

*Any teacher of very young children needs three basic skills: Respect for children and their families, Responsiveness to them, and the ability to support Relationships. Open the gateway to learning and future success by interacting in ways that support all areas of children's development.*

# The 3 R's: Gateway to Infant and Toddler Learning

Nancy Cheshire

Through the years, educational systems in the United States have experienced great change. The one-room schoolhouse is now uncommon, but in years past it was the norm. Changes in society have brought about demands for early care and education systems that were not needed or provided as recently as 100 or even 20 years ago. Families today need and deserve high-quality care and education for infants and toddlers.

Research is clear that care and education cannot be thought of as separate entities in dealing with young children (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). Individuals working with infants and toddlers ARE teachers! They play a significant role in the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of the children in their care. When teachers and children interact in a positive manner, the foundation is laid for future learning and relationships (Leiffield & Sanders, 2007). Infant and toddler teachers open the gateway to learning by providing quality care built on the 3 R's—Respect, Response, and Relationships.

The roles of infant and toddler teachers are both challenging and rewarding. How are teachers to meet the daily demands of their jobs and yet form positive nurturing relationships with the children? Teachers of very young children need physical stamina, a sense of humor, and knowledge of the 3 R's of high-quality infant and toddler care and education.

## 3 R's: Respect, Response, and Relationship

**Respect** is shown when adults treat the young child in ways similar to how they would like to be treated by

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others! This is the Golden Rule of quality care. If a person comes up behind adults unexpectedly and touches them, the first reaction is one of surprise. People may jump or flinch. Adults expect to be

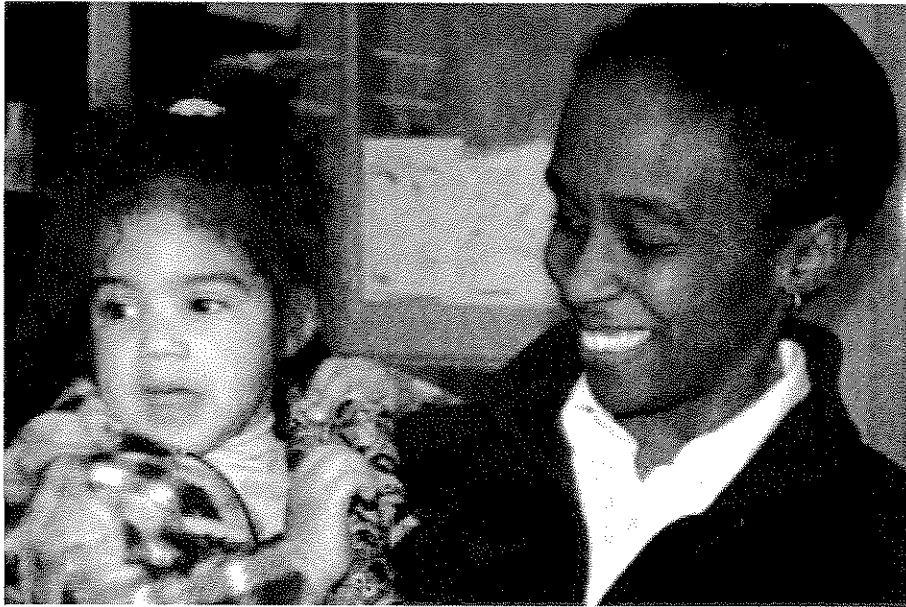
informed when someone is about to touch them. Therefore, teachers and other adults show respect when they approach an infant or toddler by moving in front, so the child sees that someone is coming. Then respectful adults speak and tell the child what is going to happen. "Kendra, I am going to pick you up and change your diaper."

When children are treated with respect, they are treated as human beings, not objects. As a child is being diapered, a respectful adult explains what is happening. "I am going to pull down these overalls so I can get you a nice clean diaper. You will feel all fresh and dry. Can you lift your bottom for me?" Teachers explain what is happening and encourage the child's participation. When appropriate, teachers smile and make eye contact with the child. Teacher and child work together as a team, and a daily routine becomes a positive learning experience.

Think for a moment what it would be like to be very

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Subjects & Predicates

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elderly, having lost control of all bodily functions, and needing someone to change YOUR diaper. How would you want to be treated? Would you want someone to diaper you while conversing with another adult in the room and ignoring you? Would you want someone to change your diaper as though you were unable to feel and see? Infants and toddlers should always be treated with respect, the same way adults would like to be treated if they were in their place.

**Response** requires teachers to observe and know the children in their care. Sensitive teachers watch for cues given by infants and toddlers, read their body language, know their temperament traits, and

**Form a positive connection with each infant or toddler.**

respond as needed. For non-verbal infants, cries and whimpers are interpreted as their words for "I have a need." A suitable, warm response from the caregiver assures children that the world is good and that people can be trusted.

For a toddler, a smile may be all that is required to reassure an explorer that an adult is nearby and ready if needed. When young children know that a caregiver will respond to their needs, children have the confidence to venture forth to explore and discover. The bond of trust has been established and positive learning can take place.

One of the most esteemed advocates of responsive caregiving was Magda Gerber. After her death, Gerber's colleagues paid tribute to her by quoting one of her well-known statements, "Do less; observe more; enjoy most" (2007). When infant and toddler teachers observe and respond to the needs and interests of children, both

teachers and children gain from the experience.

**Relationship** can be defined as a connection or kinship. A respectful, responsive teacher forms a positive connection with each infant or toddler. The primary caregiver's relationship to each child is a kinship. The child trusts the teacher to provide for needs such as nourishment and personal attention just as parents do at home.

Infant and toddler teachers provide a safe haven and an emotional ground on which first learning, social interactions, problem-solving experiences, and relationships are built (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004). "First learning is more about building a structure for thinking than about adding knowledge. It is about building patterns of behavior such as relating to others" (p. 4).

The emotional relationship between teacher and child enables the child to learn self-regulation and



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understand the feelings of others (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004). A positive relationship leads to healthy social and emotional development. This, in turn, encourages the child to feel, and be, competent and capable. Both of these characteristics help the child explore, discover, learn, and succeed.

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Not only does the well-prepared teacher need to develop a relationship with each child, but the teacher must also form a relationship with the family. This partnership of caring and understanding helps form a type of "extended family" for young

parents. Today's parents are often miles away from their immediate families, and they appreciate the friendship and support of trusted caregivers.

Infant and toddler caregivers MUST see themselves as TEACHERS. They model behavior, attitudes, and emotions that affect the long-term development of children

This article is dedicated to Magda Gerber, an educator, role model, author, and educator. She taught many early childhood professionals the methods of responding to infants and toddlers with respect. Magda Gerber died on April 27, 2007, and her positive impact on young children and families will continue for generations.

and their families. A teacher who practices the 3 R's of Respect, Response, and Relationship will lay the foundation for social, emotional, and cognitive development that will lead to future lifetime success.

## References

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# Put These Ideas Into Practice!

## The 3 R's: Gateway to Infant and Toddler Learning

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### Prepare the environment for respectful, responsive care

When grownups have friends visit, their homes are clean, neat, and attractive. Everything is ready so the hosts can spend time with their guests after they arrive. Infant and toddlers need and deserve the same respect. Be prepared to focus on the interests and needs of the individual child. Be ready to respond with respect and thoughtfulness.

### Establish a primary caregiving system

Consistency of care helps children develop trust, autonomy, and initiative. A strong relationship is formed with the families as daily communication is shared. Teamwork and cooperation are required of primary caregivers in a classroom. This improves staff relationships. Everyone wins when a primary caregiver system is implemented.

### Take care of yourself

Infants and toddlers need consistent care. They need grownups to stay physically and mentally healthy. Plan a 15-minute "personal care" time each day after work. Do something enjoyable such as walk, read, or relax in a soothing bubble bath. Caregivers who have been giving of themselves all day need this time to nourish themselves to be ready for another busy, active day tomorrow.

Enjoy the children! Smile and relax!

### Toddler Art Activities

#### Bubble wrap painting and printmaking

Cover the table as for any messy art experience. Tape down a large sheet of plastic bubble wrap. Children rub washable, non-toxic fingerpaint on the bubble wrap. Lay construction paper on the painted area. Children rub the paper gently with their fingers, which are wiped dry. Lift the paper to see the bubble print that is one result of this engaging sensory activity.

#### Classroom collage

Tape a length of clear, self-stick paper on the wall at the children's eye level with the sticky side of the paper facing out. Toddlers tear construction paper into small pieces and stick them on the sticky paper. (Tearing paper is a wonderful fine motor activity.) Turn the collage around and hang on a surface that will not be harmed by the sticky paper.

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.

