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# Cultivating Self-Awareness in Our Work with Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families

Caring for Ourselves as We Care for Others

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**Holly Hatton-Bowers, Elita Amini Virmani, Laura Nathans, Bridget A. Walsh, Martha J. Buell, Patricia Lanzon, Sandra I. Plata-Potter, and Laura Anne Roe**

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As teachers of infants and toddlers, we face many cognitive, physical, and emotional demands as we educate and care for our youngest learners and as we work in conditions of inequity. Educators do not receive the support, benefits, and compensation needed to do our essential work. This can lead to experiencing substantial stressors both inside and outside the workplace (Nicholson et al. 2020). An unhealthy cycle can arise: external pressures often lead to neglecting our self-care, which negatively impacts our personal and professional lives.

Self-care is the active process of nurturing various aspects of ourselves. It includes taking care of our health, balancing our personal and professional lives, and having social supports (Posluns & Gall 2020). See “How Are You Caring for Yourself” on page 33 for dimensions of self-care adapted from Posluns and Gall (2020). While all aspects of self-care are important for early childhood educators’ well-being, in this article, we focus on how we, as educators of infants and toddlers, can cultivate self-awareness. When we know ourselves, we are more skilled at harnessing sufficient supports and resources for our self-care, and we are better able to educate and care for others.

## Awareness of Self and Its Influence on Relationships

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A key element of self-care is self-awareness. When we become consciously alert to our physical, mental, and emotional reactions in different situations, we can observe how we respond to challenges and stress (Crane & Ward 2016). By being self-aware and nonjudgmental toward ourselves, we can, in turn, provide more emotional support and guidance to others

(Jennings 2015)—particularly infants and toddlers. For them to develop secure attachments, we need to respond to infants’ and toddlers’ cues and needs with emotions and behaviors that convey that we care and that they are valued (Lally 2009; Macagno & Molina 2020). Being present in this way provides safety and security to infants and toddlers; it also is respectful. Having a grounded sense of who we are—including our own values, assumptions, triggers, and biases—will help us to respond appropriately to all children and families (Nicholson et al. 2020).

## Fostering Self-Awareness

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Educators of infants and toddlers can take specific steps toward cultivating self-awareness, including the following research-supported practices.

### Practice Mindfulness

Too often, we are occupied with thinking about and evaluating the events and actions of our past and the possibilities of our future. Our thoughts are not often focused on the present. By concentrating on what is happening in the moment with curiosity and without judgment, we can practice mindfulness. Mindfulness can help reduce stress (Dewhirst & Goldman 2018), maintain healthy self-regulation (Frank et al. 2015), and enable us to see and understand others, less clouded by our own biases and perceptions. From a place of mindfulness, early childhood educators also are more likely to endorse developmentally appropriate practices with infants and toddlers (Brophy-Herb et al. 2019), including culturally responsive practices (Berlin et al. 2020).

## Practice Self-Compassion

Although we may readily show compassion toward others, we may struggle to extend it to ourselves. Self-compassion is our ability to accept ourselves and understand our limitations without judgment (Germer & Neff 2019). It provides greater flexibility in our use of adaptive coping strategies, such as reducing reactivity and increasing perspective-taking. It increases our mindful awareness of our emotions and how to express them in healthier ways.

For example, when we become really upset by something a parent says or when a toddler begins crying and throwing objects out of frustration, we can engage in self-compassion practices. We can take a *self-compassion break* (Germer & Neff 2019, 173), pausing before we respond, which will foster a clearer understanding of our own feelings and reactions. As we pause, we can say to ourselves,

This moment is really challenging.

Having these challenges and experiencing these emotions are part of life. May I be curious and care for myself.

May I be patient.

May I be gentle with myself.

Choose phrases that describe your experience while maintaining the practice. If saying “May I” does not resonate, you can instead say, “Can I” or “What if I was.”

During a self-compassion break, we can further consider:

- › What is this emotion I am experiencing?
- › Is this fear?
- › Where is this coming from?

Then, we can ask: What am I needing in this moment that can actually be of comfort to me? A deep breath? Feeling my feet on the ground? Slowing down in this way can enhance self-awareness, reduce reactivity, and increase our connection with ourselves and others.

## Mindfulness Strategies

Integrate mindfulness into your professional and personal lives by using these strategies:

### Take a Few Moments to Breathe

1. Identify the thoughts and feelings you are experiencing at a particular moment. How is your body responding to them?
2. Breathe. Focus on the physical act of taking air in and out.
3. Start to notice how your whole body feels as you breathe. Once you have an awareness of breathing throughout your body, begin to become aware of your surrounding environment, including sights, sounds, and smells.

Adapted from ZERO TO THREE's *Getting Started with Mindfulness: A Toolkit for Early Childhood Organizations* (Hackbert & Gehl 2019).

### Become Grounded in Gratitude

Think of someone you appreciate in your personal or professional life. Write down what you appreciate about this person, then share your note with them. Alternatively, identify three moments in the past week that bring you a feeling of gratitude. Write these down, then notice what and how you feel while thinking about them.

### Use a Mindfulness App

Explore different guided practices, including practices that are available online and through apps (some of which are free), such as *Liberate Meditation*, *Headspace*, *Calm*, or *Insight Timer*. Reflect on what is most interesting or helpful to you about a certain exercise and what would be useful for you to begin practicing each day.

## Practice Reflection

Another way to encourage self-awareness is to engage in reflection. Reflecting on our work and using what we learn to strengthen our practices are powerful ways to assess feelings, behaviors, and our effects on others. Reflective practice is an expectation of the profession (NAEYC 2019) and connected to endorsing developmentally appropriate practices with infants and toddlers (Virmani et al. 2020). (For more about how to reflect on and respond to young children's behavior, see “Becoming a Behavior Detective: Applying a Developmental Contextual Lens on Behavior” by Claire D. Vallotton and colleagues on page 20.)



## Reflective Supervision

Practicing self-awareness does not happen overnight. Having a supportive mentor or supervisor can bring heightened awareness to the ways that adults shape infants' and children's social and emotional development. In a recent study, reflective supervisors and consultants reported that they were able to support the emotional well-being of early childhood professionals by enhancing their self-awareness and self-efficacy (Susman-Stillman et al. 2020).

Through reflective supervision, trust, and mutual respect, early childhood educators can step back, discuss, and reflect on children's development and the meaning of experiences with families or other staff. The more we reflect on and learn from our own practice—how our actions and words make us and others feel—the more likely we will take care of ourselves and be attuned to the infants and toddlers in our care.

A reflective supervisor encourages reflection and growth by asking questions, such as

- › How has your week been so far?
- › Is there a specific child or family that has been on your mind that you would like us to think about together?
- › What thoughts and feelings are coming up for you as you think about your work with this child/family?
- › Is there something that you wish you had said or done differently with this child or family to bring about a different outcome?
- › Moving forward, is there something you hope to do or say to provide the responsive care you aspire to and that a child or family needs?

As educators, we often forego taking care of ourselves. We think we should be able to handle the daily stress and the often emotional and physical exhaustion of caring for others. While self-care has many aspects, an important place to start is with self-awareness. Practicing self-awareness daily can help us notice, understand, and advocate for our workplace needs and supports. Enhancing awareness of ourselves also heightens our ability to be respectful and responsive to colleagues and to the families and young children we serve. Supporting early childhood educators' self-care is not only our responsibility as educators, but it is also the responsibility of the administrative systems and policies in our organizations. This is a dynamic, evolving journey—one we cannot make alone. Daily attentiveness, supportive relationships, and thoughtful systems of care will all aid us as we continue to practice self-care.

## How Are You Caring for Yourself?

Dimensions of Self-Care Practices	Defined As	Questions to Self-Assess <i>To what extent do you . . .</i>
<b>Awareness of self</b>	A continuous process of noticing our internal and external experiences, reflecting on these experiences, and then identifying our needs and attending to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become aware of what you are feeling and why?</li> <li>• Have awareness of how your actions impact others around you and notice how others respond to you?</li> <li>• Have clear values for what is most important to you personally and professionally?</li> <li>• Ask those whom you trust for feedback about your qualities that they observe to be helpful or not helpful?</li> </ul>
<b>Flexibility</b>	Having coping skills that help us with the emotional challenges in our lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel like you can adapt to change and feel in control of emotionally stressful moments?</li> <li>• Feel like you have healthy ways to cope with your stressors?</li> <li>• Label your feelings?</li> </ul>
<b>Balance in personal and professional life</b>	Ensuring that responsibilities and pressures from work do not interfere with our care for ourselves. The extent that you make appropriate connections between your personal life and work activities depends upon your comfort level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel like what you do at work has purpose?</li> <li>• Have ways to make sure your stress at work isn't affecting your time with friends and family?</li> <li>• Have boundaries with work and your personal life and respect these boundaries?</li> <li>• Foster non-work related interests?</li> </ul>
<b>Physical health</b>	Making conscious decisions to take care of our physical health through good sleep routines, healthy habits, exercise, and nutrition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wake up at the same time each day?</li> <li>• Nourish your body with water and overall have a healthy diet?</li> <li>• Exercise at least 3 times a week?</li> <li>• Have a healthy digestive system?</li> </ul>
<b>Social support</b>	Having personal and professional relationships that are supportive and healthy. Also involves engaging with a community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have relationships that are satisfying?</li> <li>• Have at least 3 people that you are close to and that you can trust?</li> <li>• Feel like you belong to a group or community?</li> <li>• Avoid negative and unproductive relationships with others?</li> </ul>
<b>Spirituality</b>	Discovering purpose and meaning in our lives. Associated spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplative reflection, gratitude, and spending time in nature can be ways to practice spiritual self-care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel like you have a sense of meaning and purpose in your life?</li> <li>• Engage in practices that provide time for growth and reflection? (prayer, meditation)</li> <li>• Forgive others?</li> <li>• Take the time to practice gratitude?</li> <li>• Spend time outdoors/in nature?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reflection:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does self-care mean to you?</li> <li>2. Which dimension(s) of self-care do you think needs more attention?</li> <li>3. What are ways that you can strengthen your self-care?</li> <li>4. What will be your first step?</li> </ol>		

*This table is adapted from Posluns & Gall 2020, page 12.*

## Notice Your Emotions

It is important to remember that all emotions are valid, so welcome them. Our emotions tell us important information about our experiences. Becoming more aware of our emotions and what may frustrate us as early childhood educators can help us understand ourselves better and support us in identifying ways to be more responsive rather than reactive.

### Reflect

When thinking about different emotions, reflect on your experience with these questions. (For example, *when I experience anger . . . or when I experience joy . . .*)

1. What does your body typically feel like when you experience this emotion (in your stomach, head, chest)?
2. What does your face look like?
3. What are times during your workday that you have experienced this emotion? What happened to cause you to have this emotion?
4. If you draw this emotion, what does it look like?
5. How do you think infants and toddlers perceive you when you experience this emotion?
6. How do you think families perceive you when you experience this emotion?
7. How do you think your co-workers perceive you when you experience this emotion?

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