

Early Essentials Webisode 8: Responsive Interactions

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Amanda Perez: Hey. I'm Amanda Perez with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and welcome again to "Early Essentials." We're here at the offices of the home-based Early Head Start program at the Reginald Lourie Center. And we're thinking here about getting to know a young child – with the help of a family, of course – and using that information to respond to children's needs and design services for them. In other words, we're thinking about responsive interactions.

Here's Robin Stickel, an infant/toddler teacher, talking about getting to know the children in her program.

Robin Stickel: Part of being a responsive caregiver is recognizing their needs. And at first – when they first begin with us, it can be a real challenge because you have eight crying children who miss their mommy and want nothing more than to be back home. So, you try your best to look at their cues. So some children require hugs and they want your comfort; some kids are – you know, they want you – to be left alone and they don't want to be there.

Amanda: So learning about each individual child and responding to that child is not just a matter of asking them questions and talking with them. It's a matter of observation and interest, of quiet focus and attention. I recently talked with Janet Gonzalez-Mena and other experts about responsiveness and why it is so important.

Janet, thank you for being here. I think we have to start with the definition. Tell us what a responsive interaction is.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena: Well, to put it in three simple words, it's about "watching," "wondering," and "responding." "Watching" is about observing an infant's body language; "wondering" is about trying to figure out what the baby is communicating; and "reacting" is being responsive to the language that you've just read.

Amanda: Why do you think those tuned-in responses are so important?

Janet: It's a way babies get their needs met. It's about developing relationships with babies, which is essential. We certainly have enough research now about attachment and relationships. It's about communication; and babies start communicating from birth, and we need to be able to understand and respond to what they're communicating.

Amanda: Janet, you got us started thinking about the importance of responsive interactions. Let's hear from some of our experts.

Calvin Moore, Jr.: I think that if you start with a child and you understand how important and unique that child is and that child is different than any other child in the classroom, that you can begin to help make those connections for the child; that they will be confident in who they are, they would know who they are, and that they will take who they are out into the world as a competent adult. But it begins with the young child. It begins with that infant understanding that when they form that attachment with the

adult, that the adult is beginning a journey with them, and that journey starts with how important, unique, and special that child is. And they catch on to that pretty quickly. They begin to understand that, "This adult really knows me and really sees me and really values me."

Chad Sullivan: I would hope that the infantile-ed teachers know how important it is to build a relationship with a kid and listen and learn from the kid, because that's how you become a really good teacher.

Amanda: So, Janet, you and Calvin and Chad speak about responsive interactions as such a foundational piece of social and emotional development, but it's also the beginning of communication, right?

Janet: Many responsive interactions are the building blocks of communication, because communication is two-way – that the baby does something, the caregiver responds, the baby does something back, the caregiver responds. And that creates this kind of communication that leads to strong, secure, comfortable relationships. For someone who hasn't been around babies, it helps them to begin to understand that the baby is communicating. They're not just lumps lying there. And you can help them begin to see how the body language is a form of communication – and facial expressions. And crying is definitely a form of communication.

Amanda: This approach requires that staff really slow down. Can you talk a little bit about that? Janet: As long as you're kind of hustling around, getting things done, you're just leaving the baby behind. Because you really, really have to slow down. The only way you can have any kind of respectful responses to a baby is when you're really in the moment, moving at the baby's pace. And that is so hard for some really efficient people who have a lot to do to change, but it's so essential.

Amanda: And as we're slowing down, we're taking the time to understand what those children are telling us. We asked our experts about what we can learn when we slow down.

Eileen Wasow: I think sometimes we're overeager to fill the day with activities. The difference happens when we slow down and begin to observe a child more. I think in particular about being on the floor near a child who's appearing to just do something repetitively, and then you tune in and become more sensitive to what the child is really working on, listening to the self-talk that they're doing. You see them – what strategies are they using? How are they interacting with those materials? How are they taking in something that's happening near them? So, it's important to slow down.

Matika Laxson: Getting to know my nonverbal infants was really just about watching their body language and their cues. You just listen. I have one that cries – right? – only cries when he's tired or needs a diaper. [Laughter] So you check his bottom, and if his bottom's not wet or poopy, then he's tired. And there's quite a few of them that just – they do certain things when they need things, and it's – they can't tell you exactly what, but they'll show you. I have one that, when she gets tired, she starts to suck her hands. But, yeah, it's just watching and listening, and they'll tell you. It's just... They just can't speak it yet.

Cleo Rodriguez, Jr.: I think when we're responding to young children, that we may not get it right the first time. We may think one thing, and the child is still trying to send a message. And so, I think it's our job to try again, try another technique, try something different to see if it is that from which the child is – is sending a message.

Amanda: So much happens through the routines of the day. You've said that babies are not just recipients of routines, they're participants. Can you say more about that?

Janet: If I use diapering as an example and I compare someone who isn't being responsive, not using responsive interaction, to someone who really has the spirit, the whole diapering looks different. Because in some diaperings, the baby's just the recipient of the adult's action. But in a real interactive diapering, the baby is also participating actively and the adult is asking for participation. And though it seems like it might take longer to do it that way, there's nothing like cooperation to move things along fast. [Laughter]

Amanda: So, Janet, we asked our experts about responsive interactions as a way to make sure that we are really meeting the unique needs and interests of each child. They had some great strategies to share with us, including a lot of thinking about routines.

Janna Wagner: So, one way to find time to nurture responsive relationships with your children is to look at something you do every single day but think of it as a chore, and that's routines. So routines are really opportunities for one-on-one time with each and every child. And you know, we think of routines as something to rush through; but really, in routines, infants and toddlers really develop that close connection with you that's so important for their later development. And you can do this through warm, relaxed conversations with them. You can babble or coo back to babies. You can self-talk what you are doing to the infant and toddler so they know what to expect. You can just have a little one-on-one time with a child.

Jan So: I really love eating with the kids, because it's not so much about the eating, it's about sharing. I've noticed that if you can sit with a child and maybe share some – you know, something little, even like crackers or a cookie, it makes them feel that they're going to be taken care of, that you're paying attention to them, that you know that they're hungry and they can't do it for themselves so you're going to do that.

Marie Tabanera: Being in the mobile infant class, they're very, very tiny, so I spend a lot of time on the floor, mostly. I think – I'd say 99 percent of my day is on the floor just interacting with them, trying to do activities that will involve more than one, but also trying to have that one-on-one. So one child might be interested, but here comes three or four of them. So acknowledging them, talking to them, trying to make eye-to-eye contact with them, using their names, and including – making them feel included. Even though it's a group, they're feeling like we're still having that one-on-one time. And I think, over the weeks of being with them and having – having those children just with me, I can read them. So, now it just comes naturally, you know? [Laughter]

Amanda: So, it takes time – right? – many responsive interactions to get to know children. And with practice, as Marie says, it comes naturally. Another piece of learning about the child is learning about the family's culture. Talk to us about that, Janet.

Janet: Well, you know, every baby comes with a family. Every family comes with a culture. One of the huge issues in our country is identity development. Never – back in the days when we didn't have child care, we didn't have children starting school until they were 6 years old, they developed their identity in the bosom of their family. Now children – babies are in out-of-home care, so it's so important for us to recognize, value, try to understand the culture of the family and the identity that the baby is forming as member of that family, as well as a member of the larger group.

Amanda: Knowing a family, learning from the family, helps us understand the messages a baby sends and respond appropriately. How can staff work with families to support their responsive interactions with their babies?

Janet: Well, of course, if you're pretty sure that the way you're responding to the baby fits the family's culture, then the modeling effect certainly comes into play as parents watch. You can also make suggestions to parents about what you perceive the baby is trying to communicate, ask them what they perceive the baby is trying to communicate, and have them – encourage them to make responses that for them feel important and relative to what this baby's trying to communicate.

Amanda: So, you've said two things now about families. First, we can really learn from families to understand what we're seeing in responsive interactions with their children. And second, that we can also recognize the ways families are responsive to their children. So we asked some staff how they learned from families.

Jody Mortensen: We have daily communication with parents who drop off their children. So, they let us know how their night went or how their morning has gone so that we can work with that throughout the day. And even when they come on the bus, whoever's riding the bus, the parents will tell the bus driver what has happened and then they'll relay the message to us.

Maria Mottaghian: We have to ask families. We ask them, "What is it that their child likes to eat? When does their child fall asleep?" You know, all of those little questions that will help the teacher be able to better connect with that child. So, it's a conversation that we have to have with parents.

Amanda: Great tips from those staff on learning from families. We also asked Brenda Jones Harden to talk with us about home-based programs and how staff can encourage families in their responsiveness to their children.

Brenda Jones Harden: I heard a term recently called "unplugged interaction," and I thought it was the perfect term for how home visitors can help parents to really think about slowing themselves down. Not looking at television, not listening to the radio, not being on their iPhone, but really just being with their children in a way that their children can say, "Oh, my mommy is with me," even if it's for one moment, two moments. It doesn't have to be for a long, extended time. But just so the child can say for a moment that, "I am the center of my parent's attention." I think if parents can think about ways to do that for a few moments a day, and home visitors can help them think about how to pencil that in, how to make that part of their evening with their children when they come home from child care, I think would be a gift that home visitors could give to parents.

Amanda: We've heard lots from our experts about responsive interactions. Let's take a practice moment to apply some of the things we've heard. This home visitor has been working with 2-year-old Bella and her mother for a long time. Notice the comfort they have with each other as they interact. This home visitor has worked hard to establish a strong relationship with this mother and child. The mother and the home visitor have a lot to cover in today's visit. They plan to work on motor skills and language, and they've planned several experiences for this 90 minutes. Watch the signals Bella sends and how these adults respond. What is Bella interested in as her mother and home visitor talk? How do you know?

Home Visitor: Lettuce and carrots. Now, what new thing have you noticed she's been doing since we met last week? Roll the ball!

Amanda: What do you think she tells us here?

Home Visitor: What is squiggling in the dirt? Here are some worms. Has she seen the worms outside yet on the sidewalk? What's fluttering behind the bush? There's the butterflies.

Amanda: Notice how her mother responds.

Mother: A, B, C. This is a number one. Can you say "one?" One.

Amanda: How do you think Bella feels when these two adults figure it out?

Mother: You want to play with me? 1, 2, 3. Uh-oh! It's okay. Throw it back. 1, 2, 3. Uh-oh! Let me see. 1, 2... Are you ready?

Home Visitor: Catch it!

Mother: 1, 2, 3. Uh-oh. You need to put your hands together.

Home Visitor: [Clapping] That's a good try.

Mother: 1, 2, 3.

Home Visitor: You going to throw it to me? Oh, it bounced!

Amanda: Let's watch again. Watch for the signals Bella sends and the ways her mother and home visitor respond. Notice how Bella turns her interest to the ball. She examines it and then rolls it away.

Home Visitor: Roll the ball!

Amanda: Bella keeps that ball close to her even when she's engaged in a new activity. It is still important to her. Bella's mother notices Bella's interest in the ball and helps her notice and name other details on the ball. Sometimes children don't follow the plans we make. In the end, the adults in this interaction recognize Bella's cues. The goal here is to work on physical and language skills, right? And these adults know that by following Bella's interests they can be most effective in supporting her learning. Notice Bella's delight. So, even as these adults are helping Bella build physical and language skills, they're also sending her a message so crucial to her emotional development. They're showing her that she matters, her interests matter, and that she has a role in her learning, too.

That message at the heart of responsive interactions is foundational to school readiness. Janet, how so?

Janet: Responsive interactions are what create relationships. And certainly, relationships in the early years are – make all the difference in the later years. Babies who are attached, secure, comfortable, become good exploratory learners. And so, it's about a feeling of security. And that all comes from a whole lot of responsive interaction.

Amanda: Again, there's such an important foundation. Janet, thank you so much for your expertise today. To close us out, let's listen to Sarah Merrill and Eileen Wasow.

Sarah Merrill: Well, I think responsive interactions are the heart and soul of teaching and learning for any age, but particularly for the youngest who come into our programs. It's a way that you get to know them as individuals. We want these kids to know that they are special. They're certainly the heart of their parents, and we want that to carry through in group settings.

Eileen: If you're talking with an infant or a toddler, there may not be verbal responses, but you're actively engaged in reaching out to the child. And in turn, you really see the child interacting with you. And it's – I think prior to a lot of the work that we've learned in brain development, we wouldn't have had such expectations that the child was actively engaged in learning. But I think what we know now is that there really is a lot of hard work that the child is doing, that they're doing that all the time. And if we slack off on our side, then we're really missing opportunities to be a part of that relationship.

Amanda: As our experts tell us, the importance of your work is not just in the experiences you provide children. Making those experiences responsive, learning about the children and families you serve, and using that information to meet their needs, offer a sense of security and confidence, and design individualized services is essential.

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