



SECTION 1.10: INTERACTION BASICS

WHAT IS INTERACTION?

Interaction is another way of saying “relationships.” In this manual, we use the terms interchangeably. The relationships children have with their caregivers, including the day-to-day moments they share during feedings, are interactions. Positive, intentional interactions are necessary for children to grow healthy and thrive. A child’s development will become more robust as he is offered consistent and nurturing interactions with his caregivers.



Enjoyable connections with others that happen often strengthen a child’s development.

WHY IS INTERACTION IMPORTANT FOR FEEDING?

Early skills such as feeding must be learned. They are created by the relationships and events that a child experiences with her caregivers²¹. Regulation, or a child’s ability to become and stay calm, is essential for development, especially for feeding. For a child to be able to eat well, she must first be calm. Once calm, children are better able to interact with others, eat and feed themselves with greater chance for success. While children are developing, they need extra support from caregivers to become and stay calm. Reliable, safe and positive relationships with caregivers are the first way that a child begins learning how to become calm.



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KEY ELEMENTS OF INTERACTION: OPTIMAL CAREGIVER QUALITIES²²

In this section we will explain key elements that make an effective, optimal caregiver. Optimal caregiving is different from custodial caregiving. Custodial caregiving is when a person takes care of the basic standard needs of a child (e.g., provides food, water and may assist with other daily activities such as bathing, diapering and toileting). Optimal caregiving is when a person takes care of a child's daily needs, but they also provide positive, loving interactions. These positive and meaningful interactions boost the quality of life of the child, leading to improved health outcomes. It is essential that caregivers consider these elements when supporting all children, and that they learn how to provide optimal care.



Being attuned means: Being highly aware of a child's needs.

PRESENT, ATTENTIVE, RESPONSIVE AND ATTUNED CAREGIVING



OPTIMAL CAREGIVER QUALITIES

Present	Be fully present during interactions with a child — physically and mentally. Caregivers pay close attention to what is happening in the moment (i.e., not thinking about work that needs to be done) to best understand what a child needs and how to support those needs. <i>"I see you and you see me."</i>
Attentive	Be observant of the physical and emotional needs of a child. Caregivers are attentive to a child's needs to help him feel understood. Children will continue to express their needs and feelings, knowing that their caregivers are intently listening and watching. <i>"You understand me, and that makes me feel good."</i>
Responsive	Be consistent and quick to respond to a child's needs. Caregivers respond in a timely manner and children learn to trust that caregivers will keep them safe. When consistent care (i.e., same caregiver, schedule, bottle/cup/spoon, room for feedings, feeding position, etc.) is offered responsively, children develop strong relationships that are essential for life. <i>"I feel safe with you. You are always here for me."</i>
Attuned	Be deeply connected to a child and learn her individual wants and needs. Caregivers are attuned to a child's needs in order to respond consistently and respectfully to each child. This creates a feeling of dependability for a child. <i>"I can count on you because you always take good care of me."</i>



INTERACTION TIPS FOR EVERY CHILD

TIP 1:

Healthy relationships help development of the brain. Positive interactions between children and caregivers support the growth and development of a child's brain. Strong brains grow from quality time with caregivers.

TIP 2:

Healthy relationships help heal brains. Positive relationships are the primary way caregivers can reduce the impacts of challenges and stresses children experience. Caregivers can offer positive interactions by being present, attentive, responsive and attuned.

TIP 3:

Healthy relationships help children thrive. Children who are nurtured by caregivers through positive interactions are actually healthier and more well-nourished (body and mind).

TIP 4:

Optimal caregiving doesn't take extra time. Caregivers can offer positive interactions throughout daily activities and routines that they are already doing by using simple strategies.

TIP 5:

Children learn best in the context of positive relationships. Offering positive interactions with a child during mealtimes (and beyond) is the best way to support the learning process.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Positive relationships are the foundation for raising healthy children. When children receive optimal caregiving from the start, they reap substantial benefits for the rest of their lives. When children do not have anyone to consistently depend on, and when they do not experience positive relationships, their growth and development can be severely stunted. This includes developing smaller less powerful brains and bodies, learning how to connect and relate with others as well as becoming successful adults in our communities. Because of this, caregivers play a vital role in developing not only physically strong children, but emotionally strong children. Every activity and routine throughout the day is an opportunity to positively impact a child's life.

For more information on interaction and specific ways to support interaction during every activity and routine, refer to Chapters 8 and Appendix 9K

