

connections

Alberta Home Visitation Network Association



Alberta Home Visitation
Network Association

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Message from the Provincial Director

By Lavonne Roloff

In this issue of Connections, the focus is on the parent-child interaction, one of the pillars of home visitation. The newsletter offers tips and support for engaging in parent-child interaction.

The parent-child interaction is especially effective in programs that focus on the early years. In her book, *Pathways to Competence*, Sarah Landy identifies a number of longitudinal studies that indicate early parent-child interactions have a significant impact on a child's later development. One of these studies found that "early parenting environment predicted a child's adjustment to school and such capacities as social skills and problem-solving ability."

Another related resource is "Your Guide to Nurturing Parent-Child Relationships: Positive Parenting Activities" written by the former chairperson of AHVNA, Shauna Seneca, in conjunction with Nadia Hall and Chaya Kulkarni. This is a practical guide for home visitors to use when working with families. It provides activities to strengthen

parent-child relationships by developmental stage and by parenting capacity.

It isn't unusual for a home visitor to need to encourage parents in learning how to play, to interact with their infant, or to understand the importance of bonding with their child. Attachment is strengthened by spending time with a child. When we take the time to ensure there are opportunities to share with children—reading to them, talking in the car, or having them assist in completing small tasks—they will benefit. These activities

contribute to strengthening the parent-child bond which has long-term effects for the child's development and growth.

While many activities don't require specialized equipment or spending money, they do require spending meaningful time. Make a connection today and make a difference in a child's life.

Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director for the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

Hall, N., Kulkarni, C., & Seneca, S. (2008). *Your Guide to Nurturing Parent-Child Relationships: Positive Parenting Activities for Home Visitors*. Paul H. Brookers Publishing Co. Inc: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Landy, S. (2002). *Pathways to Competence*. Paul H. Brookers Publishing Co. Inc: Grand Rapids, Michigan. (pp. 34-35).



Parent-Child Interactions: Determinants of child developmental outcomes

By Connie LeMay

Parent-child interactions are essential to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth and health of children. These interactions significantly influence behaviour patterns, social-emotional development, early language formation, literacy, and academic outcomes of children. Moments after delivery, this all important interplay begins.

Positive protective factors

Positive parent-child interactions are child-focused, responsive, warm, and caring. They foster trust, curiosity, autonomy, and belief in one's abilities. Coupled with actions that provide clear expectations, limits, and logical consequences, they create resilient children. So, what determines the development of parent-child interactions? And how can the home visitors influence these interactions?

Parental perceptions influence development of parent-child interactions

Parental perceptions are key to the development of parent-child interactions.¹ Ferrier-Lynn and Skouteris (2001) indicate **parents' perceptions "of their own well-being, social support, and relationship to the role of being a parent"** strongly influence parent-child interactions.¹ Negative perceptions about the parent's own well-being may invite the belief that the child's needs are just too great and the parent does not have the energy to respond to every cry or need. Reduced sensitivity to the infant's cries may instigate a pattern of negative parent-child interactions with both parent and child experiencing frustration and distress.

Perceptions about lack of social support from a spouse, family, and friends are related to negative parent-child interactions. Parents preoccupied with the stress of a difficult relationship may experience their child's needs as additional overwhelming stress. This becomes more problematic if parents have unrealistic expectations about how the birth of a child will improve a difficult relationship. They may experience additional disappointment if parenting

demands are not rewarded with a changed relationship or emotional state.

Self-efficacy is the belief that one can perform a specific task. "Studies have revealed a relationship between **low parenting self-efficacy** and compromised developmental outcomes for children related to socio-emotional development and school achievement."¹ Low parenting self-efficacy can translate into decreased or limited attempts to vocalize and make eye contact with a child, invest emotional energy to show warmth and responsiveness, teach language and social skills, and set boundaries and logical consequences.

Parents' age and education, childhood experiences, unresolved attachment, financial stress, mental health issues, family violence, disorganization or discord and a lack of knowledge about child development have an impact on the perception of their role. For example, some parents may not know that their infant is able to express need for affection, food, play, and comfort. Therefore, they may misinterpret or miss these cues.

Home visitors can assess for parental strengths and challenges in parent-child interactions. They can use strengths as the building blocks for developing other skills and capacities in the parent-child relationship. Home visitors can offer accurate child development information and learning opportunities: information sharing, modeling, coaching, and reflective conversations. These learning opportunities in the early developmental years can help establish positive lifelong patterns related to attachment, autonomy, esteem, and self-efficacy for many children.





Take Time for Literacy: It changes lives

By Heidi Ryll

Literacy changes lives. Developing strong literacy skills is essential to our future. Although we often think of literacy in the context of formal school learning, it relates to all learning in daily living. And, play provides the best way to learn.

While having fun, children learn, develop, and strengthen their literacy skills. Literacy helps build in them a joy and foundation for future learning. It develops vocabulary, creativity, logical thinking and problem-solving skills, contributes to new possibilities, and guards against isolation, disparity, poor health, and more.

Because literacy is interactive, there is learning value in every activity in which children participate. During structured activities, such as reading together, or unstructured ones, such as helping with the housework and talking to each other on a walk, children are developing their literacy skills. Playing and laughing together allows children to practise the skills they will use in school and later, at work. Through practise, children become comfortable using these skills. This in turn creates an environment for them to try new things and adapt those skills for a variety of situations.

Parents today are under pressure to give children what they need, but no one person can do it alone. Involving other people benefits everyone. Encouraging an older sibling to read to a younger sibling benefits the older child. It strengthens reading skills, develops self-esteem, and promotes sibling bonding. An elderly neighbour who tells a personal childhood story to a child builds intergenerational bonds, personalizes history (different than learning something from a book), and expands vocabulary skills. An uncle or cousin who participates in literacy activities demonstrates that everyone has a role to play in building a child's foundations for the future.

Spending time with children changes not only their lives, but also ours. It strengthens communication and our own learning, and reminds us of the importance of continual learning.

Time is a very expensive commodity today and should not be wasted. "Dishes and dust wait; children don't." There is no better place to invest time than in our most precious commodity—our children.

Heidi Ryll is the Health for Two Coordinator in North Edmonton/St. Albert.

***"Dishes and dust wait; children don't."
Literacy changes lives. Invest time to
support literacy.***

Perception

"A parental perception of reduced control or power compared with the child has not only been found to reflect a poor parent-child relationship, but also less than optimal developmental outcomes."¹

Mother-infant interactions in high-risk, low-income families²

"Mothers with more than high school education scored significantly higher than mothers with less than high school education for social-emotional growth fostering."²

References

1 Ferrier-Lynn, M. & Skouteris, H. (2008). Parent cognitions and parent-infant interaction: The relationship with development in the first 12 months. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. 33(2), 17-26.

2 Schiffman, R. & Omar, M. (2003). Mother-infant interaction in high risk, low income families. *The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing*. 28(4), 246-251.

Connie LeMay is a consultant with the Home Visitation Network Association.

Caregiving Behaviours That Promote Attachment

By Roxana Nielsen Stewart

A baby cries. His mom picks him up, cooing softly to settle him. A toddler moves too quickly for her chubby legs taking a nose dive into the grass. Her dad scoops her up and kisses her tears. Feeling secure and safe, she continues to play. These caring acts are examples of “attachment”—the deep and lasting connection that children form with people they depend on for care and protection. Attachment is not the same as the “caregiving bond” of parents.

Parental behaviour and response to these attachments helps children develop secure attachment. Home Visitation programs can support parents in strengthening these behaviours.



Resource

Connections for Life Attachment Resource Kit available from the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute at www.preventioninstitute.sk.ca.

Roxana Nielsen Stewart was the Administrative Director with Family Services of Central Alberta and is currently with the City of Red Deer.

Sensitive Responding

A sensitive and responsive parent notices a child’s signal, usually understands the meaning of those signals, and responds promptly and appropriately (is emotionally there).

Comforting

A sensitive parent provides comfort when a child is upset, sick, hurt, frightened, or lonely. When children are comforted regularly and predictably, they learn to feel safe with, and can rely on, their parents.

Reciprocity

When a parent responds to a child’s signals by adapting behaviour to suit the needs of the child, reciprocity is happening. Reciprocity includes a parent learning to read the infant’s signals and getting to know the infant’s temperament, sleep-wake cycle, attention span, and unique responses to experiences.

Repair

Parents are not perfect and cannot always respond sensitively. They might be distracted, be delayed in responding, or have misread their child’s cue. If so, they need to fix or repair this break in the parent-child interaction as soon as possible. How? By acknowledging the child’s need and explaining the misunderstanding or inability to respond immediately. Then responding supportively.

Supportive Play

Children need to experience their parent supporting their exploration and play. Permit children to take the lead, providing only enough help to allow them to do it alone.

Protect or Take Charge

A child’s environment should be as safe as possible to allow exploration. In a frightening or overwhelming situation, the parent needs to help the child regulate emotions. Parents should set appropriate limits in a predictable and kind way.

Loving Care

Showing positive feelings and expressing genuine love and affection even during basic care, such as feeding and bathing, help children to value themselves.

Closeness

Parents need to touch, hold, and make eye contact with their child in appropriate, warm, and loving ways. Children need this physical and emotional closeness.

It is not possible for parents to respond to their children using these behaviours all of the time. What is important is that they use the caregiving behaviours most of the time when interacting with their child.

Supporting the Emotional Needs of Infants: Tips for home visitors

By Evelyn Wotherspoon and Pamela Gough

Although caregivers do not necessarily have to be emotionally available to their infant at all times, they should respond most of the time. It's okay for babies to cry, such as when they are learning to settle themselves to sleep. A moderate and manageable amount of stress will not harm small children if responsive and nurturing caregiving is usually given. Children may suffer significant harm when unmanageable stressful conditions occur regularly without comforting.

Effective parents can recognize, label, and interpret their children's emotions and behaviours. Home visitors can use these guiding questions to help assess a parent's ability to provide emotional nurturing.

Does the parent

- respond appropriately when the child is hurt, ill, or upset?
- engage in spontaneous play and positive interactions: cuddling, cooing, or babbling to the infant?
- make negative comments about, or blame and criticize the baby or his behaviour?
- have unreasonable expectations of the infant?
- take advice well and generalize suggestions to other interactions with the infant?
- seem frightened of the baby or engage in behaviours that frighten the child (e.g., highly intrusive, physically rough, excessively withdrawn)?



Signs of emotional problems in infants

It can be difficult to detect the signs of emotional problems in children who are not yet talking. The following symptoms might suggest emotional problems, although they may be due to medical problems. Children should always be checked by a physician or nurse if their behaviour is characterized by

- inconsolable crying or excessive tantrums unexplained by colic or illness
- unusual passivity or listlessness, such as lack of eye contact or interest (paradoxically, babies who have been emotionally neglected are sometimes described by caregivers as very "good" babies)
- altered sleep patterns, such as excessive sleeping for the child's age, or failure to establish a developmentally expected sleep/wake pattern
- feeding or digestion problems
- self-soothing behaviour, such as rocking, chewing, head banging, or other odd or repetitive behaviour.

Parental responding to baby's cues

Parents may have had a traumatic past or still have unresolved personal loss and grief issues. Those who become very distressed by a crying or fussy baby may need strategies for gaining control of their own emotional needs before they can learn to comfort their baby. Home visitors can demonstrate how to interpret and respond to baby's cues.

Tips for home visitors

- Neglecting an infant's emotional needs requires immediate attention. Use the guiding questions to document concerns about neglect.
- Have all neglected children screened for health, developmental, and social-emotional problems.
- Help parents find enriched care-giving experiences: high quality preschool programs, higher-functioning extended family members, or respite services.
- Target even one risk factor (housing or employment) to improve the outlook for a neglected infant.

Evelyn Wotherspoon and Pamela Gough work with Alberta Health Services in Calgary. A version of the original fact sheet can be found at <http://www.cecw-cepb.ca>.

Research Surprise: Nature or nurture

By Brenda Smith-Chant

A few years back, scientists planned to map human DNA—the blueprint inside our cells that guides every aspect of our biology—to help understand inherited aspects of behaviour, such as intelligence. They anticipated that the human genome would be complex, reflecting the intricacies of human biology. Surprisingly, they found fewer than 25,000 genes in the human genome, only five times as many as a bacterium, or three times that of an earthworm. There just aren't enough genes to encode everything! Where are the rest of the 'instructions'?

Apparently nature only needs part of these instructions—the rest come from the environment. For example, biology provides newborns with the sucking reflex to take food in. Parents and caregivers complete what nature starts. We support further feeding abilities by bringing food to infants and assisting them to suckle, nurse, and burp. Later, we help them learn to eat solid food, use eating tools, and cook. As a result of this environmental support, infants can be born at an early stage of their development. This is very different from a young earthworm, which enters the world very able to take care of itself.

Nature ensures that humans are almost compelled to interact with infants in a way that supports development. Humans engage more in activities that they enjoy (this is why sex and eating are so pleasurable). And adults find it fun to interact with infants in important ways. Watch people around a small child. They seem to be drawn into interacting with the infant. When the infant smiles, most adults cannot help but smile back, coo, and babble, and make silly faces. This is not only cute baby behaviour. We now know that by making this fun for the adults, nature has ensured babies will interact with other humans (especially face-to-face) to develop the social and intellectual parts of the brain.

Nature also ensures an infant's needs for survival and development are met. Because a baby's cry is one of the most irritating sounds known to humans, it highly motivates most adults to react. Thus, rather than having genetic instructions for informing about being hungry, tired, sleepy, or uncomfortable encoded in the DNA, all that's needed is instructions for crying!

Parents and caregivers should be aware that first, they are an essential part of a child's development. Second, the things that they find enjoyable to do with their infants, like cooing, singing, touching, rocking, and smiling, are nature's method of encouraging them to do things that are good for developing the infant brain. Having fun face-to-face with infants isn't just enjoyable—it is essential for their brain development. Parents and caregivers are on the right track!

Brenda Smith-Chant is Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Trent University.

A version of this article appeared in Ontario Connections, Vol. 21 (2).

Child's Play: Providing support versus control

By Betsy Mann

Children explore and discover their world through free-choice play where **they** decide what, when, and with whom to play. They learn and practise making choices while they play. Adults can play **with** children (peek-a-boo), **organize** play (coach a team), and **support** play without being directly involved. Here are tips to support children at play.

Make Time

- Give children free time after long periods in structured activities. It helps integrate their learning.
- Structured lessons (swimming, gymnastics), while teaching skills, do not count as play time.

Provide Play Spaces

- Babyproof your house so your toddler can explore freely.
- Play in a variety of spaces, both indoors and outdoors. Local parks and family resource centres will stimulate different kinds of play.
- Put an old mattress in the basement to encourage acrobatics and develop gross motor skills.
- Learn to put up with dirt and mess. Play is rarely neat and tidy so protect surfaces with newspapers and plastic cloths to make cleanup simpler.
- Provide easy storage with accessible shelves and boxes.

Supply Materials and Equipment

- A toy's packaging often stimulates a child's imagination as much as the toy.
- Add new elements to enrich play environments and stimulate interest: add a garlic press to the play dough table; borrow items from a toy library.

- Collect “loose parts”¹: big blocks, boxes, play dough, child-size tools, costumes, and junk collected in the park (stones, twigs, leaves). These allow possibilities for children to construct their own toys.

Offer Companions

- Join in play when invited, but remember to allow children to lead. They make the decisions; you follow.
- Invite friends over or take your children to a play group. Another four-year-old will probably have a longer attention span for playing fireman than you do.

Give Feedback

- Once you’ve set the stage for play, stand back and let it unfold. You may need to lift something heavy or redirect unsafe play, but let children work through their own conflicts. When children argue, they are working out **how** to play which may be more important than actually playing.
- Respect children’s efforts. Let them discover for themselves what works and what doesn’t. They will learn to solve their own problems if adults refrain from doing it for them.
- Let children know you think their play is important. Don’t interrupt unnecessarily. When it’s time to stop, give lots of warning.
- Weave a particularly successful play episode into a bedtime story. “Once there were some children who were all turned into mice by a magician in a red cape who said the magic words.” Children will recognize their game and play it again.

Keep your own playful spirit alive. Nurture the child in yourself!

Betsy Mann is a consultant with Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs. For more tip sheets, check www.frp.ca. Ideas are from a workshop by Betty Jones of Pacific Oaks College, California.



Sharing Age-Appropriate Books With Young Children

By Holly Handfield

Talking about and sharing books with children provides a way to bond and play with them and develop their brain. Parents’ views and expectations about books for children are often based on what they experienced as children. Today there are good quality age-appropriate books for children to read beyond the traditional picture book.

Board books are for babies who may chew on them as they learn. The good ones can withstand substantial use, and have easy-to-turn pages, simple concepts, bright colours, and real pictures. Some have tactile pages or moveable items—fun for babies to play with while learning new concepts.

Cloth books generally have simple concepts and colourful pictures and are soft and easy to care for. Some have flaps or other tactile pieces. If dampened and frozen, they can be great teething toys, too!

Made from washable plastic material, **bath books** have simple concepts and bright colourful pages that babies enjoy. Discard them when the plastic cracks as the sharp edges are hazardous.

Constructed from heavier paper, **toddler books** are a great next step for children. They are usually quite durable but thinner than board books, and great for young children just learning how to handle books.

Picture books are often available in hard and soft cover. Some are wordless and others have a simple story. Use them to start a conversation with children. Ask about the pictures or what might happen next.

Books can be expensive and construction may be poor. Parents may not like the concepts, themes, and artwork. And, choosing books based on a favourite author is not always a safe bet, as content, artwork, and themes change for each story. Having a conversation with parents about how to choose books before purchasing them can be valuable. You can show parents examples of less-than-ideal books as a way to reinforce better choices.

Holly Handfield is the Northwest FLRN, Centre for Family Literacy & Family Literacy Coordinator, Grande Prairie Council for Lifelong Learning

¹ Nicholson, S. (1971). How Not To Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts. *Landscape Architecture*.

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on **fatherhood in the early years**. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by June 15, 2009.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any correspondence to: Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, at 780-429-4787 or email: info@ahvna.org.

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Parent-Child Bonding: One backpack at a time

By Lisa Carroll

At our Parent Link Centre (Barons-Eureka-Warner Family and Community Support Services), community residents can participate in a two-hour program called Stay & Play. In this safe and stimulating environment, parents play one-on-one with their child(ren). They sing, do rhymes, and tell and listen to stories; play with sand and water; play housekeeping; dress up; build with blocks; explore science; create art; and do brain-building messy play.

For circumstances that don't allow parents to come to the centre, such as transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, or bad weather, the FCSS created a brilliant home version of Stay & Play—a backpack of activities that parents can use at home. It includes a variety of themes and activities that support relationship building, literacy skills, numeracy skills, creative art, recipes the parent can make with the child, story telling and much more.

I plan to take advantage of these backpacks on a regular basis when I do home visitation. What a wonderful blessing it will be for me to watch parents, who might be struggling with literacy skills, interact with their own children and learn along with them. If you think you would like more information about these fantastic tools, contact me at warnerliteracy@gmail.com so I can share more of this exciting way to incorporate literacy through play. Happy learning!!

Lisa Carroll is the new Literacy Coordinator for the County of Warner Further Education. She is originally from St. John's, Newfoundland but loves southern Alberta and is proud to call Warner her home. Lisa is involved in many organizations within her community because of her desire to get involved and make a difference. She is married to Jason and they have a nine-year old daughter, Maggie, who is a constant source of entertainment and joy.

Editor Changes

Our gratitude goes to Cheryl Moskaluk who has been the editor of the Connections publication since its inception. With Cheryl's guidance and insight, we have been able to create a quality publication that promotes home visitation in the province of Alberta. We will miss Cheryl as she leaves the position of editor and wish her well in her future endeavours. Thank you, Cheryl.

We would like to welcome Carri Hall, our new editor. Carri is not new to AHVNA as she wrote and designed the advocacy kit that is on our website. She also has assisted with writing and editing articles for the website. Carri brings a wealth of experience and we look forward to working with her in the future. Welcome, Carri!



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