Powerful Interactions

Amy Laura Dombro, Judy R. Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson

Think of a teacher who made a positive difference in your life. Try to recall an interaction with this teacher. What did your teacher say and do? How did you respond? Take a moment to reflect on the ways this teacher made a difference for you.

Interactions are the daily exchanges in words and gestures we have with others. Sometimes, we don't think about them, they just come naturally. At other times, though, we think very hard, for example, about how to ask for a favor, let someone know that he or she hurt our feelings, or express affection or gratitude. As a teacher, the interactions you have with young children can make a positive difference in their lives, just like the teacher who came to your mind during your reflection.

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You make a difference

Your interactions with children affect how they feel about themselves and how they learn. Who you are as a teacher—your professional development and emotional intelligence—shapes your decisions about what you say and do as you interact with children. Your smile and sense of humor, the sound of your voice, the words you choose, the interests you share, and your curiosity are like that of no other teacher.

Every day you have dozens of interactions with children. As preschool teacher Ramona describes it:

> I think of interactions as a dance. Sometimes I'm in the lead, sometimes the child is. An interaction may last a moment, like when I give Daria a smile of encouragement as she looks up from the enclosure of blocks she is building for the farm animals. Or it may last all day when I shadow Tyrone, guiding, distracting, reminding, and holding him to help him to express his feelings in words instead of biting. Sometimes we are in sync. Other times our dance is one of missteps, like when I interrupt a child.

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Your powerful interactions with children play an important role in their emotional well-being and learning. In the words of Hamre and Pianta, "The quality of everyday classroom interactions in the form of instructional and emotional support moderates the risk of early school failure" (2005, 13).

Sometimes you may interact without thinking ahead. Other times, when you are more aware that your interactions can make a difference, you may be more planned and purposeful. For example,

- To convey a silent message of support: You sit quietly next to Roger in the block area and pay attention as he adds cylinders to his structure. Your message is, "What you are doing is important." Your presence alone may help him focus on his actions and lead him to new discoveries about blocks, planning, and problem solving.
- To support a child's learning about her emotions and relationships: You talk with 5-year-old Erihana's mom about why Erihana seems sad and find out that her best friend has become friends with another child. Erihana feels left out. You acknowledge Erihana's feelings, talk with her about friendship, and coach her to join another child with similar interests to work on a project together.

At the beginning of this article, you thought about a teacher who made a difference for you. Now think about a child you currently teach. Fast-forward about 10 years and imagine that this child (now a teenager) is telling a friend about you, her preschool teacher, and about being in your classroom. What do you hope this teenager will say about you? Your interactions with children have an impact on their lives—now and in the future.

What are powerful interactions?

Powerful interactions are not the same as everyday interactions. We define *powerful interactions* as those in which you intentionally connect with the child while at the same time saying or doing something to guide the child's learning a small step forward. As you nurture your relationships with children in ongoing ways, you model for them how to learn and, at the same time, stretch their thinking and learning. No matter what you teach, how you interact as you do it shapes how well a child learns (Dombro, Jablon, & Stetson, forthcoming).

Building positive relationships

Children's positive relationships with their teachers lay the foundation for children's exploration and learning and enhance the likelihood of children's engagement and achievement in school. Preschool children who have positive relationships with teachers tend to know more letters, have higher math scores, and demonstrate advanced language and literacy skills (Center for Social and Emotional Education n.d.; Howes & Ritchie 2002; Gallagher & Mayer 2008). They are also more inclined to

- make use of learning opportunities within the classroom,
- make friends,
- adjust to classroom and school, and
- enjoy school and achieve benefit from early positive relationships well after they leave the program (NAEYC 2008, 13).

In the early childhood years, children are forming a sense of who they are and what they can do. Every interaction with you is an opportunity for children to develop positive feelings about themselves. These interactions are also opportunities to support the development of children's emotional intelligence: the ability to perceive, understand, and use their emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thinking (Mayer & Salovey 1997). Interactions that promote positive relationships have common qualities. They are validating, personal, respectful, and accepting.

Validating. Show your interest and appreciation for children's efforts by using *mirror talk* rather than saying "Good job." Mirror talk lets the child know you see exactly what they are doing because you tell them what you see them do or say. For example, "Deborah, I see that you have drawn many lines and circles on your drawing."

Personal. Have conversations with children about topics that are important to them. "Marla, on Friday you were so excited about going to your cousin's birthday party. How did it go?"

Respectful. Ask permission before joining in a child's activity. "Jeremy, may I sit with you while you work on your puzzle? I notice that you are looking at each piece carefully before you decide where to put it."

Accepting. Acknowledge a child's emotions and coach him or her about how to manage them. "Bobby, I can tell you are very upset about Henry stepping on your sand castle. You can tell Henry how you feel. I'll go with you."

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Supporting learning

Researchers at the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) conducted a multistate study of prekindergarten programs and a study of statewide early education programs (SWEEP). NCEDL found that though classrooms were generally friendly, the quality of instructional support was surprisingly low. Interactions that supported learning were few and far between (Early et al. 2005; Pianta 2010).

Every interaction is an opportunity to nudge forward a child's development or learning. You can add to what children know, encourage them to try something new, introduce interesting new vocabulary, and model language (for example, when a child points to a toy, say, "I see you would like to use the red truck. Is that right?"). Find and take advantage of opportunities to provide interactions that support learning during daily routines and while children play and explore. Teachers promote learning when they model curiosity, introduce new vocabulary, encourage thinking, take risks, teach how to find answers, and recognize children's accomplishments and progress.

Every interaction is an opportunity to nudge forward a child's development or learning.

Model curiosity. Let children know you are interested in learning about things. "Hmm, I wonder what birds we might see on our walk to the park this morning."

Introduce new vocabulary. Incorporate varied words as you talk with children. "When you cook dinner today, Reggie, maybe you'll make a pepperoni pizza, some roasted chicken, or a big cauldron of butternut squash soup!"

Encourage thinking. Tell children when you observe them thinking, and ask open-ended questions. "You did some good thinking as you set the table today. You put out just the right number of paper cups. How did you figure out how many you needed?"

Take risks. Try new things with children. "We never had a papaya for snack. Let's get one and try it together."

Teach how to find answers. Say, "I don't know," and suggest ways to find answers. "I don't know what that part of an insect is called, Samantha. Here's our insect book. Let's see if we can find the name of that part."

Recognize learning and development. Help children be aware of and reflect on their progress and accomplishments. "Wow, Suk Won, you made it across the climbing bars by yourself today. Remember how last week you couldn't go the whole way? You have been practicing all week and now you can do it. That must feel good!"

Being intentional

Interactions work when your responses are intentional rather than just automatic reactions. In "Building a Better Teacher," Elizabeth Green writes about a teacher who "noticed that what looked like natural-born genius in the best teacher was often deliberate technique in disguise"—in this case, standing still when giving directions. She continues, "It was the tiniest decision, but what was teaching if not a series of bite-size moves just like that?" (Green 2010, 3).

Teachers need awareness—of their impact on children and the children's impact on them—in order to speak and act intentionally. Stay thoughtful and alert—pay attention to yourself and your emotions, actions, and words. Draw on your knowledge of individual children as well as your understanding of child development and learning styles. In all the examples earlier, the teacher's responses and questions were purposeful, leading the child to feel greater

confidence, think more deeply about a problem, or attain some other goal.

Having powerful interactions, not perfect ones

There will always be times when your interactions are clumsy—when you and a child seem to step on each other's toes. It can be more challenging to interact with some children than with others. That's reality. But as you pay more attention to the interactions you have with children, you can begin to recognize when you are out of sync with a child. It may be that *your* emotions are causing interference. Emotional intelligence can help you know which of your emotions to set aside and which ones will help you decide how to best support the child (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade 2008). You can step back, become more aware of individual children's unique personalities and needs, and then reconnect in more effective ways. This can make your relationship even stronger and support the child's learning more effectively.

Powerful interactions begin with you

Powerful interactions begin long before you first meet or talk with a child. They begin with the way you think—your attitude about your work as a teacher and the children you teach. They depend on your emotional intelligence, which allows you to connect with children and promote their emotional and intellectual growth (Mayor & Salovey 1997). You can become a more effective teacher by staying aware, open, and curious about your own practice. Your attitude matters. Teaching is more than following a curriculum successfully. It is an ongoing process of inquiry that requires curiosity and the ability to ask questions and look for answers (Stremmel 2007).

Effective teachers reflect on their practice by asking themselves questions such as, "What did I want to convey to children? What did I do? Why did I do it that way? How did the children respond? What can I do to make my interaction more effective next time?"

The reality of everyday classroom life presents many pressures, from varied sources: curriculum, standards, outcomes, administrative procedures, and logistics. These combined pressures can slowly drown out your curiosity about and awareness of your ability to make a difference in the lives of children and families, burying it deep in your subconscious.

Teachers can keep their spirit of inquiry alive and make their interactions powerful by applying several techniques.

Be yourself

Young children have an uncanny ability to tune in to the important adults in their life, including you. They can read meaning in the sound of your voice, your facial expressions, how you hold yourself and move. They know when you are being genuine and when you are not. "How you are is as important as what you do" (Pawl & St. John 2004, 3). As a teacher, it is important to bring your authentic self into the classroom:

- Speak normally and avoid teacher talk. When you hear yourself saying things like "use your words," "friends share with each other," and "use your inside-voice," pause and check whether you have slipped into automatic pilot.
- Find ways to incorporate your interests into your curriculum. Whether it is baking cookies or studying turtles, if you enjoy an activity, children will sense your enthusiasm and probably enjoy it too.
- Share information about who you are and your life outside the classroom. For example, add pictures of your family to the wall of family photos. Share something about your childhood. "Your story about camping, Hester, reminded me of a time I went camping with my mom and dad when I was 6 years old. I saw deer and heard an owl." Be sure to respect the boundaries of what's not appropriate to share, such as how you feel about other children, families, or issues that may be controversial within a community.

Fuel yourself

For the last 30 years, as the three of us (the authors) have worked as teachers, with teachers, and as authors, we have listened to teachers' stories about their interactions with children. As the teachers begin to trust us, they become willing to share themselves at a deeper level. Through this more open sharing, their stories become more meaningful. They reveal a wide range of daily responsibilities and actions that include everything from wiping up spilled juice to baking muffins to planning and offering a painting activity. They also illuminate a wide range of emotions, including joy and satisfaction in a child's accomplishments, feelings of isolation, and, for some, periods of feeling bored or burned out. Teaching is rewarding and demanding work. Here are a few suggestions of things teachers can do to energize themselves:

Set priorities. Look over your to-do list. Put a star next to the three most important items you want to accomplish this week. Pick one to start with.

Be physically comfortable. Are there places for you to sit in your room—places where you can settle down to listen to, observe, support, and talk with children? If not, bring in a chair or add some pillows. Arrange your classroom so you can be relaxed and at the children's level at the same time. (It's hard to have positive interactions when your back aches from perching on a small chair!)

Add personal touches to the room. Glancing at a favorite poster, photo, poem, or quote can restore happy feelings and reduce stress. You can ease your frazzled nerves with a vase of flowers, a CD of favorite dancing music (you'll never have a shortage of dancing partners!), or perhaps a fresh mango to enjoy during your break.

Arrange your classroom so you can be relaxed and at the children's level at the same time.

Children and Powerful Interactions

As you develop **positive relationships**, children will initiate interactions with you. Depending on their age, they may

- catch your eye and smile.
- cry and come to you for comfort.
- crawl into your lap.
- run over to you with open arms.
- call you over to see what they are doing.
- test limits by continuing to do something after you say no, trusting that you will not react harshly.
- tell you stories about their life.
- silently show you something they made, hoping you will notice and respond.

As you **support learning**, you may see children

- focus more on what they are doing.
- incorporate new vocabulary into their play: "Here are chrysanthemums to put on the table." "I'm an architect building a house."
- solve problems together: "I'll give you the red marker and you give me the green one."
- tell you what they are going to do before they begin playing: "I'm going to pretend to be a daddy when I play in the house today."
- make connections to the real world: "That book is about a mommy and a boy playing together. I play with my mommy, too."

Remember to laugh. Did a child do or say something this week that made you laugh? Surprised you? Amazed you? Take photographs and keep children's quotes in a notebook. Look at the photos and read the children's words when you need a boost. Keep it in a place where families can add to it and enjoy their children, too.

Keep your energy tank fueled. Talk with colleagues about ways you can support each other. Here are some ideas:

- Take turns bringing in a bunch of flowers for each room or the teachers' room.
- Bring in healthy and tasty snacks to share with each other one day a week.
- Check in with each other regularly. Are you stiff after a weekend of gardening? Talk together about working some stretching exercises into movement time.
- Share responsibilities for dealing with stress. Take turns shadowing the toddler who tends to bite or listening to the 5-year-old whose lengthy, detailed descriptions of her interests and activities can be overwhelming.

Look for clues

Building relationships and supporting learning are the two most important outcomes of powerful interactions. Children will give you clues about how you are doing. Ask yourself if your interactions are meaningful, then observe the way the children react to you. Watch children to see how you are doing and be aware of yourself.

You can also find clues in your own feelings and behavior. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Can I "be there" for children—be truly present? Do I pay close attention to what they are doing or saying? Or am I just going through the motions?

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Am I always thinking about what's next instead of what is happening now?

• Do I really listen? Do I give a child time to share? Am I open to what he or she might say? Or do I assume I already know the answer? Do I brush off what the child says, moving on to my own agenda?

• Do I feel at home and comfortable in this space where I spend many hours every day? Does the setting reflect anything about me, my interests, and/or family? Or do I come to work and count the hours until I can go home?

• Am I a curious, ongoing learner? Do I introduce interesting and new vocabulary to children? Do I invite children to problem-solve with me? Do I encourage them to problem-solve themselves at times? Do I genuinely recognize accomplishments and challenges? Or do I often feel I'm on automatic pilot as I offer learning opportunities? Do I blindly follow a curriculum? Am I often bored?

Your answers to these kinds of questions are a conversation with yourself. They can help you to bring yourself up in down times and feel terrific in good times.

You can make your interactions more powerful

How do we promote more powerful child-teacher interactions through professional development? Our field is trying to answer this question. It will take all of us in various roles to find the answers: researchers, program leaders, professional development specialists, college course instructors, and most important of all, we believe, teachers. Here are some ways to join in the conversation as you work together with colleagues to make your interactions more powerful:

Record and share interaction stories. Share stories about how your interactions make a difference. Ask colleagues for their stories as well:

> [Stories] enable teachers to tell and relive the stories of their personal and professional experiences. In the process, they can experience shifts and changes in their identities, shifts that create changes in the way they see themselves as teachers or see children as learners. Perhaps there is nothing more important than keeping track of the stories of who we are and of those who have influenced us along the way. (Meier & Stremmel 2010, 4)

Stories are strong forces of change. Record (on tape or in writing) some of your stories so you can see how you are changing over time.

Work with a partner. Often it is hard to see ourselves accurately. Our actions may be quite different from our intentions. Find a trusted person to watch and be a mirror for you, telling you what he or she sees and hears. This can give you valuable feedback and help you raise questions and change practices. Do the same for others.

Be realistic. Change takes time. Have realistic expectations about how many powerful interactions you can actually have each day. Perhaps your goal would be to have three each day. Just think—if you have three powerful interactions a day and you teach five days a week, that would be 15 powerful interactions during each week. A lot of children would benefit from your support.

Pay attention to yourself. Recognizing your interaction behaviors and patterns is a major step toward expanding your repertoire of strategies. Do you have difficulties personalizing your interactions with each child? Do you hear the same words coming out of your mouth over and over? Are you

finding that your interactions always focus on counting or the alphabet? Don't get upset or give up. Making even one small change each day will result in significant improvement in your interactions as time passes.

Closing thoughts

During the course of your busy day with children, allow yourself a little time to be curious, to slow down, and to enjoy your interactions with children. A few times each day be intentional about your interactions. When you do, children will benefit from their powerful interactions with you—interactions that deepen children's relationship with you as they guide children's learning a small step forward. Your powerful interactions with children make a difference for them now and in the future.

The authors invite you to share stories with others at their website, **www.powerofinteractions.com**, where you will find a growing series of materials about interactions created with and for teachers and an evolving conversation about powerful interactions.

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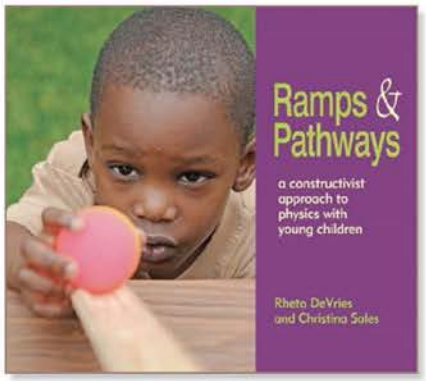

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