



Building Positive Relationships with Children

A key premise of the Teaching Pyramid is that the most fundamental way to promote healthy development and learning in young children is for teachers to build and sustain positive relationships with children.

The Importance of Relationships

From the earliest moments of life, children’s development—who they become—is influenced by the nurturance and care that they receive from adults—first their parents, then members of the extended family and other caregivers. In the next sections, we describe the importance of relationships in the family, then with teachers and other children.

Family Relationships: Attachment Theory Decades of research on mother–child interactions support the concept that children’s ability to learn depends on their developing trusting relationships with caregivers—called **attachment theory** (Bowlby, 1969/2000). Much of the research was conducted by Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978). They observed how young children interacted with their mothers when they were brought into a novel or strange situation (such as being presented with new or unusual materials to explore). They identified kinds of attachments between mothers and children that have varying effects on children’s development. It is important to note, however, that attachment is influenced by cultural contexts and will look and mean different things to diverse cultural groups.

Secure Attachment All children develop attachments to their primary caregivers. They rely on their caregivers’ protection and nurturing, and base their understanding of relationships on their early experiences. Based on the quality of care infants receive from caregivers, they develop secure or insecure attachments. According to attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/2000; Scroufe, 1996), when children’s caregivers are responsive and sensitive to their needs, children develop **secure attachment relationships**. Securely attached children rely on their caregivers for support, yet comfortably explore their surroundings. Children who are securely attached to their caregivers have a strong foundation not only for building relationships with other people, but also for school success (Sagi-Schwartz, 2016). Research suggests that kindergarteners who were more securely attached to their mothers in toddlerhood show better self-regulation, and are considered by their teachers to present fewer problems in everyday school situations (Bernier, Beauchamp, Carlson, & Lalonde, 2015).

What does secure attachment look like? Consider Matthew, a 2½-year-old who enjoys a warm, loving relationship with his mother. When his mother enrolls him in a child care center, she stays with him for almost an hour while he becomes acclimated. At first, he clings to her leg and eyes the toys and other children. Gradually, he ventures a few steps toward an enticing ramp that the other kids are sliding down, but quickly runs back to his mother. After a few more attempts, he hesitantly joins in the fun by rolling a ball down the incline, all the while seeking regular eye contact with his mother. After a while, he begins to explore the classroom, occasionally returning to her side for reassurance. Matthew relies on his mother as a **secure base** from which to explore his new environment. During the next few days, his mother stays with him for shorter periods of time, until one day he joyfully waves goodbye to her at the door. He no longer needs her actual presence as a physical base from which to explore because he has internalized the sense of trust and confidence that she provides. Teachers can help children make such transitions from the secure attachments of home to child care settings, as described in the following example:

A month before a new group of 1- and 2-year-olds entered the child care center, their teacher, Durrell, contacted the families to learn about the daily routines at home.

attachment theory The theory that children’s ability to learn depends on their developing trusting relationships with caregivers.

secure attachment relationship A responsive and sensitive relationship with caregivers that allows children to venture forth and comfortably explore and learn about the world.

secure base An attachment figure (mother or caregiver) who serves as an anchor for children to rely on and from which children can safely venture out and explore.