

- understanding children’s tendencies to imitate others. Infants younger than 6 months may imitate care educators’ facial expressions and make cooing sounds in response to others’ vocalizations. Engaging infants younger than about 6 months in face-to-face interactions gives them opportunities to imitate others and supports their ability to recognize familiar people.
- observing and documenting children’s interests revealed through their imitations. Infants and toddlers delight in imitating gestures, words, and facial expressions they have experienced in interactions with care educators and peers. For example, a child may “read” a book by babbling while flipping through the pages or wipe a table with a nearby scrap of fabric after observing a care educator clean the table with a sponge. Reflecting on this observation and documentation allows care educators to plan novel experiences that support further creativity and exploration.
- recognizing a child’s increasing participation in interactions over time. Children use the information they have learned in prior interactions when they interact with care educators and peers. A care educator who recognizes a child’s increasing interest in interactions can document and study this progression, plan and implement increasingly complex interactions, and then reflect on how the child responds.



Practice

Learning through interacting with others

Interactions with people around them can support infants and toddlers as they learn and develop language and social behaviors, including how to initiate interactions, work cooperatively, and negotiate conflicts (Phillips et al., 2022). Young children learn about kindness and empathy from being treated kindly and respectfully in interactions with others. Infants and toddlers also learn language by experiencing language from the individuals in their homes and communities. The following are ways that care educators intentionally interact with infants and toddlers to promote learning and development:

- assisting children with entering into play with peers by suggesting appropriate words and actions. For example, if a 16-month-old is approaching a peer who is playing with puzzle pieces, a care educator might sit next to the children, pick up a puzzle and start playing with it. The care educator can then offer a puzzle piece to the 16-month-old and say, “We’re both playing with puzzles.” This type of interaction provides children with a model and guidance on how to join in play or ask someone to join them.
- describing their emotions and thoughts while engaging in warm, caring interactions. This approach to interacting can help children connect with their care educators and learn social and emotional skills and vocabulary.

For example, a care educator might touch an infant softly on the hand while rocking them to sleep and say, “You look like you are falling asleep. Seeing you so relaxed and peaceful makes me feel happy.”

- modeling language without correcting the child. As toddlers learn to combine words into sentences, they may say things such as “Him falled-ed down.” Without commenting on the child’s language, a care educator can simply model by responding, “He fell down? Does he need help?” Responding in this way provides children with language input that supports their language development while allowing them to remain a valued conversational partner in the interaction.

Practice

Scaffolding children’s acquisition of new skills

Children learn new ways to experience and manipulate objects and materials, such as using a spoon, closing doors, putting on a shirt, or opening lids, through their own exploration and through interactions with adults. One way care educators can support children’s learning during interactions is through scaffolding. Care educators who scaffold children’s developing skills provide just enough support in the beginning for a child to acquire a new skill and ample opportunities for the child to practice and master the skill. Below are suggestions for providing scaffolding for children as they acquire new skills during interactions:

- describing ways to divide an action into smaller parts or asking questions to prompt the child’s thinking, such as saying, “It can be tricky to get these stickers off the sheet. What do you think will happen if you try grabbing a little corner of the sticker?” Children also need many opportunities to practice new skills over and over.
- narrating a child’s actions in order to scaffold the child’s thought processes and perseverance. For example, a child might try to fit an object inside a container that is too small, then pause and try again. If, after a moment of observation, the care educator senses that the child is not sure what to do next, the care educator might scaffold the child by narrating, “It looks like the shovel doesn’t fit in the bucket.” The care educator can then pause to allow the child to consider the spatial properties of the objects and consider a solution.
- supporting children’s development by providing the next step toward skills a child is working to master. Care educators can anticipate and identify these next steps by studying and interpreting their previous observations and documentation of a child’s development. For example, a care educator might observe that a child is interested in learning to use a pitcher at snack time. The care educator can scaffold the child’s learning by holding the cup while the child is pouring from the pitcher. This allows the child to focus on holding the pitcher and pouring without having to worry about the cup moving.

In-Practice Example

Gwen’s Experimentation With Size and Shape

Adrian cares for their 22-month-old neighbor, Gwen, in Adrian’s home several days a week. Gwen, who is not yet speaking, communicates with Adrian mainly using gestures, gaze, and facial expressions. After lunch, Adrian asks Gwen to help them put away some of the leftover food. Adrian reaches into a low cabinet and takes out two small storage containers, placing them on the table. Adrian and Gwen put leftover vegetables into one container. While Adrian scoops leftover rice into the other container, they observe Gwen pulling lids of various shapes and sizes out of the cabinet. Adrian and Gwen carry a few lids to the table, and Adrian lifts Gwen into a chair so she can reach the containers. They allow Gwen to examine several lids, placing them over the tops of the containers as she has observed Adrian do many times.

Gwen pushes down on one lid repeatedly, then puts it down on the table, frowning. “Hmm,” Adrian says, picking up the lid and holding it in front of them. “This one is a very big lid, isn’t it? What if we try to find a small one?” Adrian observes that Gwen is uncertain about what to do, so Adrian selects two lids from the pile to simplify the task. “Here is a big lid, and here is a small lid,” Adrian says, pointing to each one. Adrian emphasizes the words *big* and *small* to support Gwen’s developing ability to use words. “Which one might be good to try?” Adrian asks. Gwen picks up a lid and places it on top of the container. Seeing that the size is a good fit, she smiles at Adrian and gestures to the container. “It fits!” Adrian replies. Gwen gestures to Adrian’s hand. “Would you like me to help you push it?” Adrian asks. Gwen nods, and the two push the lid together.

Reflection Questions

Think about the following questions by yourself or with a colleague:

1. What are your thoughts about the way Adrian used everyday objects and actions to support Gwen’s understanding of size and shape?
2. What everyday objects and actions might you use to support children’s understanding of size and shape?
3. When you think about children you care for, how might you use ideas from this example to scaffold their learning as they work on solving problems?

Closing

Consistent and responsive interactions within caring relationships support infants' and toddlers' learning and development in all domains. These supportive interactions strengthen secure and meaningful relationships with children. Interactions are informed by conversations with families as well as careful observation, documentation, and planning. The practices presented in this chapter highlight the importance of the planning cycle. They provide guidance for interacting in ways that are consistent with family preferences and priorities and individualizing interactions to support children's full participation based on their abilities, needs, and interests. In addition, the practices encourage all care educators to engage in sensitive, playful, and joyful interactions. Care educators support the learning and development of infants and toddlers through their interactions: They encourage children to explore the world around them, notice new aspects of their environment, and share information with others. Interactions also support children's developing relationships with adults and peers and affirm that the child is an important member in those relationships. It is critically important that interactions with children are responsive to the child's communication, interests, strengths, and needs.

Reflection Questions

Here are some questions to help you as a care educator reflect on your interactions with infants and toddlers:

- When you think about the practices presented in this chapter, what is similar to how you interact with infants and toddlers, and what is different?
- What did you find inspiring about the descriptions of interacting with children and collaborating with families?
- How might you incorporate practices new to you into your reflective planning to support children's learning?