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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

Research Digest
Standard 5 Interactions

Fostering constructive
interactions (child/child, child/
adult and adult/adult) requires
explicit policies, procedures
and practice that emphasise
the value of process and are
based on mutual respect, equal
partnership and sensitivity.

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Introduction

Interactions, whether they are between children themselves, children and adults or between adults, intersect all areas of child development – social, physical, emotional, intellectual and linguistic. They are a strategic means by which children's knowledge, skills, understanding and abilities are exercised and extended, through both direct engagement with the child and the process of modelling.

The role of the practitioner in terms of ensuring constructive interactions with, and between, children is demanding: it is powerful, varied, essential and dynamic, and can be enhanced through reflection and self-challenge. In addition to the physical or more obvious interactions (e.g., listening, eye-contact, talking with the child), the practitioner needs to be equally aware of the overall context of this type of learning and so, is challenged to observe the less apparent components. These include considering the individual child's feelings, interacting for meaningful lengths of time, being age and developmentally appropriate and following the child's lead. During care routines, for example, the practitioner needs to be aware of the child's signals and cues and needs to respond appropriately and consistently. Further challenge lies in the fact that the same levels of perception and response may need to be exercised across different age ranges. A small baby, for example, may simply lie and listen as her/his nappy is being changed, distinguishing the voice of the key worker as they describe what they are doing. A young toddler may carry her/his nappy to the changing area and join in with a song or rhyme with the relevant key worker, and a young child may need to establish agreement about the need to wash her/his hands so that she/he may return to play as soon as possible. All of these activities require delicate and responsive practitioners who understand the value of thoughtful interactions (French and Murphy, 2005).

From a socialisation perspective, interactions develop a child's relationship with other children and adults. From what they are actively engaged in and what they observe happening around them, children gain knowledge about people in different contexts, as they share activities and experiences (Moyles and Adams, 2001). This is further enhanced by the practitioner's role as she/he interacts with the child, considering individual dispositions and encouraging positive identities, a sense of belonging and self-confidence. The emotional and intellectual development of the child is equally broadened through interactions. Children's daily experiences contribute significantly to their feelings about themselves and about others, as well as to their individual styles of thinking and knowledge-processing. Their linguistic capacity is developed through both verbal and non-verbal interactions, as they experience spoken, written and body language.

The impact of positive, meaningful interactions within the wider context of child development is founded and complemented by the presence (physical and emotional) of a responsive and reflective practitioner.

Recent Research

Peer interaction

Friendship amongst young children should not be underestimated, particularly in out-of-home settings. Adults need to foster children's friendships between the children they care for as these relationships act to enhance the child's self-esteem and self-worth (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2005). In addition, studies of typically developing children's interactions with their peers in unstructured settings (such as in playgroups or free-play), demonstrate increasingly complex play and the development of social networks (Guralnick *et al*., 2006). The day should be planned and paced to ensure that there are numerous opportunities for children to engage with peers in child-to-child encounters. In practical terms this means that groups are kept small and that the ratio of adults to children is high to encourage positive interactions (French, 2003). In order to achieve this, recommended strategies for adults include:

- Encouraging children to interact with one another in ways appropriate to their developmental levels

- Finding many opportunities to refer children to an older or more able peer for help

- Looking for and supporting children's spontaneous co-operative efforts

- In large group work, ensuring each child can make a specific contribution (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation [HERF], 2001)

There are children who experience difficulty in engaging with their peers. This can be characterised by poorly organised (difficulties in entering and sustaining play) and conflict-prone interactions. There are many influences on behaviour. The child may, for example, have a specific developmental delay, have limited prior experience of positive interactions, have a challenging temperament, be tired, hungry or simply having a bad day. What is clear is that patterns of behaviour are shaped, strengthened or counteracted by the child's relationships and experiences. Sensitive, responsive, positive adults in an accepting, low stress environment ameliorate these influences (French, 2007). Practitioners may model play behaviours (Research Digest/ Standard 6: Play) and in conflict situations, adults and children may work together using a problem-solving approach to mediate conflicts. Social conflicts can be approached calmly, firmly and patiently as a first step.

The children's feelings are then recognised and acknowledged and information gathered in order to:

- Restate the problem according to what the children say

- Ask for ideas for solutions

- Restate the suggested solution(s)

- Ask the children to make a decision about which one to choose

- Encourage children to act on their decisions

The adult must then be prepared to provide follow-up support for the child (HERF, 2001).

When children practice resolving conflicts from an early age, they develop and exercise necessary social skills and they begin to understand how to respect the needs of others, while simultaneously meeting their own (French, 2003).

Interactions between adults and children

The past ten years of research have attested to the knowledge that the quality of young children's experience is closely linked to the interactions between the child and her/his caregivers. The early years of a child's life signal a time of unique dependency, during which caregiving routines (eating, sleeping and bodily care), in a stimulating environment, are appreciated as opportunities to develop a relationship with the child (CECDE, 2005). Care and education are not separate, but must be integrated within the child's relational experiences. Children in secure relationships with adults are more likely to:

■ Explore their environment, thereby enhancing their learning and development

■ Be more sociable and interact better with peers

■ Display verbal precision

■ Perform better at cognitive tasks

Conversely, adults who are not responsive to children (who may locate themselves nearby but not engage in children's play) have a negative effect on children's early years' experiences; their social interactions and cognitive activities are less complex (Lobman, 2006). Careful consideration must be given to the countless opportunities to foster active learning, language, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and moral development and problem solving. Adult support must be a constant in all interactions from greeting the child on arrival to saying goodbye at departure (French and Murphy, 2005).

We communicate in several ways and so language forms only a small part of interaction. Children need security and warmth with a key adult where they learn the rules of communication

through shared meaning of their experiences, and where their early attempts to converse are valued, interpreted and responded to (David *et al.*, 2002). This is especially important in the first years of life, particularly for those who have a specific language delay or who do not speak English or Irish as their first language. The child's ability to communicate is not fully developed, and the adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances or gestures (French, 2007). It is up to the practitioner to get to know the young person and match her/his response to the child. A child, for example, who hesitates to reach out for new experiences, a face, new food, or new piece of play equipment needs more time to grow accustomed to that new experience. Some children like gregarious experiences such as tickling and singing noisily, while others prefer quieter, more gentle experiences (French and Murphy, 2005). Ahsam *et al.*, (2006) established that training in language acquisition, interaction strategies and appropriate modelling are the key ingredients which supported 'making time to talk', encouraging children's initiation and open questions, 'calm time', and finding opportunities to praise children. The use of specific language games such as turn-taking, story-telling, and picture sequencing with small groups (of three children) gave children confidence, especially those who were not used to speaking in large groups.

Studies have shown that when adults learn to effectively use a range of adult-child interaction strategies they can enhance the length and quality of children's interactions through 'sustained shared thinking'. This is where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to clarify an idea, solve a problem, or evaluate an activity. It was found that this was most likely to occur when children were interacting individually with an adult or with a single peer partner; both contributing and participating equally as partners. Periods of 'sustained shared thinking' are essential for effective early years practice which extends child-initiated interactions and contributes to intellectual challenge. Furthermore, a balance between child-led and adult-led interactions and between an open-framework approach (where children have free choice in instructive environments) and more

focused group work with direct instruction is in evidence in the most effective settings (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Further key practitioner behaviours supportive of children's learning and development in relational activities have been identified in research (Lobman, 2006). These include:

- Sensitivity to children's current activities

- Responding to children's cues

- Observing and elaborating children's learning by adding information and materials to the activity at hand and thereby taking it to the next level (with both adult and child as equal participants in learning)

- Maintaining a focus on what children are doing

- Offering choice, and opportunities to investigate

- Giving directions stemming from what children are already engaged in

- Introducing uninvolved children to new activities

Interactions between adults

The collaborative, focused efforts of the adults in children's lives draw together the elements of providing a safe, inviting and stimulating environment, caring child-centred routines and enriching experiences to enhance children's learning and development. Throughout each day, members of the practitioner team work together to observe and support the children in their service. The practitioner team also works in partnership with parents/carers, exchanging child observations and striving to provide consistency between children's at-home and away-from-home experiences (Research Digests/Standards 12: Communication and 3: Parents and Families).

Trusting collegial relationships amongst practitioners, in stable and consistent teams, are fostered by members who practice open communication. This involves speaking in an honest, straightforward way. It implies sharing genuine feelings and opinions and taking turns speaking and listening respectfully

to each other, drawing on strengths and differences amongst team members. This dynamic provides an authentic experience for children and models respect for difference and contrast. Turn-taking, pausing and listening will ensure that focused discussion about setting issues and the needs of the children can take place. Even colleagues committed to the principles of open communication do not always agree. However their commitment ensures that they engage in joint problem solving/conflict resolution in order to reach a solution to support them in their common interest – the child (French and Murphy, 2005).

Implementing the Standard

Progressing onwards from a theoretical framework, there are a number of practical ways in which constructive and meaningful interactions can be fostered across the three domains; child/child, child/adult and adult/adult.

Child/child

In order to ensure that each child is enabled to interact with her/his peers and with children of different ages, the practitioner may consider what opportunities are presented throughout the daily routine. These could include:

- Seating arrangements

- Layout of space

- Different activity areas

- Meal/snack times

To further support positive interactions, certain strategies can be used to manage conflicts between children:

- Helping children resolve conflict themselves without imposing solutions (e.g., negotiation, compromise, listening, naming emotions, acknowledging feelings)

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- Providing guidance and discipline which is supportive

- Reflecting realistic expectations for the child's age and individual development

Child/adult

With a focus on process rather than outcomes, the process of child/adult interactions needs to be balanced between talking and listening. Both the formal and informal parts of the daily routine can be used to achieve this balance, where various opportunities for sensitive and respectful interactions arise:

- Greetings

- Care routines

- One-to-one interactions

- Small or large group activities

- Incidental conversation

- Games

Adult/adult

It is vital that the interactions between adults within, and associated with the setting, act as a model of respect, support and partnership for the child. As this impacts directly on the child's learning and development, adults within the setting can demonstrate positive (both verbal and non-verbal) interactions:

- Co-operation

- Helping

- Turn-taking

- Showing kindness

- Problem-solving

Conclusion

Attention to effective interactions is critical to the provision of quality early childhood care and education experiences. It constitutes a pivotal part of a child's development, and so must be rooted firmly in policies, procedures and practice that are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

It is equally important that the understanding and practice of interactions is process (as opposed to outcome) focused, and that interactions between adults themselves and between adults and children are recognised as being as significant as those between children. As Fallon (2004:96) points out:

"The importance of secure early attachment relationships to the child's well-being cannot be overstated. Furthermore, secure, respectful and caring relationships with adults provide a crucial context for supporting learning."

Meaningful interactions follow the child's lead and interests, and challenge the child appropriately. The development and delivery of such is dependent on the presence of a responsive, reflective practitioner that is willing to challenge her/himself on a daily basis within the setting.

Resources for Interactions

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