



Why early relationships matter?

The ability to pay attention, transition from one activity to another, and work cooperatively with others are three key skills for school readiness. The development of these skills begins with the first interactions between parent and newborn. The length of eye contact (attention) as you gaze into each other's eyes continues to increase as the infant grows and develops. How you respond to a baby's fussing becomes the first transition lessons, perhaps as you help them learn to calm themselves before sleep. From the earliest days the relationship between an infant and parent or caregiver grows through touch, eye contact, voice, and exploration, all helping the child to develop trust and become secure in the relationship. For more on the development of social emotional development and early relationships go to www.pbs.org/wholechild.



Early relationships matter!

Susan A. Radway, EdD
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What is Building Blocks?

Building Blocks, as a system of care, is a coordinated network of comprehensive services that meet the mental health needs of children and families.

new at BB

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Infant Psychiatry Comes of Age

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Abstract for Keynote Address at International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions Congress, September 11, 2006.

The science of early development and our understanding of the impact of early experiences on later social, emotional, and cognitive development has grown dramatically in the past three decades. Because of increasingly compelling and far-reaching data, there is increasing interest and concern about the quality of the infant's earliest experiences, and how those experiences shape the child's later development. Infant psychiatry, or more broadly infant mental health, is the clinical discipline that focuses on the profound importance of early experiences for the developing individual.

The unique focus of infant mental health interventions is most often the caregiver-infant relationship, rather than the traditional approach of focusing either on the child or caregiver. Because a relationship approach to assessment and treatment is new, the development of evidence-based approaches is just emerging. Nevertheless, there are overarching goals across the continuum of services: (1) enhancing the ability of caregivers to nurture young children more effectively, (2) minimizing/averting suffering and ensuring that families in need of more intensive services can obtain them, and (3) expanding the ability of non-family caregivers to identify, address, and prevent social-emotional problems in early childhood.

This Address summarizes the model that guides infant mental health and illustrates specific approaches.

Writing to parents:

"Looking at the emotional context of your child's life opens up a whole new way of seeing and feeling what both of you are doing. For example, so much is involved in even the simplest game. Peekaboo can be rich with possibilities.

Consider this: A round of peekaboo doesn't just happen. Someone has to start it. At first, you did, of course. But why? What were you feeling when you started this intimate little game? Playful? Irritated and needing to distract yourself with a little magic? In need of some reassurance that you matter to the little guy? That you will always "be there for him" when the hands open over the eyes? That we will "always be there for you?" Once it is started, then what? How long do you play? You have to read your child's response. If it's fun, you'll both keep at it. If not, at least one of you will quit. Do you still try to reconnect and save the game? Your child's reaction matters as much as yours.

This is a short list of what could be at work here, but there is always something. And the emotional "something" matters a great deal, because that is how the event gets remembered. The way it feels to be together and how both feel is that togetherness matters every bit as much as the child's neuromuscular ability to open and close his eyes at will, smile, make eye contact, blow spittle bubbles, or giggle.

This will only make sense to you if you understand that your child can feel many things long before he can tell you in words, and that understanding emotional milestones benefits both of you enormously."

SPEAK OUT:

Me, My Family and Building Blocks - A Nurturing Relationship

My name is Trysha, and I have two beautiful daughters, ages 2 and 6. A little over 2 years ago, my family fell victim to a home invasion at which time my daughter and I were assaulted. Two men forced their way into my family's home and assaulted my daughter with a weapon resulting in her receiving stitches to her face. She was only 3 years old at the time. Due to safety reasons, our family had to leave our home. We found ourselves homeless overnight. I had no idea where to begin to start putting the pieces of our lives back together. My whole world was turned upside down. I was concerned about my daughter and how she was dealing with our situation. She seemed distant and frightened by every stranger that came her way. She was not the same little girl. I knew I had to do something right then to help her, but I had no clue where to start. Then one day while visiting at my sister-in-law's home a young woman came by to visit my niece. She began playing with her and explaining to my sister-in-law why my niece was doing what she was doing and showing her ways to help communicate with her daughter. After she had left I asked my sister-in-law about the lady and she told me that she works for Building Blocks and gave me their contact information.

That one phone call I made to them changed my family's life dramatically. I was amazed at how quickly they returned my call. When I met with my family care coordinator for the first time she explained to me how they worked and different ways they may be able to help my family and our situation. For the first time in a long time I felt like my family had a plan and the support we needed to make sure the plan could run as smoothly as possible. My family care coordinator was very resourceful, and made sure I could apply for every housing list that was right for me and my family. She was always pointing me in the right direction and she was so helpful. She made me feel like I wasn't alone. I now had goals and nothing was going to stop me. The family care coordinator was for me and Building Blocks assigned a mental health clinician for my daughter. It felt so much better to know that I could communicate back and forth with my daughter about what she was going through and to understand her feelings about our situation. Even though our family was going through this difficult time, I felt like a good mother to know that I didn't ignore her pain and feelings, and because we were working on it together with the help of Building Blocks. I knew the longer I waited to get help for her, that more damage would be made to her emotional wellness. I was in fear of my daughter's mental health as well as my own because we have a family history of mental health issues and I was afraid of being told that either one of us had a mental illness.

Building Blocks helped us by referring us to different agencies and even supported us by attending our appointments if I felt uncomfortable for any reason. One of the best things was I was continuously being told that this is my family and it is my decision. I felt in control of my family's destiny. Over time, my family's goals were met and I felt confident on leaving Building Blocks educated and with the tools I needed to continue to move forward.

I would like to thank the entire Building Blocks team for helping my family at our hardest time. If you feel like you could use the help from Building Blocks, please give them a call. They changed my family's life, and they could change yours.



Building Blocks Evaluation Highlights:

Factors That Can Impact the Development of Early Relationships

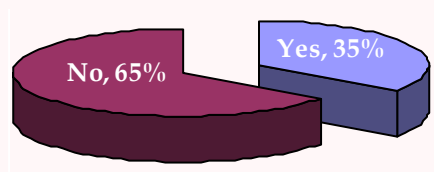
By Amy Griffin and Joy Kaufman, Yale Consultation Center

Early attachments shape a child's later social and emotional functioning. To understand how early relationships between a child and parent/caregiver are formed; we examined factors associated with developing those attachments. Upon entry into Building Blocks, parents/caregivers are asked questions about the child's living situation to determine if the child has had an opportunity to interact with his/her primary caregiver on a regular basis. To date, nearly half (44%) of Building Blocks children are in the custody of their biological mother only, one-third (33%) are in the custody of two parents, and 2% in custody of their biological father only. The remaining 21% of children have an alternate custody arrangement including: adoptive parents (7%), a grandparent (4%), Ward of the State (5%), and some have another type of custody arrangement (5%) not characterized above.



Most children (95%) live at home but 5% live in with a foster home or emergency shelter at enrollment into Building Blocks. Additionally, caregivers report that 17% of Building Blocks children have multiple living arrangements (lived in more than one home) six months prior to enrollment. In other words, at enrollment into Building Blocks, about 20% of Building Blocks children experience instability in their home environment either by having a different caregiver or being in a different home. This instability in caregiver and/or living situation can make it difficult for a child to develop a healthy attachment to their primary caregiver if they have interrupted contact.

Figure 1. percentage of children that have been separated from their caregiver



During interviews, we also ask parents/caregivers if their child has been separated from the caregiver that the child depends on for love and support for more than a few days or under stressful circumstances. At the initial outcome study interview with families, we learned that about one-third (35%) of caregivers report that their child has experienced a significant episode of separation from someone that they depend on for love and support (Figure 1).

Does Enrollment into Building Blocks Impact the Child-Parent Relationship?

Building Blocks family Care Coordinators and Behavioral Health Clinicians work with the identified child and the caregiver in the family's home to enhance the child-parent relationship using tools and techniques unique to that family's situation. From interviews with caregivers, it appears that Building Blocks families feel that difficult interactions between the parent and child lessen as a result of receiving services. In addition, parents report that their children appear to be exhibiting increased signs of attachment (e.g. acting happy or excited when the caregiver returns or responding positively to comfort). As more families are interviewed, we will be able to say whether or not participating in Building Blocks services impacts the parent-child relationship in the ways that they communicate and bond with each other over time. Presently, improvements in the child-parent interaction are not statistically significant.

Nurturing Relationships - Do They Matter?

For many reasons infants and young children need warm, responsive and consistent caregivers. As young children learn to trust and anticipate that their basic needs will be met, their young brains are developing with the help of nurturing relationships that buffer potentially stressful experiences. Infants and young children need dependable adults in order to grow and learn. Positive nurturing relationships in the early years form the groundwork for the development of later relationships. Babies are learning ways to be soothed and are establishing regulation and predictable cycles of eating and sleeping. These routines help a young infant learn that a familiar caregiver will respond promptly when the child feels distressed. Learning that they can count on being cared for helps infants build a sense of security.

The relationship a provider has with the parent or caregiver is also important. A warm and responsive relationship leads to a trusting relationship where both the provider and the parent/caregiver communicate openly about the needs and concerns for the child. Together they will guide the child through the day-to-day experiences, as well as developmental milestones. **Nurturing relationships do matter!**