

# Supporting babies' and toddlers' learning and development through good quality relationships

## **Aistear Theme:**

*Well-being, Exploring and Thinking*

**Guidelines for Good Practice:** *Learning and developing through play*

## **Síolta Standards:**

2. Environments

6. Play



We know that the first 1000 days of a child's life lays the foundation for later learning and development. We also know that the brain grows at a rate that is faster in early childhood than at any other time in life. This growth depends, in part, on the quality of the experiences the baby and toddler receive. What babies and toddlers experience from moment to moment is what drives their development and emotional well-being in the present and the future. All learning happens in the context of relationships. We know about the impact of early experiences on the developing brain and the associated risks of poor-quality experiences and environments during the first three years. All the above points to the importance of what adults do with children in their care. The complexity of children's learning and development at this age requires particularly nurturing and responsive support from the adults around them.

## **Babies and toddlers must experience good quality relationships in order to be free to learn**

Within *Aistear* and *Síolta*, relationships form part of the underpinning principles of learning and development regarding children making connections with others. Such communication involves:

- Noticing and responding calmly and consistently to children's cues. The younger the child, the more subtle the cues are. Sometimes these cues or signals are about engagement ('I want more of this'; 'Come and do something with me') or disengagement ('I don't like what we are doing'; 'I am stressed or tired so please do something different to help me').
- Prompt responses to crying. Very young children signal their most urgent needs by crying. Prompt responses are important, as is the adult learning what the different cries of each child means.
- Child-adult relationships that are responsive and attentive – with lots of back and forth ('serve and return') interactions – build attachments and a strong foundation in a child's brain for all future learning and development.



Such responses enable children to trust that their needs will be met. Children can express emotions of joy, sadness, fear and frustration, leading to the development of strategies to cope with challenging, new, or stressful situations. Good quality relationships can support children to reduce anxiety, feel secure, communicate, enjoy being with people, play, chat, build relationships, express love and affection, and learn.

## Building secure attachments through the key person approach

For babies and toddlers to become strong psychologically and socially, adults must build attachment with them through reciprocal (give and take), nurturing relationships. The quality of the attachment between the child and their primary caregiver needs to be mirrored in early childhood settings between children and educators. A baby or toddler may not understand why they are in a setting, can strongly feel the loss of their caregiver, and experience heightened and intolerable anxiety. Such stress is a risk factor to babies' and toddlers' mental health, immune system, brain development, thinking and understanding, and emotional wellbeing. Children need the stability of a consistent and personal relationship with a person who knows them well and who will recognise their special interests. The secure attachment figure responds to, soothes and calms the child's shifting arousal levels, which in turn affects and serves to calm the child's emotional states. If a sustained calm stage can be reached due to soothing, the child begins to learn how to self-soothe and how to regulate themselves. These skills form the building blocks of habits of mind or ways of responding in certain situations.

The relationship between the child and the educator is strengthened by using the key person approach. This is an approach where each child is allocated a person who is responsible for building relationships with the child and their family, and who engages consistently in those intimate bodily routines like nappy changing and feeding and helps each child build a special bond of belonging in the setting.



To build secure attachments and to really get to know the child, engagement with families is essential. This can be achieved by recognising that parents are the child's first educators; that parents' priorities, preferences and cultural difference should be considered in all aspects of planning and implementing the curriculum; that procedures are in place in the setting for regular two-way communication between educators and families and finally, by educators noticing and responding to signs of stress in the family or other challenges to support children's learning and development. See the *Key Person Approach in the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* [here](#) for more information. Such an approach focusses on babies' and toddlers' mental health, supports their well-being, reduces the impact of harmful childhood experiences, and prevents emotional trauma through predictable, consistent nurturing.

## Strategies to support good quality relationships

### *Being an interesting playful companion*

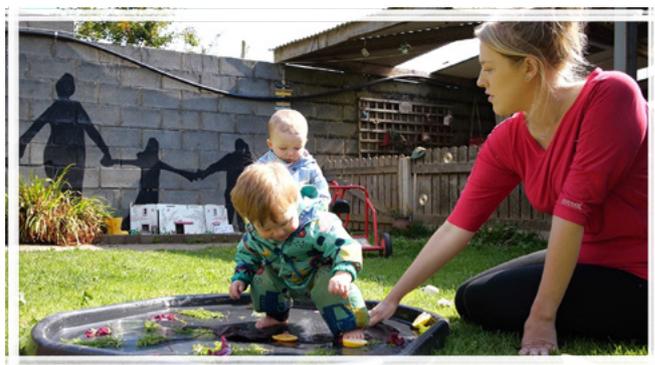
- Being an interesting companion with children involves forming partnerships with them, noticing their cues and responding with warmth, interest and affection, being attentive and being attuned to the mood of the child. Attunement involves being in harmony through careful observation and respecting children's unique traits. Any responses are neither too intrusive nor too passive. When not holding the child, always interact face to face, at the child's physical level, and exaggerate your facial features. Respect the child's preferences (for tastes, toys, touch, activities, and people). Play simple games like peekaboo. Sing songs – it doesn't matter what words are used. Respect individual temperaments. Show interest in children's everyday activities.



### *Attending to communication and emerging language*

- The development of language is linked with children's developing social abilities, understanding and thinking. In learning about language babies imitate, learn to focus on the same thing as their companion and learn to see things from another person's point of view. Children's communication and emerging language

can be developed through talking about what the child is doing (narration), informal conversations, songs, rhymes and sharing books. Narration involves the remembering and retelling of children's experiences. Narration is important as it allows children to give meaning to the range of their experiences, helps develop tools for thinking and supports children's appreciation of their own achievements.



### *Individualised support during routines as opportunities for learning*

- In early childhood settings everything that happens to children in their daily routines is the curriculum, such as feeding, nappy changing, napping, playing and are equally important aspects of education and care. Babies and toddlers experience many transitions within their daily routines, which demand individualised support. A transition is a process of moving from one situation to another and taking time to adjust. Routines that are consistent and expected help to alleviate the potential stress that exists for babies and toddlers when faced with changes. Babies and toddlers benefit from the security of knowing what comes next but also that the routine builds on children's natural rhythms and are flexible when required to suit individual needs. Babies and toddlers need those around them to follow their lead and focus on them as people (not just the caring task like changing a nappy).

### *Supporting babies' and toddlers' intentions*

- Focus on the child's strengths and interests (ability to suck, and mouth, reach out for materials, choose materials from a shelf). Anticipate the child's explorations and encourage their choices in play and explorations (arranging furniture so the child can move from one to the other without falling). Helping the child achieve what they set out to do (reach the stair), enabling the toddler to bake with sand in the home corner.

### *Slow relational pedagogy*

- Achieving secure relationships with children requires educators to slow down the pace of their interactions. Educators need to be led by the child and respond to their emotional needs. Children need time to be listened to, to be outdoors exploring, to return to the same place and connect to it, to play with open-ended materials like sand, blocks, water and to solve problems in their own way. Bodily care routines are proactively seen by adults as opportunities for learning and managed in a calm, unhurried, interactive way, with the child given time and space to eat at their own pace, to be held and physically moved with respect. As children develop, they are afforded increasing independence and opportunities to master skills, e.g., feeding themselves, climbing the steps to lie down on the nappy changing table.

To sum up, very young children need sensitive, responsive caregiving from educators who are attuned to them, affectionate, physically and emotionally available to them in the present (without the interruption and distraction of mobile phones) and who use all aspects of the daily routine, slowly and calmly, to enhance children's learning and development. See the *Key Elements of Good Practice to Support the Learning and Development of Children from Birth to Three* [here](#) for more information.



**Developed in collaboration with Dr Geraldine French, Dublin City University**