

~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND RAPPORT

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Rapport is the foundation for a productive and meaningful learning experience—one that makes participants receptive to all the wonderful ideas and information you are so eager to share.

~ Paula Jorde Bloom ~

INTRODUCTION

Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs hinges on building and sustaining positive relationships with the young children enrolled there. Effective teachers and caregivers understand the power of meaningful relationships on children's growth and learning, on every child's success in the program, and on each child's self-worth and feeling of belonging to the group.

While positive relationships are frequently acknowledged as important in adult professional development experiences as well, emphasis on building relationships has often been neglected or fallen low on the list of instructional priorities. Currently, there is a growing movement to promote relationship-based approaches to teaching and learning. This movement is based on evidence that "instructor rapport consistently predict[s] participation, affective learning, and cognitive learning" (Communication Education, 2010).

Whether you are training providers you know well or new acquaintances, building meaningful and reciprocal relationships improves the likelihood of achieving your learning outcomes. A number of effective adult learning principles promote relationship building as a natural outcome of their implementation. However, it can be beneficial to look at strategies for building positive relationships and rapport on their own merits. Effective relationship-building strategies include:

- *Limit group size*
- *Greet participants*
- *Introduce yourself*
- *Learn names*
- *Promote transparency*
- *Listen attentively*
- *Make eye contact*
- *Provide feedback*
- *Involve participants in logistics*
- *Acknowledge learning and growth*
- *Do not apologize too much*

"If you can't establish a positive connection with people—rapport—then you won't carry them with you, get them to cooperate, or engage them."
~ Alan Matthews

LIMIT GROUP SIZE

It's not surprising that the number of participants in the learning experience affects your ability to build and maintain meaningful connections. Current research indicates that 15 participants or less is optimal for achieving positive growth and learning in educational experiences based on the positive effect of cultivating relationships.

It seems obvious that rapport is more easily achieved in small groups; however, you have probably felt a sense of connectedness even in a very large group ac-

tivity, such as a keynote address. What makes the difference? Here are a few strategies that help build connections in any size group:

- Have people stand up or raise their hands to be recognized for commonalities connected to the topic. For example, the type of program they work in or their teaching role or their years of experience teaching, etc.
- Ask a question or two that elicit a group response based on the groups' common experience, such as "who remembers something a child said to you today that made you smile?" or "imagine yourself at circle or group time and the kids are engaged and participating. How does that feel?" Be sure your question gets participants thinking about ideas related to the planned topic.
- Laughing, singing, or anything done in unison introduces a sense of community and connectedness. So tell that humorous story, show that clever youtube video, or display a relevant cartoon or comic strip like the one below!



DAYCARE DRAMA

GREET PARTICIPANTS

A comfortable, welcoming physical environment is essential, but there are also specific ways you personally can help participants feel welcome. Frequent interaction with individual learners can be planned for and sought after. A few ways to do this include:

- Greet participants personally—say "welcome" and smile at each participant as you give them the handouts or as they enter the room. Be friendly; whenever possible, ask participants about themselves or their day.
- Greet participants environmentally—post an attractive PowerPoint slide that includes the name of the session, your name, and a welcome message. Or place a welcoming note or handout at each seat for participants to read as they get settled.

"Try to relate to [participants] as individuals and think about what they need to make the experience an enjoyable and productive one. Taking time before the session to get to know participants one-on-one reduces stress and helps you build audience support." ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Take time at the beginning of the session to repeat your name and introduce yourself. Here are a few guidelines to get you started:

- Be brief, yet warm and friendly.
- Briefly explain experience you likely have in common with participants.
- Share your passion for the topic and the early childhood field as you describe your expertise and related background.
- Confess inadequacies only in partnership with how you have put in the time and effort to compensate for them.

"You can either posture yourself as an expert, thus creating social distance from your participants, or as a partner in learning who is there to facilitate mutual inquiry." ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

LEARN NAMES

Learning names builds rapport and demonstrates interest in participants as individuals. Addressing participants by name helps each one know you value him or her as a person as well as his or her participation.

- Name tags—printed labels are an easy way to focus on participants' names. You may wish to include the program they represent or their role or some other pertinent professional detail on the nametag, depending on the topic. Be sure to use bold, visible letters for the first name.
- Name tents—you can make name tents for participants to put on the table in front of their place or participants can make (and decorate) their own as an activity before or during the session. Some trainers use name tents to assess participants' state of being at times during the session. For example, ask participants to write their names on one side of the table tent, and on the other side (or under the name), ask them to describe themselves in one or two words using the first letter of their name—or not. Or ask them to describe how they are feeling or their level of knowledge of the topic, etc.

"They are also more apt to feel like a member of a learning community if they are known by name and know others by name." ~ TEP (Teaching Effectiveness Program, University of Oregon)

PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY

"Transparency means being able to see through something, especially when light is shone through an object. Do we make time to shed as much "light" on our training plans, our needs analyses, and desired outcomes with required leaders and learners? Are we involving everyone who can make a performance difference with the application of the learning?" (Roy Saunderson)

You promote transparency, build a sense of security, and ensure that participants encounter few, if any, surprises during training when you:

- Accurately and clearly describe the session in recruitment materials.

- Preview the session agenda and define anticipated outcomes at the beginning of the session.
- Outline not only the outcomes for learning but also your expectations for participation. For example, 1) set ground rules; and 2) tell participants in advance when you have planned a small group activity or working with someone new in a partner activity. It is also helpful to briefly explain why you are asking them to participate in this type of activity and how it benefits learning.
- Connect what they are learning to their requests, needs assessment, quality practice, and/or state or system requirements.

"When transparency is fully embraced in the training arena, learners become better learners and trainers become better trainers." ~ R. Saunderson

LISTEN ATTENTIVELY

Take advantage of every opportunity to truly listen to what participants say before, during, and after the session. Pay attention with your whole body. Resist the temptation to start talking as soon as a participant stops commenting.

Listen for the feelings being expressed as well as what is being said. Ask "tell me more" when a participant's comment would benefit from further clarification or an example. A few other simple strategies that indicate you are listening include:

- Leave the front of the room and move toward the speaker; offer your whole attention.
- Stand at different points in the room while you are speaking. Use a remote control for PowerPoint presentations so you can stand closer to the audience.
- Use the power of touch to connect with individual participants. Consider shaking hands or patting someone on the shoulder/back as acknowledgment of their contribution.
- Join and observe group activities after asking permission. Give warning at the beginning of the activity that you will be coming around, not to see how they are doing or whether they are on

task, but to hear their ideas and thought process first-hand.

MAKE EYE CONTACT

Research shows a strong link between the amount of eye contact people receive and their degree of participation in group communication--in the number of turns taken in a group conversation, for example. In addition, eye contact conveys that you are interested in what participants are saying. Infrequent eye contact conveys you are disinterested and detached.

Early childhood teachers are expected to observe the children in their care and adjust activities accordingly. Early childhood trainers benefit from observing participants in active learning experiences, and then using a variety of methods to connect nonverbally, including establishing eye contact with individual participants from time to time.

"Eye contact is essential for establishing communication channels and building rapport."

~ Paula Jorde Bloom

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Instructor feedback promotes optimal skill development and learning. Feedback is especially beneficial when it addresses participants' active participation in the learning process as well as their growth and increased capacity. Verbal or written feedback can be given in numerous ways:

- Offer encouraging words specific to session outcomes in private, quiet, moments during group activities or a break.
- Be specific; comments such as "I like what you are doing" or "good job" are not by themselves meaningful feedback. They give the person receiving feedback no measure to apply to future performance, for better or worse. If you are in the habit of giving this type of feedback, please visit www.mtecp.org and read Training Solutions - Issue #13: Using Encouragement with Training Participants (October 2006).

- Use post-it notes briefly describing specific accomplishments or ways to improve. Remember that people need to know what they did that was effective as well as what needs improvement.
- Use guided activities that include immediate feedback. For example, 1) teach a process, strategy, or technique; 2) give participants a brief case study, story, or show a video that requires using the technique; 3) ask participants to record their responses to the story using the process or technique or have them actually practice the newly learned skill; and 4) provide immediate feedback by providing a checklist participants can use to assess their application of the strategy or written responses to the case study that correctly or appropriately use the process.
- Use activities that require individuals to give helpful feedback to one another. A checklist can help peers give productive input here, too.
- Help participants recognize personal growth and learning through a KWL chart, pre-post evaluation, self-assessment, etc.

Although not as effective as individual feedback, you enhance rapport and promote collaborative learning when you express appreciation to the group as a whole as well. Let them know you sincerely appreciate their participation, their staying on task, their willingness to work with new people or try an experiment, etc.

INVOLVE PARTICIPANTS IN LOGISTICS

When you are intentional about forming positive relationships and creating a learning community where everyone is growing together, you look for meaningful ways to involve participants in the process of learning. For example, use helpers to a) gather materials, b) write on a flip chart during large group processing or brainstorming, c) pass out handouts, etc.

Think about making paper snowmen with young children; when the teacher cuts out pieces and parts to "get ready for the project," the teacher practices cutting skills she likely already has and prevents the children from practicing emerging skills they are trying to learn and develop! Don't do everything yourself; you promote a sense of community when you involve

learners in completing tasks necessary to the success of the experience.

ACKNOWLEDGE LEARNING AND GROWTH

Promote a feeling of success and engender enthusiasm for professional development by pointing out what has been accomplished. Ways to do this include:

- Post completed flip charts and attractively display products that groups create; make the room look like creativity and active learning have taken place. (Sounds like something you want them to do with the children, doesn't it?)
- After a particularly rich discussion, point out the obvious: "there is a lot of learning going on in this group!"
- Take pictures of active learning activities and post online, on the program's bulletin board, or on a computer slide show for participants to see at the next training (or after this one).
- Make the last activity a celebration of growth and learning by asking the group to tell each other what they learned during the session.

Mistakes to Avoid as a Trainer #7—"Neglecting to tell participants WIIFM (what's in it for me?)"
~ Elaine Biech

DO NOT APOLOGIZE TOO MUCH

While admitting mistakes and sharing challenges is admirable, frequent reference to your inadequacies or lack of preparation inhibits rapport. In fact, focusing too much on yourself (and perhaps how inexperienced you are at training adults) jeopardizes the establishment of reciprocal relationships. Paula Jorde Bloom expresses it well: "Apologies undermine your attempts to build rapport because they make the audience feel uncomfortable for you . . . and undermines your credibility as a speaker."

CONCLUSION

Activities that result in a process and/or product where satisfaction comes from working together as a

group tend to build positive relationships and a sense of group identity in and of themselves. Even moving chairs and tables around to accommodate watching the video serves to create a group bond. Of course, completing a physical activity together is only one of the many ways trainers can use to build connection and positive relationships with participants in training.

What can be the far-reaching effect of your efforts to implement relationship-based training events? There is no strategy on this list that could not also apply to working with young children. Thus your session has become not only professional development for early childhood practitioners but you have modeled ways to build rapport with the young children enrolled in participants' early childhood programs. ~

*RESOURCES

* *Workshop Essentials* by Paula Jorde Bloom. Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons. Provides practical tools you need to design and deliver high content, high involvement, and high-energy training.

* *How to Design and Deliver Great Training* by Alan Matthews (2012). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. Sets out exactly how to take any material and turn it into lively, engaging and effective training. Provides a practical, easy-to-read guide covering all aspects of design and delivery. Sets out simple ways to get learners in a positive and receptive frame of mind before you start (something which most training books neglect to cover).

* Roy Saunderson is author of "GIVING the Real Recognition Way" and president of the Recognition Management Institute, a consulting and training firm specializing in helping companies "get recognition right." Its focus is on showing leaders how to give real recognition to create positive relationships, better workplaces, and real results. For more information, visit www.RealRecognition.com.

* *Training for Dummies* by Elaine Biech (2005). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing. Covers all the modern, interactive instructional methods and dynamic training approaches available and helps trainers get trainees inspired, involved, and enthused.

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