

## **The Power of Relationships: How to be a Good Mirror in Child Care**

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A tiny baby, almost toddler, toddler or preschool child comes into childcare, where he or she will spend 8-10 hours every day. What is the role of the caregiver who “inherits” this little person? What does this job entail? The job description might say something like “assume primary responsibility for the care of 15 toddlers, communicate with parents at arrival and pick up, design learning environment for exploration and age appropriate experiences.....etc.) When the newly hired teacher/caregiver announces her new job to family members at their summer reunion, she is likely to hear, “Aww! Thanks nice! They are so cute at that age.....” as the listener conjures up a thought bubble full of smiling children dancing in a circle, with their smiling teacher standing by. They imagine childcare to be “an easy gig”.

But what we know, is that high quality childcare involves more attunement, commitment and connection than most people can imagine. In order to provide high quality childcare, the caregiver needs to become an attachment partner for the children in her care. Young children cannot be without attachment partners for 8-10 hours every day! While parental figures are children’s primary attachment partners, teachers and caregivers fill that role for the hours that babies, toddlers and young preschool children are in their care. The caregiver becomes a **partner in development** for children while she is with them. We know that young children’s brains only develop in optimal ways **within** relationship. Young children can only accomplish essential developmental milestones in concert with their adult partners. While developmental process happens within each child, ready to unfold as he or she grows, development is in part **experience dependent**! No baby, toddler or young child can master the social and emotional milestones that are foundational for well being, trust, and positive socialization without strong relationships with the adults who care for them. Since children develop in an environment of relationships, caregivers need to develop partnerships with families as well as with children, so that children don’t have to bridge the two worlds of home and childcare by themselves. Teachers and caregivers who are with very young children almost every day, become part of the very small circle of adults that “count” in their developmental stories.

**First** teachers and caregivers are usually one of only a few adults apart from family members, who have deep connections to young children. Studies show that *warm* relationships with a child's first teacher predicts positive cognitive, emotional and social outcomes throughout the grades.

What makes a "high quality" childcare setting? How can attachment relationships in childcare facilitate developmental process? High quality child care centers know that the caregiving part of the childcare program is not the incidental part of the day that happens in between the chosen curriculum activities. The caregiving part of the childcare experience is an essential component to the development of a baby, toddler and preschool child's developing self- image. Children who experience consistent, responsive and nurturing care, come to know that they are worthy of care. Contrary to myth, self worth doesn't come from posters on the wall of the center that say "children are our greatest resource". Self worth develops from a foundation of consistent, responsive and nurturing care.

I'm going to provide some imagery for the next part of our talk. In a high quality childcare program, adults are a "good mirrors" in their relationships with the children in their care. Very young children look into the eyes of the adults who care for them to feel connected. They become themselves within nurturing relationships with their parents and caregivers. To see themselves as lovable, they look into the faces of the adult caregiver for a loving, engaged expression. To see themselves in a positive light, they need to see positive regard in the eyes of the adult caregiver.

Being a "good mirror" has many facets. How **do** very young children come to feel engaged and connected? How do caregivers get to know a baby or toddler or preschool child through the process of mirroring? How does mirroring deepen attachment? Since relationships are reciprocal, the process depends on the adult taking in and responding to what the baby, toddler or young children is expressing, before responding back. That looks very different at different ages and stages.

A tiny baby fusses in his caregiver's arms. The caregiver mirrors the distress with empathy. A toddler yells, "NO! NO! Mine!" as he grabs his blanket away from another child who has become interested. The caregiver says, "You really *don't* like it when Monica looks at your blanket!"

A four year old girl approaches her teacher, looking dejected. She points at one of her playmates. “ He said I can’t play!” Her teacher responds- “You look really sad about that. What can we do?” In all of these examples, the teacher/caregiver becomes a good mirror for whatever affect is being expressed. The mirroring communicates that the adult can hold the child through all kinds of feelings, and that feelings can be communicated within relationship.

The primary mission of the caregiver is to “be with” the children in their care, and invite the children in her care to “be with” her. To be a “good mirror”, the caregiver has **to know** the children in a deep way. She or he has to read the baby’s affects, know what makes her comfortable, stressed, happy, sad, afraid and angry. Teacher/caregivers need to know as much as possible about life at home, in family, in community. To help children explore, integrate, and make sense of their worlds, teachers and caregivers need to know those worlds. Together, they explore the shared space of the childcare center, and build a repertoire of shared experiences. Together *with families*, caregivers gather stories of children’s life experiences, so that children will not be all alone with experiences that might be too hard to hold by themselves.

Children’s primary relationships with adults need to hold all facets of their being; their tired selves, their hungry selves; their happy, sad, angry and fearful selves, and need to provide “good mirrors” for all kinds of feeling. Without relationships that are strong enough to hold negativity as well as joy, negative feelings can become isolated or explosive while children are little, and create risk for depression and anti-social behavior as children grow up. A high quality childcare environment itself becomes a holding environment; a place where the whole child can live in “good company”. Despite the pervasive myth that “happy is good” and “angry is bad”, we know that all humans feel a range of emotional experience, including babies, toddlers and young children. Being in “good company” means that adults can be genuine with children, and can acknowledge their own emotional states as well as the changes in children’s emotional states, as they share emotional moments. “Oh! I can see that you don’t like cottage cheese! You made a “yuck!” face and started crying when I fed that to you!” Reflective language helps children with social and emotional cause and effect, and

enhances reciprocity between child and caregiver. It allows children to get to know themselves as they grow and change. The same baby who sits down to a snack as a toddler and happily eats a bowl of cottage cheese smiles when his caregiver reflects, “You *love* your cottage cheese now! I remember when you were a baby, you thought cottage cheese was yucky!” The reflective conversation communicates that the caregiver does not judge the child’s reaction, but allows the child to connect to his likes and dislikes and feel that his story is being held within the childcare community.

The attachment relationship itself is represented in a young child’s transitional object. A transitional object is often a stuffed toy or blanket that comes from the attachment partner, and allows the child to feel secure even when physically separate, even before they have mastered *object constancy*, the ability to bring the adult to mind and feel their presence internally.

You may have noticed that there is a consistent presence of Teddy Bears in my background imagery, and if you know my work, you know that using transitional objects in classrooms is a part of it. Early childhood programs that organize themselves around supportive caregiving relationships can help to level the playing field, by offering transitional objects to children who have had disruptions in attachment, or, are too young to conjure the image of their parent internally and have not invented their own. The child psychologist and author Winnicott called the invention of a transitional object “a child’s first symbolic act”, and many toddlers brilliantly invent one as a solution to the not- yet- resolvable developmental conflict of being physically separate before they are individuated as their own person. The invitation to use transitional objects in the child care setting invites connection and self comfort, two resources that help toddlers to feel secure in group care.

Sadly, as children move through toddlerhood into the preschool years, many centers seem to change their focus from relationship based practice to teaching “readiness skills”. In many centers, you see the readiness emphasis in a greater focus on ABCS and 123s, and sometimes in the laptop computer center that is always accessible to children. But what is it that actually underlies readiness? By now, you’re probably predicting that I will say “relationship”, and you would be right. For me, relationship becomes the foundation for making learning meaningful as it feeds the birth of representational activity. The birth of pre-symbolic play in early or middle toddlerhood emerges in well

supported, well attached children who begin to imitate intimate caregiving routines, looking to their attachment partners for acknowledgement. The more elaborate representational play that unfolds for 3 and 4 year olds moves from the imitative to the symbolic, allowing big developmental issues and big life experience issues to be made “small enough” in play to make mastery and integration possible through the use of symbol and metaphor. The emergent themes of dramatic play weave stories that make connections between the players, foster the self regulation necessary for children to tolerate different ideas and changes in direction, and sets the stage for social as well as academic learning.

When young children play, their symbolic play includes representations of inner life as well as actual life experience. When their symbolic play holds developmental realities that are common ground issues for other children in their age groups, children begin to connect and communicate through these mutually valued symbols. So, if you care for 4 year olds in your child care center, you live among superheros and royalty, categorized into good guys and bad guys. These play themes help children feel powerful during a stage of development where they have realized that they are little in a big world. Adults have power that they do not have. Their play allows them to identify with figures that are even more powerful than their own parents, balancing their feeling of powerlessness.

If you can “play about” a wish to be powerful, you are expanding on and building your symbolic repertoire, and soon you may be “drawing about” that wish, then, talking about that wish, and eventually “writing about” what is in your head and in your heart. Relationship based learning is generative. It is not about an agenda that the teacher/caregiver has gotten from the internet or approved program and now has become her mission for the children to learn, it is about **being with** children and offering them good mirrors and many invitations to explore and symbolize so that they feel empowered to discover their learning within a co-created creative process involving their emergent selves and their peers, held by their relationships with trusted adults.

If you are a young child who lives with high levels of stress, disruptions in attachment or traumatic history, your need for relationship based learning will remain high, even as you outgrow childcare and move to kindergarten. We often see such children caught in a cycle of developmental arrest, where they cannot move beyond their difficult experiences. Sometimes, these are the children who have the fewest resources to create symbolic solutions to developmental and group life challenges. If children don't have the relationship support to develop representational capacities, and cannot “play about”, “draw about” and “talk about” their experiences, they remain overwhelmed by their stress and trauma

and are too distracted to take in new learning. If you work with children with difficult lives, and you become an attachment figure who is there with them for many hours each day, you become an inner resource for those children, and need to have a voice of advocacy for their developmental needs.

If you work with very young children, you are on the scene for their first discoveries about self and other. “Who am I” and “who are you?” The “good mirror” of your relationship supports the toddler’s emergent sense of self. But **caregivers themselves also need good mirrors**. It can be hard for caregivers who work in child care programs to see their worth reflected anywhere. It certainly is not reflected in salary or benefits! It may or may not be reflected on the faces of exhausted parents who are picking up their children at the end of the day. To be a good mirror, it is important to have a good mirror, so I will try to be one right now. Taking care of and **Being with** very young children every day gives them a foundation for trust and learning that cannot come from a computer, a packaged curriculum or an academic enhancement program. It can only come from a strong relationship with you. In case real life distracts you from that fact, you have a little Teddy Bear in your bag that can be an Infancy Institute transitional object. Thank you.

different ways of mirroring- face and affect

- emotional tone

- reflective language

- reflective reading and story telling

- reflective song and lyrics

- reflective play scenarios

10. Questions/ Comments