

Let's slow down:

Shifting from directing and correcting to a culture of connecting.



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Why connecting?

What busy lives we lead. Always rushing from here to there, structuring our days, and time, to fit as much in as possible. Where does all of this over-scheduling leave us in terms of connecting? Connecting with the children we work with? And why is connecting so important anyway?

Let's start by having a look at what the neuroscience research tells us. We have been lucky over the past few years to have had such a fast rate of development in terms of neuroscience, in particular brain scans. We are now able to look at brain scans as a key tool in helping us understand brain development and what has a positive and negative impact on it.

Nathan Wallis has been instrumental in New Zealand for disseminating information and research around brain

development and neuroscience. He reflects that the brain develops in stages and that essentially it is the ability for children to be able to develop a key adult-child relationship, or as he calls it a 'dyad', that provides them with the right conditions for the brain to develop (Wallis 2018). This helps to steer us towards the need for us to spend time connecting and building relationships with children, especially in their early years while the brain is developing at such a high rate.

By developing these deep connections and relationships with children we are enabling them to keep the brainstem, or the survival part of the brain, quiet in order for the frontal cortex to develop. When we are thinking about these kinds of relationships, what is it that we can do to set our children up to thrive and develop these important connections? Sue Gerhardt provides us with some food for thought. She suggests that just as a child's body adapts to a shortage of nutrition, so the brain adapts to inadequate emotional input (Gerhardt 2011). During the first couple of years, then, as the brain is laying down its foundations and growing extremely rapidly we need to ensure that we providing an environment that is rich in brain nutrition. The best way to nourish the brain is through relationships and social stimulation, with at least one key caregiver.

Babies and children learn how to have and build relationships through the key relationships that they have in their life. Basically, babies learn how to do things through their experiences with other people, not through words or instructions. This stretches from learning how to cope with stress by having an experience of someone being with them and helping them to cope, to knowing what it is to listen and be present by spending time with someone who is giving them their undivided attention. It is down to the quality of these kinds of connections that enable children to develop a strong sense of self and their ability, in later years, to be able to self-regulate, to pay attention, and to have empathy of others (Gerhardt 2011).

'Prepared in the head, heart and hand. It is those who choose to be 'present' and have an attitude of 'mindfulness' that really do make the difference in the life of children.' - Crisp 2015

The report 'Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature Review, 2011', further solidifies the need to bring to the forefront an increase in connection, especially for infants and toddlers. The literature review suggests that the absence of high ratios leads to inconsistent care and teachers who are unable to develop a responsive curriculum that meets the needs of the tamariki and effectively demonstrate and use their infant and toddler pedagogy. Teachers are more likely to be attuned to young children if they are working with a small group and they will be more readily able to champion a responsive environment that will have positive outcomes for all children (MoE 2011). Again this is another

nudge towards encouraging us to think about how we are designing our curriculum and space to meet the needs of the child. At this early stage their needs are often met through connections and time spent one-to-one with a key caregiver or teacher. Does the design of your curriculum allow you to meet these important needs? Are you allowing the children in your space to have a rich diet of love, care, attunement and connection to help them build and develop their brains for their future success?



Correcting and directing

When we stand back and look at the landscape of our day, unfortunately there seems to be a high proportion of the time spent in the modes of correcting and directing. We feel the need to busy ourselves and flit from job to job. In our hurry to rush through the day we sweep the children, that we work with, along with us. Instead of creating a calm and peaceful environment where our children are picking up our cues of attunement and connection they are sent into a whirlwind where stress and cortisol are induced leading to them remaining emotionally unsatisfied and therefore unable to truly access the curriculum.

If we know this to be true why do we spend so much time trying to schedule and control the day? How often have you found

yourself directing children to the bathroom, the table, outside or inside? How often do you slip into correcting mode and find yourself nearly barking instructions out to the space that you are in; 'walking feet', 'put that back', 'get down from there'? How is this kind of communication affecting the children in the space? Is it allowing them to build a safe and secure attachment and connection with you that will allow them to fly, fill up their emotional tank and explore the environment? Probably not. Is it enabling the kind of rich brain nutrition that is needed for them to develop their social brain and strong sense of self? Not really, because when we are correcting and directing we are not spending time connecting with and interacting, in a meaningful way, with the children. If we are not there with them, in the moment, connecting, how are they going to learn how to build relationships, cope with the array of situations that present themselves over the day, learn how to regulate their emotions and to have empathy others.



We are social beings and Gerhardt and Wallis reminded us earlier we learn all these things through our interactions with others and this brings us back to the importance of having a key person as a touchstone to help navigate these early years of learning and development. This may take the form of a primary caregiver at home or a key teacher in an early years setting, either way the important thing to remember is to spend time connecting and

not correcting or directing, which would be interactions, yes, but ones that are not rich in brain nutrition.

Slow down and then slow down some more

So, how can we shift the ratio of our day away from correcting and directing and focus on connecting? A key first step is to slow down and when you think you have slowed down, slow down some more. We need to purposefully set aside time to just be with the children, be present and available. This will enable us to cultivate those connections that we are striving for. As Parker J. Palmer (1997) reminded us if we want our children to be able to weave their own web of connections between the world, the people around them and themselves then we need to spend time modelling this with them. When they see us making these positive connections they will learn what it is to be kind, peaceful and in a place of emotional wellbeing and safety.

Some have suggested 'burning the rosters' and 'turning the clocks around', both of these suggestions have a goal of forcing us to slow down and take our cues from the children. When we are present we can pick on the cues of hunger and tiredness we can ascertain when a child is asking for help and when they are confident to give it a go independently. By playing and working alongside the children that we work with we can help to sow the seeds for 'peaceful, creative relationships' (Brownlee, 2013).

'wait, watch and wonder'

When we are in state of mindfulness we are connected enough to know if the child is seeking connection. I like to use the phrase 'wait, watch and wonder'. For me this makes me slow down, I don't need to rush

in and make assumptions about what is happening for a child. So often I find that what is happening in front of me has roots in something very different to my first reaction. Having waited and watched I am able to wonder alongside the children, is my interaction going to help or hinder this play or situation? What is the child really asking of me here? I am able to be a caring teacher with a listening ear and can curate acts of kindness that don't hinder the autonomy of the children, but foster the connection and relationships. In our ECE settings this means we need to deliberately 'unbusy' ourselves, slow down the pace of the entire programme and allow for small bursts of one on one time, at regular intervals. This helps to fill the emotional tank, which needs doing regularly and consistently for children to thrive. A learning child is one who is emotionally satisfied and fulfilled.

I challenge you to think about what the ratio in your day is between connecting:correcting:directing? How can you shift it towards connecting? Towards spending time being present with children, attuned to what they are truly asking and wondering alongside them about this wonderful world we live in.



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