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July 2002

# Extending the Dance: Relationship-Based Approaches to Infant/Toddler Care and Education

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# Extending the Dance

## Relationship-Based Approaches to Infant/Toddler Care and Education

Carolyn Pope Edwards and Helen Raikes

In Lincoln, Nebraska, 18-month-old Cole has established a warm and loving relationship with his parents. He looks to them for support in new situations, greets them with glee after a day in child care, shares his discoveries with them, and seeks comfort from them when hurt. Observing Cole and his mother—how they move together, exchange looks and glances, and take turns in communication—one almost has the feeling that their close relationship is like a dance. That dance, although mostly smooth and harmonious, also includes moments of surprise and catch-up when the dancers momentarily get out of sync with each other for one reason or another. Over time, new elements are incorporated into an ever-widening repertoire of steps, rhythms, moods, and tempos. The relationship gradually becomes a performance with many acts and many layers of meaning and interpretation. Cole grows in confidence as well as competence and becomes able to lead and follow in an increasing numbers of arenas—social, cognitive, and communicative.

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The work on this paper was partially supported by the University of Nebraska Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources, Journal Series No. 13265.

Photos courtesy of Carolyn Edwards.

The intimate, rhythmic exchange that occurs between Cole and his mother has aptly been called a *relationship dance* (Thoman 1987). The relationship dance delivers important elements for successful infant development. Through the pleasure and emotional sharing of a warm, loving, reciprocal exchange with an emotionally available caregiver, a baby learns about people and the world and grows cognitively, socially, and emotionally in tiny, manageable steps. Many babies have this kind of relationship dance with their parents, their primary caregivers.

Today, many infants and toddlers also receive alternate care while their parents are employed or continuing their education. Moreover, all babies—whether or not their parents work outside the home—soon begin to be part of social groups beyond their immediate families. Indeed, from the earliest weeks or months of life, children direct their attention and interest beyond the family toward other adults and children who seem friendly and exciting or loving. Although parents mediate their child's early interactions and relationships, the child is the one who seeks out these relationships and enters into them at his or her own pace. People create their lives through relationships with others; development and learning

take place "in, through, and for relationships" (Josselson 1996, 2).

Thus, nonparental adults such as providers, teachers, and directors of early childhood programs become significant figures in children's lives—implicit or explicit partners in their relationship dances. This article describes the value of these kinds of relationships

People create their lives through relationships with others; development and learning take place through, and for relationships."



for children and outlines some specific steps that American and Italian educators from relationship-oriented programs rely on to expand on children's first relationship dances.

Cole has expanded his relationship dances. In addition to his close relationship with his parents, he also enjoys a close, security-based relationship dance with Mia, his child care teacher. He has been with this teacher since he was a young infant. Mia has cared for him and three other children in a small relationship "family" that has enabled her and them to concentrate on one another throughout the families' workday.

During the workday, Mia is Cole's secure base. Mia soothes and helps him when he is hurt. She shares in his discoveries. For example, she pauses and looks up at the sky with him when Cole seems excited by an airplane going by; Mia says, "Airplane," and Cole repeats, "A-plane," and they exchange smiles. In general, they keep track of each other, and Cole's behavior changes when Mia steps out of the room. Cole likes Mia to cuddle him and rub his back at naptime.

When Mia arranges the classroom before the children arrive in the morning, she chooses some toys she has seen him just beginning to explore. She shows the children photographs of a recent walk they took together, and Cole immediately recognizes himself and names many things and people as he babbles joyfully. Cole's parents and Mia work closely together; they are a kind of dance team, handing off to one another so Cole dances smoothly through his days and early years.

**How might the parent-child relationship dance look in another cultural context? Let us go to Pistoia, Italy, a small Tuscan town thousands of miles away from Lincoln, Nebraska, to observe another interaction (from the research video discussed in Edwards & Gandini 2001, 187-89).**

Ten-month-old Clara is being carried by her mother into the city-run infant/toddler center, Il Grillo (the caterpillar). It is nearly the end of Clara's first week in the center. On earlier days, Clara's mother stayed with her the whole time she was there; but now Clara is comfortable enough that her mother leaves her for a while. Clara plays happily with Franca, the teacher who is helping this new family settle into the program. Clara is also very interested in the other children and the toys.

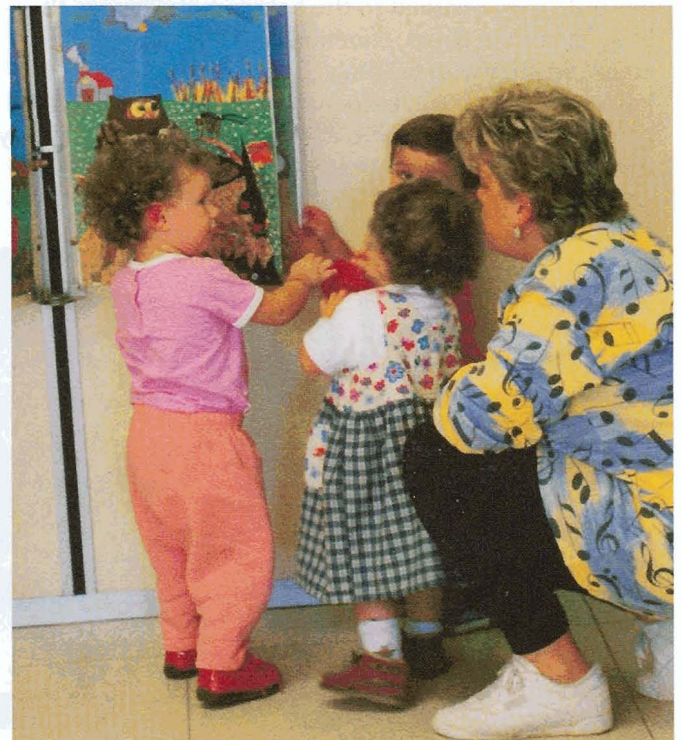
When Clara seems hungry, Franca mixes up the cereal that she knows Clara is to eat today. Franca had wanted to wait until Clara's mother returned before beginning the feeding, but the delay proved too long and Clara is too hungry to wait any longer. Clara eats well being fed by Franca until, suddenly, she sees her returning mother and bursts into tears. Franca sits back to make room for the mother to draw near and hands over the bowl of cereal. Mother tries to feed Clara some more bites, but the baby is too distressed to eat until her mother takes

her out of the feeding chair into her arms, saying soothingly, "That wasn't so bad." Then Clara quiets and finishes her lunch as Franca sits by, watching with a warm, attentive look.

By the end of the week, when her mother comes to pick her up, Clara rests comfortably in Franca's arms, gazing at her mother while the adults chat about how the day went. Then Clara and her mother head out the door, with the mother turning to wave bye-bye while calling out "Ciao" and naming all the children in sight (speaking as if for Clara and thus showing that they both already feel part of the group).

The language and some of the customs and practices may be different in the central Italian setting, but what happens nevertheless seems familiar and easy for outsiders to understand. The Italian educators use their own distinctive concepts to discuss their strategies, but many of their goals are similar to those of Americans. The educators in the city-run program in Pistoia, for example, strive to make the settling-in period as gradual and comfortable as possible for both the child and the family so they begin to feel a sense of belonging in the program and a warm connection to the other children and adults there.

The educators seek to convey "generosity of attitude," to create "favorable and evocative environments," and to promote feelings of "harmony" and "ease" between children and adults (Galardini & Giovannini 2001). The educators explicitly base their





practice around the relationships developing within each program. They consider what happens between and among all of the teachers, children, and families. Furthermore, each of the centers such as Il Grillo is firmly embedded in a system of relationships with the other city-run children's programs and with the community as a whole. The program in Nebraska also bases its practice on relationships, assuming that, if children are secure in relationships with teachers and parents, they will prosper in their development.

What is the meaning of relationships to an infant, and what is the value of extending upon them during the caregiving day?

**If children are secure in relationships with teachers and parents, they will prosper in their development.**

**The role of relationships—and the relationship dance—in development**

Over the past three decades, researchers have learned a great deal about the importance of relationships to infants. Enduring, close, caring relationships provide the context for all aspects of healthy growth, learning, and development (Dunn 1993; Thompson 1997). Sensitive, emotionally available adults create a framework for interaction with the infant from birth onward. They respond to the baby's cues, engage the baby in mutual gazes, communicate with gurgles and coos and later with language, move in synchrony, imitate the baby, and respond appropriately when the baby cries. The baby, who is born with a primary ability to share emotions with other human beings and the need to join in and "learn a culture," eagerly finds a way to participate. Many infant psychologists have noticed how much the reciprocal responsiveness between parent and child seems like a dance. Thoman (1987) developed the dance metaphor beautifully in her book for parents called *Born Dancing: How Intuitive Parents Understand Their Baby's Unspoken Language*.



**Relationship- and attachment-based programs in the United States**

Knowledge about caring relationships is beginning to transform educators' work with infants and toddlers in early care and education. Many infant/toddler educators have applied principles of attachment theory and research in their work with children and families across several program types and venues. For example, in Early Head Start, building and protecting strong positive relationships that continue over time is a fundamental principle of educational work with the child and family (Lally et al. 1995; Lally & Keith 1997). More programs today, such as the Child and Family Research Center at the University of Nevada, stress continuity of care over periods of several years (Essa et al. 1999). For nearly 15 years the Donald O. Clifton Child Development Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, has served employees of the Gallup Organization in a program based on attachment principles (Raikes 1993, 1996).

At the Donald O. Clifton Center, the attachment-relationship focus begins with the creation of small family groups of infants, each group having a qualified caregiver who stays with the children over time, typically throughout the infant and toddler years. Teacher selection begins with a structured interview that stresses themes of empathy, rapport, drive, ability to see children as individuals, and other relationship qualities. The program supports teachers' and parents' relationships with children through observation, feedback, reflection, and occasional intervention. It also promotes teacher retention through good wage structure, high morale, and a supervision process that values personal and professional growth.

Teachers plan for each child, creating individualized portfolios with monthly plans that build on that child's emerging interests, developments, talents, and capabilities; they share these plans with families. The teacher-child relationship is an extension of the primary parent-child relationship, and teachers invest in building supportive relationships with families around their common interest, the child. Continuity of care, frequent phone and face-to-face conferencing, and other strategies encourage

## Guidelines for Programs Providing Attachment-Based Education and Care

Although every program is different, programs designed around attachment principles tend to share a number of program features. We offer the following guidelines to early childhood teachers and directors implementing a relationship-based infant-toddler program.

Look at program decisions through the relationship lens so practices support rather than undermine relationships. For example, consider relationships when planning teachers' schedules or when designing an addition to your building. Look for ways to support and strengthen child-parent, child-teacher, parent-teacher, child-child, and teacher-teacher relationships.

- Appreciate that child development takes place in family, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. Develop sensitivity and understanding for differing values, beliefs, and expectations. Build relationships that support continuities yet also afford challenge and change.
  - Use and model the qualities that build strong relationships—empathy, emotional responsiveness, good nonverbal communication, individualized perception, respect, acceptance, delight, and acknowledgment of interests and strengths—in interactions with children and families.
  - Promote continuity of care by supporting “family groups” that include a teacher (or teachers) and children who remain together for a prolonged period of time. Consider practices that support continuity, such as multiage grouping or looping. Looping allows a teacher to move up with a group of children through a program or section of program until the children move on and the teacher takes a new group.
  - Provide each child with a primary teacher-caregiver. This teacher becomes a secure base for each member within a small group of children and families.
  - Promote consistency among all staff, beyond the primary teacher-caregiver. For example, during a shift change, assign a consistent part-time teacher to the same children for the second shift, enabling children and families to experience predictability and trust across primary and secondary caregivers.
  - Ensure that facilities allow children to be with one primary teacher (or sometimes two) in a small group throughout the program day. Avoid overly large rooms that necessitate large group sizes.
- Support children through daily separations, reunions, and moments of transition by ensuring that teachers are with them during critical moments to promote feelings of security.
- Support children and parents through *major* transitions; for example, try to move children together with close or familiar peers or with a familiar teacher. Be aware of the role the teacher-caregiver plays as a secure base in cushioning changes for children.
  - Implement methods of observation and planning that promote interactions geared to each child's unique needs. For example, primary caregivers can maintain portfolios documenting the growth and development of each child, a task they can do because they have closely observed and followed a small group of children over time.
  - Support communication and dialogue between teachers and families and encourage frequent conferences, visits, and information exchange.
  - Use relationship goals as a theme in dialogue with families. For example, talk with parents about how the child's relationships are going.
  - Hire staff who believe in the importance of relationships; have strong rapport, empathy, and communication skills; and are able to invest emotionally in children.
  - Work with staff so they relate to children consistently across the program in both caregiving and teaching and learning situations. For example, if your program advocates responding quickly to babies' cries to foster the babies' sense of trust and agency, then ensure that all staff respond consistently.
  - Reduce teacher turnover by providing good wages and benefits, and emphasize the program's focus on relationships and the importance of commitment to the family group throughout infancy. Encourage each staff member to commit for the duration of his or her assignment with a family group and to consider career changes only after the group has completed infancy.
  - Think of staff development as a process, not an outcome, and attend to the emotional components of adult development during supervision (for example, considering the importance of relationships to the teachers as well as to children and parents). Provide training that enables teachers to continue learning about the importance of their own relationships to infants and families.



The teacher-child relationship is an extension of the primary parent-child relationship, and teachers invest in building supportive relationships with families around their common interest, the child.

communication and mutual commitment between teachers and families. Center space is organized with relationship continuity in mind. The facility is designed so each teacher has her own room, which she and her family group use exclusively during the children's infancy until they are transitioned into preschool.

### An education based on relationships: Italian approaches to infant/toddler care

The approach used in the United States emphasizes ways to think about the child's relationship dance in infant-toddler programs. But just as there are many ways to dance, so there is more than one way to design a relationship-based program. Throughout the world, wise approaches to infant/toddler care embed the child in close, rhythmic relationships with caring people. Although the languages and customs may vary, the essence of these approaches is similar, even in places distant from one another in time and space (Whiting & Edwards 1988). Examining other systems and practices allows us to reflect on our own and possibly gives us a way to effectively revise, extend, or elaborate on them.

## Suggestions and Guidelines for Programs from the Italian Approach to Infant/Toddler Care

A close look at the Italian approach and the innovations in several different cities suggests additional ways that American teachers might bring attachment theory and research to bear in their practice. Educators may want to reflect on the following:

- Build the program around extended, close companionship between and among children and adults. Nourish attachment to the local community and different people's traditions, past and present, including favorite stories, communal events and symbols, and central meeting places.
- Provide staff training that enables teachers to learn strategies for beginning relationships (settling in) in a delicate, relaxed, empathetic, and individualized way that respects feelings and *emotional time* rather than *clock time*.
- Use the good-bye process to provide a sense of closure, climax, and celebration so children and families move on to the next program with satisfaction and anticipation.
- Act on the insight that children can form multiple attachments and become part of a complex group life that has its own special rituals, games, jokes, favorite fantasy characters, hideaways, and precious objects. Share these attachments and experiences with families and treasure them through documentation.
- Recognize that peer relationships take a long time to develop among infants and toddlers and are emotionally costly and time consuming to replace. Consider ways to preserve group continuity over time

and respect special friendships that develop between children.

- Promote each child's and each family's identification with a wider network of early childhood services, and build closer ties with the programs from which many children come and into which they transition.
- Make staff feel like part of a supportive system. Embed professional development within community and statewide efforts, and make these connections visible to families.
- Create an amiable physical environment that promotes emotional well-being and supports interactions, communication, and relationships through physical qualities of harmony, openness, reflectiveness, and transparency.
- Make spaces and activities evocative and favorable to imagination, fantasy, and expression, enabling children to create and re-create a collective imaginary world that provides each child a special place in the group and allows him or her to work through universal emotions such as fear, anger, worry.
- See the program as a place for both children and adults to learn and grow. Use the vision of education as relationship in your framework for dialogue with and among staff, families, and the public.
- Seek to increase long-term public support for your services through the same celebrations and "beautiful products" that you prepare to share and conclude children's project work and stages of learning. This effort widens the circle of relationships.



Italy is a country where, for several decades, educators have been working with parents and other citizens to build high-quality public systems of care and education to serve families with young children (Gandini 1993; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). The Reggio Emilia system has become known to educators for the work and words of its founder, Loris Malaguzzi (1993), who spoke of “education as relationship.” He saw that children are forces who enrich our world by creating new connections between people, places, and things. Therefore, educators must treat them as people who are always interconnected with others and seeking participation in wider communities.

Although Reggio Emilia is very well known among educators, other cities of northern and central Italy have witnessed parallel success stories as the sites of significant innovations. Stories of these experiments in the field of comprehensive, family-centered education and care have been gathered from four cities—Milan, Reggio Emilia, Parma, and Pistoia (Gandini & Edwards 2001). Leading policy experts, researchers, administrators, pedagogical coordinators, and teachers prepared the narratives that together provide a portrait of a distinctive and evolving Italian approach to “an education based on relationships,” in the words of Malaguzzi (1993).

The people participating in public services for infants and toddlers engage in continual improvement of quality through active information sharing and exchange with families as well as with researchers from Italy and other countries. In particular, they have worked on developing a gradual, individualized, and respectful period of entry, or transition (called *inserimento*), as a way for families, caregivers, and children to coconstruct a sense of belonging and mutual trust (Bove 1999). They have also put a strong emphasis on documentation—a collaborative process of observation, interpretation, and production of various displays or records—to sustain the professional development of



Throughout the world, wise approaches to infant/toddler care embed the child in close, rhythmic relationships with caring people.



educators; make curricular decisions that are respectful of children; and communicate with families, colleagues, and the community.

For example, to balance the emphasis that is placed on the beginning period when the new children enter, the educators also are careful to *close* relationships in ways that say good-bye in the emotional language of attachment. Teachers often express parting feelings and concluding thoughts through a beautiful construction, the *diario*, or memory book, given to each family upon departing the program. They include photographs that capture significant moments, creative products (drawings, constructions), anecdotal records and summary notes, letters that have been exchanged, and schedules or calendars. The books might be woven together with a simple accompanying text that speaks directly and affectionately about the child's experiences and highlights the child's particular strengths and contributions to the life of the group (Edwards & Gandini 2001; Giovannini 2001). Families treasure these diaries and look at them in later years.

Finally, Italians are famous for creating beautiful, well-planned, personalized environments. The programs' human and physical environments convey a strong sense not only of respect for the child's capabilities but also of welcome to all who enter, children and adults (Rinaldi 2001). Cristina Bondavalli created this kind of environment at the center, Peter Pan, in Reggio Emilia (Gandini 2001, 59–61). The entryways are set up to introduce what happens inside. Carefully designed displays inform families about the rhythm and content of their child's day. One display features sets of notes about each child that are decorated and encased in transparent envelopes to convey underlying messages about open communication and belonging. Entering the classroom, families find an inviting place decorated with homelike rather than institutional pieces of furniture. Other focal points for families are the framed photographs of each child, the collection of treasure boxes full of children's mementos from the previous summer holiday, and large folders containing children's work, which

are placed in a comfortable spot to share with peers or parents. The environment is emotionally and physically safe yet amiable, encouraging interactions, communication, and relationships (Gandini 1993).

The environment supports the children and families in forming new friendships and in learning about the unique cultural traditions, values, and ways of enjoying family and community life in the local area and region. In Pistoia, educators speak of making the space favorable to the child and the group. In an inclusive way that reaches out to all new arrivals, the space should transmit to children the sense of belonging to a community with a history (Galardini & Giovannini 2001). For example, most rooms contain familiar pieces, such as wicker cradles

woven by local craftsmen and furnishings coming from children's homes. The space should also encourage imagination, fantasy, and expression. Through stories, puppet theater, and fairy tales, children and teachers explore imaginary roles together, rediscover regional folktale traditions, confront and master emotions, and create a collective imaginary world that includes special characters who become part of group life.

Certain cities (notably Pistoia, Parma, and Milan) have witnessed a strong cooperation among educators, public officials, and families in developing innovative program models to meet the needs of different kinds of families. Today in Italy, one can find cities with municipal services that feature not only full-day infant/toddler centers but also community and family centers, organized play groups, and parent-child centers. These Italians have worked toward offering a diverse set of services that combine public and private funding and that integrate social service and family support functions with child care and early intervention. Moreover, these programs are open to the entire community rather than directed only to families with defined needs or risks. Achieving and sustaining high quality in these programs requires continuity and cycles of communication within and between all levels and groups of participants in the system. The search for high quality also depends on collegial collaboration and continual inservice professional development. Several cities have become models of systems that strengthen and improve themselves through teacher-centered research done in collaboration with outside experts.

**The programs' human and physical environments convey a strong sense not only of respect for the child's capabilities but also of welcome to all who enter, children and adults.**

**The environment is emotionally and physically safe yet amiable, encouraging interactions, communication, and relationships**



## Conclusion

Creating an infant/toddler program that revolves around relationships can be compared to expanding a relationship dance from first attachment figures to new ones. The educator must take on an artistic role for this performance. The educator makes the space ready, creating a beautiful place that inspires everyone to feel like dancing. For a new child just entering, the educator must take the initiative, become attuned, get into rhythm with the child, following the child's lead. Because a young child enters the programs "in the arms" of parents, the educator also enfoldes the parents in this process.

Gradually, as the dance between the educator and child becomes smooth and familiar, the educator can encourage the child to try out more complex steps and learn how to dance to new compositions, beats, and tempos different from those known before. The dance partnership can also widen as both child and adult try out new partners from the larger group. As the child alternates between dancing sometimes with one or two partners and sometimes with many, the dance becomes a story about who the child has been and who the child is becoming, a reciprocal self created through close relationships.

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