

A CURRICULUM OF CONNECTION

Nurturing relationships, belonging and learning in early education

McMonagle, A. 2026



From the very second a baby enters the world, they're on a mission to connect. Long before their first full word, they're locking eyes, listening for voices, feeling warmth, and responding with a symphony of coos, babbles, and eventual smiles.

Far from being passive evolutionary traits, sensitive and responsive adult-child interactions serve as critical catalysts for early neurological architecture and socio-emotional trajectory.

The Secret to Healthy Brains? Relationships

The secret to healthy brain development in the early years may be simpler than we think: strong, nurturing relationships. When a child is spoken to, comforted, played with, and responded to with warmth and consistency, these experiences help build the neural connections that support learning, emotional regulation, communication, and resilience.

It is not expensive toys, fancy environments or constant stimulation that matters most, but **the quality of human connection**. Loving, responsive relationships provide children with a secure foundation, helping their brains—and their sense of self—grow stronger from the very beginning.

Virtually all healthy child development hinges on stable, reliable relationships—**both inside and outside the family**. Think of these early bonds as the foundation of a house. When built with warmth, empathy, and responsiveness, they support a lifetime of essential skills:

- **Emotional Resilience and Mental Health:** Strong self-confidence and self-worth.
- **Social Connection:** The ability to resolve conflicts, make lasting friends, develop empathy and build healthy future relationships.
- **Cognitive Drive:** Curiosity, problem-solving, and a lifelong motivation to learn.



Quality, Pedagogy, and the Role of the Educator



Beyond the Home: Why the 'Key Person' Matters

Children are fully capable of forming deep, supportive bonds with adults outside their immediate families. In early childhood care and education settings, **the Key Person approach is a gamechanger.**

A warm, predictable adult provides a safe harbour for a child to explore their world and build social trust. For children facing tough situations at home—like stress, adversity, or instability—a secure relationship with an educator isn't just nice to have; **it's a critical safety net.** This is also why keeping staff turnover low in early years settings is so vital for young minds.

While curricular guidelines provide pedagogical goals and structural guidance for fostering well-being and learning, structural policy alone is insufficient. The translation of curricular framework into developmental outcomes relies directly on **the professional competence of early childhood educators.**

The Recipe for High-Quality Interactions

1. Tune In, Be Present, and Stay Positive

Get down on the child's eye level. Show genuine excitement at their attempts to communicate, exaggerate your facial expressions, and use humor. When you foster cooperation and model empathy, children naturally learn how to navigate friendships.

2. Master the "Serve and Return" Game

Think of communication like a game of tennis. The child "serves" an interest or sound, and the adult "returns" it by:

- Following the child's lead during play.
- Asking open-ended questions and expanding their vocabulary.
- Pausing and waiting—giving little brains the time they need to process and respond.

3. Turn Everyday Moments into Brain-Building Opportunities

Every moment is a learning moment! High-quality interactions happen when adults comment on play, sing together during snack time, set up a cozy 'Chat Chair', or offer meaningful choices that build decision-making skills.

What about the importance of relationships and connection when children start or return to preschool?

Use the tip sheets on the next 2 pages to discover some **useful strategies to support 'A Curriculum of Connection' in the early weeks of starting, or returning to preschool.**



The priority in the early weeks of **starting** preschool

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In the early weeks of pre-school, making new connections and getting to know educators and other children should be the primary focus. For some children, connecting and talking with new peers will come easily, for others this is a skill yet to be mastered.

Below are some useful strategies to support educator planning in the early weeks:



1. Environmental Design & 'Connection Hooks'

- **Paired Play Stations:** Set up activities that naturally require two people (e.g., dual-sided easel painting, large block building, heavy object carrying, or two-person sensory bins).
- **Low-Pressure areas:** Create quiet, parallel play spaces (like a book nook or playdough table) where hesitant children can sit near peers without the immediate pressure to verbally converse.
- **Observer-Friendly Spaces:** Position spaces so children can comfortably watch ongoing group play before deciding to join in, e.g. a well positioned tent or couch.

2. Visual and Non-Verbal Communication Supports

- **Visual Feeling & Interest Boards:** Use visual emotion or activity cards so non-verbal or shy children can signal how they feel or what they want to play with to peers.
- **Social Scripts & Puppets:** Use storybooks or puppet play during group times to act out everyday social scenarios (e.g., "What can we do when we want a turn with the red truck?").

3. Small-Group Routines

- **Use small group clusters (3–4 children).** Smaller groups reduce anxiety and allow quieter voices to be heard.
- **Collaborative Rituals:** Incorporate simple, daily partner rituals like a high-five greeting, or a joint routine where partners share daily tasks.

4. Educator-Facilitated Social Bridging

- **Active Introduction & Translation:** Model social engagement for children who initially struggle. Instead of asking "Can they play?", frame it as a shared interest: "Leo is building a bridge for the cars, Maya. You were just looking for cars—maybe you can drive them across his bridge?"
- **Use intentional micro-interactions** (e.g., "Pass the blue crayon to Sam," or rolling a ball back and forth) to establish early rapport without requiring complex conversation.
- **Highlighting Shared Interests:** Explicitly point out common ground ("Look at that, both of you chose the yellow playdough today").

5. Tune in, be positive, happy and responsive

- Maintain eye contact – look at children as you engage;
- Be attentive and present;
- Interact on the child's level;
- Exaggerate facial expression;
- Demonstrate empathy;
- Show excitement at children's attempts to communicate;
- **Demonstrate humour, be silly and have fun.**

Returning to Preschool?

Start with the 3 R's

Regulation. Rhythm. Relationships.
Everything else will follow.



STRATEGIES TO TRY:

1. Regulation — Help everyone settle before expecting them to learn

After a long break, children may return with big emotions, lots of energy and a reduced tolerance for the usual demands of the day. Before diving straight into expectations and curriculum, focus on helping everyone feel calm, safe and regulated.

- Create a calm, welcoming environment with softer lighting and familiar activities.
- Build plenty of movement — dancing, outdoor play, or simply opportunities to move freely.
- Use co-regulation: slow your own pace, take deep breaths and use a calm, reassuring voice.
- Keep expectations realistic and remember that some children may need extra support with separation, transitions or emotions.
- Offer cosy, quiet spaces where children can take a break when they need one.
- Don't fight the wiggles — movement is often exactly what children need to regulate.

Remember: Regulation before expectation.

2. Rhythm — Rebuild the routine, but leave room for flexibility

Children thrive on predictability, but after time away, it can take a while to find that familiar rhythm again.

The goal isn't to jump straight back into a perfectly timed schedule — it's to gently rebuild the flow of the day.

- Reintroduce familiar routines gradually.
- Use visual schedules, songs and cues to remind children what comes next.
- Allow extra time for transitions — everything may take a little longer at first!
- Plenty of free play and child-led opportunities
- Keep the structure predictable, but be prepared to adapt when children need more time.
- Repeat familiar games, stories, songs and rituals to create a sense of security.
- Avoid cramming the first few days with activities. Less can be more.

Remember: A flexible rhythm is still a rhythm.

3. Relationships — Reconnect before you redirect

Connection is what helps children feel safe, secure and ready to engage. After a break, children may need time to reconnect with their adults, friends and the wider early childhood setting community.

- Prioritise warm greetings and individual check-ins.
- Spend time playing alongside children and following their lead.
- Create opportunities for shared laughter, conversation
- Notice the children who may be quiet or unsettled.
- Revisit group rituals that build belonging, such as morning meetings, songs or special greetings.
- Give children opportunities to reconnect with friends through collaborative and open-ended play.
- Focus on connection before correction whenever possible.

Remember: Connection leads to cooperation.