

# Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners



## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DAP STATEMENT

The foundation for the learning community is consistent, positive, caring relationships between educators and other adults and children, among children, among educators and colleagues, and between educators and families. Each member of the learning community is valued for what they bring to the community; all members are supported to consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning.

Vera, 32 months, begins to chase Demetri (25 months) while yelling, “Demetri, Demetri!” her arms spread wide toward him. As Demetri laughs and runs away, Brian (30 months) and Peter (33 months) run after him. When Demetri drops to the floor, Brian and Peter drop down on their backs and roll around too.

Then Demetri runs to the sofa, with Brian following. When he catches up, Brian puts his arms around Demetri and leans on him. (Adapted from Recchia & Dvorakova 2018, 43)

A caring, equitable community is reflected in the welcoming spirit and warm relationships within your early childhood program. Infants and toddlers respond to the joy reflected in their educators' faces during greetings and activities. They see families and educators together celebrating their efforts and accomplishments. They learn about themselves and develop confidence in themselves in the context of the close connections between you and families. They are also beginning to build relationships among themselves, which can flourish amid the caring and safe social and play experiences you provide. These early experiences are very influential in the lives of infants and toddlers because they develop ideas about themselves and grasp their significance to others through genuine and consistent relationships.

Educators make teaching personal—getting to know each child's family, learning about their unique cultural and linguistic experiences, and using these as assets for planning and supporting children's learning. They communicate with families and colleagues and explore the community to understand the contexts of each child and to foster each child's enjoyment of and engagement in learning. Remaining attuned to daily patterns and changes in development enables teachers to adapt the environment and their support to align with the strengths and needs of each child, fostering their exploration and growth.

Teachers also provide safety, security, and emotional support to infants and toddlers through proactive and responsive caring routines. As you engage with children in these routines, listen to and acknowledge their feelings, using words as well as nonverbal means to reflect what the children are communicating. Recognize signs of stress and work closely with families to be sure children are psychologically and physically safe. Include families' home languages, cultures, and ways of interacting with their children in the setting to help make it feel familiar and safe, encouraging children to explore and play. Provide frequent opportunities for infants' and toddlers' self-directed play; active, physical movement; and joyful exploration as part of the daily schedule. Don't forget outdoor experiences! They offer interaction with the natural world to delight young children and engage their curiosity and interest.

A caring, equitable community is characterized by reflective, inclusive practices. Educators take care to reflect on their own behaviors and the ways in which these may affect children's developing sense of personal identity, self-agency, and self-worth, knowing that implicit biases can interfere with children's well-being and learning. Children with and without disabilities feel that they are valued when you guide activities and routines with gentleness, encouragement, and respect and build on their contributions and assets through strengths-based teaching. In such an environment, children learn *from* and *with* each other.

The chapters in Part 1 showcase authors who create spaces where children and families experience safety, equity, and inclusion. Like you, these teachers hold deep

respect for the patterns of life, routines, and practices of families, and they explore ways they can support each child's security and sense of belonging.

## READ AND REFLECT

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As you read the chapters in this section, consider and evaluate your own classroom practices using these reflection questions.

“Caring Relationships: The Heart of Early Brain Development” presents the positive impact of caregivers’ responsiveness and consistency on the brain development of infants and toddlers. Understanding this, teachers can identify and use strategies that are in harmony with the developing brain and build a solid foundation for learning. **Consider:** How do the caring routines you use impact a child’s developing sense of self? How do your interactions during play, routines, and meals offer opportunities for language development and learning?

“Care and Equity in Toddler Classrooms: Practices for Creating, Sustaining, and Empowering Community” illustrates ways teachers can facilitate collaborative spaces where families are full partners in contributing to joyful learning in a toddler classroom. **Consider:** In what ways does your program invite families to participate in daily program life? How do you include families who are not able to be physically present in the program? How do you show appreciation for the contributions that families make to the program?

“Cultivating Positive Relationships and Physical Environments to Support Emotional Well-Being” illustrates how infant and toddler development is impacted by cultural, social and emotional, and physical contexts. Learning about children’s unique family experiences enables you to respond to children’s strengths, assets, and needs. **Consider:** How do you connect with families so that they feel safe sharing their personal experiences? What approaches do you use with children and families who are currently experiencing loss, grief, and other traumatic experiences? What community resources are available for you and families to explore together?

“The First Step for Addressing Bias in Infant and Toddler Programs” invites you to discover insights about the roots of bias and find strategies for increasing sensitivity, compassion, and understanding of yourself and others. Through shared reflection, you can design experiences that promote a sense of belonging and of being valued for each member. **Consider:** Think about the ideas you hold about early caregiving routines and interactions. What practices do you think are important? How might

your ideas differ from those of the families in your program? How can you challenge yourself and think about situations in new ways as you consider what is in children’s best interests?

## NEXT STEPS

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You’ll find many ideas and strategies in these chapters that you can integrate into your work to support children and their families. As you read, remember that the caring community you are creating is special and unique to your setting. Then consider the following suggestions as you plan next steps.

1. Identify at least two practices you learn from these chapters that may be most effective with the infants and toddlers you teach. Try them out and share your observations with a colleague.
2. Talk with a coach or colleague about ways to create a more inclusive, culturally responsive, personally safe, and encouraging community for those you work with. What is already working well? In what areas would you like to make changes, and how would these impact your practice? Identify two specific changes you could make and implement them.
3. Identify and carry out a new strategy to connect with families and learn about their stories and experiences. Note the ways listening to families challenges your own thinking. How does learning about the contexts and strengths of families help you become more intentional in creating culturally responsive experiences for children?

References for the chapters in this part can be accessed online at [NAEYC.org/books/focus-infants-toddlers](http://NAEYC.org/books/focus-infants-toddlers).