



Infants and Toddlers: Meeting Their Attachment, Social-Emotional and Behavioural Learning Needs in ECEC Settings

A Mini-Masterclass with Dr Kaylene Henderson

The first few years of a child's life is critical for building a healthy foundation for lifelong wellbeing, development and learning.

Brain development

Order of brain development

The brain develops 'from the bottom up' in the following order:

Brain stem:

Our basic survival functions are all under the control of our brain stem.

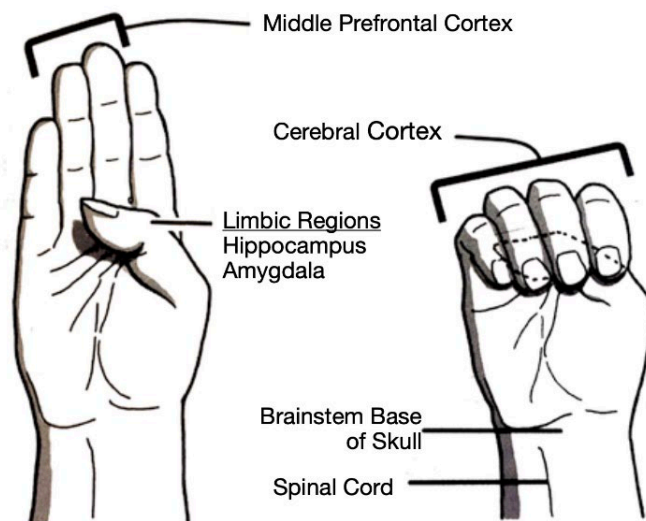
The brain stem starts to develop before birth and its sensitive period of development continues through until an infant is 8 months of age.

Cerebellum:

This part of the brain is responsible for movement, posture and balance and its most sensitive period of development occurs between birth and 2 years of age.

Limbic System, including the hippocampus and amygdala:

The hippocampus is responsible for consolidating our memories and takes 2-3 years to mature. The amygdala, often known as the 'fear centre' of the brain





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(or 'smoke alarm'), is responsible for detecting danger and is mature from birth.

Cortex:

The cortex continues to develop right into our 20s and is responsible for thinking, storing memory, attention and language. At the front of the cortex is the **pre-frontal cortex** which takes the longest to mature. This is responsible for our executive functioning along with empathy and being able to reflect on our own thoughts and experience.

Appreciating how long it takes for these capacities to fully develop, can help to have realistic expectations of infants and toddlers.

Neuronal connections

Infants are born with approximately 100 billion neurons (nerve cells), which, over time, form a million new connections every second. These connections shape a child's mind, their thoughts, their feelings and their view of the world.

With repeated experiences, connections are reinforced allowing pathways to form, like highway systems or helpful shortcuts within the brain. As neuropsychiatrist Dr Dan Siegel says, **"neurons that fire together, wire together"**.

Attachment

Attachment theory focuses on young children's early relationships and the impact of these on their ongoing development.

Children need consistently warm, nurturing relationships that are responsive to their needs in order to form an optimal foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.

When children have a **secure** relationship with you, they are able to use you as a **secure base** from which to venture out, explore their environment and learn about the world and their place in it. They are also able to return to you as their **safe haven** when they need comfort, protection or help calming down when they're feeling overwhelmed.



The more often we respond to children's needs for both exploration and closeness, the more secure the attachment relationship becomes.

A secure attachment style benefits children's:

- Brain development
- Behaviour
- Social and emotional development
- Self esteem
- Resilience
- School readiness
- Academic learning
- Future relationships

When working with infants and young toddlers, it's important to view **care as the curriculum**

Practical suggestions for strengthening your relationships with young children:

- Recognise the in-built relational cycle of 'going' (exploration) and 'coming' (connection-seeking)
- Read and respond to young children's cues as they look/move away from you and as they look/move back towards you
- Engage in 'serve and return' interactions
- Delight in and have fun with children
- Help children 'just enough' to extend upon their skills and promote independence
- Ensure you are both physically and mentally present, watching over children as they take risks and challenge themselves
- Provide comfort, taking care to respond with connection and empathy

Serve and return interactions are responsive, back and forth, two-way interactions that take place between infants and their caregivers. They can occur during the most routine of tasks, yet promote critical connection, relationship-building and learning.

Remember, attachment security is not fixed.



Language, social-emotional and behavioural learning

Language development

Greater child-directed exposure to spoken language promotes:

- Improved communication
- Enhanced literacy skills and school readiness
- Improved cognitive skills - attention, memory and problem solving abilities
- Enhanced social-emotional development - stronger social skills, empathy and self-esteem

Emotional development

Emotional literacy is the ability to notice, understand and express feelings and can be taught from infancy.

Teach children to identify their emotions by mirroring their facial expressions and by using words that describe the different feeling states.

Feeling = Facial expression = Word

The development of emotional regulation skills occurs in stages:

Stage 1: We regulate the emotions of infants

Stage 2: We help to co-regulate young children's emotions - **connection** and **empathy** are key

Stage 3: Children learn to self-regulate

Remember, help young children to calm down first, then talk and teach



Script for responding to separation distress:

Parent:

Pick up your child with a sad look on your face that mirrors his/hers and say in a soothing voice, *I know you re feeling sad that I have to go. Your teacher will keep you safe until I get back. Let s have a big cuddle and then your teacher can give you a cuddle too after I ve gone.*

Educator:

Pick up the child with a sad look on your face that mirrors his/hers and say in a soothing voice, *You re sad that Mummy/Daddy has left. You wish you could stay with Mummy/Daddy”. I understand. I ll keep you safe until she/he comes back later. How about we stick together until you re feeling better and you re ready to play.”*

Behavioural learning

Tips to remember:

- Infants and toddlers are only just starting to learn how to behave. This learning occurs through repetition, mistake-making, practice, coaching and modelling
- Young children’s behaviour reflects their needs (including biological needs - hunger, tiredness etc), their struggles and the skills they’re yet to master. It should never be interpreted as manipulation
- Respect young children’s need for autonomy and provide choices, whenever possible, that don’t affect the require outcome

Three-question behaviour guidance approach:

1. Reason - What is happening for this child?
2. Lesson - What would I like this child to learn?
3. Teaching - What is the best way for me to teach this?

Supporting families

Establishing effective, collaborative two-way communication with parents is always important, but this is especially so in your work with infants and toddlers who have generally not yet developed the language skills to share news of their day.



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It's also important to acknowledge that while your role isn't to diagnose young children's challenges, you are perfectly placed to recognise early signs for concern in infants and toddlers and to suggest that parents seek early assessments and intervention.

Thank you, for all that you do.

Additional Resources

For Parents:

Further resources that may be helpful in your work with infants, toddlers and their parents include the following:

Free video tip series and written tip sheets that you can share in your communication and social media platforms:

<https://drkaylenehenderson.com/free-resources/>

Online video-based ‘advice packs’ for parents wishing to guide their children through various challenges (eg anxiety, picky eating, screen-time, school readiness and more):

<https://adoseofawesomeness.com>

Of particular interest to parents of 0-3’s might be:



‘A Dose of Calm’ (for ages 1-5):

Helping children during upsets and tantrums

<https://adoseofawesomeness.com/advice-packs/a-dose-of-calm/>

‘A Dose of Seriously Awesome Parenting’ (for ages 0+): Bringing out the best in your child (relationship/attachment focus)

<https://adoseofawesomeness.com/advice-packs/a-dose-seriously-awesome-parenting/>

‘A Dose of Awesome Toddlerhood’ (for ages 1-3): Setting limits and teaching positive behaviours

<https://adoseofawesomeness.com/advice-packs/a-dose-of-awesome-toddlerhood/>

For Educators:

‘Raising Good Kids’: Guiding Behavioural and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings (Updated 2023)

<https://drkaylenehenderson.com/for-professionals/>

Online Masterclass Series, covering topics such as attachment, behaviour, emotional regulation, early childhood trauma, sensory processing challenges and parent engagement:

<https://drkaylenehenderson.com/mini-masterclass/>

Australian Association for Infant Mental Health:

Freely available position statements and guidelines to support infants and those who live or work with them:

<https://www.aaimh.org.au/resources/position-statements-and-guidelines/>



Early Childhood Australia's 'Research in Practice Series' document: **'The Circle of Security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships'**, authored by Robyn Dolby, 2007

Circle of Security International:

Includes some wonderful videos to share with parents via your website, newsletter or social media platforms

<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>

Little Parachutes website:

Picture books to help young children cope with worries, health issues and new experiences (big and small):

www.littleparachutes.com



