

## RESEARCH

# Simple, Everyday Interactions as the Active Ingredient of Early Childhood Education

by Junlei Li and Dana Winters

In a research review article in 2012, *Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient: A Unifying Working Hypothesis of "What Works" Across Intervention Settings*, my colleague Megan Julian and I outlined the idea that responsive and supportive relationships between adults and children are the *active ingredients* of children's development across intervention contexts.

We reviewed foundational theories in developmental science and research, as well as intervention studies across multiple settings, including institutionalized care (i.e., orphanages), elementary school classrooms, youth mentoring programs, and home visiting programs for young parents. When interventions specifically improved adult-child interactions in orphanages, the positive impacts were significant for children even in the absence of abundant material resources. Compared with other indicators of quality (e.g., class size, curricula, teacher credential), high-quality classroom interactions were the most predictive of students' learning. Adult-youth mentoring

relationships lasted longer and produced greater impact if the mentor focused more on understanding and supporting the youth rather than prescribing changes to the youth. Lastly, the more home visitors invested in their relationships with parents, the more likely they were to enhance the parent-child relationships. Overall, we found that both theories and studies converged on the idea that interventions across these settings were positively impactful if and only if they enhanced the quality of human relationships around the children.

We compared these *developmental* relationships—human relationships that help children learn and grow—to fluoride inside a tube of toothpaste. While there are many ingredients in toothpaste, fluoride is the only active ingredient that prevents cavities. The *inactive* ingredients, such as water, baking soda, flavor, color, have no protective power separated from the fluoride. These inactive ingredients are useful if and only if they assist the active ingredient. For example, child-friendly flavoring helps children brush longer, allowing

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Junlei Li is the Saul Zaentz senior lecturer in early childhood education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His research and practice focuses on understanding and supporting the work of helpers—those who serve children and families on the frontlines of education and social services. Dr. Li teaches about improving human interactions and supporting adult helpers in his graduate courses, and delivers keynote addresses and workshops for early childhood professionals nationally and internationally.



Dana Winters is the assistant professor of child and family studies and academic director at the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at Saint Vincent College. She directs the Simple Interactions initiative and leads statewide projects in Pennsylvania and Georgia to strengthen early childhood systems and enhance teacher-child and adult-adult interactions. Dr. Winters has traveled to over a dozen states to deliver keynote speeches and workshops for early childhood professionals.

the fluoride to be spread out more evenly around the enamel. But flavoring does not help prevent cavities by itself. Like fluoride in toothpaste, developmental relationships are the active ingredients in programs and services that promote child and youth development. The many other ingredients in our educational and social service systems, including curricula, standards, facilities and professional credentials are inactive ingredients. They can be helpful if they enhance the quality of human interactions between children and those adults directly caring for and teaching the children. However, inactive ingredients are counterproductive if they distract, dilute or undermine the direct interactions that take place between children and adults.

Since 2012, my colleagues and I have been applying these ideas to better understand early childhood practices, programs and policies. We spent our time observing teachers and caregivers in settings varying by age (infants/toddlers, pre-schoolers), context (family child care, centers, schools), and culture (United States, Canada, and China). Three lessons emerged from our work.

### Developmental Relationships Are Made of Simple, Everyday Interactions

Developmental relationships across age groups, social settings and cultural contexts may look very different outwardly, but the underlying dynamics of human interactions are universal. We find that even the simplest moments of human interactions can be developmental if they embody one or more of these four processes:

- **Connection** - Children and adults seek to be present and in tune with each other, whether they are listening, talking or working together.
- **Reciprocity** - The power and control in any joint activity—whether it is conversation, homework or game—gradually shift towards balanced “serve and return” exchanges.
- **Opportunities to grow** - Children are incrementally supported to stretch beyond comfort zones of their current competence and confidence.



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- **Inclusion** - All children, especially those who are the least likely to engage due to disability, temperament, or other factors, are being invited and welcomed into a community of peers.

These dynamics are as present in activities traditionally associated with learning such as reading, drawing or playing, as in seemingly mundane daily routines like handwashing, cleaning up or going to nap. The dynamics may be found in places with abundant material and curricular resources, yet they are just as likely to be visible in communities with very limited access to resources. We found exceptional practices by rural foster mothers in China who raised and taught young orphans with cerebral palsy with make-shift adaptive tools, family child care providers who fostered a sense of safety and trust in neighborhoods marred by violence, and teachers in high-poverty public schools who re-used broken electronics to help children discover the true meaning of innovation. It is not “stuff” that directly enhances early learning quality, it is human interactions that make creative use of “stuff” (however limited and rudimentary they might be) that ultimately enriches children’s learning and development.

### What Counts Cannot Always Be Counted

While few in the early childhood profession would doubt the importance of adult-child interactions, our compliance-driven

system of quality standards and accountability measures can shift our attention from the quality of human relationships to the easier-to-administer and more quantifiable “scores” and “checklists.” Yet, few of these scores or checklists reliably predict long-term child outcomes.

We cannot adequately address the persistent challenge of providing equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities if we continue to define and measure quality by counting high-cost resources (facilities, curricula, higher education degrees). What can be counted easily are often the least affordable and accessible to families, teachers, and providers in low-income communities. Through the lens of developmental relationships, we can discover seeds of high-quality early childhood practices in programs with *both* high and low resources. We can find creative and equitable ways to support, sustain and expand such practices without artificially marginalizing those with low access to resources. For example, the questions around the credentials required to be an early childhood professional should not be a litmus test that decides who is in and who is out. It has to start with those who are already in the best position today to have face-to-face interactions with children. The discussion about professional credentials and preparations needs to be a rigorous and compassionate conversation about how credentials and preparations can best support and recognize the growth of teachers’ and caregivers’ competencies in building developmental relationships with children (and their families).

To support quality improvement on the frontlines of early childhood education, we need to look beyond the scores and checklists and directly at what supports and hinders the development of adult-child interactions.

### Early Childhood Education Is a System of Human Development

In order to grow the quality of developmental relationships across early learning contexts, we find it helpful to focus every part of the early childhood system, including teachers, parents, administrators and policymakers, on the power of simple, everyday interactions between adults and children. To do that, we can start by asking an essential question at every level of decision making that impacts our practices, programs and poli-

## HUMAN INTERACTIONS AS THE ACTIVE INGREDIENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT



*cies: How do we encourage, enrich, and empower the human interactions around the children, caregivers, and teachers?*

If we take seriously the idea that human interactions are the active ingredients of children’s development, then this question can frame and guide discussions about program design and evaluation, professional development and compensation, and public investment and accountability. Asking this question consistently and insistently also pushes us to expand our understanding of developmental relationships as between teachers and children, to include those between family caregivers and children, teachers and families, teachers and teachers, families and families, and of course, children and children.

After all, the system of early childhood education is ideally a system that promotes human development. The learning and development of our children depends on the learning and development of the grown-ups who care for and teach children. All of us are supported by, and support others by, the thoughtful and intentional ways we relate to one another.

### References

Li, J. & Julian, M. (2012). “Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of ‘what works’ across intervention settings.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 157–166.

## PRACTICE

# Appreciating and Growing the Active Ingredient in Early Childhood Education

by Dana Winters and Junlei Li

Understanding everyday human interactions as the “active ingredient” of human development (Li & Julian, 2012) can be a helpful reminder for what truly matters in the work of serving children and families. Across many early childhood education contexts, these human relationships already exist between teachers and children, though they are sometimes undervalued and under-recognized. How do we appreciate and grow these relationships and communicate their importance to broader audiences?

At the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, we have been developing and adapting an approach called “Simple Interactions” to put this active ingredient concept into practice for early childhood education. We refer to *interactions* rather than relationships, because we have found that it is often more helpful to support educators to notice and appreciate interactions as the building blocks of child development, rather than fully formed developmental relationships as a whole. Working with children’s helpers across contexts and age groups, we encounter many settings in which educators may not have the luxury of time and duration to build a full relationship with children and families. Nevertheless, their moment-to-moment interactions matter a great deal, and such interactions can be seen and described in very specific ways. Through Simple Interactions, we want to help front-line providers, directors, coaches, and system leaders across the early childhood education system find practical ways to capture and grow the active ingredient of human interactions. Three practical questions guided our shift from talking about relationships to capturing and understanding concrete and tangible interactions.

1. How do we support developmental interactions with front-line providers?
2. How do we support developmental interactions through those who support front-line providers?

3. How can we best communicate the importance of developmental interactions throughout the early childhood education system?

Here, we share some of our strategies in supporting early childhood professionals across care contexts, age and culture in relation to these three questions.

## Supporting Developmental Interactions With Front-Line Providers

When we ask teachers or caregivers about their days or weeks, we often hear stories of grand moments of achievement (a child taking her first steps, learning to read, throwing a ball), or grand moments of setback (a well-planned lesson that did not work as hoped, a particular child that does not want to engage, losing points on a measure of quality). Sometimes, it is easy to overlook the seemingly mundane moments that lead up to these more visible achievements or setbacks. Highlighting these ordinary moments can affirm that the educators’ daily work is vitally important to the development of the children in their care.

How do we draw attention to simple, everyday moments? One process that has worked well in our efforts is to watch, observe, film, and talk with providers about their everyday work. To do this in childcare settings, we:

- capture on video the unscripted and un-staged interactions that normally take place between adults and children;
- identify moments of interactions that exemplify one or more characteristics of developmental interactions, as illustrated by the Simple Interactions Tool (a one-page learning tool that gives a common language to describe what we are noticing, appreciating, and working to grow);

- use short video clips of such moments as material for professional learning and discussion, focusing on what is already working in daily practices.

Through these community learning sessions, teachers and caregivers examine and discuss their own practice and learn from the practices of others. It can be rewarding and affirming for teachers to slow down, especially in the company of supportive peers, in order to appreciate how they have contributed to children's development through the ordinary moments of interactions. Appreciating the work of others gives value to, but also creates a climate of safety and trust, for learning, exploring, and growing together (Wanless & Winters, 2018).

### Supporting the Growth of Developmental Interactions Through Those who Support Front-Line Providers

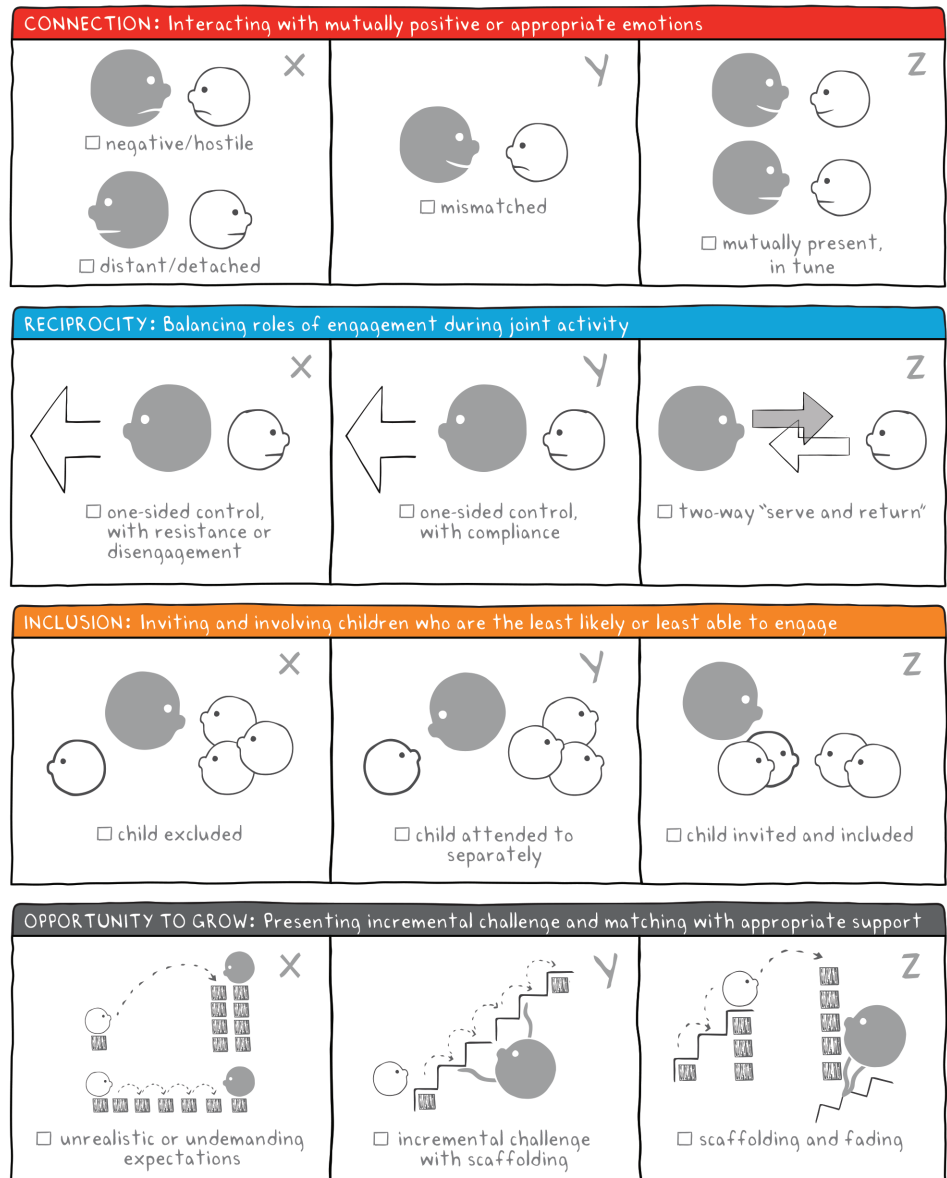
There are many early childhood professionals who have transitioned from working directly with children and families into roles that support front-line staff. In their work as supervisors, mentors, and coaches, they use their own relationship-based experiences and skills to help front-line teachers. As intuitive as it might be to value relationships and interactions between adults and children, many coaches and mentors are also very intentional about nurturing similar relationships and interactions between the adults within the system.

Those who support front-line providers recognize the importance of the learning environments for adults. They approach adult-adult interactions from a place of respect, trust, and mutual growth. They communicate the worth and value in the daily work of early childhood, knowing that each person has something to offer and is constantly developing. Using

the same foundation of developmental interactions, mentors and coaches create spaces for front-line teachers to take risks, struggle, make mistakes, persist, and have room and support to keep trying. It can be a "parallel process," where seasoned professionals use their experiences and skills interacting with children and families to do for the teachers what we imagine the best teachers do for children.

## SIMPLE INTERACTIONS TOOL

Noticing and Appreciating Adult-Child Interactions Across Developmental Settings



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## Communicating the Importance of Developmental Interactions

One important leadership responsibility of many educators, researchers, and advocates is to communicate the work of early childhood with diverse audiences, including community and business leaders, funders, legislators, and policymakers. Over the recent decades, two strategies have been effective in the United States: one, translating brain science to elevate the importance of the early years; two, formulating the return on investment economics equation to make the case for increasing public investment. As broad bipartisan support materializes into expanded public investments for early learning opportunities, the crucial question shifts from *why* we need to invest to *how* we can invest effectively. Informed by the science of developmental relationships, we need a third communication strategy to focus investments on promoting human interactions with children and the grown-ups around them.

For those of us who have the responsibility and privilege to communicate and advocate on behalf of young children, we can explicitly and intentionally make the case for the importance of developmental interactions. One way to advocate and communicate that is to ask one simple, but essential question: How do our practices, or programs, or policies encourage, enrich, and empower the human interactions around the children? This question, both broad (about any decision) and specific (focused on interactions), can rally stakeholders across the system to think about with whom children are having these interactions,

who can support the grown-ups who directly interact with children (teachers and families), and how to better promote the parallel “adult to adult” interactions between coaches, supervisors, and mentors with teachers and families. It can be a lens with which we evaluate our decisions by their potential or realized impact on human relationships, from policy issues such as subsidy rates, to program decisions such as staffing, or practice choices such as classroom activities. Such disciplined discussions and decision-making can help build a relationship-focused foundation to improve quality and equity across all levels of the early childhood education profession.

### Authors' Note:

For more information on the Simple Interactions approach and initiatives and to access the resources and tools, please visit [www.simpleinteractions.org](http://www.simpleinteractions.org).

### References

Li, J. & Julian, M. (2012). “Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of ‘what works’ across intervention settings.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 157–166.

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## A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

Encourage, Enrich, and Empower Adult-Child Interactions

