



# BabyTalks: Responsive Caregiving as an Effective Practice to Support Children's Social and Emotional Development

## Discussion Guide for Training and Technical Assistance Specialists and Education Staff

Below are recommended stopping points and suggested questions to help guide reflection by education staff and support trainers in their work with education staff. Please feel free to follow your group's lead and discuss topics and questions that are of greatest value to them! If you're working with larger numbers, you may find it useful to discuss these questions in smaller groups and then reunite to summarize.

### Learning objectives

At the end of this presentation, you should be able to:

- 1) Identify the strategies children use to connect to other people and learn about their world in the first years of life.
- 2) Summarize the importance of healthy and supportive early relationships and responsive caregiving.
- 3) Describe at least three research-based components of high-quality interactions with children.

### Presentation Overview

*What Is Responsive Caregiving? (Slides 4-9)*

#### ◉ Recommended stopping point: After Slide 9

- Responsive caregiving refers to a parenting, caregiving, and effective teaching practice that is nurturing and responsive to an individual child's temperament and needs. Reflect on your own experiences with children and families. How have children you have worked with in the past been different in their needs and preferences? How have you adjusted your behavior or actions to meet their unique needs? If you are a home visitor, how have you supported parents and other caregivers in adjusting their interactions with their children in order to be more responsive?
- Think about a typical day for the children and families you work with: at what points throughout the day are you comfortable making adjustments to either your behavior or the environment to meet individualized needs of a child? At what times is it more difficult?
- What are your own personal strategies for individualizing for each child? What would you recommend to others newly starting out in your field, or to parents, family members, or other caregivers during a home visit?
- Why do you think there is such a strong link between early brain development and responsive caregiving?
- Outcomes of responsive caregiving and healthy early relationships have been linked to later-in-life outcomes like what children expect of relationships with others, how confident they are in social settings, and how motivated they are in scholastic achievement – for example, how long they will persist at a challenging task, or their

likelihood of completing high school or attending college. Do these outcomes surprise you? Why or why not?

*Children Learn from Social Interactions (Slides 10-19)*

❖ **Recommended stopping point: After Slide 19**

- Think about a typical day in a teacher or caregiver's life. How can they incorporate eye gaze or pointing into their everyday moments with children? Brainstorm a few ideas. How might these interactions be adjusted to meet a child's individual needs and preferences? For example, how might these non-verbal communications be adjusted for children with suspected or identified disabilities?
- Children imitate quite naturally; it does not need to be taught or forced. But do you think there are activities you could try to encourage or invite children to learn through doing and imitating? What are those activities?
- Nonverbal cues play an important role in early development. Adults must learn to read and respond to children's cues in order for children to feel supported and loved. Conversely, children learn from watching our cues, like eye gaze and pointing. What other subtle, non-verbal cues do you use on a daily basis? Have you seen children notice cues that you give?
- Many non-verbal cues are the similar for children across many backgrounds, abilities, and cultures. However, each child may have their own cues or ways of showing their caregivers what they are feeling and needing in the moment. What are some of the non-verbal cues you have learned from the children or families you have worked with? Did any surprise you? Were any children's cues particularly difficult for you to read? Why or why not?

*Responsive, Back-and-Forth Interactions Are Key to Learning (Slides 20-27)*

❖ **Recommended stopping point: After Slide 27**

- Research tells us that babies learn best from live interactions with other people. How do we know? Describe at least one piece of research-based evidence for this. Does this match with your own experience in teaching or working with families? Why or why not?
- In one study, infants learned foreign language sounds from less than six hours of play sessions with a native speaker. However, babies that watched a DVD of the same language content did not show any evidence of language learning. Was this result surprising to you? Why or why not? How might this information be relevant for children who are dual language learners?
- When adults respond in a way that is contingent to a baby's actions or behaviors, it enhances learning. For example, researchers found that when caregivers gave contingent feedback, or responded immediately, to infants' sounds with full-sentence replies, the babies babbling become more frequent and complex. Why do you think contingent responses supports learning in young children? How do you think contingent responses supports dual language learners in their language development?

*A Deeper Look at Responsive Caregiving as an Effective Teaching Practice (Slides 28-42)*

❖ **Recommended stopping point: After Slide 42**

- Why is understanding how infants respond to other people's emotions important? If you are a home visitor, how would you support parents with this?



- Take a moment to consider what behaviors you're modeling, and what you want to model. Before presenting a new lesson, entering a family's home during a visit, or introducing something new to a child, think about how you want to shape their expectations. Think back to the last time you introduced a new toy to a child. What did you say or do? Knowing what you know now about how children take adults' lead in new situations, would you have behaved differently? If so, how?
- Young children are just beginning to learn how to express themselves. It can be challenging to know what babies need or want, and even experienced caregivers familiar with an individual child can misread cues. In addition, children with suspected or identified disabilities can sometimes have cues that are more challenging to read as a new caregiver. There might also be cultural differences in behaviors and needs. Because of these differences, a caregiver might misinterpret or miss an infant's cue. And that's okay! However, what can you or someone do to improve their ability to read and respond to children's cues? Brainstorm some ideas.
- When have you noticed you or another adult, for example in a home visit or classroom environment, successfully read a child's cues? How about unsuccessfully? How have you reflected on this experience to affect your future interactions with young children?
- Learning happens in relationships. What strategies do you use to support relationships in your work with young children or families?

## Resources

### *Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center*

- Introduction to Temperament:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/introduction-temperament>
- Infant Toddler Temperament Tool for Infants:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/infant-toddler-temperament-tool-infants>
- Infant Toddler Temperament Tool for Toddlers:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/infant-toddler-temperament-tool-toddlers>
- Quick Start Guide for Responsive Interactions:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/webisode-8-quick-start.pdf>
- Early Essentials Webisode 8: Responsive Interactions:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/early-essentials-webisode-8-responsive-interactions>
- Individualization - Resources:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/browse/keyword/individualization>
- Social Emotional Development - Resources:  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/browse/keyword/social-emotional-development>