Relationships, the Heart of Quality Care

Creating Community among Adults in Early Care Settings

Amy C. Baker
and
Lynn A. Manfredi/Petitt

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National Association for the Education of Young Children
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Why Relationships Matter

Adults really count in a young child's life. The younger the child, the more important the grown-ups. We have all seen babies light up and wriggle with delight when their special people gurgle or make funny faces. A parent's look or a nod gives infants courage to crawl to the other side of the room or make eye contact with a stranger. Beloved adults have the power to soothe distressed babies when no one else can. Research only confirms what we know from experience: Children thrive when they are surrounded by people who are crazy about them (Bronfenbrenner 1991).

Life for young children is shaped by relationships. Wherever they spend their time they need to be cared for by adults who are able to invest emotionally in their well-being—adults who care *about* them, not just *for* them. Young children do best—now and later—when they are nurtured within a tightly woven web of love. A large body of research acknowledges the significance of such caring and attentive relationships. (See the range of findings in **A Look at Adult-Child Attachment** on pages 8–9.) Relationships shape a young child's growing identity (Lally 1995; Honig 2002b; Bowlby 1969): Through interactions with adults—parents and caregivers alike—infants develop a sense of who they are, what's important in the world, and how much influence they bring to relationships with other people. To develop a healthy sense of self, children need to be cared for by adults who take the time to attune to their emotions and understand their cues; long-term, stable relationships have a positive impact. It takes time and focus to get to know a child, especially one who is not yet verbal.

A Look at Adult-Child Attachment

Research on attachment supports the importance of bonded relationships between grown-ups and very young children. Here is just a sampling:

Attachment defined. Attachment is a strong emotional bond that grows between a child and an adult who is part of the child's everyday life. Attachment relationships between children and adults teach children to interpret emotions and behaviors and to develop an understanding of relationships (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980).

Parent-child dyad. A young child's crying, smiling, nuzzling, and lifting of arms to be carried are examples of behaviors that encourage adults to be responsive, and thereby enhance the child's chances for survival. Pediatric anthropologists note that humans have evolved to begin life as part of an intimate dyad with a loving adult. We are born before our neurology is finished; it could be said that humans really have a 21-month gestational period (9 months in utero and 12 months outside). Children are completely dependent for their survival on people who care about them. (Small 1998)

Secure attachments. Loving, trusting relationships with caring adults result in *secure attachments;* children know they can count on their adults to be attuned to their feelings and to respond quickly and constructively. Children look to trusted adults for guidance. For example, a toddler will look to his parent for a nod that indicates it's safe to explore or play with a particular toy.

- Secure attachments allow children to test the consequences of challenging behaviors—a critical part of moral and value development, or *conscience.*
- Children who have secure attachments develop resilience and a positive sense of self (Ainsworth & Bell 1974; Arend, Gove, & Sroufe 1979; Erickson, Korfmacher, & Egeland 1992). They come to believe they are lovable and important and can have an effect on other people.
- Children who have secure attachments know they can communicate their needs and will be taken seriously. These children are better at self-regulation (Shore 1997). They can comfort themselves with a blanket or a book or a teddy bear or a TV program when they need to. They're also quicker to settle down after they've been distressed (Honig 2002a, 2002b).

Attachment and conscience. Longitudinal studies show that relationships between young children and caring adults become the foundation for conscience and the capacity to succeed in school (Perry 2001). Children with poor attachment capacity are harder to teach because they feel little pleasure from teachers' warm encouraging words. They don't regret being a disappointment to adults. Conversely, children with strong attachments do better in school. They are more likely to cooperate, develop language proficiency, and have fewer behavioral problems (Perry 2001).

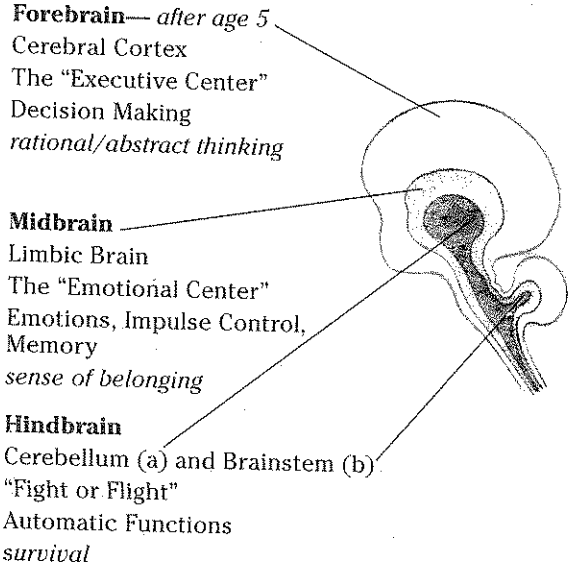
Attachment and emotional development. Erik Erikson's (1950) stages of emotional

development create a connection between brain development and loving relationships:

- Infants develop *trust* by having physical and emotional needs met.
- Toddlers develop *autonomy* by "pushing against" loving limits of attached adults.
- Preschoolers develop *industry* through loving attention and encouragement to master skills.

Attachments with more than one adult. Children are able to become attached with more than one adult (van IJzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermon 1992; Raikes 1993; Barnas & Cummings 1997; Goncu & Klein 2001). Children who form positive attachments to their caregivers benefit from those relationships (Honig 2002a, 2002b). Parents sometimes worry that their relationship with their child will be disturbed by a caregiver-child attachment; but relationships formed in child care don't disturb or replace the bonds between parents and child (NICHD 1991).

Attachment and brain development. The development of higher-level thinking skills depends on love and attachment. As represented in the figure below, the brain develops from the "bottom" (Bales & Campbell 2002), along the lines of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1970). Insecure attachments affect a child's ability to move from the brain's "emotional center," which manages trust and impulse control, to the "executive center," which is responsible for abstract thought and reasoning.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Children will bond with more than one adult, and that is all right. But just a few primary relationships are best when life is new. To do otherwise overloads a young child's ability to make sense of the world. Predictable adult interactions teach children what to fear, what behaviors are appropriate, how messages are received and acted upon, how to get one's needs met by others, what emotions and level of emotion can be displayed, and whether or not one is worthy of another's attention (Lally 1995). For this reason, child care should be a waltz—not a mixer dance. The field of early care and education recommends that a very young child stay with the same caregivers for the first 36 months of life, especially if the child spends more than 35 hours a week in care (Lally 1995).

When adults have trusting relationships with plenty of give-and-take and care is seamless, children reap the benefits.

To meet children's developmental needs, the daily curriculum of infants and toddlers is *relationships* (Lally 1995). But not only the relationship between caregiver and child. Relationships between adults significant in a child's life are also part of that curriculum—wherever children spend their days. In a child care setting that means parent-caregiver interactions as well as relationships between coworkers. Adult relationships have a powerful impact on children's quality of life. When adults are uncomfortable or mistrustful with one another, children feel the tension and are less able to attend to normal developmental tasks. But when adults have trusting relationships with plenty of give-and-take and care is seamless, children reap the benefits. And so will we, when this template laid down in childhood shapes their adult approach to living with others.

A growing number of centers across the United States are looking at the impact of relationships on child development. Relationship-based programs support the view that every interaction counts. We support that view too. The caregiver-child relationship is our starting point, and its development is our primary goal. But the matrix of adult relationships—parents-caregivers, caregivers-caregivers, caregivers-directors—is vital to quality care as well. That matrix is the focus of this book.

The importance of adult-adult relationships

Research has just begun to look at the nature and value of parent-caregiver relationships. The Parent-Caregiver Rating Scale, which asks questions about communication, friendship, and trust, is one example (Elicker, Noppe, & Noppe 1996). Child care professionals know that parents possess information and insights that are invaluable to their

children's caregivers. Caring and trust enable teachers to understand a family's childrearing practices and values and offer seamless and holistic care. National standards support family-caregiver "partnerships" and encourage the professional teamwork approach to adult relationships. (See **Family-Caregiver Partnerships Indicate Quality Care.**)

Less research and practice plumbs the depths of caring relationships between families and caregivers in child care settings and the potential effects of those relationships on the children. The practice of modeling center culture after what is typical in a business or elemen-

Family-Caregiver Partnerships Indicate Quality Care

All national standards of excellence recognize the importance of the parent-caregiver relationship as an indicator of quality care.

National Association for Family Child Care. The NAFCC accreditation workbook emphasizes that the most important aspect of a high-quality family child care program is human interactions. The quality of a caregiver's approach to children and their families forms the foundation of support for everything else. All kinds of development are supported in the context of warm, responsive human relationships. (NAFCC 2002)

NAEYC. The National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation criteria (1998) state that in good programs "teachers and families work closely in partnership to ensure high-quality care and education for children, and parents feel supported and welcomed as observers and contributors to the program." Revised accreditation criteria, now in preparation (2004), preserve this principle and spell out in considerable detail aspects of interactions and relationships with parents as priorities for program staff. For example, the new criteria would stress that staff need to work with families on shared caregiving issues, including routine separations, special needs, and daily-care issues. Facilitating opportunities for families to meet together formally and informally, work together on projects to support the program, and learn from and provide support to one another is another emphasis.

Head Start. The Early Head Start and Head Start Performance Standards identify parent-caregiver relationships as a priority. Head Start involves families as partners, expecting them to share with caregivers and teachers their knowledge about their children. Parents also are asked to share in the process of planning/implementing and reviewing the effectiveness of the curriculum. (Head Start Bureau 1999)

Rating scales. The Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), both widely used program quality scales, consider programs to be good when (1) families are made aware of philosophy and approaches practiced; (2) much sharing of child-related information occurs between parents and staff; and (3) a variety of alternatives are used to encourage family involvement. The instruments rate programs highly when families are involved in decision-making roles along with staff. (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer 1998a; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford 2003)

tary-school setting limits the important attachments many families and caregivers make naturally with each other. (See **The Business and School Models.**)

The Business and School Models

Business model. In the business model, service comes first; relationships are secondary. Most service-customer relationships are expected to be formal and cordial, limited to the task at hand. When we pick up dry cleaning or make a bank deposit, we don't normally tell the person behind the counter about our personal life. Mentioning visitors from out of town or a squabble with a spouse doesn't improve the service. In fact, it can slow things down. Friendships are considered messy, troublesome, and not worth the effort. Many businesses have policies against friendship with customers, among coworkers, and between staff and supervisors. Relationships are expected to be formal and limited to the work itself.

Elementary-school model. In the elementary school model, relationships generally begin and end with the academic year and are contained within the classroom. Teachers and families meet at formal conferences and have little day-to-day contact. Typically, unless the child is doing poorly, neither parents nor teachers make a big effort to communicate separate from scheduled formal conferences. Ongoing friendships between teachers and families are not encouraged. When they do occur, they are mostly ignored unless the relationship becomes unbalanced and the teacher shows preference for one parent over others. In that case, the friendship is generally seen as unprofessional.

The teacher expects each child to fit in with the expectations of the classroom, even when there is a conflict between school and home. Little is known about the child's home life. Teachers don't usually know about changes in the family—even dramatic ones—unless the child offers the information.

The school's administrative structure supports a hierarchical relationship between the principal and the teachers. Teachers' autonomy and participation in decision-making are limited.

Likewise, little attention has been paid to relationships among caregiver team members and between caregivers and directors. We are uncomfortable with the idea of regulating emotions in the workplace—and rightly so. The line is fuzzy between what is too much closeness and not enough, between what is personal and what is professional. And yet a hands-off approach fails to take into account that such staff relationships exist, and that they can and do affect the children who also spend their days in that workplace.

Of course, not every center uses a business or elementary-school model to guide its practice regarding adult relationships. Some centers recognize that caring parent-caregiver, caregiver-caregiver, and caregiver-director relationships are the heart of quality care. Such

The Family Model

Relationship-based child care takes as its model the loving web of relationships that surrounds a child in a well-functioning extended family of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in some cases neighbors and close friends. They form a community of people who care about the child and about one another.

While no family is perfect, members of a well-functioning family try to be cooperative. They try to balance their own needs and interests with the needs and interests of others. They generally refrain from making demands that strain the ability of the rest to cooperate. Parents try to live by the rules they impose on their children; for example, if children are to resolve their differences by using words, the adults too try to settle their conflicts that way.

High-functioning families generally have a common understanding of which behaviors are permissible, forgivable, and possible—and those that are not. The adults try not to push too hard against agreed-upon boundaries, preferring community and cooperation to uninhibited self-expression. These families are resilient and flexible and able to admit new people into the circle without testing or penalties.

Members of high-functioning families generally have an appreciation of their need for one another, or *interdependency*. Broadly speaking, they have a sense of one another's strengths and know that the group functions best when everyone works together. They realize they benefit from the support and love of other family members and are able to rely on each other for help when it is needed.

Children thrive within this web of caring and usually adopt it as a template for their own adult lives as they grow.

relationship-based care, based on the family model, values and celebrates close and caring relationships between adults—whether those relationships develop naturally or require effort or encouragement to form. In such centers, relationships are as important as regulations, budgets, and the everyday tasks of caring for young children. Positive, respectful, caring interactions between all the adults in the child's world are valued as essential to the spirit, the flow, and the quality of the program. (See **The Family Model.**)

Relationship building is a priority for directors in programs following the family model. Their support and awareness maximize the likelihood of success. Valuing strong family and caregiver partnerships, directors in relationship-based programs see to it that potential caregiver teams have time to talk privately with parents who are considering enrolling their child. Directors encourage teachers to empathize with parents and appreciate the stress of raising a family while working outside the home—even if that work appears to be a choice and not a necessity. Directors also encourage understanding about the worry parents feel when they entrust their child to someone

else's care. They reward teachers for going the extra mile to support families when they can, as this teacher did in one relationship-based center:

> The father realized he'd forgotten to bring his son's pacifier to the center today. He felt bad but he had to be at work and didn't have time to go home and get it. I told him not to worry. We'd figure something out. Later that morning I went out and bought the child three pacifiers to keep here at the center. I would have wanted someone to do that for me, if I was in his situation.

With a focus on balanced relationships, directors of relationship-based programs encourage parents to reciprocate caregiver kindnesses and to value the skill and commitment it takes to care for and teach other people's children. Directors help parents recognize the patience, dedication, and giftedness of the teachers and the relationships they form with children. And it works. "I don't know how my caregiver does it," says one parent, "She's so relaxed and affectionate with the children, and she almost never raises her voice. She's a gem!"

In relationship-based programs, staff interactions count too. When caregivers are hired, or need to be moved to another room, directors take into account personal styles and the relationships already formed between caregivers. Teachers who naturally get along and draw energy from each other are kept together and moved as a team. Interpersonal connections are valued, supported, and encouraged. In one infant room the caregivers describe themselves as a family and talk about what each member brings to the team:

> Sandy's the grandmother in our group. She's the one who can comfort the babies when none of the rest of us can. She just sits with them in that rocking chair and they curl up against her. . . . Denise is really good at taking pictures of the children when they are just about to learn something new. The parents love it! "Look! There's Alena discovering her toes!" . . . Ellen is the youngest member of our family and we love her. We can't wait until she's out of school and working with us full time!

Relationship-motivated directors know that caregivers thrive—along with the children—when staff relationships are full of that kind of energy and joy.

Learning from family child care

"My caregiver knows our whole family, including our cat and dog and pet fish, and we know hers."

High-quality family child care can teach us a great deal about care that is relationship based. In family child care homes, relationships tend to resemble those in an extended family. Parent-caregiver connections are broad and enduring. The children in care generally get to know the provider's own children, her husband, and other family members. It isn't uncommon for a child to join the caregiver's family at the dinner table when parents are delayed. Providers often get to know the child's brothers and sisters and sometimes even go to the child's home on festive occasions.

Families and providers typically feel comfortable sharing important information about circumstances that affect the children whose care they share. Parents let caregivers know that Sam may be worried because his father is traveling or Becca might be overtired because her cousins came to visit over the weekend. Parents tell providers when household routines are changed or upset. One mother says proudly, "My caregiver knows our whole family, including our cat and dog and pet fish, and we know hers. She knows that when Grandma comes to visit, Eli is always more excited."

Parents generally say they choose home-based care because they want a close relationship with a caregiver who will bond with their child. They rely on the provider as they would an experienced family member or friend who knows about childrearing and can offer advice or help when needed. For instance, one mother who was struggling with bedtime routines asked her caregiver how she could get her child to go to bed "without three extra stories and a glass of water?" She followed the caregiver's advice and reports, "Now I have a little time to myself in the evening."

In family child care, no other adult stands between caregiver and parent; the provider is owner, director, and teacher. Families and providers sustain their relationships as long as the child is in care, and often beyond. Children who come to a family child care provider as babies often remain in care until they begin kindergarten, and many return to the caregiver's home before and after school and over school breaks. When a baby brother or sister is born, that child often follows

the older one's footsteps into the provider's home. The parent-caregiver-child relationship can continue for a decade or more, depending on circumstances. Friendships develop; some last a lifetime.

A high-functioning web of relationships is not exclusive to family child care. It can happen naturally and informally in any setting—and does in many high-quality child care centers. Elements of the family approach to relationships are within reach for even the largest center program. A commitment to relationships is the place to start. Inspired by the family approach, one large Atlanta center uses class trips to create intergenerational connections and community within each classroom. Children and their families, sometimes even pets, are invited to join staff and their own children on excursions. Weekend camping trips are a favorite. The adults exchange observations, casually and naturally, as they stir rice over the campfire or watch the toddlers playing. In this setting parents and caregivers find common ground and relax as peers. They bond around the children and share the joys and challenges of learning and loving.

These trips are the starting point to all sorts of adult connections within this center. The pre- and post-trip difference in relationships is dramatic. Bonds formed on these excursions are noticeably stronger than those in other centers. It is not unusual for parents who share a classroom to regularly hang out after hours with their caregiver and

Two Exemplary Relationship-Based Approaches

Parent Services Project (PSP). Believing that "you can't serve a child without serving the family," PSP provides training and resources to programs seeking to shift to family-centered thinking and practice. Respectful relationships are the foundation of the PSP approach, and it is built on the values of partnership, equity, shared power, social support, and asset building. In programs using PSP's approach, parents and staff work side by side to create strong and caring communities where relationships matter. All are welcome to come together to shape services and activities that meet the needs and interests of children and families at each site. For more, visit the PSP website at www.parentservices.org.

Reggio Emilia. In Italy, the community-based early childhood education approach known as Reggio Emilia creates an environment in which parents, staff at all levels, and children are involved together in continuous learning and reflection. Learning is viewed as relationship based; each child is immersed in a network of carefully cultivated, emotionally warm, and responsive relationships. Experiences of conflict and difference are valued as opportunities for discussion, repair of relationships, and reaching new points of view. The entire program culture is one of children, parents, and staff all learning and developing together. For more, see Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman (1998) and Gandini & Edwards (2001).

the children or to adjourn somewhere for supper. Community connections, once begun, endure throughout the year and even beyond; they surround the children in a circle of caring that goes beyond the norm.

The early childhood program developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is an example of the family approach (see, e.g., Gandini & Edwards 2001; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998), with relationships one of its founding principles. Community is also an objective of child care centers involved with the Parent Services Project (PSP). Again, the sense of community and extended family is tangible among adults, with bonds that can last a lifetime. It is not unusual to discover groups of families and former caregivers enjoying each others' company at restaurants and ball games years after the formal child care arrangements have ended. Long-term relationships like these are not as rare as we once believed; they often happen naturally, even when discouraged by center policies. Slowly, thanks to programs such as PSP, authentically close adult relationships in child care settings are becoming recognized as a goal of quality care. (See **Two Exemplary Relationship-Based Approaches.**)

Benefits of positive relationships between families and caregivers

Close, caring relationships between children's families and their caregivers improve the quality of children's care in ways both direct and indirect.

Caregivers and children bond

What we learned about relationships in family child care is also true for center-based care—that a solid relationship with parents allows a caregiver to feel comfortable bonding with their child. Relationships with parents that are friendly and reciprocal make caregivers more likely to delight in children's progress, remember details to share about the day, think about the children after hours, and remain connected to the family beyond the child care years. In either setting, a child and caregiver are more likely to form strong ties when the child's parents value that relationship.

On the other hand, a tense or conflicted relationship with parents can impact a teacher's ability to become attached to their child. Many caregivers say they pull back from a child if a parent seems threatened by the affection they naturally feel for children. The warm feelings that

a caregiver has for children may feel uncomfortable, and even "adulterous," when parents seem jealous or insecure. Seasoned caregivers become uneasy about forming a close relationship with a child when interactions with the child's family are limited or formal. Some caregivers say they actually feel relief when a relationship-resistant family withdraws from their program, because they don't want a child whom they have grown to love to suffer an emotional tug-of-war between the adults.

Children get seamless care

Strong relationships between families and caregivers allow communication to flow naturally and smoothly. In child care this generally translates into fewer mistakes, easier adjustments, and milder upsets. Each child is better understood, and the care between home and center is seamless. An infant caregiver tells this story involving the stress of a baby's first few days in care:

> I was trying to get her to sleep, but she couldn't relax. I didn't know whether her mother rocked her to sleep or put her down and let her fall asleep on her own. I looked in her bag and found a pacifier, but it didn't seem to help. I held her on the rocker. She was exhausted, but she wouldn't fall asleep. An hour went by. I was feeling pretty frustrated because I wasn't able to help this baby, and I wasn't free to help my coworker either.
>
> After three days of this I decided I needed to talk to the mother. She told me that the baby usually went to sleep with her Pooh bear, but she didn't think we'd allow him at the center. I felt so bad! I told her we would welcome Pooh and anything else that would comfort her baby. The next day the mom brought Pooh and a beloved yellow blanket, and naptime was much easier for all of us. I rocked the child and Pooh and the blanket, and she fell asleep right away. It was such a relief!

The seamless care that results from close parent-caregiver relationships reduces confusion or tension between home and center that children may feel. A child who drinks from a bottle at home but is expected to "be a big boy" and use a cup when he's at the center will probably be confused until the adults caring for him sort out the rules. If the mother is angry with the caregiver for "making her son give up the bottle," her child will feel the tension until she and the caregiver resolve their differences.

Young children can't explain that they feel pulled in two directions. Instead they express mixed emotions through anger, aggression, withdrawal, sadness, or out-of-control behavior. In this caregiver's story, a simple connection between significant adults made all the difference in calming a little boy's anxieties and increasing his comfort within the group:

> One of my worst times was when I was caring for a little boy who came from a family who didn't speak any English. He sat in a corner for the first two weeks and cried. I tried to comfort him but I couldn't get through. Now and then I could distract him with a toy, but most of the time he sat alone. He didn't eat American food at home, and that made it even worse. I felt so sad watching that little boy. Angry too, with his mother. Why did she leave him there like that? What was she thinking? Didn't she know how miserable he was?
>
> One day the mother came to the center with a friend who spoke some English. The friend translated while I told them what was happening. I asked her to ask her son what I could do to make him happy. I was desperate. Of course he couldn't tell her. He was just 3. But he knew that his mother and I were talking about him, and that made a difference. The next day he was shy when he came in, but not tearful. He stood near the other children when they played and had a cracker at snacktime. It was because the mother and I talked that we started making progress. He didn't understand me any better than before, but he began to trust me. It took time, but gradually he became more at home in our group.

"It was because the mother and I talked that we started making progress."

When forced to compartmentalize their home and care lives, many children become overloaded. They struggle to make sense of their disjointed world but lack the capacity to make it happen. Misbehavior is a young child's way of telling everyone that the stress is too great and that the adults need to work more closely together. If the grown-ups don't compare notes, distress is inevitable for all and attachment between caregiver and child remains limited. But when adults coordinate and goodwill prevails, challenging behaviors and tension diminish and children feel as comfortable as the adults do.

Caregivers feel rewarded

The quality of the parent-teacher relationship also has a direct effect on the stability of the caregiving arrangement. Positive, caring relationships with families keep caregivers working—whether in a home or center setting. For many teachers such relationships are part of their compensation, a hidden benefit that makes them want to stick around over time (Manfredi/Petitt 1993). Caregivers are more likely to feel they are doing valuable work if they know that parents value their

relationships with children as much as the mundane chores they do. An easy give-and-take with families makes teachers feel valued and validated. Reciprocity strengthens the caregiver's sense of self-worth and reduces negative feelings, stress, and burnout. This is critical in a field in which annual turnover is estimated to be 30 percent for caregivers and 40 percent for directors (Center for the Child Care Workforce 2001).

Caregivers who talk openly release conflicted emotions that contribute tremendously to burnout. Caregivers who develop a personal commitment to each family are less likely to suddenly seek other employment in the middle of a year. It is no accident that center turnover seems to be greatest at transition times, when well-loved children are moved to other rooms. Losing a group is a natural time for many caregivers to leave the job—before another group comes along to bind a dedicated teacher to yet another year of short-lived attachments.

"I can't leave my babies! I started off with most of them in the baby room."

We came across one caregiver who was well-loved by families but punished for those close ties by a new, inexperienced director. Uncomfortable with the tight, free-wheeling, confiding relationships that Val had with the "clients," the director demoted her from lead teacher. After observing this director make a particularly sarcastic remark to her, we asked Val why she stayed. Her response is a dramatic illustration of the power of family-caregiver connections:

> These are my babies! I started off with most of them in the baby room. When they moved up, I ended up taking a job in their room later that year. When they moved again, so did I. Next year they will move to preschool, and then I'll be gone—but I can't leave my babies! Besides, I know their parents so well. I babysit for some of them on the weekends, they invite me to their houses for dinner—this is my family! They know what is going on. They appreciate my staying.

Fortunately, the director of this center moved on, and the dedicated caregiver was reinstated as a lead teacher as soon as the new director learned the whole story. The caregiver still works at the center, following another group in the same way. Her kind of commitment cannot be bought. It comes from adult relationships built slowly and deeply over time.

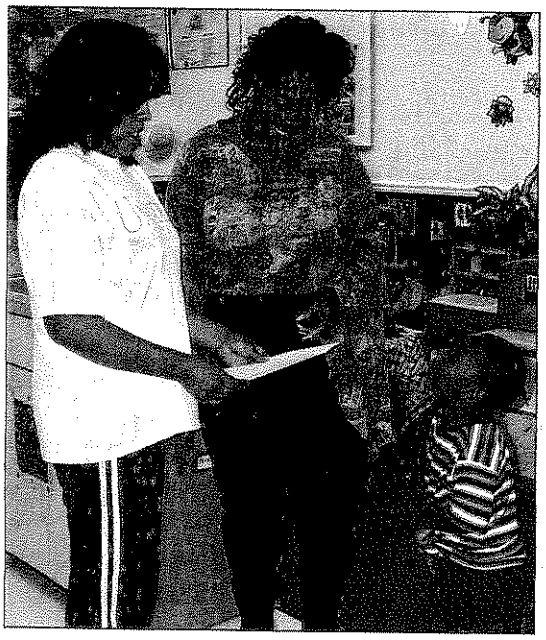
Families return their appreciation for teacher dedication in countless ways. It can be as simple as a thank-you card or a verbal acknowledgment of how important the caregiver is in the child's life. It can be a single flower or a few tomatoes from the garden or a note written at the end of the day. In one center, caregivers in the infant room report

that parents bring in bagels or donuts in the mornings, "It makes a big difference!" Other friendly gestures, such as sharing photos of a family trip or helping pick up the room at the end of the day, are natural in budding relationships. When parents connect with them, caregivers feel less stressed by the work, and they are happier altogether. Like anyone else, when their work is appreciated and they feel part of a community of people who care about one another, even the difficult days seem manageable.

Parents relax

When relationships between families and caregivers become authentic and reciprocal, parents feel more settled and relaxed. They know they are leaving their children with people they can trust. When friction arises—and it always does—the confidence parents have in their caregivers encourages them to resolve differences rather than hide them, question themselves, or rail against their circumstances. Here's an example of a mother's confidence in her caregiver:

> I had twins and I wanted them to be fed on demand. But every time I came to pick them up, one of them would be screaming with hunger. I asked their caregiver to try to feed them before they reached a fever pitch. I hated to come to the center when one of them was crying! She had a lot of children to care for, and I knew it was hard for her to do that. I considered looking for a new center, but I liked the caregiver, and she liked me and the children, so I stuck it out. Eventually we figured it out, and my children were much happier. I wouldn't have put up with it if I hadn't liked the caregiver so much.



Once parents are comfortable, they are more likely to routinely share information about their personal interests, family relationships, and parenting issues. Family child care providers report that such information makes them better able to work through problems; it is no different in child care centers.

As with all good relationships, natural, informal daily interactions help everyone keep things in perspective when challenges do arise. A welcoming hello, an offer of juice or snack at the end of the day, a thank-you note, or a comfortable adult-sized chair near the doorway invites parent and caregiver to relax together

and talk about the children and about their lives. The chatty bits of information easily shared at drop-off and pick-up times give the adults the insights they need to identify and untangle looming conflicts.

One caregiver tells of a child who had been taught a game by her grandfather that involved slapping him lightly in fun, then saying "sorry" and rubbing his face to make it better. When the child began playing it Monday morning with the other toddlers, the caregiver was surprised by her peculiar aggressiveness. The child was slapping her friends, but she was smiling! At pick-up time the parent's casual mention of the "Grandpa game" gave the teacher the information she needed to understand and redirect the innocent perpetrator. There was no need for a formal conference or tense telephone call. The trusting, easy interaction already developed between parent and caregiver solved the problem before it got out of hand.

Caregivers and families rely on each other

As the partnership between each parent and caregiver deepens, the inevitable differences and conflicts become part of an ongoing fabric of personal interactions rather than thorns of contention. The adults become more trusting and tolerant of each other, and solutions arise naturally and easily because of the friendship-like sharing that has formed over time. They are able to broach sensitive subjects when needed.

It's hard to separate cause and effect in good relationships. Does a teacher begin to see parents as a resource because their relationship is reciprocal and friendly? Or do families become more friendly and respectful of a caregiver because they feel valued as a resource? Either way, most of the caregivers we interviewed see families as an invaluable source of insight and information, especially when children's feelings are difficult to understand. One veteran teacher explains,

> It helps to know whether a child was up late at night when he arrives at the center tired and cranky in the morning. In the same way, it's easier to maintain a sense of humor when children throw temper tantrums if you know they are testing their parents at home too. Parents also benefit from talking to us. If parents know that their child was unable to rest at naptime, they are less likely to see him as uncooperative or "bad" when he's irritable in the evening.

Communication helps both ways, as this example offered by another caregiver shows:

> When Jen enrolled Nicky she brought a letter "written by him" about his likes, dislikes, and cues. She wanted to be sure I knew as much about him

as possible. We laughed a lot about the letter. He was only 4 months old. But it made a big difference. I knew from the very beginning I could go to Jen anytime I needed help; she made me a part of her team.

As in all relationships, the door opens most easily when time is spent mutually enjoying each other's company and sharing light-hearted conversations as well as challenging ones.

"I knew from the very beginning I could go to [the mother] anytime I needed help; she made me a part of her team."

Benefits of positive relationships between caregivers

As professional organizations become clearer about their goals, they begin to set standards for themselves and their members. Our own field has a clear understanding of the importance of staff relationships.

> Developmentally appropriate practices occur within a context that supports the development of relationships between adults and children, among children, among teachers, and between teachers and families. Such a community reflects what is known about the social construction of knowledge and the importance of establishing a caring, inclusive community in which all children can develop and learn. (NAEYC 1997b, 16)

Children receive better care

Staff who enjoy respectful relationships with one another are more likely to be responsive and emotionally engaged with children in their care. Sharing the joys and challenges out loud with colleagues can help teachers to become more conscious of individual children and to remain calm, even bemused, when children misbehave or conflict. Successful caregiving teams share the workload along with the responsibility of making sure all the children are accounted for in the comings and goings of each day. Children in turn feel safe, secure, and surrounded by a sense of belonging. They are able to play, explore, learn, and cooperate with other children. The classroom becomes a happy place.

Children see positive role models

Caring, cooperative relationships between staff members model the best of adult teamwork day by day, letting it seep into each child's template for future use. Cared for by predictable adults who are flexible, responsive, and able to see children as individuals, children can afford to offer flexibility and responsiveness to others in the room. Creative exploration, humor, and playfulness take precedence over rigid rules and herd-like monitoring. When caregivers' own relation-

ships are positive, they set a moral tone and teach children about responsibility, mutual respect, integrity, and human values in the way children learn best—through experience.

Children learn what they live, and children who live within the loving web of a bonded team are often more empathic with their peers. Here's a teacher who takes advantage of this nurturing cycle:

> A child in my care used to help other children. . . . She always looked pleased when my coworker and I would tell her that she was a good caregiver like the two of us. The other children noticed and they'd ask, "Am I a good caregiver too?" They all wanted to be like Cassie.

Families feel included

Families benefit from the stability and continuity of positive staff relationships and their children's obvious comfort in the situation. When staff members have a shared understanding of each child, parents get similar information from any caregiver they talk to. Parents feel more relaxed and confident because caregivers seem to be in accord and on top of the situation. When staff relationships are strong, families sense the respect that flows between staff members. Families feel naturally invited to become part of a caregiving team that supports one another and find mutual joy in the raising of children. Because respect and trust helps everyone feel safe, the center becomes a place where everyone can explore childrearing values and develop shared practices. Ideas and personal needs are easier to integrate when the template is already forged by bonded classroom teammates.

Caregivers feel at home

Teachers obviously benefit when their relationships with coworkers are strong and positive. They look forward to coming to work in the morning. They enjoy sharing their observations of the children. They feel understood, in accord. Their needs are anticipated. They don't have to work to assert themselves. As with good parent-caregiver relationships, staff relationships that thrive go beyond polite collegiality. Caregiver team members share their lives and values and personal challenges. Each knows what makes the others "tick" and finds ways to work around or through the difficult situations, just like a family. Here is how one teacher puts it:

> When your relationship with your coworker is good and you've worked together a long time, you don't have to wonder what the other person is

thinking. You know. You don't have to explain what you're doing either, because your partner knows. You can just concentrate on the children and do your job. The children are the center of your attention. I've worked in settings where I had to spend a lot of energy on the relationship with my coworker, and it isn't the same. When you're arguing or you have to explain a lot of things to your coworker, you can't give as much to the children. You're too busy. There isn't as much of you to go around.

The center's atmosphere is positive

"I've worked in settings where I had to spend a lot of energy on the relationship with my coworker."

People who really like and value one another pass on that positive attitude to the children. As in a fully functioning family or community, authentic staff relationships weave a safe and comfortable atmosphere where children can thrive. When staff members become comfortable, caring teams, they are actually better able to remain focused on the children in care. In settings where teachers have a strong sense of collegiality, interactions are genuine and relaxed and individuals feel free to express their thoughts openly (Bloom 1997). Conflicts resolve more easily, and each one feels supported by the others in times of stress. Friendships, often forged beyond center hours, make the center atmosphere noticeably different from less harmonious workplaces.

Teamwork is a delicate balance that must develop on its own, but that development can be encouraged. Wise administrators, Paula Jorde Bloom points out, know they cannot force a sense of esprit de corps:

> Contrived congeniality invariably backfires. A sense of community must be nurtured and developed by careful attention to the social and affiliation needs of the people who work together. [Directors] can therefore enhance collegiality by structuring opportunities that enable teachers to work collaboratively on projects, share resources, and solve problems together. (1997, 41)

Directors whose caregiving teams work well together can celebrate. One thoughtful director went so far as to *document* conversations among staff members, encouraging and valuing their interactions rather than trying to stop or control them. She created a photo essay on "collegial collaboration," which elaborated on the benefits of strong staff relationships, especially to children. Appreciative of her respect and understanding, teachers at this center use their freedom to chat wisely, constructively balancing the needs of children with their own needs for adult connections.

Benefits of positive relationships between caregivers and directors

In a traditional business or school model, power and priority are concentrated at the top and trickle down the chain of command. A relationship-based child care center functions more like a large, caring circle instead, with children at its center. Teamwork and cooperation are an expected norm for all.

Caregivers feel supported and appreciated

Outsiders may assume that because a center looks cheery, the staff naturally must get along. But positive director-caregiver relationships are not a given; they must be built over time with authenticity, reciprocity, and mutual respect. The director-caregiver relationship can be complex. The director is supervisor, mentor, check-signer, "Big Momma" or "Big Daddy," and the person to whom parents turn with complaints. The relationship a director has with each caregiver affects the way work and other relationships are approached. When relationships with the director are at their best, caregivers don't feel judged or afraid of the "boss." Instead, director and teachers operate as a professional team, pulling together cooperatively to offer the best care possible to children and families.

Caring directors are also mentors. When they enjoy mutually satisfying relationships with staff, directors become a valuable resource for second opinions and fresh perspectives about particular children or situations. The director's office can be a refuge for stressed-out caregivers or children having a really tough day who need a change of scene. Directors keep caregiver-child relationships on the high ground by being supportive, understanding, and available. Here's what one teacher has to say about her director:

> My director is amazing! I have learned so much from the way she talks to the children. She always has a smile in her voice and says just the right thing to them. I try to use her voice when I have trouble figuring out what to do with a child. Sometime it is like magic—I don't know how she does it all the time. She's like that with everybody—like a sister, friend, or my second mom!

When a staff member has a supportive and respectful relationship with the director, she can ask for help without feeling embarrassed. She may even fling herself into the director's office now and then to blow off steam, knowing she will be treated with good humor and understanding rather than disapproval. By being able to be them-

selves—even at their worst—caregivers are less likely to burn out. And that is good for everyone!

Appreciation from directors helps teachers see themselves as valued members of a caregiving team. Passing on compliments from parents, acknowledging progress made in difficult situations, and setting up time for teams to plan and develop their partnerships are some of the many ways that a director can show support for staff. Accommodating caregivers' personal needs, arranging for choice in professional development opportunities, and providing monetary rewards help caregivers feel valued and known by the director as individuals. Written thank-you notes and small tokens also enhance the director-caregiver relationship. In the best of centers, caregivers return their thanks to directors and coworkers, keeping the circle of community vibrant and full of potential.

"Some of us have been here forever—and it is all because of [our director]."

The director-caregiver relationship affects retention (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1990). With a solid relationship, a caregiver can resist the urge to take an unscheduled day off or to quit when the going gets tough. One teacher says,

> I would do anything for my director. She works harder than any of us! We can go to her with our problems—not just the ones at the center—personal things, like when I was getting divorced or when Chennee had that car accident. We are like a family. When she needs something, we are there for her too. We love her so much, we even got the mayor to declare her birthday a special day in our city a few years ago. Some of us have been here forever—and it is all because of her.

Genuine, caring relationships create loyalty that cannot be bought or taught. Director-staff interactions become a template for all other relationships in the center, establishing a foundation for quality care at its best.

Directors feel supported

Good relationships between directors and caregivers, ones that are built on respect and mutuality, are valuable to directors too. Directors need relationships to feel a part of a supportive circle of colleagues instead of a dumping ground or a buck-stopping top dog. Positive relationships with caregivers and families keep the director accessible and down-to-earth. A natural give-and-take makes the job feel doable. It's only natural if you work with people you enjoy being with, respect, and want to support that you are more likely to look forward to coming to work each day and creating a work environment that encourages everyone to do the same.

Children get better care

Respectful director-caregiver relationships offer teachers more access to information about children and their families. For example, one director changed enrollment procedures when she realized that her old method excluded the caregivers. She explains,

> I used to send a note to the caregiver with the new child's name and address. Now I'm trying harder to empower my caregivers and strengthen their relationships with the parents. I tell them more about the family when the parent enrolls the child. I might tell them the names of the child's brothers and sisters or how the parent feels about separating from the child and going back to work. If I know anything about the child's likes or fears, I pass them along so the caregiver has them from the very first day.

The director-caregiver relationship helps to set the tone for caregiver-parent interactions. When respect is shared, it is also passed along. In high-functioning, relationship-based centers, directors support the parents and the caregivers in equal measure. They are available to parents, but they encourage the primary relationship to be between parents and caregivers. When interpersonal challenges arise, directors bring people together and help them solve problems, rather than taking sides or being a go-between.

Including parents on the team is easy when a sense of openness and mutual support is modeled by the director and teachers. Staff with authentic relationships talk about each other in respectful and supportive terms. This allows families to feel comfortable having a relationship with teacher and director both, without the confusion of competition. Parents experience the entire staff as a team working together on behalf of the child. More voices enrich the child's experience with more input and shared expertise. Families are welcomed into the circle because the caring, respectful relationships already established between director and teachers make that circle safe, inviting, and clear.

Relationships meet our human need for community

Families, caregivers, and directors alike have told us that strong adult relationships fill a need in their lives for relationship and communal life. Relationship-based centers foster the feeling of community in dozens of small ways. Office staff are warm and friendly; they remember the names of the parents and the children and offer help even before parents think to ask. Kitchen staff smile and wave as families go by; they put out leftover snacks for parents and children in the late afternoon. Thoughtful directors show concern for teachers, and caregivers' affection for children is out in the open for everyone to see. Teachers help one another and work together with support staff as a team.

Such a center, whether large or small, feels like family. Ideally, it is a home away from home that nurtures everyone and encourages everyone to join in. Parents have opportunities to talk with other adults who care about them and their children. They get to know the parents of playmates and friends of their own children. They share a world in which the adults work together to balance work and home and meet the needs of every member, especially the needs of the very young children they all love.

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Left to our own devices, adults form positive, caring relationships naturally, especially when children are part of the mix. So why is relationship-based child care not the norm in all center programs? What challenges and dangers, both real and perceived, cause us to be cautious about, even resistant to, developing close ties within child care center culture? **Chapter 2** addresses the elements of human nature that make cordial formality between adults seem preferable to caring and connection. And it explores how centers are structured, sometimes intentionally, in ways that undermine relationship-based care.