

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

The Power of Secure Relationships in Supporting Development

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In *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Maria Montessori says, “Love is more than the electricity which lightens our darkness, more than the etheric waves that transmit our voices across space, more than any of the energies that man has discovered and learned to use. Of all things, love is the most potent.” [1]

Humans are social beings. Meaningful relationships and feelings of connectedness shape our experiences, influence our feelings about ourselves, and impact our overall sense of belonging, mental well-being, and joy. For the youngest children, trusting relationships provide security, influence how their brains are wired, how they cope with stress, and how they learn. This article will explore the effects of secure relationships on early childhood learning and how these important connections impact every aspect of development.

Dr. Maria Montessori emphasised the role of the prepared environment in the child’s process of self-construction and adaptation. From all of the experiences in the environment, the child builds the architecture of their brain and develops their personality. This environment includes both physical and psychological aspects. Montessori saw the adult’s role as a guide and support, someone who could observe and understand the child’s needs and then prepare an environment to meet them. The relationship between the child and adult would be one of mutual respect and warmth. The psychological, or human, environment must be as intentionally and thoughtfully prepared as the physical space.

A warm, nurturing environment, where children feel safe and fully accepted, is imperative for optimal development. When secure relationships are prioritised, children will thrive. Children must feel safe and loved to learn and reach their fullest potential.

When the human environment meets children’s fundamental psychological and relational needs, they can fully benefit from their interactions in the physical environment and their social experiences there. Let’s look at how nurturing relationships affect the way the brain wires and how these connections support cognitive development and social and emotional learning. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, human connection and interaction are the “active ingredients” in a child’s environment. They are the only aspects of the environment that are responsive and adaptable, changing based on the child’s cues, communication, states of mind, and their interests and needs in the moment. [2]

Relationships give the child valuable feedback about the world in which they live, shaping the child's understanding and perception of their place in it. Experts in child development and neuroscience emphasise the importance of "serve-and-return" interactions between a child and their caregivers. [3] Through back-and-forth interactions, the child's brain creates new meaning, deepens understanding, and solidifies neural pathways. Serve-and-return interactions are crucial from the moment of birth and continue to play a vital role throughout early childhood. Enjoyable, responsive relationships with caregivers also give children important information about themselves, helping to form their sense of identity. Through meaningful human connection, children receive the message that who they are, and what they do, think, and say are important.

When children have secure relationships with their parents and caregivers, they develop healthy stress response systems, which help them navigate challenges and return to a state that is open and receptive to learning. The human brain constantly gains knowledge about the world through the senses, scanning for potential threats, and responding to internal bodily needs. Stable relationships provide the sturdy framework from which cognition can grow. The nervous system and brain state dictate what the person must focus on. If we detect safety, we are open and receptive to learning. If we detect a threat, we go into survival mode and a protective state of mind and body. Positive relationships provide the safety that the brain and nervous system need to feel regulated and be able to learn and grow optimally. [4] Children with predictable, stable relationships are free to explore, discover new things, and grow in their independence.

Young children are in the process of developing an understanding of their emotions and the emotions of others. Through close, trusting relationships, children have a model of how to express and move through instances of emotion. Emotional regulation is not something we learn in isolation. When sent to a "calm down" space, put in a time-out, or asked to self-regulate alone, children learn to stuff or hide their feelings to gain the acceptance of others. For healthy emotional development to unfold, children need connection and empathy to know that their emotions are normal, acceptable, and part of being human. Through relationships, children learn how to identify, express, and process any emotions that arise. Interactions with trusted adults give meaning to the child's new and sometimes overwhelming emotional experiences. To cultivate self-regulation, children must experience repeated co-regulation with calm, nurturing adults.

The human environment and all the relationships a child has shape their social development. Through their relationships, children learn what it means to be human in their particular family, time, place, and culture. They will learn how people communicate, how love is demonstrated, how we help one another, and how to work through challenges. Dr. Bruce Perry put it simply in his book *What Happened to You* when he said that how we were loved at the beginning of our lives is how we will love others. [5]

The importance of the human environment and the relationships a child forms in the first years of life cannot be overstated. Whether you are a parent, caregiver, or Montessori guide, I encourage you to prioritise connection, social-emotional well-being, and warm, responsive care. Here are a few ways to build secure relationships with children:

- Engage in serve-and-return interactions often
- Share enjoyment– have fun together, delight in the children, and be attentive to their interests
- Validate children’s emotions and experiences
- Practice co-regulation in challenging moments
- Respond warmly to children’s bids for affection

Children’s social interactions are just as important as the physical materials they explore. The quality of our human connections directly affects the quality of our lives. For the youngest children, the relationships they form have a lifelong impact on how their brains are wired, their overall well-being, and their capacity to learn. Maya Angelou says it beautifully, “I have learned that people will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

REFERENCES

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- [5] Winfrey, O., & Perry, B. D. (2021). *What happened to you?: Conversations on trauma, resilience, and healing*. Flatiron Books.

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Emily grew up in the Coast Range of Oregon and got a BA in Psychology and Sociology from George Fox University. After college, she served as an Americorps volunteer with the “I Have a Dream Foundation” in Forest Grove, OR. She holds a Master’s Degree in Montessori Education from Loyola College in Maryland, and AMI diplomas at the 0–3 and 3–6 levels.

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