

## The Fourth 'R': Teacher-Child Relationships Are Central to Quality

**Peggy Patten**

The recent report from the National Academy of Sciences, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), detailed the importance of early experiences on brain development and human behavior. The National Academy of Sciences report and numerous other studies tell us that high-quality early childhood environments play a critical role in early life experiences (Patten & Ricks, 2000). Research on the quality of early childhood experiences has focused on the knowledge and skills of the caregiver(s) along with the ratio of adults to children. More recently, research has identified characteristics of the adult-child relationship as uniquely important to children's development.

The adult-child relationship in early childhood settings influences children's development in a number of ways. Adults provide emotional security. Although the attachment a child forms with an adult in child care is different from the attachment a child forms with his or her parents, a secure emotional bond with a caregiver is essential for healthy child development. Secure attachments develop as a result of sensitive, warm, responsive, and respectful caregiving. Continuity of care is also important, particularly for infants and toddlers who need regular and predictable caregiving (Elicker, & Fortner-Wood, 1995, pp. 69-72; Essa et al., 1999, pp. 12-14).

Secure attachments with adults in child care also influence children's friendships. In a variety of studies, children who had close and secure relationships with their teachers in child care had better peer relationships—they were more gregarious, more flexible in their play, and displayed fewer withdrawn and hostile behaviors toward peers (Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995, pp. 72-73; Essa et al., 1999, p. 13).

The impact of children's close relationships with adults on social competence continues beyond the preschool years. Research conducted by Carolee Howes of UCLA found that a positive teacher-child relationship in child care predicted social competence with peers much beyond child care years. Howes's longitudinal study reported that children's friendships as well as their relationships with their elementary school teachers were influenced by their relationships with their toddler and preschool teachers. Children who had close relationships with teachers in the preschool years were rated high in social competence and high in child-teacher closeness five years later. The reverse was also found to be true—children with less secure relationships with their teachers during the preschool years had more adjustment problems in elementary school, had higher rates of peer aggression, and were more disruptive in second grade (Howes, 2000, pp. 12-13; Howes, Hamilton, & Philipsen, 1998, p. 425). These findings about second-grade peer competence and teacher-child closeness are significant because of their influence on later school achievement and social competence. Difficulties getting along with others and following classroom rules may persist in early elementary years and adolescence (Howes, 2000, p. 13; Patten, 1999).

### **How can a relationship with a teacher in preschool have powerful long-term influences on a child?**

One perspective is based on attachment theory, which suggests that children use relationships with significant adults to organize their experiences. Children who feel emotionally secure can use their teacher as a base from which to explore and learn. "People grow in connection to others" is how

Michele Seligson explains it. Seligson conducts research on relationships between caregivers and children in after-school programs and is developing “relational curricula” for use in those environments (Edwards, 2000, p. 1). “Even the little bit of research on what works in after-school programs points inescapably to the nature of the adult/child relationship as the single most significant variable in helping children achieve positive outcomes in school,” says Seligson (2000, p. 3).

It also appears that children’s relationships with teachers may have a greater impact on peer relations than the child’s relationship with parents. Researchers theorize that this may be because teachers are part of the same environment where peer relationships are developed and are available to guide and instruct children in peer situations (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994, p. 272). When teachers value relationships and work with the child to improve their social skills, the child has a greater chance of developing healthy peer relationships. Conversely, when teachers feel that helping a child cope with peers is not a part of their responsibility, the child’s social development might suffer.

### **How can parents identify strong and effective adult-child relationships in preschool and school-age care programs?**

Sensitive, warm, responsive, and respectful caregiving—often referred to as process or dynamic quality—can be difficult to identify for parents and even for regulators of child care programs. State regulators typically assess specific structural features of programs that are associated with positive adult-child relationships. These include group size, adult-child ratios, and training and education of the teachers/caregivers (Hofferth, 1996, p. 54).

To help policy makers and practitioners know where to focus their quality improvement efforts, research has examined which structural features have the greatest impact on process quality. The structural features that appear to have the strongest associa-

tion to process quality, or responsive caregiving, are high levels of teacher education, few children per teacher, and good teacher wages. This last feature is important because of its influence in minimizing teacher turnover and enhancing continuity of care. Not surprisingly, states where regulation of care is more stringent in the area of adult-child ratios and teacher education, have, on average, better process quality in child care (Cryer, 1999; Howes, 1997, p. 423; Honig & Hirallal, 1998, p. 21). The positive impact of regulation on quality has been found in child care centers and in family child care home arrangements (Cryer, 1999, p. 51).

When assessing the quality of a child care arrangement—whether starting care or continuing in a child care arrangement—parents are advised to pay attention to the licensing features of the child care facility. These are the conditions where good adult-child relationships are most likely to occur. Parents should also focus on the nature of interactions they observe between teachers or caregivers and children. Is there evidence of warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness, and respect in these relationships? While relationships are important in programs for all children, these interactions will look different in programs for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. The following are examples of what parents might observe in a high- and low-quality teacher-child interaction in various programs:

#### **Infant Care**

*Description of high-quality interaction:* While changing the diaper of 6-month-old Benjamin, the caregiver smiles and talks to him about the toy Benjamin was playing with before his diaper needed changing. When Benjamin reaches up to touch the trim on the caregiver’s shirt, the caregiver responds, “Do you like the shirt I’m wearing today?”

*Description of low-quality interaction:* While changing the diaper of 6-month-old Benjamin, the caregiver continues a conversation with another adult in the room. The only words directed at Benjamin are when he wiggles on the changing table.

The caregiver responds, “Stop your wiggling so I can finish.”

## Toddler Care

*Description of high-quality interaction:* Two-year-old Ellie comes to child care with her stuffed teddy bear from home, Poo, something she regularly brought to care when she started weeks ago. The caregiver greets Ellie in the morning and acknowledges Poo’s visit. “You haven’t brought Poo for some time here. I see you put on his red scarf today. Would you like to bring Poo to the story corner to read with you this morning?”

*Description of low-quality interaction:* Two-year-old Ellie comes to child care with her stuffed teddy bear from home, Poo, something she regularly brought to care when she started weeks ago. The caregiver greets Ellie and asks why Poo is back. “Your bear was always getting lost and in trouble when you first started here. I thought we asked you to keep him at home. Please put him in your cubby until rest time.”

## Preschool Care

*Description of high-quality interaction:* During story time, the teacher brings out a picture book to read to the group. Four-year-old Andrea announces, “I’ve read that book already and I did so all by myself.” The teacher responds, “Good for you Andrea! Isn’t reading wonderful to do? Let’s not give the end of the story away, but do you think the other children will enjoy this book?”

*Description of low-quality interaction:* During story time, the teacher brings out a picture book to read to the group. Four-year-old Andrea announces, “I’ve read that book already, and I did so all by myself.” The teacher responds, “Well aren’t you a smarty pants! It’s the book I’ve chosen to read today so please don’t interrupt me or disrupt the others while I’m reading.”

## School-Age Child Care

*Description of high-quality interaction:* A group of children head out to the playground to play football immediately after school hours. Ten-year-

old Luke has a history of losing his temper playing team sports. The school-age program leader heads out with Luke and asks if he can be on his team. The leader places himself strategically on the team so he can urge Luke to “Cool it!” before Luke loses his temper. At the end of the game, the leader says to Luke, “You’re a pretty good football handler. Maybe you and I could warm up together before the game tomorrow. I could use some additional practice.”

*Description of low-quality interaction:* A group of children head out to the playground to play football immediately after school hours. Ten-year-old Luke has a history of losing his temper playing team sports. At the start of the game, the school-age program leader reminds Luke from the sidelines, “The first time I see you lose your temper today, you’ll be out of the game. There’ll be no reminders. Is that clear?” Ten minutes into the game, Luke is sitting out on the sidelines for losing his temper.

There are many opportunities for high-quality relationship building in preschool and school-age child care—opportunities for children to grow in connection with significant adults, to paraphrase Michele Seligson. These include such routine activities as morning greetings, mealtime conversations, playing on the playground, diaper changing, patting backs at rest time, attending to minor injuries, and picking up toys after activities (Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995, p. 77). How these seemingly ordinary and routine events in child care are handled by staff is indeed central to quality.

## For More Information

National Association for the Education of Young Children  
<http://www.naeyc.org>

National Child Care Information Center  
<http://nccic.org>

## Sources

Cryer, D. (1999). Defining and assessing early childhood program quality. In A. W. Heston & N. A. Weiner (Series Eds.) & S. W. Helburn (Vol.

Ed.), *The annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Vol. 563. The silent crisis in U.S. child care* (pp. 39-55). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Edwards, L. P. (2000). *Building relational practices in out-of-school environments* [Online]. Available: <http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/projects/building.html>.

Elicker, J., & Fortner-Wood, C. (1995). Adult-child relationships in early childhood programs. *Young Children*, 51(1), 69-78. (ERIC Journal No. EJ513983)

Essa, E. L., Favre, K., Thweatt, G., & Waugh, S. (1999). Continuity of care for infants and toddlers. *Early Child Development and Care*, 148, 11-19. (ERIC Journal No. EJ582377)

Hofferth, S. L. (1996). Child care in the United States today. *Future of Children*, 6(2), 41-61. (ERIC Journal No. EJ537046)

Honig, A. S., & Hirallal, A. (1998, June). *Which counts more for excellence in child care staff: Years in service, education level, or ECE coursework?* Paper presented at the Annual Quality Infant/Toddler Caregiving Workshop, Syracuse, NY. (ERIC Document No. ED421211)

Howes, C. (1997). Children's experiences in center-based child care as a function of teacher background and adult:child ratio. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43(3), 404-425. (ERIC Journal No. EJ554324)

Howes, C. (2000). Relationships: Child and teacher. *Early Developments*, 4(1), 12-13.

Howes, C., Hamilton, C. E., & Philipsen, L. C. (1998). Stability and continuity of caregiver and child-peer relationships. *Child Development*, 69(2), 418-426. (ERIC Journal No. EJ564407)

Howes, C., Matheson, C. C., & Hamilton, C. E. (1994). Maternal, teacher, and child care history correlates of children's relationships with peers. *Child Development*, 65(1), 264-273. (ERIC Journal No. EJ478225)

Patten, P. (1999). Pathways Project: An interview with Gary Ladd. *Parent News* [Online], 5(4). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew799/int799c.html>.

Patten, P., & Ricks, O. B. (2000). *Child care quality: An overview for parents*. ERIC Digest. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Seligson, M. (2000). Can't we all get along? *School Age Notes*, 20(12), 3, 6.

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

## Source of This Document

---

Patten, Peggy. (2001). The Fourth 'R': Teacher-Child Relationships Are Central to Quality. *Parent News* [Online], 7(2). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew301/int301c.html>