



PART 3 | CHAPTER 8

MAKE MEALTIMES MATTER: GROWING CHILDREN WITH RELATIONSHIPS

Section 8.1: Growing Healthy Brains and Bodies

Section 8.2: Supporting Interaction Across the Ages



SECTION 8.1: GROWING HEALTHY BRAINS AND BODIES

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS MATTER³

When children experience positive interactions with others from the start of their lives, they reap substantial benefits for the rest of their lives.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS ...

- + Teach children about the world and themselves.
- + Show children that they are loved and by whom.
- + Help them learn if the world is safe or scary.
- + Explain what happens when they become upset or happy.
- + Allow them to observe and learn how to treat other people and communicate.
- + Shape and help a child's brain to grow.
- + Create healthier and happier children and adults.



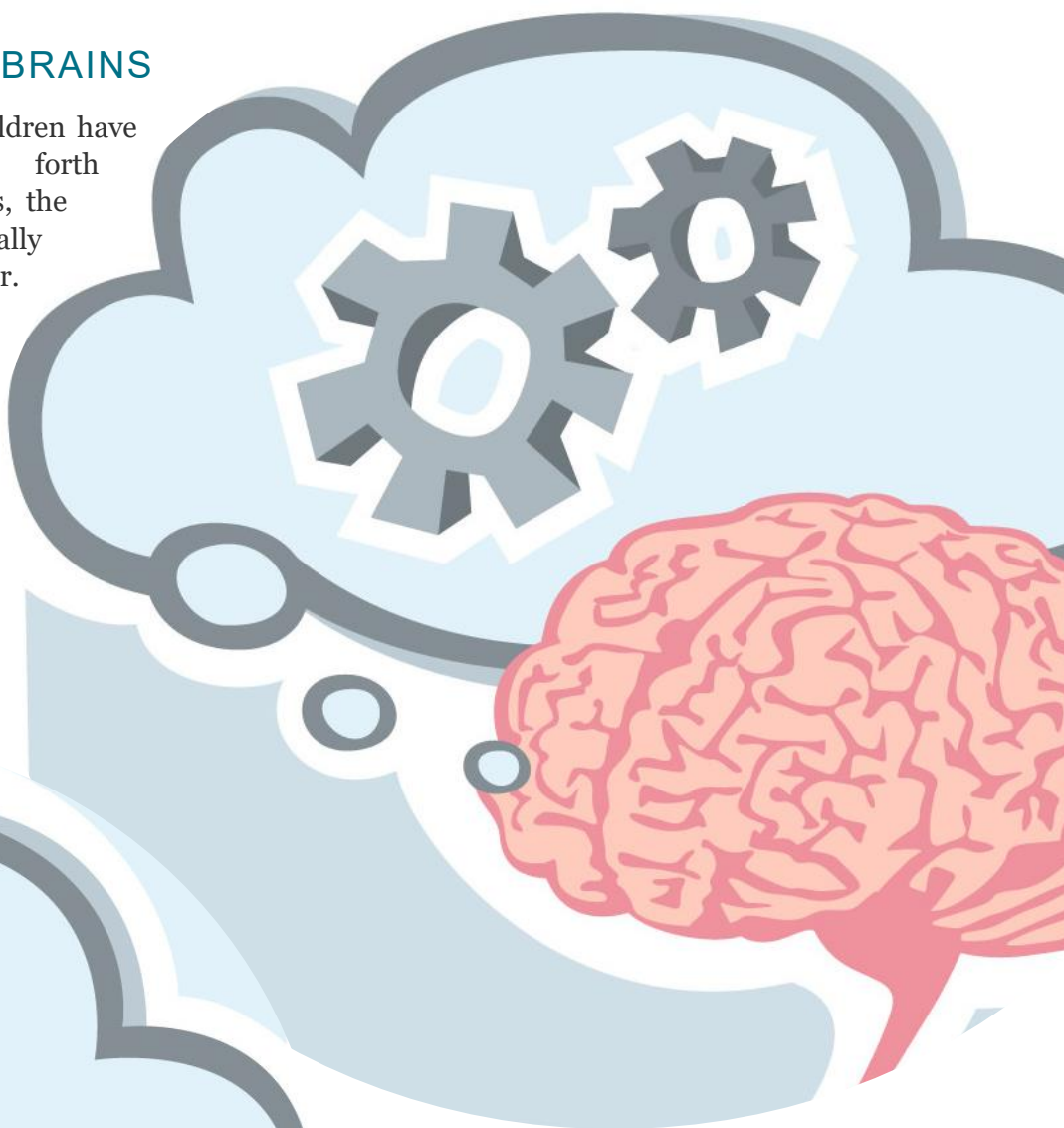
Positive relationships are the essential foundation for raising healthy children.

All children need five vital elements for robust development in life:

- ① A healthy, safe and low-stress experience in the womb before being born
- ② The chance to experience love with a nurturing and safe adult caregiver
- ③ Support for learning how to calm themselves when upset (self-regulation)
- ④ Support for discovering how to become calm with the help of others (co-regulation)
- ⑤ Reliable, thoughtful and developmentally matched care from primary caregivers

BUILDING HEALTHY BRAINS

Research shows that when children have encouraging back and forth interactions with caring adults, the wiring in their brains actually changes – and for the better. This means that positive relationships are powerful. The more nurturing social connections a child has and the more often they are positively interacted with by others, the bigger, stronger and wiser their brains will become.



BUILDING HEALTHY BODIES

Positive relationships are often overlooked when discussing how to best support a child's growth, nutrition and well-being. However, research clearly shows that when children have supportive and consistent relationships with adults, they actually grow better. Children's bodies grow bigger, stronger and healthier because they are receiving good nutrition, but also (and just as importantly) because they are receiving nourishing relationships. Strong relationships equal strong bodies.



When children *do not* have anyone to consistently depend on, and when they *do not* experience healthy relationships, their growth and development can be greatly hindered. This also means that the growth of a child’s brain will be negatively impacted.

CHILDREN WITH LIMITED OR NO ACCESS TO POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS ARE:

- ① At greater risk of chronic illnesses and death.
- ② At greater risk of malnutrition and dehydration.
- ③ At greater risk of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, behavioral difficulties, etc.
- ④ Less likely to recover from difficult, traumatic life experiences such as the loss of a caregiver, sibling or friend.
- ⑤ Less likely to develop necessary developmental skills to become thriving, functional adults such as learning to wash, dress, and feed themselves, manage daily activities and positively interact with others.



The type of care we provide to a child matters. There is an important difference between custodial care versus optimal caregiving for children. Taking care of a child’s basic needs such as feeding, bathing and dressing (also known as “custodial care”) is hard work and incredibly important. However, when caregivers provide optimal caregiving, they go above and beyond by offering children positive, supportive and loving interactions.



Thoughtful and nurturing interactions aid with healthy brain and body growth. This is the essence of optimal caregiving.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CUSTODIAL CARE AND OPTIMAL CAREGIVING

CUSTODIAL CARE	★ OPTIMAL CAREGIVING
Keeping a child alive	Keeping a child alive, happy and thriving
Feeding a child	Feeding a child safely, thoughtfully and offering appropriate support and positive interactions
Attending to a child’s diapering and toileting needs	Responding to diapering and toileting needs in a timely and considerate manner while offering positive interactions
Bathing a child	Bathing a child safely and thoughtfully and offering opportunities for child participation and positive interactions
Dressing or undressing a child	Dressing or undressing a child safely and thoughtfully, offering opportunities for child participation and positive interactions
Sleep or wake routines for a child	Responding to a child’s needs for sleep or activity with thoughtful schedules and routines along with positive interactions
Limited or no playtime offered to a child	Encouraging daily play with children, adults, and peers and opportunities for positive interactions
Limited or no holding or comfort to a child	Responding to a child’s needs for comfort and holding in thoughtful, individualized ways while offering positive interactions

WHEN CAREGIVERS PROVIDE OPTIMAL CAREGIVING:

- ① A child's quality of life is significantly improved.
- ② A child's health and well-being are greatly improved, including physical and brain development → they are more likely to develop to their full potential.
- ③ A child's nutrition improves → they can better use the nutrition they receive, and they are at lower risk of malnutrition, stunting, wasting, etc.
- ④ A child's risks related to difficult life events are lowered because positive relationships lessen the impact of these early challenges.
- ⑤ A child is able to fully experience life and thrive and spend less time and energy focusing on staying alive and safe.



“Every child deserves a champion.

An adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

— *Rita Pierson*



SECTION 8.2: SUPPORTING INTERACTION ACROSS THE AGES

Every child deserves the opportunity to grow and develop to their fullest potential. Regular and frequent positive interactions with children are the primary way to best support a child's complete development. By thoughtfully including frequent moments of connection throughout a child's day, caregivers are growing calmer, stronger, healthier children; in addition to functional and flourishing adults.



Any positive interaction with a child, no matter how brief, is powerful.

Listed below are examples of ways caregivers can support positive interactions with all children during daily activities and routines. The key is to provide each of them with thoughtful intent and consistency to grow healthy and socially strong children.



Some strategies are excellent for children of all ages. Some strategies are better suited for younger or older children. Consider the age and developmental level of the child when choosing which strategies to use.



OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT POSITIVE INTERACTIONS THROUGHOUT DAILY ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINES

FOR THE CHILD 0-36 MONTHS AND OLDER

WHEN TO INCLUDE INTERACTION:	HOW TO INCLUDE INTERACTION:	
<p>Mealtimes</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Holding child when bottle feeding ⇒ Looking at child during feedings ⇒ Offering soothing touches (may include swaddling for young babies) ⇒ Providing a quiet environment for calming before, during, or after meals (dim lights, reduced noise) ⇒ Responding consistently to her signs of hunger ⇒ Offering food before she becomes too hungry or upset ⇒ Feeding child at the same time each day and night ⇒ Having the same caregiver feed child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds or word ⇒ Eating meals with an older child ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for self-feeding ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for trying new foods ⇒ Offering child opportunities to assist with washing before a meal and cleaning up afterward ⇒ Offering child opportunities to serve self and others food or drinks ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child
<p>Diaper Changes</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child ⇒ Looking at child ⇒ Offering soothing touches ⇒ Making fun faces and sounds with child ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds or words ⇒ Responding consistently to his signs or cries for a new diaper ⇒ Changing his diaper as often as needed during the day and night 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Having the same caregiver change child each time ⇒ Having consistent diapering and toileting schedules for children ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for child's attempts to help with diapering and toileting ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for child's attempts to alert caregivers of diapering and toileting needs

<p>Dressing and Undressing</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child ⇒ Looking at child ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds and words ⇒ Following predictable dressing and undressing routines ⇒ Having the same caregiver dress and undress child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for child's attempts to help with dressing and undressing ⇒ Offering child regular opportunities to practice dressing and undressing themselves
<p>Bathing, Washing, Cleaning Routines</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child ⇒ Looking at child ⇒ Offering soothing touches ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds and words ⇒ Having the same caregiver bathe child ⇒ Following predictable bathing and washing routines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Bathing her as often as she needs ⇒ Offering child regular opportunities to practice washing hands and face and brushing their teeth ⇒ Offering positive support and praise for child's attempt to help with bathing and washing
<p>Waking up from rest; Putting down to rest</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child ⇒ Swaddling young babies when appropriate ⇒ Offering calming, repeated movements to soothe child such as rocking, bouncing, patting, swaying, etc. ⇒ Singing or playing music that has a soothing steady rhythm and signifies it is time to rest ⇒ Adjusting temperature to suit her needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Having the same caregiver wake and put child down ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds and words while preparing for rest or upon waking ⇒ Following predictable wake up and resting routines ⇒ Responding to child in a timely manner when she wakes ⇒ Offering child comfort items such as pacifiers, blankets, loveys or other age-appropriate items
<p>Play Time</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child ⇒ Playing on the ground, floor or bed with him at child's eye level ⇒ Making fun sounds and faces with child ⇒ Repeating child's faces, movements, sounds and words ⇒ Encouraging a child's exploration of objects, toys and environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Looking at child often during play ⇒ Having the same caregivers play with child ⇒ Playing in different environments such as play room, outside, a different room, park, etc. ⇒ Playing often throughout the day

Holding, Carrying,
Comforting



- ⇒ Wearing child in a wrap, pack, blanket, etc., to calm her and stay close
 - ⇒ Swaddling young babies when appropriate
 - ⇒ Snuggling child each day and often
 - ⇒ Offering consistent comfort and soothing when child becomes upset
 - ⇒ Repeating child's faces, sounds and words
- ⇒ Responding to moments of distress in a timely manner
 - ⇒ Having the same caregiver soothe child
 - ⇒ Talking, singing and smiling at child during calm moments and moments of distress
 - ⇒ Offering the older child "cozy corners" or "quiet spaces" to use for calming when she becomes upset or overstimulated





KEY POINTS FOR SUPPORTING INTERACTIONS

Healthy relationships help children thrive. Children who are thoughtfully cared for by others through daily, positive interactions are healthier and more well-nourished (body and mind). Providing this optimal care does not need to take extra time or expertise. It only requires a desire from caregivers to build strong connections with the children they support. Caregivers can offer positive relationships during the daily activities and routines by incorporating simple, but powerful strategies.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- ① Positive relationships are the key experiences a child needs to build a strong foundation for a healthy and happy life.
- ② Healthy relationships with others are the main way caregivers can help reduce the effects of negative experiences for children.
- ③ Positive relationships are necessary for a child to have a well-nourished body and mind.



For more information on interaction basics, refer to Chapter 1, Section 10.

