

Research indicates children need many positive relationships

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The relationship between a parent and a child sets the foundation for the child's future, according to early childhood education professor Bronwyn Fees, Kansas State University. But parents don't have to build the foundation alone. Research shows children need many positive relationships.

Nurturing a baby into a capable, competent individual is complicated. A parent models language and behavior. A parent sets boundaries for safety and social expectations. A parent gives undivided attention.

It's a whopping responsibility, a demanding task.

Difficult? You bet it is, said Bronwyn Fees, associate professor of early childhood education and life-span human development at Kansas State University. But it will likely be the most enjoyable experience in your life.

To celebrate Week of the Young Child April 12-18, Fees examines research-based ways to strengthen the relationship between parent and [child](#).

"The kind of relationship you have with a child sets the foundation for the child's future," she said. A

child needs at least one person who is nuts about her, the researcher added.

A parent's relationship is unique and special. But, as a parent, you don't have to do it alone.

Research indicates children need many positive relationships. The more adults you can surround the child with—the more adults who are "nuts" about her—the better that facilitates the child's development, the professor said. "By engaging with multiple role models, a child learns there is more than one way to do things."

Enter grandparents, aunts and uncles, child care providers, neighbors. "The idea of the nuclear family with [parents](#) and children only living separately from the rest of the family is a fairly recent concept," Fees said. "The child needs them all."

From these relationships and experiences, a baby grows to learn problem-solving, critical thinking, communication and understanding the feelings of others and herself, Fees said. He will learn how to understand and value himself as an individual. She will become physically capable of caring for herself – basic skills such as getting dressed and sophisticated ones such as managing a home and career.

Fees, who also is associate dean for academic affairs in the College of Human Ecology, specializes in [child development](#) and [early childhood education](#). Her research focuses on physical activity of young children within [child care](#) programs, affordances of the physical environment for children with autism and international perspectives on early education. She has published and presented nationally and internationally on curriculum and [physical activity](#) in early education programs. She also is a licensed teacher.

She offers research-based suggestions to parents,

relatives and other caregivers on raising children from birth to age 8.

- When you are with your child, be fully engaged. Put down the cellphone. Close the computer. Turn off the television set. Focus on the child. "This is not just about you now," Fees said. "Your child relies on you to be a guide and support when she is learning to manage her own feelings and behavior. She is watching how you express your feelings to understand what is appropriate and expected behavior. Actions so speak louder than words."
- Choose quality over quantity. Both are important when you are together. Follow the child's interests. For example, if your child wants to do a puzzle, sit with her and talk about the puzzle. Make specific comments about tasks and ask open-ended questions. Why did you choose that puzzle piece? How did you know that it fit there? What is the picture in the puzzle about? Why do you think the fox is wearing a hat? Offer specific feedback rather than just saying "good job," Fees said. This way the child knows exactly what she did well and can repeat it. It shows that you respect the child as an individual. And that is how a child learns to respect others. "Learning is a socially mediated process. It takes repeated high-quality engagement over time between child and parent," she said.
- Be the child's cheerleader. A child needs a strong social relationship with an adult—usually a parent—who is the child's advocate, Fees said. That advocate is intuitively tuned into the child's needs and knows who the child is. Research shows that even in infancy, a child senses this security.
- Remember your actions are learning experiences for your child. You are the child's model, Fees said. That's how she learns emotions, behavior and values—joy or anger, patience or impatience, tolerance or bigotry, love of learning or indifference, hope or pessimism. The list is long.
- Set clear expectations and boundaries for behavior. In all these tasks, a parent has to

set boundaries for safety and [social expectations](#), Fees said. Expectations and boundaries should be clear, gentle, firm, reinforced and consistent. They teach a child the behavior that is expected in different settings with different people. A child wants the same things an adult wants: predictability and consistency, Fees said. Be flexible. "They are little human beings and they haven't learned to regulate themselves yet, but they are working on it. A parent helps a child, but has to be willing to change his behavior, too. For example, if a child is tired or hungry, skip the grocery store."

- Talk. Talk. Talk. It's a good thing! A child learns from chatter. Fees suggests a parent narrate aloud activities such as making breakfast and getting dressed. A child learns vocabulary as the adult models how to organize, think and behave. This self-talk expands the child's vocabulary and opportunities to engage in conversation. Sing, rhyme, chant, whisper, speak slowly, speak softly and laugh. Enjoy language together. Make internal thinking visible, she said.

Through many interactions, a child begins to feel a sense of competence and begins to be capable of self-regulation of emotions, actions and thinking, Fees said.

Learning doesn't start in kindergarten or first grade or college. The interactions that support learning start from the moment of birth. Those sensitive, responsive interactions between a parent and infant are the foundation for future relationships and a sense of confidence, Fees said.

All these experiences contribute collectively to the development of a capable and competent adult.

Provided by Kansas State University

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