

*Singer invites early educators to think about the profound importance of their work, and the ways in which the Brazelton Touchpoints™ Approach can support early care of young children and all those who care for them.*

# The Brazelton Touchpoints™

## Approach to Infants and Toddlers in Care: Foundation for a Lifetime of Learning and Loving

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Jayne Singer

More infants and toddlers currently are experiencing out-of-home care than ever before (Larner, Behrman, Young, & Reich, 2001). At the same time, it is now also well understood that the early years of childhood are the most critical of life (Denham, 1998). These years are a time not only of the fastest and most foundational physical growth, but also in the development of

- brain structure and functions (Nelson, 2000; Thompson, 2001),
- cognition and learning (Thompson, 2001),
- language and communication (Thompson, 2001),
- temperament (Rothbart & Bates, 1998),
- emotional regulation (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004), and
- social competence (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002).

The flood of early child development research in the past decade has blossomed into enormous public interest in the importance of the first years of children's lives (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is critical for policymakers and professionals to acknowledge and honor the crucial role that early care and education (ECE) providers have in the developmental health and well-being of infants and toddlers.

The Brazelton Touchpoints Center®, and its ECE Initiative, have two goals:

- to optimize children's development through supporting strengths in families and caregiving environments, and to

**Children learn how to love and learn in their first relationships.**

- appropriately support and acknowledge ECE providers for the unique and important role that they play in the lives and futures of infants and toddlers in their care.

High-quality ECE environments provide physically safe and appealing environments for children's naturally curious exploration (Bergen, Reid, & Torelli, 2002), as well as appropriate curriculum for experiential learning and stimulation (NAEYC, 2005).

Perhaps the most important contribution teachers make to children's development is in building founda-

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tional skills in emotional competence through their emotional attunement as they meet children's needs for predictable nurturance. Teachers also do this by facilitating children's social interactions and in using their own relationships with children to promote learning (Baker & Manfredi-Pettit, 2004; Hyson, 1994; Leavitt, 1994). When any care environment is of appropriate quality, it includes emotional safety as well. Child care providers enhance children's security and freedom to both trust and build new relationships, and also to use this emotional security to explore learning opportunities.

## Development in the Context of Relationships

If the United States as a nation, and those in the profession of early childhood education, are to accept the responsibility that comes with understanding the profound impact of the first years of life, this question must be answered: How is child development best supported in the context of human relationships? Rich opportunities are possible in group care settings in children's relationships with teachers and with their peers. Interacting with friends and teachers within strong, mutual, emotional relationships enhances children's responsiveness to the many wonderful features in their "immediate physical, social, and symbolic environment, that invite exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination" (Bronfenbrenner, 2002, p. 45).

In this sense, children's social and emotional development and competence are recognized and valued as



Subjects & Predicates

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the most important foundation of learning and later school readiness across all domains of development. Teachers who have "specific foundational knowledge of the development of children's social and affective behavior, thinking, and language" (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000, p. 330) exhibit the highest quality of teaching. Most importantly, Bowman and her colleagues asserted, "If there is a single critical component to quality, it rests in the relationship between the child and the teacher/caregiver, and in the ability of the adult to be responsive to the child. But responsiveness extends in many directions: to the child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical characteristics and development" (p. 341).

A strong, stable relationship between child and teacher has been found to

- enhance child social competence with other adults and peers (Churchill, 2003),
- predict better adaptation to child care (Sroufe, 1983), and
- improve cognitive performance (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

**High-quality early care settings are truly family-centered.**

Howes and colleagues found that, of three main domains regarding quality of care—*regulatable* (e.g., ratios, training), *global* (e.g., materials, classroom activities), and *interactive* (e.g., relationship between caregiver and child)—it is the child-caregiver interactions that best predicted child outcomes (Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992).

From the beginning of the progressive education movement, children's curiosity for the learning process has been seen as embedded in how well relationships with teachers support children's self-esteem and ability to take the risks necessary for the learning process (Biber, 1984). Positive child development outcomes in ECE environments are associated with consistency in emotionally-attuned and consistent care in those settings.

**A burst in one developmental area is often linked with backslide in another.**

The Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD, 2002), in its broadly publicized study of early child care centers across the country, found that time spent in higher-quality child care was not only positively related to better cognitive and language abilities, but was also predictive of higher social and emotional competence. How, then, do early educators support the foundations of children's relationships?

## Families as First Relationships

The literature is clear that it is in children's best interests that relationships with those who are in care are strong, and strong relationships bring joy to this work everyday. However, caregivers must look beyond their relationships with children to relationships with whole families to truly develop best practices in the service of the child.

Children's families are typically their first relational environments. Early parent-child relationships are

thought to have powerful effects on later functioning (Bowlby, 1980; Bradley, Caldwell, Rock, & Ramey, 1989; Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Zigler, Finn-Stevenson, & Hall, 2002). Family relationships influence

- emotional well-being (Davies & Forman, 2002; Dawson & Ashman, 2000),
- basic coping and problem-solving abilities (Bowlby, 1988),
- future capacity for relationships (Lerner & Castellino, 2002), and
- cognition and brain architecture (Trevanthen, 2001).

Best child outcomes are associated with consistency and emotional attunement in children's relationships with their original, primary attachments, which are usually within their families.

The effect of first relationships on brain development is strong and well-documented (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004), and positive outcomes across all developmental domains are associated with strong skills in self-regulation and emotional competency. "The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior...and relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 3).

All of a child's learning—across cognitive, communi-

cation, motor, and behavioral domains—stems from a child's social and emotional competence, which has foundations in the child's first relationships. In the earliest days of childhood, cognitive development cannot be teased apart from emotional functioning (Bell & Wolfe, 2004; Greenspan & Lewis, 1999).

Simply put, children learn how to both love and learn in their first relationships. How they are loved promotes how they learn. How do children develop the ability to create a web of relationships around them? If adults are to truly support every child's developmental potential, then it is essential to support the health of all of the relationships surrounding the care of that child. This



**Subjects & Predicates**

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Nancy P. Alexander

*Parents, teachers, and children together benefit when the relationships among all are mutual and strong. The goal as truly caring professionals should be to join parents as their allies in the systems of care surrounding their children.*

entails forming strong caregiving relationships with children and among children, with each other. Very fundamentally, supporting children means supporting their families and supporting relationships within those families.

Bronfenbrenner (2002), in his “ecological” approach to understanding the system of relationships around the care of young children, strongly recommended that the primary caregiver have at least one other caregiver adult who “encourages and expresses admiration and affection for the person caring for and engaging in joint activity with the child” (p. 45).

Owen, Ware, and Barfoot (2000) suggested that the “child’s quality of experience in each environment may be enhanced when parent and childcare provider bridge the distance between the two social worlds of childcare and home and work together as partners in the child’s

care” (p. 426). This suggests the benefits to teachers as well when they experience more partnership with parents. The same authors found that more partnership behavior between families and caregivers predicted interactions with children that were more sensitive, supportive, and stimulating.

**Touchpoints are opportunities for parents and teachers to build collaboration, support, and appreciation.**

Finally, research has demonstrated that relationships among families and providers can have effects on parents’ behavior with children. Shpancer (2002) documents the connection between parent-child interactions and parent-teacher interactions. Mothers who engaged in partnership behavior with their

children’s providers were more supportive and sensitive with their own children than mothers who did not engage in partnership with their infant caregivers (Owen, Ware, & Barfoot, 2000).

The quality and consistency between a child’s first care environments and relationships lay the foundation for mastering self-regulation of emotions and behavior. The goal for adults becomes to increase children’s emotional security and blossoming of their sense of self through consistency of care across home and ECE settings and relationships.

## Putting It All Together

As a result of these understandings about mutually supportive relationships, high-quality early care settings are becoming truly “family-centered” (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004; Keyser, 2006). The benefits to children when early educators join with families are enormous. This movement to emphasize the mutual and collaborative nature of the family-program connection is reflected in the current NAEYC practice guidelines (2005), which promote:

- The development of reciprocal and collaborative relationships among teachers and families;
- Parents participating in decisions about their children’s care and education, including involvement in assessing and planning for individual children;
- Teacher sensitivity to and respect for parents’ preferences and concerns without abdicating professional responsibility to children;
- Teachers and parents frequent-



ly sharing their knowledge of the child and understanding of children's development and learning;

- Programs facilitating family linkages with a range of appropriate services; and
- Teachers, parents, and other professionals with educational responsibility for children sharing developmental information about them as they move to a new program or setting.

## The Brazelton Touchpoints™ Approach

Increasingly, ECE programs and providers are seeking to learn skills and strategies to help families and teachers work together in strong relationships. All parents can grow stronger when they are openly recognized through acknowledgment of the strengths in their child's development and for the love and care they have provided for their children. All providers can benefit from being acknowledged for the crucial influence that early educators caring for infants and toddlers have in helping these children reach their developmental potential, while the children are actively in their care and for the children's future.

Parents, teachers, and children together benefit when the relationships among all are mutual and strong. The goal of truly caring professionals should be to join parents as their allies in the systems of care surrounding their children. The Brazelton Touchpoints Approach offers key developmental understandings and relational strategies that assist families and early care providers in establishing the highest qualities of **developmental-**

## ly informed care and shared caregiving partnerships.

The Touchpoints Approach acknowledges

- the need for ECE providers to be seen as competent and professional,
- the need for parents to be valued for their primary relationship and intimate knowledge of their children, and
- the need for children to be understood and cared for in truly developmentally appropriate ways, with children honored for their individual learning paces, styles, and temperaments.

The Touchpoints Approach assists caregivers and children in their emotional competence, and enhances quality of care by strengthening relationships among parents and teachers, teachers and children, and parents and their children. Through the Touchpoints Approach, teachers can strengthen their roles as emotional models for the children and for parents.

Touchpoints of the first years typically can be predicted to happen when the child is:

- newborn
- 3 weeks
- 6-8 weeks
- 4 months
- 7 months
- 9 months
- 12 months
- 15 months
- 18 months
- 2 years

Brazelton (1992) noted that a burst in one developmental area is often linked with backslide, or regression, in another area or in a child's behavior. He argues that

these predictable periods of regression need to happen for a child's development to move forward. Periods of normal regression are well documented (Heinmann, 2003).

Every Touchpoint brings a step forward in development after the regression, but also leaves behind the earlier stages of development, and parents can have mixed feelings about this. Touchpoints periods of disorganization can create frustration and self-doubt for parents and teachers as well, and can place strain on relationships among them.

Indeed, in the ECE setting, when the actual care and relationships with a child are being shared among providers and parents, Touchpoints can be even more disorganizing for all of the caregivers, especially when natural feelings of gatekeeping are at play in the relationships and feelings between parents and teachers. Gatekeeping is the premise that "all adults who care about a baby will naturally be in competition for that baby" and it serves as "energy for attachment to the child" (Brazelton, 1992, p. 4).

While gatekeeping can be a common feeling among all members within a family system, it also happens between parents and caregivers, especially as parents have developed intense emotional attachments to their children, only to have those feelings of attachment become sometimes painful as they share their children in someone else's care. Parents so often feel, "If I share her, will she love someone else more?" (Brazelton, 1992, p. 368).

Touchpoints offer providers opportunities to "touch" into the family system, helping parents anticipate and respond positively to these times of children's develop-

mental disorganization. These are opportunities for parents and teachers to build their collaboration, support, and appreciation for each other.

Caregivers also benefit from this developmental understanding, because children's behaviors, and thus caregiving routines such as feeding and sleeping, are likely to become disorganized in the ECE setting as well. Children become more deeply understood and appreciated for their strengths. Imagine the impact of being able to join with parents around identifying strengths in their child's development, even when their behavior can be challenging, and linking those strengths to the parents' relationship with the child!

ECE professionals can do this by supporting parents through difficult Touchpoints™ periods, as well as predicting the next Touchpoint. Parents' appreciation can reflect back as acknowledgement to their child's care providers. This powerful parent appreciation for their children's ECE providers is an essential ingredient in the cycle of caregiving nurturance and partnership for children and adults alike, and gives back to ECE providers the mutual respect they deserve (Singer, 2005).

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## President's Message

(continued from page 2)

so many new friends in all the states and have been inspired by the wonderful work each of you is doing for children and families. I will continue

to be an active part of SECA because SECA has always been the scaffold that supports my professional growth. And I leave you with a question...What is your role in SECA?

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## Introduction

(continued from page 3)

to start at the very beginning of the child's life. She explains the necessity of parent involvement in early intervention. Due to space limitations, this article will appear in the Winter 2008 issue of *Dimensions*.

This theme issue of *Dimensions* has been designed to assist early

childhood professionals in their quest to open the Gateway to Lifelong Learning for the infants and toddlers in their care, and by extension children of all ages. The authors offer information, materials, and resources to help readers implement constructive, realistic, and exciting ideas and approaches.

The editors wish to thank Dr. Bill Strokes, Executive Director of the Child Development Center at

the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, for graciously allowing us to use the title, *Gateway to Lifelong Learning*, which was the title of a statewide conference in Louisiana on early childhood education sponsored by his organization.

Both guest editors of this issue are members of the SECA Editorial Committee and past members of the SECA Board of Directors.

# Put These Ideas Into Practice!

## The Brazelton Touchpoints™ Approach to Infants and Toddlers in Care: Foundation for a Lifetime of Learning and Loving

Jayne Singer

### The Brazelton Touchpoints Approach to Development

Children develop their skills in many different areas at the same time. When children show a sudden burst in one area of development, they often “regress” or backslide in another area. This is really a positive sign of development moving forward, but parents and teachers might find themselves worried or disagreeing with each other! These bursts can disorganize children’s feelings and actions, and disrupt caregiving routines, such as feeding and sleeping. Think of the budding toddler who has just learned to walk, and now no longer wants to predictably nap or sit for a meal! Touchpoints of the first years typically can be predicted to happen when the child is:

Newborn	9 months
3 weeks	12 months
6-8 weeks	15 months
4 months	18 months
7 months	2 years



### The Touchpoints Approach to Relationships

The Touchpoints™ Approach reminds adults everyday of the power of strong and positive caregiving relationships in promoting best developmental outcomes for children.

Developmental Touchpoints can be stressful to parents and teachers because Touchpoints disorganize children’s behavior and routines. However, Touchpoints offer opportunities for providers to “touch” into the family system, helping parents carefully watch and understand their children’s behavior and strengths. Parents and ECE providers can then together look forward to periods of regression and disorganization more positively, being supportive of each other and of the child, in stronger, shared caregiving partnerships. When parents and ECE providers work together around these Touchpoints, relationships among caregivers and children, caregivers and parents, and parents and children are all nurtured. This supports families in meeting the educational and emotional needs of their children. Caregivers have such a powerfully important role in helping

#### Subjects & Predicates

young children learn to love, and love to learn!

**Learn more at [www.touchpoints.org](http://www.touchpoints.org)**

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.