

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors by Expressing Warmth and Affection to Children

What does it mean to express warmth and affection to children?

Warmth and affection are aspects of positive teacher-child relationships that are essential for children's well-being in early care and education settings. Expressions of warmth and affection occur as teachers protect, guide, communicate, teach and play with children. Signs of affection can be physical such as holding, hugging, a pat on the back or a high-five, as well as the use of facial expressions, laughter, tone of voice or words of endearment and encouragement.

Why is it important to express warmth and affection to children?

Studies show that expressing warmth and affection contributes to and supports children's social and emotional development. Affection can provide the foundation for secure relationships between teachers and the children in their care. Affectionate responses from teachers also provide a model for children of positive, gentle behavior, which will result in more positive child-to-child interactions. Signs of affection are especially important for some children who may need additional support to feel included in the classroom community, such as children with disabilities and children who are withdrawn. Warm, affectionate gestures from teachers will send these messages to children: I like you; I enjoy being with you; I'm having fun with you; I am excited by your efforts and accomplishments; You are important and valued; My day is better because you are here!

What can you do in your classroom?

Warmth and affection should occur in the context of your daily routines, activities, and interactions. If your classroom is organized to promote children's appropriate behaviors, you will find it easier to interact more positively with children. If they are not, you may find that you spend much of your time responding to children's inappropriate behavior with directions, corrections and fussing. Try to set the stage in your classroom to allow yourself the time and energy to express affection through relaxed interactions.

The following situations reduce your ability to provide warmth and affection in your classroom. Try to avoid:

- having your focus on taking care of the classroom (wiping tables, etc) instead of interacting with the children
- setting tables with only enough chairs for the children, so teachers must stand
- requiring children to wait or stand in lines too long or too often
- storing materials where they are not easily accessible to children
- spending much of the day in whole-group instruction

To increase your ability to provide warmth and affection in your classroom, you can:

- sit and talk with children during snacks and meals
- play with children in learning centers
- hold children on your lap or sit next to children while reading stories
- look for ways to have fun with and enjoy the children

Make sure you know your children well and adjust your style to the needs, preferences, family and cultural background, temperament and abilities. Make sure you are communicating warmth in ways that are comfortable to them.

Research on this topic:

Did you know that 'feel good' chemicals (such as serotonin) are released in the brain through loving interactions and that a child's body and brain require gentle touch to reach their potential? Research also shows that smiling is the sign of affection that children respond to most often (and it is a positive message that can be sent and received across the room)! Additionally, research has found that families and cultures that express warm physical affection have fewer issues with anger and aggression.

Food for thought:

Children who use challenging behaviors are the children who most need your warmth and affection. After a child has been disruptive or aggressive, try including signs of warmth and affection with your guidance*. Add a little love to your behavior management techniques and you can create a classroom culture with fewer anger and aggression issues.

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