****

Association for Professional Development in Early Years

# **OCCASIONAL PAPER 7 – Relationship-based pedagogies with babies and toddlers: Issues for teaching and implications for learning**

***Sheila Degotardi***

*Associate Professor in EC Education, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Australia*

## Introduction

Relationships play a central role in human existence. As individuals, we define ourselves with reference to these relationships – as a friend, a partner, a colleague, a parent, a teacher, a learner, a community member and so on. The nature and the function of these different relationships will shape the activities that we engage in, the interactions that we have with others and the intensity and purpose of these interactions. Our relationships with others therefore comprise an interpersonal context through which we develop the socially and culturally-relevant ways of thinking and acting that shape our present and influence our future.

The influential power of human relationships is particularly salient in the first years of life. The relationships formed in infancy have a pervasive and long-lasting effect on children’s social, emotional and intellectual development ([National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004](#_ENREF_28)). A focus on relationships places interactions with others at the very heart of the learning process, with the view that learning is socially and collaboratively constructed through mutually responsive interpersonal exchanges. For this reason, many contemporary early childhood curriculum documents place relationships, and their associated interactions, at the core of learning processes. The idea that children learn essential knowledge and skills through relationships is acknowledged as a central principle in the UK’s Early Years Foundation Stage ([Department of Education, 2012](#_ENREF_14)), the Australian Early Years Learning Framework ([Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009](#_ENREF_1)), Ireland’s Siolta ([Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006](#_ENREF_5)), and New Zealand’s Te Whariki ([Ministry of Education, 1996](#_ENREF_27)). These policy documents place a premium on the ability of those working with young children to form and maintain the relationships which will ultimately foster children’s learning.

While the concept of ‘relationships’ has achieved widespread appeal in early childhood education, the task of establishing and fostering relationships is not a simple one. Hinde (1997) sums up his first chapter with one deceptively simple sentence: ‘Relationships are complicated’ (p.11). In doing so, he emphasises the multidimensional and multi-functional nature of relationships. In this paper, I tackle some of these complexities by reviewing contemporary theoretical literature and research findings to identify factors which contribute towards comprehensive and inclusive relationship-based pedagogies in early years settings for infants and toddlers.

## The framing of ‘quality’ in infant-toddler programs.

With early childhood centres now regarded as significant contexts of development and learning, attention is increasingly directed towards improving the quality of these settings. Dalli ([2014](#_ENREF_8)) explains that quality encompasses connections between structural (e.g., administration and environmental provisions) and process-related (e.g., teaching/caregiving behaviours and

interactions) elements. She cites research evidence to show that early childhood workers are likely to demonstrate supportive caregiving behaviours and social interactions if structural

elements are favourable. This body of research shows that opportunities for relationship building are not only facilitated by high-quality infant-toddler programs, but that relationship quality is, in itself, a central indicator of program quality.

The most prevalent theoretical perspective that has been used to understand the significance of relationships in infant-toddler programs is attachment theory. Early attachment theorists paid great attention to the ability of a primary caregiver to respond to infant cues in order to provide them with the protection and care that they needed to survive. Over time, the concept of *sensitivity* became central to understanding individual differences in attachment relationships, with research demonstrating that infants who experience responsive, attentive caregiving interactions are more likely to develop secure relationships with these caregivers than those who experienced less sensitive or ambivalent interactions ([see Slater, 2007 for a review](#_ENREF_36)). The significance of attachment in the early childhood centre contexts is supported by research demonstrating that infants who are securely attached to an early childhood educator are likely to become more empathetic and independent, and to engage in more cooperative peer play than their insecurely attached peers ([Cassiba, *et al*., 2000](#_ENREF_4); [Howes, 1997](#_ENREF_23)).

Attachment theory therefore places the focus on educator-infant relationships to provide the social-emotional functions of trust and security from which further learning and develop is said to occur. Professional publications resulting from this theoretical approach (e.g., [Dolby, 2007](#_ENREF_15)) have done a great deal to emphasise the availability of emotionally warm, sensitive interactions as important aspects of quality infant-toddler rooms.

## Moving beyond attach**m**ent theory

While many embrace the knowledge gained from attachment research, its applicability in early childhood contexts is not without critics. Some question the cultural appropriateness of attachment theory, noting that many countries do not place a primacy on adult-infant attachment, instead placing focus on kinship, shared care and peer interactions ([e.g., Rockel, 2005](#_ENREF_32)). Others question the predominant focus on dyadic caregiver-infant interactions and emotional attachments, claiming that, while these may be regarded as ‘ideal’ in home contexts, they do not fit the professional agendas of early education and care settings ([Degotardi & Pearson, 2009](#_ENREF_11)).

A further critique comes from those who call for a wider view of relationship-based pedagogy. My colleagues, Emma Pearson, Naomi Sweller and I drew on the theoretical ideas of Weiss ([1974](#_ENREF_37) ) and Lewis ([2005](#_ENREF_26)) to argue that attachment is just one of many social and learning functions that give meaning to human relationships. As well as fostering security, relationships function to enhance self-worth, provide companionship, socialise individuals into the group, and afford teaching and learning opportunities across all developmental and learning domains (Degotardi, *et al*., 2013). These different functions necessitate a pedagogy of relationships that acknowledge the many roles that relationships play in the lives of infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers live and learn through the relationships they experience with educators, parents and peers, so the potential exists for them to derive multiple benefits from these different relationships. In our study, we investigated parents’ and teachers’ perspectives about these different relationship functions within the contexts of child-educator and child-peer relationships. Not only did we find that parents and educators valued diverse functions of both child-educator and peer relationships, but also that certain functions were associated with specific relationships. The provision of care, security and learning were more strongly associated with child-educator relationships than with peer relationships, while companionship, friendship, and learning about others’ social and cultural backgrounds were more strongly associated with peer relationships.

Interestingly, parents and educators of infants differed in their responses. Parents of infants attributed more importance to the learning and socialisation functions of the child-educator relationship than teachers, and parents also rated infants’ opportunities to actively and confidently contribute to cooperative peer relationships more highly than did teachers.

Such variety in perspectives highlights the different agendas of parents and educators, which, at first glance, seem to further complicate the provision of a relationship-based program. As well as educator child and peer relationships, policy and curriculum documents often stress the importance of the parent-educator relationship, which can provide social and emotional support to parents, and the resulting communications can help educators to tailor program goals and activities to suit individual children’s learning styles, temperaments, and family expectations ([Harrist, *et al*., 2007](#_ENREF_21)). Yet differing expectations and priorities of parents and educators can cause tensions which may then have a follow on effect on the child ([Brooker, 2010](#_ENREF_3)). This is likely why both educators and parents cite respect, open communication, affiliation and honesty as significant features of effective parent-educator relationships ([Degotardi & Pearson, 2014](#_ENREF_12)). The presence of different perspectives is an expected and realistic reflection of children’s relationship experiences, so the establishment of mutual respect can provide the context for open communication and the negotiation of differences to the benefit of all involved.

## Implementing relationship-based pedagogies: Issues to consider

The emerging picture is that relationship-based pedagogies are multi-dimensional and intricate. Effective pedagogies must therefore recognise that infant-toddler programs comprise a complex web of relationships, each of which will impact upon the others. The challenge of relationship-based pedagogies is to pro-actively foster all relationships within this network and seek ways to support and strengthen both individual relationship types and the connections between them (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014). As a result there can be no single relationship-based approach and no single formula for developing and maintaining such an approach. Instead, practitioners and policy makers are best informed by a range of theoretical perspectives which focus attention on different aspects of infant-toddler relationships. In the next sections, I review some contemporary research findings that highlight these varied perspectives, framing my discussion around some core issues that require consideration by those seeking to enhance relationship-based teaching and learning opportunities in their programmes.

### Time

An essential element of relationships is that they are founded and maintained on the basis of a shared history of interactions and experiences. Relationship formation needs time for individuals to come to know one another and build expectations of the kinds of interactions that will occur within that relationship. The significance of time is particularly acute during transition periods, where infants, educators and their families all adjust to the physical and social features of a new setting.

The Reggio Emilia practice of *Inserimento* invests in time by purposefully providing extended opportunities for infants, educators and family members to get to know one another ([Bove, 2001](#_ENREF_2)). Educators allow time for all involved to become comfortable in their new setting, and engage in many informal interactions with the aim of developing trust and mutual understanding. Parents and infants are encouraged to see themselves as part of the centre community, with connections fostered between other young children, educators and parents in the room. Time also needs to be approached flexibly. In a recent observational study of three infants as they transitioned from an infant to a toddler classroom, Recchia and Dvorakova ([2012](#_ENREF_31)) emphasise that infants will vary widely in the time it takes to adapt to new situations. They stress the importance of establishing a relaxed pace and developing routines and schedules that respond to infants’ individual time-frames. This willingness to adopt flexible, responsive schedules reduces infant and educator stress which in turn maximises the opportunities for each individual to become accepting of the other.

Time also has structural implications, the nature of which are illustrated powerfully by De Groot Kim (2010) in her case study analysis of toddler Ellie’s developing relationships with educators and peers. In this centre, variable times of arrival and departure, the practice of transitioning children in and out of the room across the year, as well as rotating educator shifts continuously interrupted the opportunities that Ellie and her parents had to build relationships with both peers and adults. The significance of stability is highlighted; not only as an essential factor related to the provision of stable care and education from adults, but also as a factor which can impact on the formation of the relationship network comprising educators, families and peers.

### Space and Place

The physical environment is another aspect to consider as both space and place can influence interpersonal interactions and the resulting relationship prospects. While space can viewed on a purely organisational level, Curtis and Carter ([2003](#_ENREF_7)) remind us that space is also structured according to implicit values which can support and constrain opportunities for learning. Rutanen ([2014](#_ENREF_34)) draws on the philosophical work of Lefebvre to propose that space gains meaning from how it is experienced and used by its inhabitants. In her study, Rutanen describes how tensions existed between educators, who often disrupted social interactions as they sought to control children’s use of space for their own educational goals, and the children, who attempted to collectively and sometimes subversively appropriate spaces for their own social purposes.

The meaning of any space is therefore highly subjective, and is dependent on how it is conceived and experienced by those who inhabit it. This focus on values draws attention to the significance of culture as a basis for relationship experiences. Emerging evidence suggests that ideas about what constitutes an ‘ideal’ relationship vary between cultures. For example, the dyadic, primary caregiving infant-educator relationships that are promoted in some early childhood policies may not be appropriate in cultures or contexts where shared caregiving, group togetherness and collective identity are valued ([Hӓnnikӓinen & Rutanen, 2013](#_ENREF_25); [Rockel, 2005](#_ENREF_32)). Cultural differences have also been noted in the dynamics of the educator-parent relationship, with countries such as Norway and Portugal reflecting a partnership model, while Baltic countries promote an educator-as-parent-advisor approach Hujala, *et al*. 2009). Such differences reflect culturally specific value systems which result in the various functions of relationships being promoted to greater and lesser extents. They draw attention to the importance of taking into consideration both theoretical and community perspectives when developing educational programs that are commensurate with both educational goals and local beliefs and priorities.

### Hearts

Emotionality features strongly in the enactment of many types of relationships. Connections in the forms of emotional bonds and commitments evoke intense emotional expressions and reactions (Hinde, 1997). As such, the emotional intelligence and resilience of educators is now identified as an enabling factor for effective relationship-based approaches with infants and toddlers. Goouch and Powell ([2013](#_ENREF_19)) found that infant-toddler educators described their work as emotionally demanding in that they experience often relentless calls to meet the emotional needs of infants and families. Anxieties can be caused by conflicting ideas about the kind of relationships that educators and parents want for the infants in their care. Page ([2014](#_ENREF_29)), for example, tackles whether love should feature in educator-infant relationships. She contends that both educators and parents want loving relationships to exist, but that the nature and intensity of loving feelings will be variously expected and enacted in family and early years settings. She acknowledges the complexity that bounds notions of love with equally powerful emotions such as jealousy and resentment, explaining that disagreements often exist in relation to how much love, or how close an attachment is desired.

Elfer’s ([2014](#_ENREF_17)) work has been instrumental in highlighting the challenge faced by educators as they try to balance the necessary level of emotional engagement with an appropriate stance of professional detachment. Elfer argues that educators require professional opportunities to acknowledge, discuss and reflect on their own emotional experiences if they are to open themselves up to professionally engage with the emotional expressions of others. This openness is essential if close and caring relationships are to become a feature of the infant-toddler settings. Constraints, however, exist in contexts where infant-toddler educators report a lack of emotional and professional support, and where educators often feel isolated from others within their centre and in the wider profession. This situation highlights the importance of leadership and advocacy for those working with very young children. In a context where educators report a lack of visibility ([Davis & Degotardi, 2015](#_ENREF_9)) and a sense of disempowerment ([Goouch & Powell, 2013](#_ENREF_19)), the need to bolster emotional support for these educators becomes clear. When mentors and pedagogical leaders are available to connect with educators on an emotional level, educators are provided with a dialogic space from which to engage reflexively with their experiences (Hammond, *et.al.,* 2015).

### Minds

Throughout this paper I have drawn attention to the importance of different perspectives when developing relationship-based approaches. Relationships involve psychological components, as an individual’s expectations, beliefs, motivations and opinions will influence who an individual connects with, how connections are made, and the role that they will play in that individual’s life (Hinde, 1997). Recent studies are beginning to illustrate how a willingness on the part of educators to acknowledge and engage with minds is integral to a relationship-based approach to teaching and learning. In one such study, Degotardi ([2010](#_ENREF_10)) found that the extent to which educators interpreted infants’ behaviours with reference to these infants’ subjective points of view was related to their level of emotional sensitivity and cognitive stimulation during play and caregiving interactions. While this study suggests that educators may vary broadly in their proclivity to think about very young children’s minds, a recent Australian study by Salamon and Harrison ([2015](#_ENREF_35)) suggests that this tendency may also be dependent on the developmental domain under consideration. Their study found that educators willingly ascribed physical and cognitive capabilities, but were less willing to attribute social-emotional ones. Interestingly, the ascription of higher levels of capabilities was associated with a more ‘hands-off’ approach to teaching which focused on individual, rather than collaborative learning. From these studies, it appears that individual and contextual factors related to a willingness to engage with infants psychological states can both enable and constrain relationship-based teaching.

In her work on relational pedagogy, Papatheodorou ([2009](#_ENREF_30)) contends that teaching through relationships is reliant on dialogues which involve ‘reciprocal and multivoiced exchanges of ideas that direct the path of learning’ (p.10). These words draw attention to the significance of a level of insightfulness, not only about the subjectivities and capabilities of the infant, but also the perspectives of others who invest in the care and education of that child. Insightful educators have been observed to capitalise on their knowledge of both individual, group and family motivations and understandings to successfully facilitate peer group belonging and involvement ([Degotardi & Pearson, 2014](#_ENREF_12)). Forming relationships with infants and toddlers therefore requires a careful consideration of family, educator and peer perspectives so that connections can be made on a cognitive as well as emotional level. Elfer’s ([2012](#_ENREF_16)) research on work discussions has demonstrated how the opportunity to share and critically reflect on challenging work-place experiences can enhance collegiality and lead to collaborative approaches to these challenges. Together, these examples illustrate how relationship-based approaches involve a community of minds, and that interactions must engage with these minds if the benefits of such approaches are to be realised.

## Concluding thoughts

The dynamic nature of the early years setting means that broad variation will exist in regards to relationship experiences, perspectives and expectations of those inhabiting the space. While conflicting positions will invariably occur, I contend that professional practice can be enriched by embracing a comprehensive and multi-perspectival understanding of relationships. Each new perspective, whether it be a theoretical approach or a real-world view point, can provide an additional lens through which teaching and learning can be understood. New perspectives provide starting points for critical reflection and offer practitioners a set of strategies and alternatives from which to enact change. In this way, practitioners can work collectively with colleagues, children and their families to build the many kinds of relationships that will enrich the lives and learning of all involved.

## References

Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, belonging and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: DEEWR.

Bove, C. (2001). Inserimento: A strategy for delicately beginning relaitonships and communications. In L. Gandini & C. P. Edwards (Eds.), *Bambini: The Italian approach to infant/toddler care* (pp. 109-123). New York: Teachers College Press.

Brooker, L. (2010). Constructing the triangle of care: Power and professionalism in practitioner/parent relationships. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 58*(2), 181-196. doi: 10.1080/00071001003752203

Cassibba, R., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & D'Odorico, L. (2000). Attachment and play in child care centres: Reliability and validity of the attachment Q-sort for mothers and professional caregivers in Italy. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 24*(2), 241-255.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2006). *Síolta, The national quality framework for early childhood education*. Dublin: CECDE.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Design for living and learning*. St Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Dalli, C. (2014). Quality for babies and toddlers in early years settings. *TACTYC Occasional Paper 4*. <http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-papers/occ-paper-4-prof-carmen-dalli/>

Davis, B., & Degotardi, S. (2015). Who cares? Infant educators’ responses to professional discourses of care. *Early Child Development and Care*, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2015.1028385

de Groot Kim, S. (2010). There's Elly, it must be Tuesday: Discontinuity in child care programs and its impact on the development of peer relationships in young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 38*, 153-164. doi: 10.1007/s10643-010-0400-6Degotardi, S. (2010). High-quality interactions with infants: Relationships with early childhood practitioners’ interpretations and qualification levels in play and routine contexts. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 18*(1), 27-41. doi: 10.1080/09669761003661253

Degotardi, S., & Pearson, E. (2009). Relationship theory in the nursery: Attachment and beyond. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 10*(2), 144-145. doi: 10.2304/ciec.2009.10.2.144

Degotardi, S., & Pearson, E. (2014). *The relationship worlds of infants and toddlers: Multiple perspectives from early years theory and practice*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Degotardi, S., Sweller, N., & Pearson, E. (2013). Why relationships matter: Parent and early childhood teacher perspectives about the provisions afforded by young children's relationships. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 21*(1), 4-12.

Department of Education. (2012). *Statutory framework for early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five* London, UK: Department of Education.

Dolby, R. (2007). *The circle of security: Roadmap to building supportive relationships*. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

Elfer, P. (2012). Emotion in nursery work: Work discussion as a model of critical professional reflection. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development, 32*(2), 129-141. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2012.697877

Elfer, P. (2014). Facilitating intimate and thoughtful attention to infants and toddlers in nursery. In L. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler eduction and care: Exploring diverse persectives on theory, research and practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., & Selleck, D. Y. (2003). *Key persons in the nursery: Building relationships for quality provision*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Goouch, K., & Powell, S. (2013). *The baby room: Principles, policy and practice*. Maidenhead, UK: Open Univerity Press.

Hammond, S., Powell, S., & Smith, K. (2015). Towards mentoring as feminist praxis in early childhood education and care in England. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research, 35*(2), 139-153. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2015.1025370

Harrist, A. W., Thompson, S. D., & Norris, D. J. (2007). Defining quality child care: Multiple stakeholder perspectives *Early Education and Development, 18*(2), 305-336. doi: 10.1080/10409280701283106

Hinde, R. A. (1997). *Relationships: A dialectical perspective.* Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Howes, C. (1997). Teacher sensitivity, children's attachment and play with peers. *Early Education and Development, 8*(1), 42-49. doi: 10.1207/s15566935eed0801\_4

Hujala, E., Turja, L., Gaspar, M. F., Veisson, Marika, & Waniganayake, M. (2009). Perspectives of early childhood teachers on parent-teacher partnerships in five European countries. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 17*(1), 57-76. doi: 10.1080/13502930802689046

Hӓnnikӓinen, M., & Rutanen, N. (2013). Important themes in research on and education of yung children in day care centres: Finnish viewpoints. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning, 6*(26), 1-10.

Lewis, M. (2005). The child and its family: The social network model. *Human Development, 48*, 8-27. doi: 10.1159/000083213

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whariki: He whariki matauranga mo nga mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood curriculum*. Wellington, NZ: Learing Media.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). Young children develop in an environment of relationships/ Working paper 1: Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Retrieved August 2013 from <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp1/>.

Page, J. (2014). Developing professional love in early childhood settings. In L. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and care: Exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research and practice.* (pp. 119-130). Dordrecht: Springer.

Papatheodorou, T. (2009). Exploring relational pedagogy. In T. Papatheodorou & J. Moyles (Eds.), *Learning together in the early years: exploring relational pedagogy* (pp. 3-18). Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Recchia, S. L., & Dvorakova, K. (2012). How three young toddlers transition from an infant to a toddler child care classroom: Exploring the influence of peer relationships, teacher expectations, and changing social contexts. *Early Education and Development, 23*(2), 181-201. doi: 10.1080/10409289.2012.630824

Rockel, J. (2005). Primary care in early childhood education - To be or not to be? *ACE Papers*(15), 73-87.

Rouse, E., & Spradbury, G. (2015). The role of the educational leader in long day care – how do they perceive their role? *Early Child Development and Care*. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2015.1036419

Rutanen, N. (2014). Lived spaces in a toddler groups; Application of Lefebvre's spatial triad. In L. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived Spaces of infant-toddler education and care: Exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research, practice and policy* (pp. 17-28). New York, NY: Springer.

Salamon, A., & Harrison, L. (2015). Early childhood educators' conceptions of infants' capabilities: the nexus between beliefs and practice. *Early Years: An International Research Journal, 35*(3), 273-288. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2015.1042961

Slater, R. (2007). Attachment: Theoretical development and critique. *Education Psychology in Practice, 23*(3), 205-219.

Weiss, R. (1974 ). The provisions of social relationships. In Z. Rubin (Ed.), *Doing unto others: Joining, molding, conforming, helping, loving* (pp. 17–26). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.