

CHAPTER 3

Cultivating Positive Relationships and Physical Environments to Support Emotional Well-Being

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Joshua, a 2-year-old in Ms. Keller's class, has been staying at a family friend's house because of his father's depression since Joshua's mother died during childbirth. Ms. Keller has known Joshua's father for many years since they both grew up in the community. She knows about the deep loss the family has experienced and that Joshua is now staying with a family friend.

On many days, Joshua stays close to his teacher and avoids the other children, pushing them away or swatting at those who approach him. Ms. Keller recognizes that he needs consistency and assurance that he is cared for and safe. She understands that building a caring, consistent relationship with Joshua provides a buffering effect against trauma, helping Joshua to overcome adverse experiences and promote healthy, secure learning and development. Ms. Keller provides Joshua with a blanket that he keeps at the center to hold when he is upset. She makes time to do one-on-one activities with him, like reading his favorite book while rubbing his hands. She has also found that singing and dancing to "Shake Your Sillies Out" with Joshua and another child he likes really gets him energized for the day.

To help Joshua and other children in the class understand their own and others' emotions, Ms. Keller provides words to describe their feelings as they are experiencing them: "You look sad that we have to clean up" or "You are mad because Ella took your truck." Ms. Keller always tries to acknowledge each child's emotion and offer an action: "Joshua is feeling sad. Let's find a book about feeling sad" or "Jamal, Joshua feels sad. Can he sit next to you to play with the trucks?"

This example illustrates the importance of positive relationships to a child's development. Joshua is experiencing many significant stressors, including the loss of his mother and living away from his father for a period of time. Understandably, he sometimes

exhibits strong emotions. His teacher adjusts her approach to support a child she knows is under stress. The connections among the learning environment, the circumstances in which Joshua lives, and his emotions require Ms. Keller to make intentional decisions to spend more one-on-one time with Joshua, select materials and activities that help him feel safe, and model some approaches he can use to regulate his own emotions. She understands that building a relationship with him that provides him with a feeling of security is critical to his development.

Ms. Keller knew a lot about Joshua's home experience and background and understood some of the causes of his stress. However, you may not always be aware of the cause of a child's emotions or behavior. To support a child who appears to be experiencing stress and sadness, you may need to reach out to the family to find out background information for a fuller understanding. While you may not always have the opportunity to engage in focused one-on-one interactions with the child, you may be able to engage other children in supporting their peer, as Ms. Keller did when she asked Jamal if Joshua could sit near him as they played with trucks. Children are often eager to help cheer up a friend who seems sad.

The Importance of Relationships and the Environment to Learning

Evolving research in multiple disciplines offers new insights into the importance of the early years in children's learning and development. The development

of the brain and other biological systems impacts a child's ability to learn and is heavily influenced by environmental factors (NASEM 2016, 2019). Environmental factors that affect development include cultural (e.g., feeding and toileting practices), social and emotional (e.g., adult interactions with and responses to children), and physical influences (e.g., sleep, nutrition, and exposure to chemical substances such as lead).

Biological and environmental factors interact in myriad complex ways that impact children's development: "All biological systems in the body interact with each other and adapt to the contexts in which a child is developing—for better or for worse—and adaptations in one system can influence adaptations in others" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2020, 2).

Particularly for children experiencing stress, factors such as reducing long-term stressors; having strong, caring, and positive relationships; and developing key life skills have a profound impact on supporting young children's learning:

Learning is a dynamic, ongoing process that is simultaneously biological and cultural. Attention to both individual factors (such as developmental stage; physical, emotional, and mental health; and interests and motivations), as well as factors external to the individual (such as the environment in which the learner is situated, social and cultural contexts, and opportunities available to learners) is necessary to develop a complete picture of the nature of learning. (NASEM 2018, 26)

Creating an Environment to Mitigate the Effects of Stress and Trauma

It is important to understand how environmental factors such as consistent, sensitive, and responsive caregiving and close child-adult relationships can lead to positive childhood experiences. Likewise, it is important to recognize the effects that trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have on child development.



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Observing carefully to identify the stress and sadness that infants and toddlers experience—and being aware of the buffering effects of caring, consistent relationships—can help teachers calm and support children when they are worried, afraid, or anxious.

The environments that early childhood educators create offer a foundation for supporting positive relationships and experiences with children and for protecting them from stress and trauma. Consider this example in the earliest years of a child's life:

When adults are sensitive and respond to an infant's babble, cry, or gesture, they directly support the development of neural connections that lay the foundation for children's communication and social skills, including self-regulation. These "serve and return" interactions shape the brain's architecture. They also help educators and others "tune in" to the infant and better respond to the infant's wants and needs. (NAEYC 2020a, 8)

Arranging a physical environment that meets children's individual physical, social and emotional, and learning needs conveys to children of all ages that they are safe, valued, supported, capable, and resilient (Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020; Iruka et al. 2023)—all of which contribute to children's ability to trust others and focus on learning.

Strategies to Support Children Through Long-Term Stress

by Marie Masterson

During prolonged times of financial difficulties, illness, community trauma, and crisis, teachers need effective strategies to calm and comfort children. Here are some suggestions.

- › Notice signs of stress, such as a change in behavior, crying, prolonged quietness, or anxiety.
- › Reassure children through gentle physical responses, words, and tone of voice.
- › Ensure that adults model calm and soothing reactions.
- › Keep a predictable schedule of caring routines to develop trust.
- › Offer a lovey, blanket, or pacifier when part of the family's guidance.
- › Monitor levels of stimulation and offer quiet and soft spaces.
- › Provide soft and soothing sensory experiences, such as water and sand-type play.
- › Enjoy lap time or sitting-together time for talking, reading picture books, and connecting.
- › Teach calming techniques like deep breathing, snuggling with a blanket, and seeking help.
- › Include stuffed animals, puppets, and baby doll activities to promote vicarious soothing. Accept that children may use construction or other play materials to reenact a stressful event. Offer words that seem to match what they are feeling as well as words of reassurance and comfort.
- › Recognize that children “may need frequent, explicit, and consistent reminders that they are psychologically and physically safe” (NAEYC 2020a, 17). Be ready to seek mental health experts and other supports and resources that can assist you and families when they welcome this assistance.

Environments can also have negative impacts on children's development. There is extensive evidence showing that children who experience adverse circumstances, such as emotional and physical abuse,

living with someone who suffers from depression or mental illness, or having an incarcerated family member, are negatively impacted (CDC 2023). These ACEs impact children's cognitive development as well as their social and emotional and physical development. ACEs have been found to increase children's risk of “sleep disturbance, failure to thrive, growth and developmental delays, viral and bacterial infection, atopic disease (including asthma, allergies, and eczema), overweight and obesity, and learning and behavioral difficulties” (NASEM 2019, 204–5). Racism must also be recognized “not only for its immediate and obvious impacts on children, but also for its long-term negative impacts, in which the repetitive trauma created by racism can predispose individuals to chronic disease” (NAEYC 2020a, 8). (See “Stress and Trauma, Including Racial Trauma, Affect Children's Learning.”) In addition, the physical environment can greatly affect children's development. As just one example, as climate change continues to have impacts on all of us, children included, extreme heat can affect children's health and development, with effects felt throughout their lives (Early Childhood Scientific Council on Equity and the Environment 2023).

Stress and Trauma, Including Racial Trauma, Affect Children's Learning

When children experience losses and adverse circumstances, they grapple with a number of emotions and often don't have the cognitive capacity or language skills to process the events or articulate what they are experiencing. For example, Black children may continually witness someone who looks like them, their father, their mother, or other loved one be expelled, mistreated, or, in the worst case, killed. They are vulnerable to racial trauma (Jernigan & Daniel 2011; Saleem, Anderson, & Williams 2020) and may not be able to express their fear and distress in a way that's recognizable to some teachers. An Asian American child who witnesses someone telling their family to “go back where you came from” may begin acting aggressively toward their peers or withdrawing from participating in the classroom. While there is a need for more research on racism and its impact on children, children take in a great deal of information from their environments and begin to draw conclusions—yes, they are scientists in the making! There is evidence that children begin to see race as early as 3 months old; they gaze more at faces that look like their caregivers (Singarajah

et al. 2017). As young as 3 years old, children begin to make decisions based on race, such as choosing preferred peers, with White children preferring to play with those who look like them and excluding those who don't look like them based on skin color and other factors (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020; Iruka et al. 2020). Early childhood educators have always voiced a conviction that every child matters, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, or creed. Unfortunately, the United States is built on systemic and structural racism that has permeated every institution and system through policies and practices that position people of color in oppressive, repressive, and menial positions. The early education system is not immune to these forces. In addition to the home and community environments, early learning settings are one of the central handful of places where children begin to see how they are represented in society. Thus, the early learning setting can be a place of affirmation and healing for children, or it can be a space of trauma, terror, and exclusion. Educators must work to ensure that it is the former.

The beauty of the brain, however, is its plasticity—the ability to compensate, regenerate, and develop different pathways to overcome the deleterious effects caused by traumatic experiences and adverse environments (Hunter, Gray, & McEwen 2018). Environment, as both a positive influence and a negative one, plays a significant role in children's development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2023). It is the educator's role to create the type of environment that nurtures the health and development of every child.

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