



Topic:

How caregiver responsiveness affects early development of young children with disabilities

Research tells us:

A responsive caregiver interaction style favorably influences a young child's development. Parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators enhance a child's intellectual and social-emotional development when they consistently interact with the child in prompt, sensitive, responsive, and supportive ways.

Acting on the evidence:

According to a research synthesis conducted at the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, beneficial adult-child interactions are ones where:

- The parent is sensitive to the child—noticing, understanding, and responding positively to the child's actions.
- The parent responds promptly when the child produces a behavior.
- The intensity of the parent's response matches that of the child in terms of attributes such as the volume of speech, the speed of response, and the level of expressiveness or emotion, so that the child easily "handles" the response.

Happy talk!

Research reveals practical pointers for beneficial adult-child interaction

Research findings show that a caregiver-interaction style that is responsive, appropriate, prompt, and positive is highly beneficial for young children, including young children who have disabilities or are at-risk for developmental delays.

Carol M. Trivette, Ph.D., a senior research scientist on the staff of the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, examined 13 research studies focusing on the quality of parent-child interactions to see if the combined findings might have something important to say to caregivers.

Research involving more than 1,000 young children who participated in studies published between 1983 and 2001 was analyzed for this synthesis. The focus was on studies of caregiver responsiveness and sensitivity occurring mainly as interactions between the caregiver and child during loosely structured or unstructured free-play situations.

The research synthesis clearly shows that both intellectual and social-emotional development of young children, including those with or at-risk for developmental delays, is enhanced when they are consistently exposed to a style of interaction or communication that:

- **takes the form of a prompt and positive response to the child's behaviors, and**
- **is generally consistent with the tone of the interaction the child initiated.**

In families or classroom/center situations where it is considered culturally appropriate for adults to elicit social and interactive behavior from their ►



Caregivers who are "tuned-in" to young children's efforts to interact offer quick, positive responses that match the intensity of the child's gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations.

children, the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development recommends practicing a style of interaction that is responsive, appropriate, prompt, and positive.

Let's take a look at one such interaction:

It's late Saturday morning, and Alice and Michael James are lingering over coffee and newspapers. Eight-month-old Anthony naps in a basket at their feet. The only sounds are the rustle of crisp newsprint and quiet comments, chuckles, or sighs as they take in the events of the world.

In a moment Anthony yawns noisily and opens his eyes. Michael peers over the top of the comics pages and meets his son's gaze. "Hi, Tony-Tony," he says softly, lowering the paper to reveal his full face. Anthony kicks at his blanket and flaps his arms, a look of gleeful anticipation lighting his face. Michael abandons the paper and reaches for the baby, chanting as he lifts him, "Here's my Tony-o, wide awake and ready-to-go!" Tony responds with a smile of pure delight, followed by a flurry of now-familiar jerking, spasmodic movements of his head and limbs, a characteristic of cerebral palsy.

"This little man says he's feeling good!" coos Alice, looking affectionately at her son, her voice gradually rising to normal conversational tones. She reaches across the table to grasp his hands in her's and rub her thumbs gently across his small fingers, momentarily stilled by her touch. "Are you hungry, my Tony-man? Is it time for breakfast? Yes, yes?"

Tony continues to wiggle and utters a brief but emphatic, "Ahhh!"

"Ahhh, ahhh' is right!" Alice says animatedly, her face now close to the baby's. "Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhmm gonna make you something yummy to eat!"

As Alice busies herself mashing a ripe banana and warming rice cereal in milk, Michael holds Anthony in one arm, situated so he can watch his mom while being regaled with a dramatic reading of the home team's box scores.



These family groups illustrate the importance of interactions between adults and young children. Each adult is responding sensitively and positively to a child's behavior, whether it is in the form of vocalizations, gestures, or other actions.



Take another look:

Read or download the complete research synthesis in the *Bridges* section of www.researchtopractice.info:

Trivette, C. M. (2003). Influence of caregiver responsiveness on the development of young children with or at-risk for developmental disabilities. *Bridges*, 1(6).