

X is for X's and O's

The Power of Warmth and Affection to Promote Nurturing and Responsive Relationships

Nurturing and responsive relationships are essential for healthy development and learning. From a child's birth, hugs and kisses from a caregiver lead to the child's warmth and affection with peers and rewarding relationships later in life. There are hundreds of opportunities for caregivers to show warmth and affection within everyday routines and activities. These opportunities may look different depending on a child's age and the family's cultural values, beliefs, and community. For example, a caregiver may hug a toddler and sing a favorite song in an unfamiliar environment (e.g., a new playground). Research shows developing supportive, responsive relationships between a caregiver and a young child using warmth and affection promotes healthy development and learning at every stage.

Strategies for Promoting Nurturing and Responsive Relationships Using Warmth and Affection

Here are tips and strategies for using warmth and affection to build nurturing relationships with young children at different ages.

Strategies for Infants:

Strategy 1

Carry or hold your infant whenever possible. Research shows physical contact between a caregiver and newborn, often called "kangaroo care," promotes positive physiological and behavioral changes for the infant and the caregiver, including the release of calming hormones, such as oxytocin, and increased positive responsiveness between caregiver and infant.

Strategy 2

Use touch to encourage learning and development. As infants get older, caregivers' touch helps orient infants' attention and can promote their active engagement during everyday routines and activities. For example, when introducing tactile books for shared reading, gently guide the infant's hand with your hand to touch the object on the page and describe it (e.g., "rough").

Strategies for Toddlers:

Strategy 1

Be physically responsive when communicating and interacting with a young child by providing reassuring physical touch and encouraging words to promote positive behavior. For example, smile, gently place your hand on the child's back, and say, "I like how you asked me for more water and then waited for me to bring it to you." This reassuring physical touch paired with positive words encourages the child to continue the positive behavior.

Strategy 2

Redirect a young child's challenging behavior through supportive and developmentally appropriate interactions. If a young child demonstrates challenging behavior, one appropriate response would be to touch their arm and make eye contact while calmly describing what behavior they should do instead. For example, if a young child is upset about not being able to continue playing with a favorite toy, bend down to their level, gently touch their arm, look them in the eye and say, "I know you are upset, but we have to stop now. We'll play later."

Strategies for Preschoolers:

Strategy 1

Teach a young child how to share their emotions using warmth and affection by showing and talking about emotions. For example, while waiting at the bus stop with a preschooler, say, "I'm feeling frustrated waiting for this late bus. Can I have a hug?" Showing and talking about how to ask for affection when experiencing emotions teaches the child how to share their own emotions.

Strategy 2

Encourage a young child's positive interactions with others by being close to the child and supporting positive interactions, especially in new places or with new people. This increases opportunities for warmth and affection. For example, during a new lunchtime routine, sit close to the child, make eye contact and smile. Being close and positive helps young children feel safe and supported.

What We And Our Partners Are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators are helping families and practitioners use warmth and affection to develop consistent, positive relationships during everyday routines and activities that support young children's development and learning.