



Investing in Interactions

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in”
- Deepak Chopra



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Contents

Introduction	3
Communication	4
Time management	6
Emotions	8
Routines	10
Group sizes	12
Atmosphere and environments	14
Knowledge	16
Reflections.....	18
The building blocks of interaction	19
References	20

“Children’s emotional wellbeing and their ability to explore and play hinges on the attachments they develop with staff. Secure trusting relationships with carers provides children with the foundation for their successful exploration of the social and learning environment.” (Harrison, 2003: 15)

Introduction

Regardless of the setting - school hall, purpose-built centre or backyard - meaningful interactions between adults and children are the core element of a high quality service.

When you and your team invest in positive, quality interactions, the rewards will be endless. Building partnerships with children of all ages and forming relationships based on trust foster life long skills on both sides.

Through daily interactions, children and adults can develop relationships that help children learn about themselves and their world.

One of the most important experiences adults can provide is to talk with and listen to children.

Acknowledging the importance of all partnerships within your service - parents, staff, management and community - enriches your service delivery.

The aim of this booklet is to encourage staff, owners, directors, family day carers and outside school hours care professionals to discuss and reflect upon the importance of adult to child interactions.

This booklet is a professional development tool and resource to help staff explore and reflect the key areas that lay the foundations for high quality interactions.

Communication

Quality interactions start with good communication, regardless of the age or stage of the child.

Effective communication allows people of all ages to give direction, praise, show respect, display emotion, and tell a story!

Talking, listening and body language are important components of communication. As an adult, our role in the conversation is to ask open-ended questions while keeping the conversation flowing. It is important to make sure the child does not feel pressured to respond.

As children can not always express their feelings with words, we need to look at the whole child when we listen, encouraging them to share their thoughts and feelings.

Have you considered how you...

- Model appropriate language
- Share different forms of communication
- Extend the child's language
- Provide experiences for the child to explore languages
- Use a calm and friendly voice
- Give the child time to respond
- Acknowledge all attempts of communication
- Respond to the child's non verbal cues
- Recognise each child's communication strengths
- Acknowledge differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, developmental stages and abilities.
- Give the child your full attention using your eyes, body and mind. How do you listen to the child? Do you seek an understanding of the child's perspective and way of thinking?

Time management

To achieve quality interactions you need time, with minimal disruption. Creating interaction times will enable staff to have meaningful connections with the children in their care, leading to high quality experiences on both sides.

It is a reality in children's services that goals have to be met during the day and routines have to be followed. Staff need to make time throughout the day to just be with the children and enjoy each other's company.

Effective time management should be the ultimate goal of any quality service.

But how do you slow the clock?

- Create times within the routine where staff do not have to do any cleaning.
- If one staff member is writing observations, dairies etc, ensure the other staff member/s are not cleaning or writing at the same time.
- Have children help with the daily diary.
- Take some cues from the children, not from the clock.
- Make cleaning up a game where children help... another opportunity for interaction.
- Reflect upon the staff routine to minimise workloads.

Emotions

Showing emotions and recognising the emotions of children in your care costs nothing and can be the best investment in quality interactions - sharing happiness, alongside sadness, frustration with contentment, shows children that they are valued.

We often ask children to tell or show us how they are feeling. We are always looking at children's emotions, responding to them and guiding them to the appropriate behaviour.

We treat others in a particular way when they are sad, frustrated or angry.

It is just as important to be emotionally available to the children in your care - offer support and respond to all their needs.

Have you considered how you...

- Handle yourself when you are in a bad mood at work?
- Tell children that you aren't feeling great, and it's not because of them?
- Acknowledge your feelings to the children?
- Effectively role model by displaying the appropriate actions for your emotions?
- Acknowledge children's feelings?
- Recognise that your actions impact upon a child's day?
- Can make it obvious to the children in your care that you like spending time with them ?

Routines

Planning and designing quality routines creates meaningful experiences and interactions. A routine that allows children and staff time to explore, create and connect lays the foundation for high quality interactions.

Routine times such as nappy changing are great opportunities for one-to-one interactions. All your focus can be with one child for that time, allowing you to have fun and connect.

Afternoon tea time at After School Care is another opportunity for interactions within a small group. Sit down with the children and enjoy their company.

Art experiences are another opportunity for one-on-one interactions. Talk to the child about what they are trying to express while they are engaged in these experiences.

Have you considered how you...

- Allow adequate time within your routine for staff and children to have meaningful experiences?
- Regularly evaluate and update the routine?
- Feel at the end of the day?
- Structured your day? (e.g. was it necessary to pack away so many times?)
- Use routine times to further develop relationships? (e.g. nappy changes, bus runs, washing hands, folding the washing, sleep and relaxation times)
- Greet children, staff and families. Do you use their names, look happy to see them and get down on their level?
- Are constantly looking at the clock and running behind "schedule"?

Group sizes

Adult-child ratios affect children because, as the number of children per adult increases, the opportunity for sensitive or appropriate interaction between the adult and each individual child decreases.*

Smaller group sizes can create less stress for staff, while allowing staff to build upon connections with children. Catering to individual needs will create more meaningful experiences.

Your environment can also assist you to facilitate smaller groups within your service, creating moments of tenderness through cubby holes and hidey spaces.

* Howes, Carollee, 'Child Outcomes of Child Care Programs', *Issues in Child Care*, Ch. 3, p. 34.

Have you considered how...

- You might increase staff to child ratios?
- You can incorporate small group times spontaneously throughout free play?
- Some children may not be benefiting from a large group experience?
- Group time is a meaningful experience, not a time when all the children are together so other staff members can do some cleaning?
- Small group experiences throughout the routine can work? (e.g. roving afternoon tea, two playdough tables, indoor/outdoor play at the same).
- Children can work in small spaces without interruption?

Atmosphere and environments

Positive interactions with staff help create an atmosphere which is calming and safe, especially when they encourage children to treat each other with kindness and respect.

An environment where staff relationships are positive, where staff are able to express their emotions appropriately and where staff feel satisfaction within their job helps create an ideal environment. High quality interactions lead to meaningful experiences on both sides.

An environment with clear boundaries that is rich in open ended materials and allows children to actively and independently engage in activities lends itself to positive interactions.

Children will realise they are in a partnership and they will feel empowered by the faith placed on them.

Have you considered how...

- The arrangement of the room allows children to self-regulate their behaviour?
- Clear boundaries, traffic patterns and self contained experiences can all assist children to do this?
- You spend your day interacting? Do you redirect children or develop relationships with them?
- What you see, hear, smell and feel in your room?
- Your environment reflects individual children's needs? (e.g. culture, developmental and community).
- Your environment has objects, pictures and music that could evoke conversations and develop shared interests between adults and children?

Knowledge

Professionals working in children's services must have a strong drive to know more, regardless of experience or current knowledge and skills. How do we inspire children to be curious learners if we are no longer curious about the world?

Staff knowledge is not just about professional development and updating your industry-specific skills.

Effective staff knowledge should also include an understanding of the child—understanding of their body language, what they like, family history, how they react to changes or how they express different emotions.

Have you considered...

- How you look beyond lectures and workshops?
- How you read an article in-depth?
- Keeping a log of articles and journals you have read?
- Having discussions at staff meetings about interesting articles, and documenting these discussions?
- Including time in your schedule to read what parents write about their child on the enrolment form?
- Whether a child has an additional need or is from a culturally diverse background? Take the time find out.
- How you feel about and know the children at your service on an individual level - not just their strengths and needs and cultural backgrounds but their favourite experiences, how they cope with change and how they react emotionally to situations?

Reflections

High quality interactions are essential to experiences, relationships and a general sense of well being at a centre.

High quality interactions impact upon children's behaviour, including relationship with other peers, giving children the foundations to build lifelong connections.

So, where to from here?

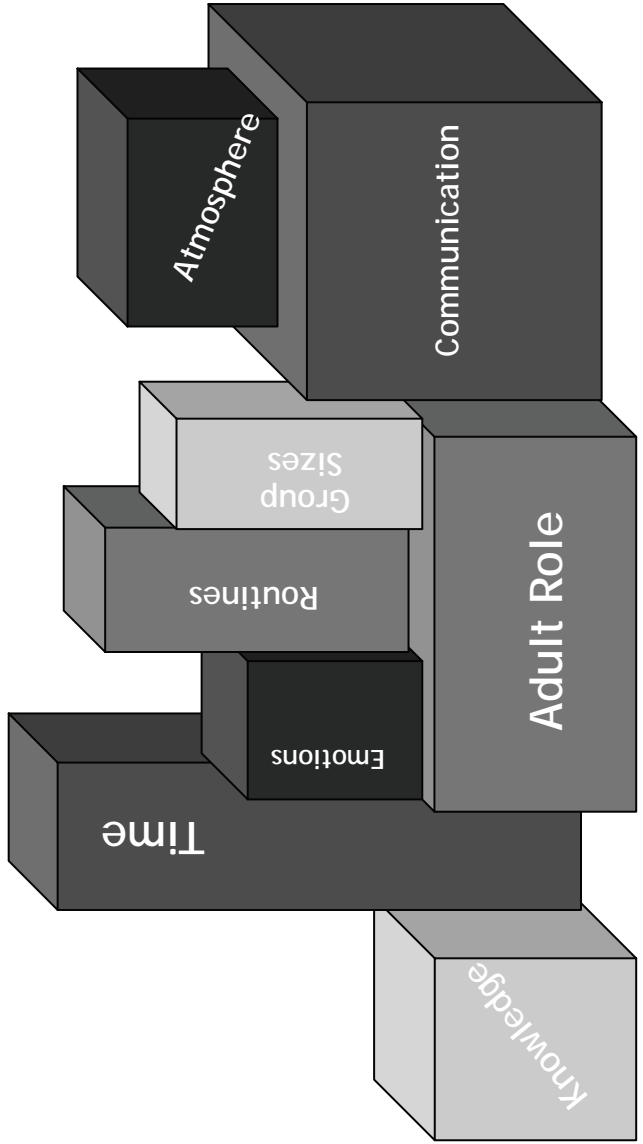
- Did this booklet evoke discussions between staff?
- Did you evaluate your interactions with the children in your care, or did it make you reflect on how much your service invests in interactions?

Your Inclusion Support Facilitator can assist your service further by working with all service staff to develop an AIR Plan.

An AIR plan assists child care services to develop and implement a plan of action to increase their capacity and confidence to include all children in care. (Semann and Slattery, 2007)

Investing in Interactions

The building blocks of interaction



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