



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: PARALLELS BETWEEN INFANT-TODDLER DEVELOPMENT AND THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS

Introduction

“Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.”¹

Working with infants, toddlers and their families is all about relationships. We know from scientific research that every domain of development is impacted by nurturing, caring relationships in early childhood.² “Babies are born with a drive to relate to and connect with others, and they continue to develop the social skills necessary to form strong, healthy relationships throughout their lives.”³

These findings teach us not only about babies, but about the ways in which people of all ages relate to others. Our understanding of relationships and early childhood development can help guide us in various aspects of our lives. Relationship-building is at the core of our work with young children, and it truly lies at the heart of effective policy, advocacy and systems work. That makes those of us in the early childhood community perfectly suited for policy work.

This article for *The Baby Monitor* explores relationship-building in early childhood *and* in the world of policy and advocacy. With a deeper understanding of relationships and how to build them, we can be stronger advocates for babies, toddlers and their families.

Relationships & Infant-Toddler Development

School success begins not with learning ABCs as a preschooler, but with learning as an infant how to trust and feel secure, explore one’s environment and form close attachments. Research shows that it is these early experiences and warm, loving relationships that form “both the foundation and the scaffold on which cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and moral development unfold.”⁴ Healthy relationships can lead to positive developmental outcomes and conversely, the lack of relationships or negative relationships can sometimes lead to often serious developmental outcomes. When an infant experiences stable, quality relationships with other people, those relationships provide the basis “for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself.”⁵ At its core, relationship building is about establishing connections based on trust.⁶ Strong, supportive relationships provide babies with the context for developing interpersonal skills and operating successfully in the world. “Relationships engage children in

the human community in ways that help define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people.”⁷

Relationships among young children are also significant. Through their relationships with one another, young children “learn how to share, to engage in reciprocal interactions (e.g., taking turns, giving and receiving), [and] to take the needs and desires of others into account...”⁸ The groundwork formed by all of these relationships serves us into adulthood, both personally and professionally. This is true in many respects, but particularly true of the policy and advocacy arena.

Relationships with Policymakers

As adults, we are constantly forming relationships and rely on them for much of what we do in life. Our understanding of relationships and the ways in which they impact outcomes for infants and toddlers can be applied to the macro-level world of public policy, advocacy and systems change. “When you think about it, this makes sense – it is in the context of relationships that adults learn, that ideas and opinions are shaped and people are ultimately influenced to take action.”⁹

Policy change does not happen in a vacuum, and it does not happen because of one person alone. Often, there are many people involved in a public policy action, and logically, the relationships among the people included can have a significant impact on the success or failure of any proposed policy change. Public policy relationships are created at the federal, state and local levels. They also take place through advocacy and coalition activities. At the federal and state levels, it is important to cultivate relationships with Members of Congress, state legislators and their staff by offering your expertise on infant-toddler development and the role public policy can make in improving outcomes for our youngest children. When those relationships are built positively over the long term, it can result in being invited to present to Hill or State House staff, give testimony before Congressional or state legislative committees, and contribute legislative language and administrative rule language on policies related to infants, toddlers and their families. Building relationships at the federal and state levels can result in important policy changes for the children and families you serve.

At the federal and state levels, you may want to consider forming relationships with:

Federal

Members of Congress and their staff

Congressional committee staff (for committees that address early childhood issues and appropriations)

Federal agency staff - Program administrators have significant control over program rules and regulations and set the course for how a program is implemented.

State

State legislators and their staff (Note: Not all state legislators have staff.)

State legislative committee staff (for committees that address early childhood issues and appropriations or the budget)

State agency staff - Program administrators have significant control over program rules and regulations and set the course for how a program is implemented.

One successful example of relationships in state-level system building comes from Illinois. The Birth to Five Project in Illinois develops an annual work plan with responsibilities assigned to respective agencies and organizations. One of the most active committees is the Government Interagency Team, which is composed of early childhood program leaders from key city, state and federal agencies which fund and administer programs for young children. Relationships are developed among team members over time as they meet together to develop strategies and solutions to address systems gaps and barriers to providing collaborative, coordinated services. These partnerships and relationships among colleagues across government agencies are what make it a success. Projects often begin within the Birth to Five Project and then become embedded within state government. It serves as a catalyst to leverage change and to comprehensively organize around early childhood issues in Illinois. As a result of this collaboration, the state has done some impressive work around early childhood mental health consultation to early childhood programs, developmental screenings, and created the All Our Kids: Early Childhood Networks.

Ways to Build Policy Relationships

You have several options for how to build relationships with policymakers, but the most effective ways are ones in which you are establishing personal and face-to-face contact with those who represent you. We encourage you to use a combination of strategies as you work to build relationships with your policymakers. Consider the following:

- Set up an in-person meeting, both at the State House, Capitol Hill or when policymakers are in their home district;
- Invite policymakers to visit your program;
- Phone, email and write letters;
- Add policymakers to your organization's mailing list for newsletters, annual reports, etc.;
- Send reports, research or other briefing materials you think would be useful as they determine policies for infants, toddlers and families; and,
- Send copies of newspaper articles, letters to the editor and/or opinion editorials which focus on infant-toddler issues in their district and were published in their local newspapers.

As you develop your skills as an advocate, think about these important elements of relationship-building with policymakers:^{10 11}

- **Relationships are built over time.** You should expect to work hard developing and cultivating relationships over the long haul. When you have created a solid foundation of a relationship, it can lead to the policymaker or their staff asking for your input on infant-toddler issues.
- **Be proactive.** Think ahead about the kinds of information that will be useful to your policymakers and reach out before the time-crunch of a vote.

- **Base the relationship on trust.** Be honest and forthcoming about potential controversies. This will serve you well over the long term.
- **All relationships are a two-way street.** Remember, in addition to asking for their vote or help on a policy issue, you have something to offer the policymaker. You want to be seen as a knowledgeable and trusted resource to them.
- **Listening is as important as talking.** Take the time to hear and understand the perspective of those you are trying to influence. This will help you in addressing any questions or concerns raised.
- **Do your homework.** Spend time learning about your policymakers, just as you would when building a relationship with any person. What do (or did) they do in their professional career? What committees do they serve on? If they are married, what does their spouse do professionally or in a volunteer capacity? Do they have children and/or grandchildren? Do they volunteer anywhere? What are their interests? Also take the time to find out demographics about their district, so you are knowledgeable about their community.
- **Be gracious and courteous.** Make sure policymakers hear about what they have done well, as well as what you are displeased with. Always say thank you. Be comfortable letting others take credit.
- **Build relationships with all policymakers,** regardless of their political affiliation. Everyone has a role to play in supporting infants, toddlers and their families.

Collaborations & Relationship-Building Outside Government

Policymakers are only one group of people with whom to form relationships in order to affect policy change. As noted above, public policy changes are more likely to occur when a variety of people come together around a common goal. When advocating for infants and toddlers, there is great power in collaboration and bringing a variety of perspectives to the table. Forming solid working relationships within the field is vital, and forming associations and collaborations with unlikely allies can lend strength to your advocacy efforts as well.

As you advocate for infant-toddler policy issues, there are many possible partners for your advocacy efforts, including:

- Other professionals working with infants, toddlers and families – Think about the many disciplines that touch the lives of babies and toddlers and reach out to professionals with whom you may have a common interest;
- Academics and researchers studying infant-toddler development;
- Physicians, nurses, dentists and other medical professionals serving families with young children;
- Business people, the local or state chamber of commerce and the local United Way;
- Law enforcement officials;
- Religious leaders;
- Professionals in the news media;
- Academics and researchers studying other disciplines, including economics, mental health, health, education, social work, business, sociology, women’s studies, environmental studies, communications, etc. You would be surprised how many

- people are interested in the connections between their discipline and early childhood development;
- Teachers and other education leaders;
 - Child advocacy organizations; and,
 - Parents and grandparents.

Be creative in thinking about who might have an interest in working with you to support infants, toddlers and their families.

Conclusion

Our examination of relationships and relationship-building teaches us that we can be effective advocates by drawing on the same skills and resources we use in our work with infants, toddlers and their families. We encourage you to use this article as a guide as you reach out to form relationships that will improve public policies for infants, toddlers and their families.

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¹ Shonkoff, J. and D. Phillips. (Eds.) (2000). National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Ibid.

³ ZERO TO THREE. "Supporting Your Child's Relationship-Building Skills." Retrieved on May 3, 2007 from http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_social_relationships&AddInterest=1157.

⁴ Shonkoff and Phillips.

⁵ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (Summer 2004). "Working Paper #1: Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships." Harvard University: The Center on the Developing Child.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Yarbrough, K. (2006) Selections from "Be a Voice for Babies: Advocating for Infants and Toddlers at the Federal and State Levels." Power Point presentation jointly produced for the 2006 ZERO TO THREE National Training Institute by K. Yarbrough of the Ounce of Prevention Fund and D. Rappaport of ZERO TO THREE.

¹⁰ Rappaport, D. and Yarbrough K. (July 2006). "Ensuring a Bright Future for Babies: How to Advocate Effectively for Infants and Toddlers." *ZERO TO THREE Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 6. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families.

¹¹ Yarbrough, K. (2006).