

# A First Look at Powerful Interactions



*Interactions* are the exchanges in words and gestures that you have with others—in particular, the exchanges that you as a teacher have with young children.

Each day and throughout the day, you have dozens of interactions with children, in groups and one-on-one. There are times when you make comments, ask questions, provide information, or give instructions. At other times, you might acknowledge a child’s effort, make requests, or correct something a child says. You may give hugs or pats on the back. You likely smile, frown, point, or wave. You interact when you greet children in the morning or say good-bye at the end of the day, during whole group experiences and small group activities, and as children work and play, both inside and outdoors. Even during transitions and daily routines you are interacting with children.

A growing body of professional knowledge “underscores the complex and critical ways in which early childhood educators promote early learning through their relationships—with children, families, and colleagues” (NAEYC 2019, 3). Research affirms that when you use your interactions intentionally to engage children, it makes a difference in what they learn

about themselves, others, and the world (Hamre et al. 2014). This means that every one of your interactions holds the potential to make a positive impact on how children feel about themselves and about learning, as well as on what and how they learn.

Let's look at a few examples of the kinds of interactions that have a positive impact on children. Do you see yourself in any of these examples?

- › Wilma greets Lilah and her grandfather in the morning, and with a smile on her face says, "Good morning, Lilah. We've been waiting for you. Come help Yael and me open this pomegranate so we can all see how it looks inside." From her teacher, Lilah gets the message that she is an important and special person. She also hears the name of a new fruit that is fun to say.
- › Robert asks 6-month-old Baili, "Are you ready for me to pick you up so we can change that wet diaper?" He waits for her to look at him and hold out her arms before reaching down. From this conversation, Baili learns about the give-and-take of communicating with another person. She also learns she can get her "I'm ready now" message across and that Robert listens to her.
- › Because 3-year-old Ryo's home language is Japanese, Ms. Jackson greets him in Japanese (*ohayō*). Later that day, Ms. Jackson sits beside Ryo on the couch in her family child care home. He is beginning to learn a few words in English, so she carefully listens to what he tells her about his picture of the fire engine, and she writes his words along the bottom edge of his drawing. From Ms. Jackson, Ryo is learning that his home language is respected, that the words he says can be written down, and that his ideas are valuable enough to be recorded.
- › Ms. Nahid joins 5-year-old Christopher at the easel. After watching for a few minutes as he adds some details, she moves closer to share in his delight about the shaggy dog he added to his painting. From this interaction, Christopher is experiencing his teacher's shared interest and joy in his work.

Unfortunately, not all interactions children have with their teachers are so productive or positive. Some interactions send unintended messages that undermine children's confidence, take away the joy of exploration, and interfere with learning. Do you see yourself in any of these examples?

- › When 2-year-old Fiona continually hears from her teacher "Don't run," "No touching," and "Shhh," she gets the message that her excitement, curiosity, and language are not welcome.
- › Running late, Mr. Bandile dismisses 5-year-old Carla's question about bugs with a brusque, "Give me a minute!" From their quick exchange, Carla may feel disrespected and that her interests are not valued. She may become hesitant to ask questions. Later during choice time, she sits quietly beside Damon at the computer rather than choosing her favorite area, the science center.
- › Each day as 4-year-old Johannah waits for her turn to use the bathroom, her teacher tells her, "Just stand there in line quietly." Johannah is learning that school is boring and that one way to make it more interesting is to fool around or start a fight.

- › Ms. Lourdes sits beside 3-year-old Fareed, who has just made a pattern using large blue bears and small orange bears. Ms. Lourdes says, “What colors are the bears in your pattern?” Fareed, who knows all his colors, responds blue and red with a smile and a sparkle in his eyes. As Ms. Lourdes quizzes him in several different ways to get him to say *orange*, Fareed’s delight with his pattern fades, his smile disappears, and finally he pushes his chair away from the table.

Positive or negative, the quality and intentionality of your interactions with children matter. This is where Powerful Interactions come into play.

## What Is a “Powerful Interaction”?

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Teachers and children interact with each other all day long. Let’s call these “everyday” interactions. In the typical classroom, most everyday interactions are perfectly fine—warm, caring, and encouraging (NAEYC 2018). Sometimes they happen spontaneously, sometimes in a rush, often with little thought about a purpose. Children may or may not learn from them. Sometimes children learn what the teacher intends to teach, but other times they learn unintended lessons.

When we as teachers can’t form secure and trusting bonds with the children in our classrooms or programs, the result may be a significant negative impact on those children’s development, especially the ability to form healthy relationships. Most importantly, our influence during early childhood can impact children’s trajectories going forward, academically and in life. All of this emanates from the quality of our relationships. (Edge 2019, 15)

Not every interaction a teacher has with children can be—or even needs to be—an interaction that promotes their learning. But we might expect that many would have learning as the goal. Research finds that interactions in which teachers intentionally promote learning are few and far between (Pianta 2010; Pianta, Downer, & Hamre 2016; Zero to Three 2017).

At the other end of the continuum from everyday interactions are what we call “Powerful Interactions”—intentional, purposeful, culturally responsive exchanges between a teacher and a child that can have a significant and highly positive impact on learning. In a Powerful Interaction, the teacher intentionally connects with a particular child in order to extend that child’s learning.

You launch a Powerful Interaction when you make a conscious decision to say or do something that conveys to the child, “I notice you, I’m interested in you, and I want to know you better.” This moment of personal connection builds upon the trust and security that exists between the two of you. Within a trusting and secure relationship, a child is more open to learning from the guidance and instruction you offer (NAEYC 2019). Early childhood educators “understand and value each child as an individual with unique developmental variations, experiences, strengths, interests, abilities, challenges, and approaches to learning, and with the capacity to make choices” (NAEYC 2020, 12).

The following vignette illustrates preschool teacher Ms. Pat having a Powerful Interaction with 3-year-old Jo-Jo.

Ms. Pat quickly checks the classroom to see how everyone is doing. Glancing over at the sand table, she sees Jo-Jo playing with a dump truck. *Things are pretty calm here, she thinks. The morning has gone smoothly so far. Jo-Jo is at the sand table by himself. This would be a good time to work one-on-one for a few minutes with Jo-Jo.*

**Ms. Pat:** *(Goes to the sand table and kneels down to connect with Jo-Jo.)* Jo-Jo, I see you playing with the dump truck again. You play with this truck a lot. And I see you're using the shovel to fill it up with sand.

**Jo-Jo:** *(Looks up at Ms. Pat and smiles. He puts the shovel down and pushes the truck toward her.)*

Ms. Pat smiles back and thinks to herself, *I've made a good connection. How can I use it to extend Jo-Jo's learning? I wonder if he can explain how dump trucks work.*

**Ms. Pat:** You know so much about trucks, Jo-Jo. I saw a dump truck yesterday, and I have a question for you. Can you teach me how the dump truck works?

**Jo-Jo:** *(Points to the lever on the side of the truck.)*

*He does know how dump trucks work, but he didn't use the word lever, notes Ms. Pat. I'll teach him that word.*

**Ms. Pat:** Oh, I see! To dump the sand, you push the lever.

**Jo-Jo:** Push a lever. *(Takes her hand and puts it on the lever. They push down together and the sand dumps out. They giggle.)* Push! . . . Push more!

Together, Jo-Jo and Ms. Pat begin filling up the truck again.



# How Do You Turn an Everyday Interaction into a Powerful Interaction?

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In just a few minutes, Ms. Pat had a Powerful Interaction with Jo-Jo. It was a Powerful Interaction because she was deliberate about noticing the opportunity and preparing for the exchange (NAEYC 2018). She connected with Jo-Jo to activate and deepen her relationship with him by sharing his interest in trucks, and she intentionally extended Jo-Jo's learning by introducing a new and interesting word. We'll check in with Ms. Pat again at the end of this book to learn more about her reflections after a day of engaging in Powerful Interactions with the children in her classroom.

Like Ms. Pat, you can transform an everyday interaction into a Powerful Interaction using three steps. Each step is overviewed across the next couple pages while we observe Mr. Dave, a preschool teacher, interacting with one of the children in his class, Marcus.

## Step One: Be Present

When you are present, you are in the moment and self-aware, and therefore you can be more open to the interesting and significant things that children do. By physically and mentally slowing down for just a few moments, you can pay better attention. This frame of mind allows you to be intentional; that is, before you act, to tune in to what a child is doing at that moment, how you are feeling, and what you want to accomplish. This step (Be Present) is a time to reflect on your beliefs, values, and possible biases that shape how you pay attention to each child. Being intentional in this way means you think about what to say and do in the interaction to be most effective as a teacher for that child.



**Because Mr. Dave is alert to what all the children are doing, he observes Marcus working with a puzzle. He takes a second to collect his thoughts before joining Marcus for a Powerful Interaction.**

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## Step Two: Connect

You acknowledge and validate children by letting them know you see them, are interested in them, know who they are, and want to spend time with them (NAEYC 2019). You recognize “positive, caring, supportive relationships and interactions as the foundation of early childhood educators’ work with young children” (NAEYC 2020, 10). Connecting in this way awakens the sense of trust and security that previous positive interactions between you and the child are helping to develop. As your relationships with children grow deeper, children feel more confident and focused, and they are more open to learning from you.

Positive relationships lay the foundation for children’s exploration and learning (NAEYC 2018). They also enhance the likelihood of children’s engagement and achievement in school (Center on the Developing Child 2016; Gallagher & Mayer 2008).

## Step Three: Extend Learning

When you extend a child’s knowledge and understanding hand-in-hand with nurturing a positive relationship with that child, you create the perfect moment for you to teach and the child to learn (McNally & Slutsky 2017; NIEER 2017). During the few minutes of a Powerful Interaction, children are open to you adding to their knowledge, encouraging them to try new things and think in new ways, modeling language, introducing interesting new vocabulary, and other learning possibilities.



The way Marcus looks up to meet Mr. Dave’s eyes is evidence that they have connected and are building on an already positive relationship. Mr. Dave reinforces that relationship by joining Marcus at the table, showing interest in his work on the puzzle.

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To extend Marcus’ learning, Mr. Dave decides to use mirror talk to describe what he is doing: “I notice you’re using the strategy of starting with the corner pieces.” He introduces Marcus to a new vocabulary word, *strategy*.

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## A Cumulative Effect

Often when we think about steps in a process, we think about them coming sequentially: first, then second, then third. Instead, these three Powerful Interaction steps are cumulative—they build on one another. You begin with Step One by stopping for a moment to be present. In this inward frame of mind, you can decide to add Step Two, choosing what to say and do to connect with the child. Staying present and connected, you then add Step Three, as you select and apply a teaching strategy to extend the child’s learning. Each of the three steps is an effective way to engage children and valuable in and of itself. When combined, they form a Powerful Interaction.

In this book, we describe the three steps separately and in detail to help you understand the importance of each one. Once you have practiced and are more comfortable having Powerful Interactions with children, each step will flow naturally from the previous one. Each would be visible as separate from the others only if you were able to watch an instant replay of yourself in slow motion. (In fact, we’ll return to this useful idea of instant replay in the last chapter, “You Make the Difference!”)

In real life, as a Powerful Interaction unfolds, the three steps are apt to happen very quickly. The whole of Ms. Pat’s Powerful Interaction with Jo-Jo or Mr. Dave’s with Marcus, for example, might have lasted just two or three minutes.

## What’s in It for You?

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Clearly, Powerful Interactions deliver wonderful benefits for children. You’ll find that children thrive from having deeper relationships with you. Their confidence will build, their engagement and motivation will increase, and as a result, they’ll become more successful learners.

We trust, too, that you will come to see the positive effects Powerful Interactions can have on you! Transforming just some of your everyday interactions with children into Powerful Interactions will make your teaching more effective and your work more rewarding. Here are some benefits to look forward to:

- › **Your interactions with children will become more intentional.** Practicing the three steps of Powerful Interactions (Be Present, Connect, Extend Learning) helps you make more intentional decisions about what to say and do. In a Powerful Interaction, you are thoughtful and alert, paying attention to yourself, your emotions, your unconscious biases and assumptions, your actions, and your words. You draw upon your knowledge of individual children, how children typically develop, and how children uniquely develop as a function of their culture, language, racial identity, gender, abilities and disabilities, economic class, and other factors. You learn to respond deliberately and reflectively, rather than react. Thus, you can more effectively support children’s learning because you are able to anticipate your impact on the child and the child’s impact on you (NAEYC 2019, 2020).

“ Since you introduced me to Powerful Interactions, my assistant and I find that we are teaching with intent rather than on autopilot. The result is that we have a greater understanding of each individual child’s development and can respond in ways that are appropriate for that child.

—Corrine, preschool teacher

- › **Your instruction will become more individualized.** In a Powerful Interaction, you are focused on that child. You are considering what you know about that child’s culture and family while you’re observing what the child is doing, and you’re making instructional decisions that fit the child’s needs right in that moment. As the Powerful Interaction evolves, you can see whether your guidance is effective; if not, you can immediately and accordingly adjust—use a different word, offer a new challenge, help the child make a link, or offer a different material. You’re individualizing instruction in a highly effective way.

[Intentional teachers] have a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning. (Epstein 2014, 7)

- › **The climate in your classroom will improve.** Through Powerful Interactions, your relationships with children grow stronger. You strengthen positive peer relationships by drawing attention to the needs, experiences, and emotions of peers and by actively scaffolding and providing support during play (Acar, Hong, & Wu 2017; Shim & Lim 2019). In this environment, children are calmer, behavior problems are reduced, and more time can be devoted to learning (Hamre et al. 2014; NAEYC 2018; Vick Whittaker & Jones Harden 2010).



“ My classroom is more relaxed and children are competing less for my attention. My interactions with them seem to satisfy them more now because I’m so much more attentive when I’m with them. I’m really talking with them rather than just giving them the “good jobs.”

—Darice, preschool teacher

- › **Your partnerships with families will grow.** Powerful Interactions allow you to observe children making discoveries and practicing new skills. These observations, in turn, enhance how you “embrace the primary role of families in children’s development and learning” (NAEYC 2019, 8). As you share wonderful, individualized, specific information



and stories with family members, you may hear their stories of children's interests and skills from home and understand more about the children's families' hopes and expectations for their children. This sharing may help you work together more effectively (NAEYC 2018).

“ “ I'm learning to be more curious with families. I'm spending more time asking questions and listening and less time telling them what I think they need to do. Relationships with families are growing more trusting, and I can feel more of a back and forth with them.

—Ms. Eva, Early Head Start toddler teacher

› **Your teaching practice will grow richer and become more enjoyable.**

Powerful Interactions energize you and your teaching. As you learn to quiet the mental static that keeps you from being present (explored further in the next chapter), you give yourself the gift of truly seeing and being with a child. As children gradually reveal their individual strengths, interests, and personalities to you, your Powerful Interactions with them are moments to remember. Over time, as you develop the Powerful Interactions habit, these moments of connection and effective teaching, and the feelings of joy and pride they bring, are more and more frequent.

“ “ When I consciously knew that my goal was to have Powerful Interactions with just four children each day, I could relax and not feel rushed. My first happened during Morning Centers, and I found myself enjoying—I mean *really* enjoying—[spending one-on-one time with] that child. I felt that same excitement when interacting with the others that day, and I ended up giving hugs. I think the children see my joy and that I truly value our conversations, and they seem to open up and offer more than before. . . . I look forward to each day and can't wait to sit down to talk with children to see what I can learn from them and about them.

—Darlene, preschool teacher

As you explore this book, you'll find all the information you need to begin transforming everyday interactions with children into Powerful Interactions. You'll discover strategies you can use to be present, connect, and extend children's learning. Some may seem familiar and reinforce what you're already doing; some strategies will be new and can take your teaching in exciting new directions.

Within these pages you'll also read many stories of teachers already using Powerful Interactions to individualize their instruction to each child's unique strengths, interests, needs, and abilities. Like those educators, you'll soon realize that using Powerful Interactions helps you make a positive difference in the lives of children and their families, which, in turn, will make a positive difference in your life as a teacher.

We think you'll enjoy the process!