The future of (early) learning is relational

by Isabelle C. Hau

Early Head Start – Summer Series
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Uvalde, TX - Head Start

Nino’s De Cristal Head Start
Old Town Head Start
CDI Head Start
Avance Head Start
Wintergarden Head Start
A few words about me

• Participated in all HeadStarter innovation conferences since 2015; other national NHSA/Head Start conferences & report contributions
• Visited Head Start / Early Head Start centers in at least 25 states
Some quotes

“In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Someone’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last and always.”

-- Urie Bronfenbrenner

“Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.”

-- Bruce D. Perry

“Whether the burdens come from the hardships of poverty, the challenges of parental substance abuse or serious mental illness, the stress of war, the threat of recurrent violence or chronic neglect, or a combination of factors, the single most common finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult.”

-- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child
I. The science: relationships are essential for learning, thriving, and more

II. The practice: our relationship crisis - 1 in 3 young child do not have a caring adult relationship, and it is getting worse

III. Looking forward: the future of (early) learning is relational
Relationships matter for human survival
A few extreme experiments

Frederick II
Language acquisition

Harry Harlow
Pit of Despair

Stuart Grassian
Solitary Confinement

• Harvard psychiatrist documented a psychiatric syndrome from solitary confinement (progressive inability to tolerate ordinary things, such as the sound of plumbing; hallucinations and illusions; severe panic attacks; difficulties with thinking, concentration, and memory; obsessive, sometimes harmful, thoughts that won’t go away; paranoia; problems with impulse control; and delirium).

• The United Nations considers solitary confinement exceeding 15 days to be torture
Relationships matter for brain development and learning

Romanian orphanages

In the Institute for the Unsalvageable in Sighetu Marmatiei, Romania, shown here in 1992, children were left in cribs for days on end.

Tom Szaky
Lesson #1 – Lower brain volume and power resulting from emotional deprivation

Source: Kings College study; Edmund Sonuga-Barke lead researcher

The brain’s activity can be measured in electrical impulses—here, “hot” colors like red or orange indicate more activity, and each column shows a different kind of brain activity. Young children institutionalized in poor conditions show much less than the expected activity. Source: C.A. Nelson (2008); Marshall, Fox, & the BEIP Core Group (2004).
Lesson #2 – Most adversity effects can be overcome in stable family environments: The Bucharest Early Intervention Project

Children were randomly assigned in two groups of (1) institutional care; and (2) high-quality foster parents vetted and trained.

Group (2) experienced:

✓ Higher IQ (held true over time 8 years into the experiment)
✓ Better language development
✓ More secure attachment
✓ Fewer signs of emotional problems
✓ The earlier the better – especially before age 2

Group (1) had altered stress physiology – higher ADD; telomere shortening and faster cellular aging
We are wired for connections

- Different from other animals, human babies depend on other humans for survival and development until ~12 year old.

- Human brains are suited to detect someone who might or might not be trustworthy.

- Our “default network” – the circuits of the brain that are constantly on - are relational.

- Connection with parent, and especially mother – attachment theory (Bowlby/Ainsworth) and “bio-behaviorial synchrony”

- Empathy to others: Studies show that toddlers will voluntarily give their blanket with someone who is cold or share a toy with someone who is sad. 14-month olds will help someone retrieve an object out of reach.

Human connections can be primed

- 18-month olds 3x more likely to perform helpful behaviors to a doll if background picture shows dolls face-to-face, as opposed to back-to-back.
Relationships matter for health, well-being & longevity

Blue Zones

- Okinawa has the highest number of people >100 in the world, 4x more than the US
- Why?
  - "Yuima-ru": interconnected "circle" of humans
  - "Moais": support groups of five to 10 friends formed in the early years and for life

Harvard Study Of Adult Development

- 80-year longitudinal study has collected many data on factors that help people live long and fulfilling lives
- Conclusion: “People who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community are happier, they’re physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected”
  --Robert Waldinger – TED Talk

Loneliness Studies

- Loneliness =
  - Reduce immune function
  - Increase inflammation
  - Increase chances of dying
- Lack of social connections = increased mortality equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes/day
- Connections =
  - Increased motivation (e.g., if people are told they share same birthday, they persist longer on math problem)
  - Delay cognitive decline and dementia by as much as 70%
Emmy Werner conducted a 32-year longitudinal study of 698 infants on the Hawaiian island of Kauai—the island's entire birth cohort for the year.

1/3 of all high-risk children displayed resilience and developed into caring, competent and confident adults despite their problematic development histories.

Protective factors: a strong bond with a parent or a nonparent caretaker (such as an aunt, babysitter, or teacher) and involvement in a church or community group.

More research has been conducted - connecting attachment and resilience.
Relationships matter for resilience to stress

A big moment: AAP highlights relational health to mitigate childhood toxic stress in 2021

But, call to action on relationships needs to expand beyond health/pediatrics to parents, education and community stakeholders.
Relationships matter for school performance

Michigan Schools

• Over 5,000 students and teachers in 78 randomly selected elementary schools in Michigan, asked to fill a questionnaire “parents involvement supports learning here”; “teachers in this school trust their students”; “community involvement facilitates learning”

• Social capital (network of relationships between schools/teachers, parents and community) had a 3-5x **larger effect** than financial capital on reading and math scores

• Social capital was more important than school’s poverty, ethnic makeup or prior achievement

Head Start

• Families assigned in 3 groups:
  
  1. Treatment group 1- Families assigned to a neighborhood classroom, one in which all children were residents of the same neighborhood. Parents were informed that children were of the same neighborhood
  
  2. Treatment group 2 - Families assigned to a neighborhood classroom; in addition, the center held a few social gatherings at the beginning of the year to allow parents to select an “attendance buddy”. 50% families did so.
  
  3. Control group - Families were assigned to a classroom as the center normally had

• Results:
  
  • Social capital increased in group 2 by about 1 person, from a baseline number of about 3 people.
  
  • Parents in either treatment group more likely to ask for help.
  
  • Moderate increase in child attendance.
Relationships matter for learners’ school readiness & performance

The more, the better

Source:
Relationships matter for little learners
The earlier, the better

24 months?
Romanian orphanage research suggests some major differences at 6 months and 24 months.

2 months?
“The child who has only two months of really bad experiences [from birth] does worse than the child with almost twelve years of bad experiences [at a later stage], all because of the timing of the experiences.” Dr Bruce Perry
Key takeaways

• Science is clear that relationships are critical for humans’ survival and for humans to thrive

• At least one safe caring adult relationship matters and can make a difference in resilience, learning, well-being and life outcomes for little learners

• This caring relationship does not have to be with a birth parent. Teachers often play a critical role

• More relationships, the better, but start with one

• Early matters, very early

• Our world is increasingly inder-dependent and inter-connected
Relationships are our greatest asset for little ones to learn and thrive, yet the most under-leveraged

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Where are we on relationships surrounding our little learners?
Our relational crisis

Breadth: How many

Depth: How close and how positive
**Breadth of relationships**

The circle of relationships around young children is getting smaller

**1990**

- Family
- Teachers & school staff
- Little Friends
- Mentors (community; faith leaders; coaches)

**2022**

- Family
- Teachers & school staff
- Little Friends
- Mentors (community; faith leaders; coaches)

Increase in youth mentorship
Decline in religious practices: from 34% in 1990 to 28% today
Lesser adult friends from 6.4 in 1990 to 4.2 in 2021
50% reduction in outdoor play from 1990 to today
Approx. 60% children per family decline (from 2.1 in 1990 to 1.7 in 2021)
Average number of children per family decline (from 2.1 in 1990 to 1.7 in 2021)
Slight increase in single parent households
200,000 children lost a parent during COVID
Grandparents: Increase in cohabitation

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Depth of relationships
While more time was spent home, pandemic stress resulted in lower emotional connections

Pre-COVID - Baby Secure Attachment

- Pre-pandemic (2014)-
  - 40% children had unsecure attachment
  - 40% did not have caring adult relationships across home, school & community

Pandemic effect - Emotional Connections


Source: COMBO study, August 2021.
Why?

Barriers to caring relationships are multi-pronged

**Individual / Inter-personal**

- Stress & mental health connected with attachment—nearly 50 million American adults experienced mental illness in 2019 and pandemic exacerbated
- Parents’ emotional distress connected with child’s emotional distress; same goes with teachers and children
- Experience with trauma affects relationships
- Technology usage also does

**Societal**

- Inequality
- Isolation
- Social segregation
  - Racial segregation: 40% of white do not have a non-white friend
  - Age segregation: 5% of youth has ever interacted with adults above 65 who are not family members
- Birthing trends
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### Relationship-Centered Parenting

#### Future is in groups

- Centering Health
- UpTogether

#### Relational parenting

- LENA
- Training Grounds

#### Families are supported

- Family leave
- Anti-poverty measures (e.g., child tax credits, guaranteed income)
- Expanded access to quality child care
- Well-being and mental health supports

#### Technology is leveraged for good / family activities
Relationship-Centered Schools

WHAT IS A RELATIONSHIP CENTERED SCHOOL?
Students of color define Relationship Centered Schools as ones that:

1. Unite social emotional learning and academics
2. Ensure all students reach their full potential regardless of race or zip code
3. Provide staff with the capacity and conditions to connect with students
4. Address trauma, build resilience, and confront bias to create healthy relationships
5. Lead together with students, parents and staff working towards a shared vision

Invest in staff
Create space for relationship building (among parents, learners/staff, among staff, among learners)
Value young learner and family voice and engagement
Relationships Among Little friends

(1) More free play:

Massive benefits of play
- SEL, academic, physical, etc.

Yet, play is declining
- More screen time
- Less time spent outdoor

And, play is inequitable
- Less recess in lower-resources schools

(2) What about an American version of Moais? Groups of children and families from the early years of life?
Relationship-Centered Communities

Gen-Xchange (UCLA) and Experienced Corps in elementary demonstrated to have major benefits

Care Corps of 1 million grand-adults supporting early care and education

Tangelo Park Program
One final quote

“Nothing has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships.”

-- Search Institute (2017)
Thank you

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