

2018



# Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

## The Power of Positive Relationships

---

*Mary Gordon, CM, ONL, LLD, and Lisa Bayrami, PhD*

### Importance of Positive and Healthy Relationships

Children develop, learn, and thrive best in the context of positive and healthy relationships with key people in their lives. The quality of children's interactions with family members, caregivers, educators,<sup>1</sup> peers, and the larger community is central to their well-being. Relationships are one of the strongest predictors of children's well-being (Newland, Lawler, Giger, Roh, & Carr, 2015). Typically, children first develop an emotional attachment to their parents/primary caregivers, which in later years extends to include others in their world (e.g., peers, teachers, other caring adults). The powerful attachments and relationships that develop with these key individuals support children's social and emotional health and well-being (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

---

1. The term "educator" is used in this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

Therefore, we must ask ourselves, how do we create the conditions that support and enrich these vital interactions that 9- to 12-year-old children need to thrive both within and outside the family and during and after the regular school day? The answer is by fostering warm and responsive relationships with caring adults in safe, caring, and inclusive spaces. These relationships contribute to a foundation of healthy growth for children in this age group.

Research shows that feeling connected to caring adults, peers, and the community contributes positively to children's engagement, particularly emotional engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). For adults working with children, nourishing these connections also leads to higher levels of engagement, positive emotions, and lower levels of negative emotions (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). When an adult connects with a child on an emotional level, it affects the child's perception of the support that adult could provide (Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009). When children feel safe and supported, they are freed up to engage, focus, learn, grow, and feel happy.

## Strategies for Building and Strengthening Positive and Healthy Relationships

### **Eliminating Perceptual Biases**

Our perceptions have an impact on our behaviour. Adults working with children aged 9 to 12 should adopt an unbiased approach, which will positively influence the adults' thoughts, feelings, and actions. Recognizing and working to overcome their biases is the first step adults can take to gain a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics, interests, and experiences of the children and families they work with. For instance, asking families about their culture, what is important to them, and what their values are will provide more insight that will inform the development of an unbiased approach to working with children and their families. Adults must appreciate that Canadian families are diverse, with varied gender, cultural, linguistic, and social expectations and contexts. Recognizing and valuing the differences and commonalities between children's fundamental familial and extra-familial settings are important for fostering inclusion. Empathy is central in guiding this process.

For instance, during Ramadan, observant Muslim families fast for an entire month. Although it is a special time, it may also be a stressful one, given that such families do not eat until after sunset, and some children go to sleep later than usual. This may mean that Muslim children have less energy than usual

throughout the day, which will probably affect their behaviour. By being aware of children's personal contexts, adults can better empathize with and understand children and engage them in activities that are better aligned with their levels of energy. Taking a child's perspective, considering what the child is feeling, and demonstrating empathetic behaviours not only helps to model positive behaviours but also helps to build a deeper and different understanding of the child, supporting a healthier connection. Research shows that empathy plays an important role in increasing prosocial behaviour (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Wrigley, Makara, & Elliot, 2015), which in turn cultivates inclusion.

### **Recognizing and Reducing Stress**

Recognizing and understanding the difference between misbehaviour and stress behaviour are key steps in this process of building and strengthening positive and healthy relationships (Shanker, 2016). Through "reframing" the child's behaviour and recognizing that the child is not misbehaving but perhaps dealing with too much stress, one begins to see the child differently. This provides the opportunity to implement strategies to help reduce factors in the program that may be adding to the child's stress load. Moreover, reducing stress levels of children and adults alike removes barriers and opens the door to better social connections, increased empathy, and opportunities to demonstrate empathetic behaviour (Shanker, 2016). For instance, a child may appear not to be listening and to be oppositional. When we reframe the child's behaviour as stress behaviour, our perception of the child changes. This shift in the adult's perspective leads to a reduction in the adult's own stress load. One begins to understand that the "negative behaviours" children display are in fact a way of communicating that they are not capable of responding effectively to all that is happening around them in specific situations. Noises, degree of lighting, emotions, inadequate sleep, and other relevant factors may be stressors that are negatively affecting them. Bright lights, for example, can be dysregulating for a child who is hypersensitive to them. Providing a quiet space in the room with dim lighting can be an effective response. Adults who work with this age group have a unique opportunity to help children unpack their stress. Adults can support children in identifying stressors and understanding the impact of these stressors, and guide children through the process of ultimately learning how to recognize and reduce the stressors on their own.

### **Understanding Temperament**

Another key strategy for building positive relationships is to understand one's own as well as the child's temperament profile. Temperament is the way we react to people and situations (Chess, Thomas, & Birch, 1959). Temperament traits are

innate (not learned) but can change over time. Each trait should be understood as a continuum, as interconnected with other traits. The nine temperament traits are as follows:

- **mood:** the child's tendency to be cheerful or more serious
- **sensitivity:** how easily the child is affected by changes in the environment
- **distractibility:** how easily things in the environment sidetrack the child
- **intensity:** the degree of the child's emotional responses to a situation
- **rhythmicity:** the predictability of the child's biological patterns, such as sleep and hunger
- **activity level:** the child's level of physical energy and movement
- **adaptability:** the child's ability to transition from one situation to another
- **first reaction:** the child's level of caution or lack of caution in a new situation
- **persistence:** the child's tendency to continue with an activity despite frustration

Understanding children's temperament traits makes it easier to support them in regulating their emotions and functioning better in different situations. For instance, a child who typically demonstrates strong and dramatic emotional responses to disappointment (e.g., a change in an activity that the child really enjoys and was looking forward to) is one who has a high level of intensity. More awareness of the child's temperament can positively affect the way the adult perceives and responds to the child. When adults develop an understanding of their own temperament in relation to the child's, interactions become easier. For instance, if the adult also has a high level of intensity, it makes the adult more predisposed to demonstrating a strong emotional response, which could intensify the child's reaction. When adults are aware of their own temperament and hence able to regulate their emotions before responding to the child, interactions flow more smoothly. Adults could also share what they are feeling with the child. In essence, awareness of their own temperament profiles would support the interaction, as each adult modulates their own response to each child, hence easing the interaction. Self-awareness and self-care are valuable not only for children, but for the well-being of adults as well. These skills strengthen the connections between children and the adults working closely with them.

### **Respectful Listening**

Yet another key strategy is to respectfully listen to children – really hear their voices, recognizing that children may express themselves in many ways (e.g., through various forms of creative expression, areas of interest, peer groups they associate with). It is vital to see children as competent collaborators capable of providing rich input and to thoughtfully consider their perspectives. When

children know their voices are heard, they feel safe to express themselves and share their deepest emotions. For instance, we respectfully and thoughtfully asked 9- to 12-year-old children about their worries and fears, and heard that the loss of important relationships, including loss of loved ones, is their most predominant source of worry and fear, followed by fear of isolation. This highlights the invaluable role relationships play in children's lives. Last but not least, adults working with children should aspire to model respect by speaking respectfully about children to other practitioners and parents.



### **Responsible Citizenship**

Responsible citizenship is about participation and contribution (Gordon, 2005). Children feel a sense of belonging in the program and in the community when they engage in meaningful participation – for example, by planning an activity, engaging in joint decision making about what happens in the program, participating in a community event, or contributing their time and efforts to help others. Children experience this as participatory democracy. Those in this age group deeply appreciate the opportunity to be more independent with respect to steering their own experiences, especially as their awareness of the world around them and their role in it grows. A greater sense of involvement also enables children to strengthen their executive function skills, such as planning, organizing, collaborating, negotiating, decision making, problem solving, and other critical thinking skills.

## **Peer Relationships: Fostering a Sense of Belonging**

As children's social environment expands, their focus broadens to include their peers and other key individuals in the community. The extra-familial environment becomes increasingly significant, and peer relationships function to support children's well-being in important ways (Goswami, 2012). Several studies have demonstrated connections between the quality of peer relationships, social competence, social acceptance, positive interactions with peers within and outside of school, and children's physical, social, and emotional well-being, as well as life satisfaction (Bendayan, Blanca, Fernández-Baena, Escobar, & Trianes, 2013; Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Gilman & Huebner 2003;

Goudena & Vermande 2002; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011; Newland et al. 2010; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010; Zullig, Valois, Huebner, & Drane, 2005).



Through developing positive and healthy relationships with children and demonstrating empathy, adults can create safe and caring environments, thereby strengthening children's social and emotional competencies, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (e.g., being more inclusive and kind). Adults have a responsibility to model constructive behaviours and are in a position to do so. As a result of adults cultivating these

positive skills in children, children engage in more positive peer interactions, are more inclusive of peers they perceive as being different in some way from themselves, including peers with special needs and mental health challenges, which in turn leads to an increase in feelings of belonging. This is important, given that research shows positive peer relationships predict children's well-being (Benson & Scales, 2009; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011).

There is a direct relationship between empathy and prosocial behaviour (Wrigley, Makara, & Elliot, 2015), as well as a relationship between increased prosocial behaviour and decreased aggression and bullying (Damon, Lerner, & Eisenberg, 2006). Empathy helps children learn how to understand and resolve interpersonal problems (Work & Olsen, 1991) and may help reduce conflict (de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007), all of which positively influence the quality of children's experiences with peers. The research clearly indicates that creating an inclusive environment and fostering empathy, which supports the development of positive peer relations, have a profound impact on children's sense of belonging and overall well-being. Empathy cannot be dictated, but it can be demonstrated. Through modelling empathic behaviours adults are able to foster empathy in children and enrich their relationships with them. The impact of modelling by far surpasses that of "instructing or teaching", because modelling supports the development of empathy through construction.

## Conclusion

Children are naturally curious, competent, capable of complex thinking, and rich in potential. Having rich and meaningful experiences and opportunities through positive and healthy relationships with important adults and peers enables children to acquire and refine the skills necessary for engaging with others and further developing their core competencies, which are central to navigating through their expanding social worlds. Caring adults are those who strive to strengthen children's rich potential. A positive shift in the climate of the shared environment is invaluable for both children and the adults working with them. The strategies discussed above are viable and important ways to increase the opportunities and supports for 9- to 12-year-old children in order to foster their well-being in the context of inclusive, safe, caring, and responsive environments. Adopting a common approach based on shared values, encouraging and supporting a sense of belonging, and connectedness will enable children to flourish.

## Questions for Reflection

- We all have perceptual biases and are often unaware of these biases. Considering the implications, how might you identify and eliminate your perceptual biases in order to connect more positively with the children you work with?
- What strategies could you use to see the children you work with differently? How could you modify your responses and behaviour to reduce children's stress level when need be?
- How might you apply your understanding of temperament (your own as well as each child's) to guide your understanding of and interactions with the children you work with?
- How do you listen to children? What are some ways you could thoughtfully seek and include children's input to co-construct activities that are meaningful for them?
- How might you create an alignment between children's individual experiences and their shared environment in order to foster inclusion?
- How might you model respect in interactions between adults and children?

## References

- Bendayan, R., Blanca, M.J., Fernández-Baena, J.F., Escobar, M., & Trianes, V.M. (2013). New empirical evidence on the validity of the satisfaction with life scale in early adolescents. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 29(1), 36–43.
- Benson, P.L., & Scales, C. (2009). Positive youth development and the prevention of youth aggression and violence. *International Journal of Developmental Science*, 3(3), 218–34.
- Chess, S., Thomas, A., & Birch, H. (1959). Characteristics of the individual child's behavioral responses to the environment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 29(4), 791–802.
- Corsano, P., Majorano, M., & Champretavy, L. (2006). Psychological well-being in adolescence: The contribution of interpersonal relations and experience of being alone. *Adolescence*, 41(162), 341–53.
- Damon, W., Lerner, R.M., & Eisenberg, N. (2006). *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development* (6th ed.). New York: Wiley.
- de Wied, M., Branje, S.J., & Meeus, W.H. (2007). Empathy and conflict resolution in friendship relations among adolescents. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 33, 48–55.
- Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), 148–62.
- Gilman, R., & Huebner, S. (2003). A review of life satisfaction research with children and adolescents. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 18(2), 192–205.
- Gordon, M. (2005). *Roots of empathy: Changing the world child by child*. Toronto, Canada: Thomas Allen.
- Goswami, H. (2012). Social relationships and children's subjective well-being. *Social Indicators Research*, 107(3), 575–88.
- Goudena, P.P., & Vermande, M.M. (2002). A review of cross-cultural studies of observed peer interaction. *Early Child Development and Care*, 172(2), 141–51.
- Klassen, R.M., Perry, N.E., & Frenzel, A.C. (2012). Teachers' relatedness with students: An underemphasized component of teachers' basic psychological needs. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(1), 150–65.



- Miller, P.A., & Eisenberg, N. (1988). The relation of empathy to aggressive and externalizing/antisocial behavior. *Psychological Bulletin*, *103*, 324–47.
- Newland, L.A., Lawler, M.J., Giger, J.T., Roh, S. & Carr, (2015). Predictors of children’s subjective well-being in rural communities of the United States. *Child Indicators Research*, *8*(1), 177–98.
- Niemiec, C.P., & Ryan, R.M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, *7*(2), 133–44.
- Oberle, L., Schonert-Reichl, K., & Zumbo, B. (2011). Life satisfaction in early adolescence: Personal, neighborhood, school, family, and peer influences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *40*(7), 889–901.
- Proctor, C., Linley, P., & Maltby, J. (2010). Very happy youths: benefits of very high life satisfaction among adolescents. *Social Indicators Research*, *98*(3), 519–32.
- Shanker, S.G. (2016). *Self-Reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life*. Toronto, Canada: Penguin Random House Canada.
- Suldo, S.M., Friedrich, A.A., White, T., Farmer, J., Minch, D., & Michalowski, J. (2009). Teacher support and adolescents’ subjective well-being: A mixed-methods investigation. *School Psychology Review*, *38*(1), 67–85.
- Work, W.C., & Olsen, K.H. (1991). Development and evaluation of a revised social problem-solving curriculum for fourth graders: Empathy as a moderator of adjustive gain. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, *11*, 143–57.
- Wrigley, J., Makara K., & Elliot, D. (2015). *Evaluation of roots of empathy in Scotland 2014–2015*. Final Report for Action for Children (unpublished report).
- Zullig, K.J., Valois, R.F., Huebner, E., & Drane, J. (2005). Adolescent health-related quality of life and perceived satisfaction with life. *Quality of Life Research: An International Journal of Quality of Life Aspects of Treatment, Care and Rehabilitation*, *14*(6), 1573–84.

## Author Biographies

### **Mary Gordon, CM, ONL, LLD**

Mary Gordon is recognized internationally as an award-winning educator, social entrepreneur, author, child advocate, and parenting expert. She is the founder of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in Ontario. In 1996, she created a local Roots of Empathy program and then later established a national and international organization with the same name. She has presented to and advised governments and international bodies, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations, and has participated in dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She is often a keynote presenter at international conferences, such as the Skoll World Forum and the UBS Global Philanthropy Forum. She has been made a member of the Order of Canada for her outstanding contributions to education. Her book, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, was a Canadian bestseller.

### **Lisa Bayrami, PhD**

Dr. Lisa Bayrami is a developmental psychologist who has a passion for research in the areas of self-regulation, social-emotional learning, and well-being. She is director of research at Roots of Empathy, and adjunct scientist at The MEHRIT Centre. Previously, she was senior scientist at the Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative, at York University. She has worked with children and families in collaboration with Drs. Stuart Shanker and Stanley Greenspan concerning early identification of autism. Lisa Bayrami is on the advisory committee of the Measuring What Matters (People for Education) initiative and the editorial board of *The International Journal of Holistic Early Learning and Development*.

The Ontario Public Service endeavours to demonstrate leadership with respect to accessibility in Ontario. Our goal is to ensure that Ontario government services, products, and facilities are accessible to all our employees and to all members of the public we serve. This document, or the information that it contains, is available, on request, in alternative formats. Please forward all requests for alternative formats to ServiceOntario at 1-800-668-9938 (TTY: 1-800-268-7095).

ISBN 978-1-4868-2043-6 (PDF) © Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2018