

Developmental Relationships and Developmental Interactions

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WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS?

It is well known that children's relationships with adults can be a powerful part of their growth and healing while living in care. They can provide the emotional support and guidance a child needs to manage the difficulties they face and the strength to engage productively in the milieu.

Some relationships with adults have an especially strong influence on a child's development because they support their core developmental and psychological needs. These include:

- feeling connected, accepted, and cared for
- being able to master skills that matter to them, and
- gaining independence

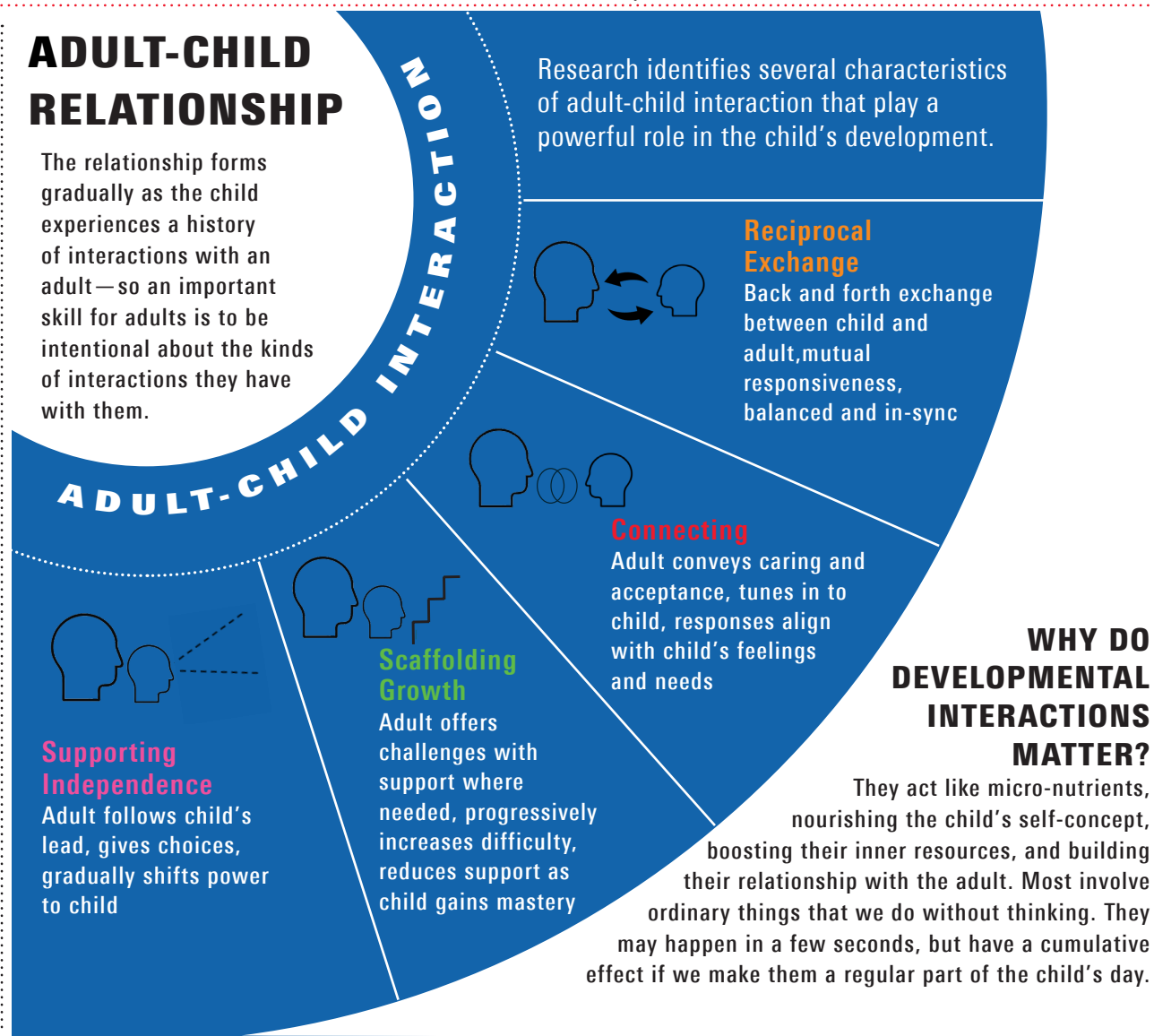
Authors Li and Julian refer to these as Developmental Relationships and consider them to be the active ingredient in many of the services provided to children.

HOW DO DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FORM?

These relationships develop over time through positive interactions, each with the potential to strengthen the child and build the adult-child bond. The diagram describes these interactions.

ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The relationship forms gradually as the child experiences a history of interactions with an adult—so an important skill for adults is to be intentional about the kinds of interactions they have with them.



WHY DO DEVELOPMENTAL INTERACTIONS MATTER?

They act like micro-nutrients, nourishing the child's self-concept, boosting their inner resources, and building their relationship with the adult. Most involve ordinary things that we do without thinking. They may happen in a few seconds, but have a cumulative effect if we make them a regular part of the child's day.

How might purposeful developmental interactions play out in the milieu?

1. Keesha (11 years old) moved to the group home last week. She doesn't want to be here, and hasn't gotten to know the other kids yet. Some of the staff seem nice—especially Kat, who always makes a point to smile and say hi.

Yesterday, Kat noticed Keesha singing her favorite song while doing homework. Today, Keesha hears her playing the same song while prepping dinner.

Connects with child in small ways

2. “Do you want to help me make the sauce?” Kat asks warmly, holding out a spoon.

Keesha has always been interested in cooking, but whenever she tried at home she made a mess and upset the grown-ups.

“Sure,” Keesha says. She’s a little surprised that Kat is showing a special interest in her.

“Here, I’ll show you how to add the ingredients,” Kat says, setting out measuring cups and spoons.

Connects and offers **growth activity**

3. Kat measures in the first ingredient, then reads the next one for Keesha to measure. They go back and forth in a kind of rhythm until Keesha hesitates at $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt. Kat sees that she’s unsure about fractions and coaches her on the next couple of ingredients. Once she sees that Keesha is getting it, she lets her do the rest, giving tips only when needed. At dinner, the other kids comment on the sauce—Kat gives Keesha a quick glance and they both smile.

Involves a **reciprocal exchange** that **scaffolds skills** and builds **connection**

4. Next Saturday morning, most of the kids are on an outing with staff and Kat asks, “Hey Keesha, wanna bake something with me?”

“I’ve never done it before,” Keesha says timidly, but remembers feeling good around Kat. She shrugs, “Ok”.

Kat says, “We can put on your playlist—but I’ve never connected to this speaker. Do you know how?”

“Oh, that’s easy!” Keesha laughs, as she grabs the speaker and shows Kat how to connect.

“What should we make?” Kat asks. Keesha says she used to love having banana bread every Sunday when visiting her brothers. They find a recipe together and Kat points her to the ingredients.

Offers **growth activity**; **Supports independence**; **Connects** child to family memory

5. Keesha feels more confident and Kat asks if she wants to read the ingredients herself. Keesha says, “Sure,” and reads slowly as she adds each one.

Kat sees she doesn’t know how to crack the eggs and offers to demonstrate. When Keesha tries, the egg breaks in her hand and she tenses up, worried about the mess she made.

Kat stays calm “No worries. Watch me again,” smiling. Keesha’s next egg makes it into the bowl, and Kat shows genuine excitement for her. She feels like she matters to Kat!

Later, they sing together as they clean up and Keesha starts to feel more connected with her. When the kids return, Keesha feels proud to offer everyone a slice of her creation.

Progresses to higher level **skills**; **Supports independence**; **Strengthens connections**

6. Keesha stays in the group home for 8 months and continues helping out in the kitchen. When she goes through hard times, Kat is consistently there for her, helping her learn ways to cope and always staying respectful and non-judgmental. She starts to see that other staff care for her as well, and she feels that her contributions are valued.

Keesha arrives at her next placement with a more positive sense of who she is. Keesha expects the adults might be genuinely interested in her and is more open to trusting and connecting with them. Her first request to her new staff: “Could I please help with the cooking?”

Developmental interactions improve self-concept and open child to other adults.

QuickTRIPs are translations of RCCP research for practitioners.

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