**Creating Together – A Pathway for Building Positive Relationships**

“*Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.*”

- Albert Schweitzer (writer and humanist)

Relationships based on trust and respect are central for the success of most human interactions. This is especially true when it comes to building relationships with children, given that their development and wellbeing is directly linked to the level of care and attention they receive. Research shows that respectful and trustworthy relationships are some of the most important protective factors in a child’s development process; they grow and thrive in the presence of a meaningful connection with at least one adult who is caring and attentive to their unique needs.

However, building a sense of trust with a child requires time, dedication and proactive care. One of the main elements that allow for a trusting relationship to develop is being truly present and engaged in the interaction. Children are usually very attentive to the world around them and pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate how engaged an adult is. Being available and genuinely interested in the connection that is blossoming allows for a meaningful relationship to unfold.

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| ***A pause to reflect****When we are engaged in creating a meaningful and supportive relationship with a child and giving them the best care they deserve, it is important to pause and remember that being genuinely available and engaged can be hard work that may at times impact our personal emotional wellbeing, depending on how we are feeling on a given day, the challenges that the child might be facing and how that relates to our own story.* *An empty lantern provides no light. Self-care and self-awareness are the fuel that allows your light to shine brightly and enables deeper connections.*  |

**Making space for the relationship to unfold**

One of the ways to create a positive and engaging relationship is actively making space for the relationship to unfold. As simple as this may sound, investing time in activities that foster positive interactions and being open and genuine goes a long way in promoting a healthy relationship. This time and attention invested is directly reflected in the child’s self-esteem, behaviour and learning outcomes.

“*No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.”* James P. Comer

This quote by American child psychiatrist James P. Comer clearly states that connection must precede learning. Any child who receives nurturance, love and care is in a better place to develop greater self-esteem and confidence that will help them thrive both intellectually and emotionally. A confident child, who feels acknowledged and appreciated, is more likely to follow their intuition, imagination and develop their creativity in the process of learning.

With that, we all know that making time is not easy. The key idea here is not to purely spend large amounts of time with the child, but to create “small pockets of time and space” for the relationship to grow, allowing the child freedom to express themselves in this new shared space you co-create together.

**How relationships influence behaviours**

One of the most important elements for fostering a healthy relationship is maintaining positive communication and responsive interactions. Children tend to respond better to a relationship that feels secure, caring and trusting, which will reflect in the way they cooperate and are motivated in their activities and interactions. Taking the time to build a trusting relationship often results in less need for intervention strategies in the future.

**Showing appreciation**
Expressing genuine interest in what makes someone unique, and an appreciation for that uniqueness sets the ground for a meaningful connection with anyone. With children, this can be done through conversations and activities that help gain an understanding of their interests, background, culture and personality. This decolonising practice validates everyone’s story and journey, and is also an opportunity to discover a connection point. Demonstrating this level of care and dedicating attention considerably reduces the prevalence of challenging behaviours from children.

**The ‘piggy bank’ relationship**

A good way to reflect on how much ‘quality time’ we invest in our relationships is to imagine a ‘piggy bank’, where efforts made to engage in positive interactions and invest time in nurturing a relationship are considered ‘deposits’, whereas actions that have a negative impact on relationships, such as judgment, criticism and a lack of attention are counted as ‘withdrawals’. What is the state of our account? Have we been making more deposits or withdrawals in our relationships? This reflection might help us realise when we must invest more in our actions and behaviours within our relationships.

***Responding to challenging behaviours***
Some children will have a harder time building trust and connection than others due to prior negative interactions. This often means that the task of building a meaningful relationship may take longer, may require more commitment, and demand more consistent “small pockets of time” to be invested in positive interactions, unrelated to the behaviour of the child, consequently creating opportunities for a stronger connection. Whilst spending time with the child, it is important to allow them to be themselves and express whatever it is they are holding within them. It is also helpful for adults to be attentive to their own actions and way in which they interact with each child. This internal feeling may be what psychologists call countertransference, and experiencing it may give us information regarding what and how the child may be feeling through what we ourselves are feeling.

While educators are willing to engage and provide the best care they can to children in their care, there are certain situations and behaviours that challenge all good intentions. Some children may become disruptive, aggressive or uncooperative, causing frustration, anger, and a desire to avoid interacting with the ‘problem child’.

However, children who display challenging behaviours are often the ones who are most in need of trust and a caring relationship with adults. Their behaviour is actually reflective of their own frustration and may be seen as a sign that extra attention is required. While there is no magic solution to create trust and cooperation, proactively investing a few minutes of ‘together time’ each day often results in deeper connections, that may become apparent after a couple of weeks.
Conclusion

Most of this article has concentrated on what children get out of positive relationships with adults. However, it is important to remember that adults also get something valuable out of the time and attention they spend building these meaningful relationships. More than observing how children’s behaviours change, educators see the ripple effect of relationship building. As children learn in the context of caring relationships with adults, they become more skilled at building positive relationships with other children. Providing a child with the chance to have a warm and responsive relationship with you means that you have the pleasure of getting to know the child as well.