Relationships, the Heart of Quality Care

Creating Community among Adults in Early Care Settings

Amy C. Baker
and
Lynn A. Manfredi/Petitt

National Association for the Education of Young Children
Washington, DC
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Think back to your very early years—what do you remember? Regular meals and a clean bottom? A toy-filled playroom or your napping spot? Probably not. Most likely it’s the people. Your parents, your first tender caregivers. The neighbor who read you a book on his front step. A grandma who snuggled you close and whispered how special you were. The teacher who shared her joy of learning and naptime backrubs. The family friend who always met you with a gleam in his eye, a ready laugh, and a funny face. And wasn’t your world also shaped by the interactions between these significant adults in your life? The respect, affection, sometimes love, they had for one another. The way they helped and supported one another.

Or maybe your earliest memories aren’t so warm? Perhaps you were cared for, but you didn’t feel cared about. Or instead of being part of a loving circle, you were caught in an uncomfortable tug-o-war between the grown-ups who populated your young life.

Usually a child’s earliest memories are linked to people and the child’s relationships to them. Everything is embedded in feelings. Everything grows out of the emotional climate and from the connections those feelings create. Experience tells us that children thrive when the adults who care for them also care about one another. When families and neighbors gather in celebration, children sense the joy of belonging to a caring community. When parents are warm and playful with each other, children feel secure and want to join in the fun; they see the world as a safe and nurturing place. On the other hand, when the grown-ups a child cares about are estranged or hostile, it’s hard for that child to feel safe and to get along with anyone. Adult relationships directly and profoundly affect children’s lives.
Much has been written about attachment and children’s relationships with significant adults. Research on child development confirms that bonding between child and adult is critical if children are to grow into competent learners and rational adults. While bonding is the starting point of this book, our purpose is to highlight the importance of adult relationships in child care settings—those between parents and caregivers, caregivers and directors, and caregiver coworkers. Specifically, we explore the concept of relationship-based child care, the understandings and attitudes that underpin it, and the policies that encourage it. This book reflects our belief that everyone benefits when adult relationships are valued and supported alongside those between adults and children.

Finding a new model for the center setting

Over the past few decades, professionals in the field of early care and education have begun to recognize the impact of relationships in child care settings. Most of us understand that children absorb what they experience, especially in their earliest years. We acknowledge the value of warm and responsive care, and we talk increasingly about the importance of caregiver-child attachments, particularly for infants and toddlers.

We also recognize that positive relationships and compatibility among adults are good for children. Adult interactions set the tone for a classroom and, more indirectly, teach children about the world they live in and what to expect as grown-ups themselves. When significant adults in a young child’s life are distant, formal, dutiful with one another—or worse, disrespectful, angry, controlling—children internalize these attitudes as characteristic of what it means to be “adult.” On the other hand, when adults are warm, collaborative, and respectful, and they work at creating a caring community among themselves, children mimic that approach and carry that model into adulthood. In this way, whether or not we are aware of it, adult relationships in today’s child care centers have an immediate, daily impact on children; more important, they are shaping tomorrow’s adults and the future we will someday share with them.

Center policies vary considerably, even among programs with NAEYC accreditation. Some encourage family-caregiver relationships through potluck dinners, open houses, parent-initiated field trips, family bulletin boards, and weekly newsletters. Some centers urge caregivers to build and maintain adult connections by communicating
with families by phone and email, offering to baby-sit evenings or weekends, and providing other family supports. But other programs discourage parent-caregiver friendships, warning staff members to maintain “professional distance.” They limit contact to short daily conversations, written notes, and formal conferences.

Sometimes a program’s policies are well-meaning but short-sighted—designed to address a particular need, yet disruptive to relationships between adults. Fiscal challenge is one of the justifications most often given for practices that limit relationship-based care. The need to cover staff-child ratios and ensure safety is another. Policies that keep caregivers emotionally detached from children and their families, for example, can be the result of a program’s knee-jerk reaction to those authentic needs.

Sometimes centers model their policies and expectations regarding adult relationships on what they see in the business or elementary-school setting. Child care is a business, but a business unlike most others. The work of caring for very young children must be viewed with a special lens, one that focuses on caring relationships that meet children’s emotional needs. Everyone thrives when adult relationships in centers are more like community than business, more like family than school. In a relationship-based setting, the worlds of adults and children become interwoven. Fragmented lives are quilted into a vibrant community of strong, mutually beneficial relationships.

Early childhood professionals who resist viewing policies and practices through a relationship lens keep children from receiving the quality care they deserve. We need to take a closer look at the role adult relationships play in child care settings and the impact those relationships have on children’s development. How do family-caregiver relationships affect the stability of caregiver-child attachments? How are children affected by daily tensions between parents and caregivers, among staff, between center directors and teachers? How does the caregiver-director relationship affect a caregiver’s ability to offer loving care? What perceptions—accurate and otherwise—act as obstacles to centers instituting and supporting relationship-based care?

Our goal for this book is to bring a fresh focus to adult relationships in the center-based care setting. We believe it will inspire those who use a business or school model to give life to family-style relationships. We know it will give others cause to celebrate their own approach to the relationship-based model, which is being used—and used well—by high-quality family child care homes across the country and by growing numbers of enlightened child care centers. We expect
this book to prompt policy makers and everyone connected to center-based settings to take the steps needed to support and strengthen caring relationships between families, center staff, and children.

**Writing this book**

In researching family child care settings for our book *Circle of Love* (1998), we were surprised by the number of parents who expressed the desire for a loving care relationship for their children. An overwhelming majority of high-quality family child care providers said that their relationship with children in care “feels like love.” Love is a given, an integral part of the family child care program. One veteran family care provider explained, “You can’t keep distance, and I don’t know any day care mother who can. If you have a child for two years, it’s almost like your own.”

Families also told us they chose home-based care because they value a personal relationship with the caregiver. They like the informality of family child care homes, where they can talk with the caregiver at drop-off and pick-up times, sometimes even after hours. Parents said that in looking for a caregiver, they used the initial screening interview to determine whether the provider’s philosophy of care and values match their own. Providers did the same, identifying families who were a good match in terms of childrearing practices and expectations. Both looked for adults who have an ability to communicate, resolve differences, and develop a strong relationship that will last for several years.

High-quality family child care offers relationship-based care. Caring parent-caregiver relationships are the norm when a small group of children and families remain in a home-based program with one or two caregivers over several years. These close adult ties benefit everyone: Caregivers feel valued and respected and free to bond with children in their care; children feel free to love their caregivers; and parents feel supported, knowing their children are happy and safe.

Knowing this, we began to wonder to what extent these benefits hold true for high-quality center-based programs. Do center staff understand the importance of relationship-based care? Do parents who choose centers hope for strong, caring relationships with caregivers for themselves and their children? Does family child care have something to teach the early care field about developing and sustaining adult relationships? For this book we examined the following questions:
What do parent-caregiver relationships look like in accredited child care centers? Are they similar to relationships in accredited family child care settings?

Are the caregiver-child bonds in high-quality center-based care as strong as they are in high-quality family child care homes?

What steps have relationship-based centers taken to strengthen relationships?

In looking for answers, we observed and interviewed staff and parents in more than 50 NAEYC-accredited child care centers across the country, including private, for-profit, nonprofit, Early Head Start, and Head Start programs. We also interviewed education coordinators, freelance consultants, child care resource-and-referral staff, and educators in college settings. One of us interviewed caregivers in accredited programs in New Mexico, California, and New York. The other examined a variety of centers in Georgia and took part in countless informal conversations with students in early childhood education classes at several technical colleges. Representation among interviewees cut across geographical, ethnic, and economic lines (although many of the vignettes in this book have understandably ended up depicting some states—Georgia and New York, for example—more often than others).

Our study was qualitative and anecdotal, rather than statistical. We asked center caregivers open-ended questions about relationships with parents and children and with their center colleagues: “Do you form strong attachments to young children, or do your relationships tend to be more distant?” “How would you describe your relationship with families?” “Do you think parents understand your relationship with their children? Do they value it? How do they let you know?” “Tell me about your coworkers. How would you describe your relationships with them? Do you see one another outside of work?” “What makes—or breaks—teamwork in your center?”

We also asked directors about their interactions with families and about the director’s role in the caregiver-parent relationship: “What do you do to support the caregiver-parent tie?” “How do you teach caregivers to form strong relationships with families?” “What do you do to create teamwork?” “Do caregivers have any say about whom they will work with day to day?” “What do you do to resolve conflicts?” “Are you close to your colleagues?” “How do you see yourself in relation to your staff?”

We compared the center study findings with our research into family child care settings described in Circle of Love. For that book we interviewed more than 75 experienced family child care providers,
from all over the country, of many ethnicities and economic levels, all offering high-quality child care. Most of the providers had cared for children for at least five years, were members of family child care associations, attended regional and national family child care conferences, and were comfortable with their interactions with families.

Our understanding of relationship-based care is enriched by our extensive professional and personal experiences in child care centers and family child care homes and in the lives of family and friends. As adult educators, we have had lively conversations with practitioners in numerous workshops and college-level courses, even when relationship-based child care was not the scheduled subject. Since 1993, when we began researching this topic, we have talked with hundreds of colleagues and parents—and even the occasional stranger in the airport or on the street—about loving other people’s children, caregiver-child attachments, jealousy, competition, grief and loss, empathy, communication, diversity in child-rearing styles, anger management, conflict resolution, friendship and professionalism, teen mothers, and families in crisis.

We are committed to relationship-based child care, and we are eager to share what we have learned.