

POWERFUL INTERACTIONS: A FIRST LOOK

Interactions are the exchanges in words and gestures that you have with others — in particular, the exchanges that you as a teacher have with young children.

Each day and throughout the day you have dozens of interactions with children, in groups and one-on-one. There are times when you make comments, ask questions, provide information, or give instructions. At other times, you might acknowledge a child's effort, make requests, or correct something a child says. You may give hugs or pats on the back. You likely smile, frown, point, or wave. You interact when you greet children in the morning or say good-bye at the end of the day, during whole-group experiences and small-group activities, and as children work and play, both inside and outdoors. Even during transitions and daily routines you are interacting with children.

Giving your interactions some careful thinking is important because research shows that who you are, and how and what you say and do as you engage with children, makes a difference in what they learn about themselves, others, and the world (Hamre & Pianta 2005). This means that every one of your interactions holds the potential to make a positive impact on how children feel about themselves and about learning, as well as on what and how they learn.

Let's look at a few examples of the kinds of interactions that have a positive impact on children. Do you see yourself in any of these examples?

- Wilma greets Lucy and her grandfather in the morning, and with a smile on her face says, "Good morning, Lucy. We've been waiting for you so you can help us take a look inside this pomegranate." From her teacher, Lucy gets the message that she is an important and special person. She also hears the name of a new fruit that is fun to say.



- Robert asks 6-month-old Baili, “Are you ready for me to pick you up so we can change that wet diaper?” He waits for her to look at him and hold out her arms before reaching down. From this conversation, Baili learns about the give-and-take of communicating with another person. She also learns she can get her “I’m ready now” message across, and that Robert listens to her.
- Ms. Jackson sits beside 3-year-old Ryo on the couch in her family child care home. She listens to what he tells her about his picture of the fire engine, and she writes his words along the bottom edge of his drawing. From Ms. Jackson, Ryo is learning that the words he says can be written down and that his ideas are valuable enough to be recorded.
- Mr. Walden listens as 6-year-old Malika reads *Ten Apples Up On Top!* After a few pages, she says, “I can’t read the rest yet.” Mr. Walden grins at her and says, “I wish Dr. Seuss could hear you read this book! Maybe tomorrow, you and I can work on the next few pages together.” Malika is reminded why she loves coming to school, and finds out that she won’t be left to figure out the rest of the book alone.

Unfortunately, not all interactions children have with their teachers are so productive or positive. Some interactions send unintended messages that undermine children's confidence, take away the joy of exploration, and interfere with learning. Do you see yourself in any of these examples?

- When 2-year-old Fiona continually hears from her teacher, “Don’t run,” “No touching,” and “Shhh,” she gets the message that her excitement, curiosity, and language are not welcome.
- Running late, Ms. Smith dismisses Carla’s question about bugs with a brusque, “Give me a minute!” From their quick exchange, Carla understands that her interest in bugs isn’t important. She may become hesitant to ask questions. Later, during choice time, she sits quietly beside Damon at the computer rather than choosing her favorite area, the science center.
- Each day, as Joey waits for his turn to use the bathroom, his teacher tells him, “Just stand there in line quietly.” Joey is learning that school is boring and that one way to make it more interesting is to fool around or start a fight.
- Ms. Annie sits beside Shantelle, who has just made a pattern using large blue bears and small orange bears. Ms. Annie says, “What color are the bears in your pattern?” Smiling, Shantelle responds blue and red. As Ms. Annie quizzes her in several different ways to get her to say orange, Shantelle’s delight with her pattern fades, her smile disappears, and finally she pushes her chair away from the table.

Positive or negative, the quality and intentionality of your interactions with children matter. This is where Powerful Interactions come into play.

What Is a “Powerful Interaction”?

Teachers and children interact with each other all day long. Let’s call these “everyday” interactions. In the typical classroom, most everyday interactions are perfectly fine — warm, caring, and encouraging. Sometimes they happen spontaneously, sometimes in a rush, often with little thought about a purpose. Children may or may not learn from them. Sometimes children learn what the teacher intends to teach, but other times they learn unintended lessons.

Not every interaction a teacher has with children can be — or even needs to be — an interaction that promotes their learning. But we might expect that many would have learning as the goal. This may sound a bit harsh, but research finds that interactions in which teachers *intentionally* promote learning are few and far between (Early et al. 2005; Pianta 2010).

At the other end of the continuum from everyday interactions are what we call “Powerful Interactions” — very intentional and purposeful exchanges between a teacher and a child that can have a significant and highly positive impact on learning.

In a Powerful Interaction, the teacher intentionally connects with a particular child in order to extend that child’s learning.

You launch a Powerful Interaction when you make a conscious decision to say or do something that conveys to the child, “I notice you, I’m interested in you, and I want to know you better.” This moment of personal connection builds upon the trust and security that exists between the two of you. Within a trusting and secure relationship, a child is more open to learn from the guidance and instruction you offer.

Let’s watch as preschool teacher Ms. Pat has a Powerful Interaction with 3-year-old Jo-Jo.

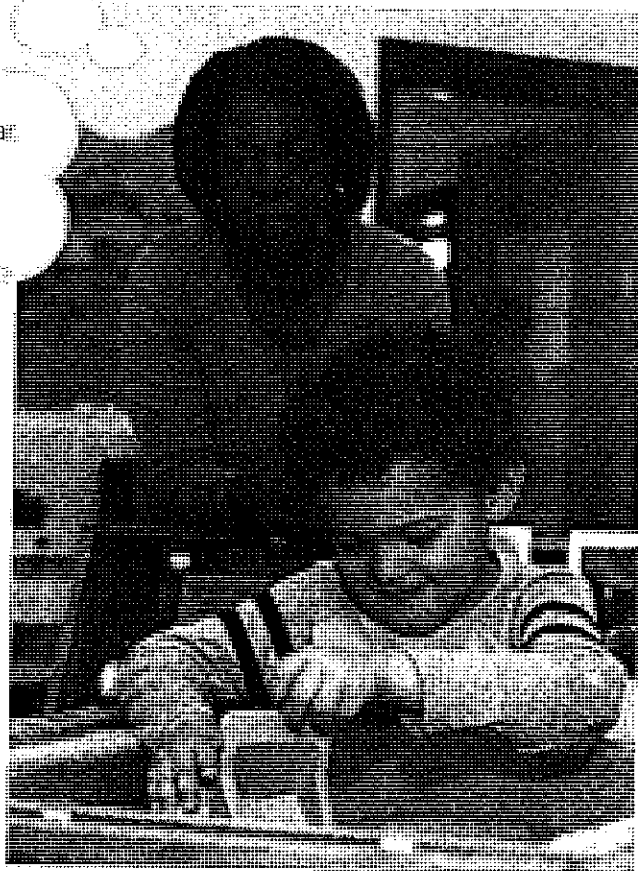
Ms. Pat quickly checks the classroom to see how everyone is doing. Glancing over at the sand table, she sees Jo-Jo playing with a dump truck.

“Things are pretty calm here; the morning has gone smoothly so far. Jo-Jo is at the sand table by himself. This would be a good time to work one-on-one for a few minutes with Jo-Jo.”

Ms. Pat goes to the sand table and kneels down to **connect** with Jo-Jo.

Ms. Pat: “Jo-Jo, I see you playing with the dump truck again. You play with this truck a lot. And I see you’re using the shovel to fill it up with sand.”

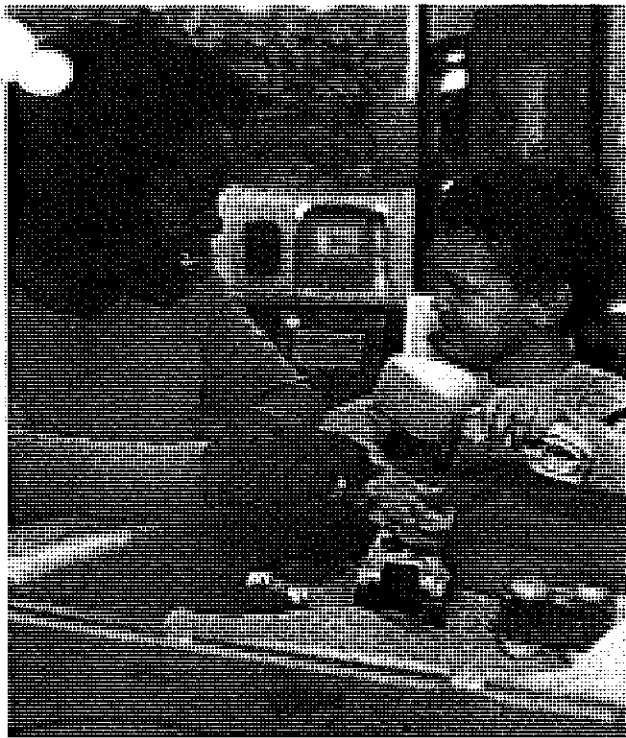
Jo-Jo looks up at Ms. Pat and smiles. He puts the shovel down and pushes the truck toward her. She smiles back at him.



"Mmmm. I've made a good connection. How can I use it to extend Jo-Jo's learning? I wonder if he can explain how dump trucks work?"

Ms. Pat: "You know so much about trucks, Jo-Jo. I saw a dump truck yesterday, and I have a question for you. Can you teach me how the dump truck works?"

Jo-Jo points to the lever on the side of the truck.



"He does know how dump trucks work, but he didn't use the word **lever**. I'll teach him the word."

Ms. Pat: "Oh! To dump the sand, you push the lever."

Jo-Jo: "Push a lever."

He takes her hand and puts it on the lever. They push down together, and the sand dumps out. They giggle.

Jo-Jo: "Push! ... Push more!"

Together they begin filling up the truck again.



How Do You Turn an Everyday Interaction into a Powerful Interaction?

In just a few minutes, Ms. Pat had a Powerful Interaction with Jo-Jo. Her interaction was a Powerful Interaction because she was deliberate about noticing the opportunity and preparing for the exchange. In order to make her teaching more effective and his learning meaningful, she connected with Jo-Jo to activate and deepen her relationship with him by sharing his interest in trucks, and she intentionally extended Jo-Jo's learning by introducing a new and interesting word.

Like Ms. Pat, you can make what could have been just another everyday interaction ("Just 5 more minutes in the sandbox, Jo-Jo!") a Powerful Interaction. A Powerful Interaction has three steps.

Step One — Be Present

When you are "present" you are in the moment and self-aware, and therefore you can be more open to the interesting and significant things that children do. By physically and mentally slowing down for just a few moments, you can pay better attention. This frame of mind allows you to be *intentional*; that is, before you act, to tune in to what a child is doing at that moment, how you are feeling, and what you want to accomplish. Being intentional in this way means you think about what to say and do in the interaction to be most effective as a teacher for that child.



Because Ms. Pat was alert to what all the children were doing, she observed Jo-Jo in the sandbox. She took a second to collect her thoughts before joining him for a Powerful Interaction.

Step Two — Connect

You acknowledge and validate children by letting them know you see them, are interested in them, and want to spend time with them. Connecting in this way awakens the sense of trust and security that previous positive interactions between you and the child are helping to develop. As your relationships with

children grow deeper, children feel more confident and focused, and they are more open to learning from you.

Positive relationships, like the one evident between Ms. Pat and Jo-Jo, lay the foundation for children's exploration and learning. Positive relationships also enhance the likelihood of children's engagement and achievement in school (Center for Social and Emotional Education n.d.; Gallagher & Mayer 2008; Howes & Ritchie 2002).



The smile Jo-Jo gave Ms. Pat when she approached him was evidence that they had connected and were building on an already positive relationship. Ms. Pat reinforced that relationship by joining Jo-Jo in what he was already doing, kneeling beside him, showing interest in his play, and acknowledging his expertise with dump trucks.

Step Three — Extend Learning

When you extend a child's knowledge and understanding hand-in-hand with nurturing a positive relationship with that child, you create the optimal condition for you to teach and the child to learn (Birch & Ladd 1997). During the fertile minutes of a Powerful Interaction, children are open to your adding to their knowledge, encouraging them to try new things and think in new ways, modeling language, introducing interesting new vocabulary, and other learning possibilities.



To extend Jo-Jo's learning, Ms. Pat decided to ask a question that invited the child to consolidate and share his knowledge ("Can you teach me how the dump truck works?") and then she introduced him to the word *lever* ("To dump the sand, you push the lever").

A Cumulative Effect

Often when we think about steps in a process, we think about them coming sequentially — first, then second, then third. Instead, these three Powerful Interaction steps are cumulative — they build on one another. You begin with Step One by stopping for a moment to **be present**. In this inward frame of mind, you can decide to *add* Step Two, choosing what to say and do to **connect** with the child. Staying present and connected, you then *add* Step Three, as you select and apply a teaching strategy to **extend the child's learning**.

In this book, we describe the three steps separately and in detail to help you understand the importance of each one. Once you have practiced and are more comfortable having Powerful Interactions with children, each step will flow naturally from the previous one. Each would be visible as separate from the others only if you were able to watch an instant replay of yourself in slow motion. (In fact, we'll return to this useful idea of instant replay in the last chapter, "Powerful Interactions: You Make the Difference!")

In real life, as a Powerful Interaction unfolds, the three steps are apt to happen very quickly. The whole of Ms. Pat's Powerful Interaction with Jo-Jo, for example, might have lasted just a minute or two, from her seeing him at the sand table to his repeating the new word, *lever*.

What's in It for You?

Clearly, Powerful Interactions deliver wonderful benefits for children. You'll find that children thrive from having deeper relationships with you. Their confidence will build, their engagement and motivation will increase, and as a result, they'll become more successful learners.

We trust, too, that you will come to see the positive effect Powerful Interactions can have on you! Transforming just some of your everyday interactions with children into Powerful Interactions will make your teaching more effective and your work more rewarding. Here are some benefits to look forward to:

- **Your interactions with children will become more intentional.**

Practicing the three steps of Powerful Interactions (Be Present, Connect, Extend Learning) helps you make more intentional decisions about what to say and do. In a Powerful Interaction, you are thoughtful and alert, paying attention to yourself, your emotions, your actions, and your words. You draw upon your knowledge both of individual children and of how children typically develop; and you learn to respond deliberately, rather than react. Thus, you can more effectively support children's learning, because you are able to anticipate your impact on the child and the child's impact on you.

Since you introduced me to Powerful Interactions, my assistant and I find that we are teaching with intent rather than on autopilot. The result is that we have a greater understanding of each individual child's development and can respond in ways that are appropriate for that child.

— Corrine (a preschool teacher)

● **Your instruction will become more individualized.**

In a Powerful Interaction, you are focused on that child. You're observing what the child is doing, and you're making instructional decisions that fit the child's need right in that moment. As the Powerful Interaction evolves, you can see whether your guidance is effective; and if not, you immediately can adjust accordingly — use a different word, offer a new challenge, help the child make a link, or offer a different material. You're individualizing instruction in a highly effective way.

"[Intentional teachers] have a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning."

— Epstein 2007, 1



● **The climate in your classroom will improve.**

Through Powerful Interactions, your relationships with children grow stronger. These positive relationships set an example for children to follow, and their peer relationships improve, as well. In this environment, children are calmer, behavior problems are reduced, and more time can be devoted to learning (Meyers & Morris 2009; Phillips et al. 1987; Vick Whittaker & Jones Harden 2010).

My classroom is more relaxed and children are competing less for my attention. My interactions with them seem to satisfy them more now because I'm so much more attentive when I'm with them. I'm really talking with them rather than just giving them the "Good jobs."

— Darice (a preschool teacher)

● **Your partnerships with families will grow.**

Powerful Interactions allow you to observe children making discoveries and practicing new skills. You have wonderful, individualized, specific stories to share with family members, which bring you closer together.

● **Your teaching practice will grow richer and become more enjoyable.**

Powerful Interactions energize you and your teaching. As you learn to quiet the mental static that keeps you from being present, you give yourself the gift of truly seeing and being with a child. As children gradually reveal their individual interests and personalities to you, your Powerful Interactions with them are moments to remember. Over time, as you develop the Powerful Interactions habit, these moments, and the feelings of joy and pride they bring, are more and more frequent.

When I consciously knew that my goal was to have Powerful Interactions with just four children each day, I could relax and not feel rushed.

My first happened during Morning Centers, and I found myself enjoying — I mean REALLY enjoying — that child. I felt that same excitement when interacting with the others that day, and I ended up giving hugs.

I think the children see my joy and that I truly value our conversations, and they seem to open up and offer more than before. ... I look forward to each day and can't wait to sit down to talk with children to see what I can learn from them and about them.

— Darlene (a preschool teacher)

As you explore this book, you'll find all the information you need to begin transforming everyday interactions with children into Powerful Interactions. You'll discover strategies to use to **be present, connect, and extend children's learning**. Some may seem familiar and reinforce what you're already doing; some strategies will be new and can take your teaching in exciting new directions.

Within these pages you'll also read many stories of teachers already using Powerful Interactions to individualize their instruction to each child's interests, needs, and abilities. Like them, you'll soon realize that using Powerful Interactions helps you make a positive difference in the lives of children and their families ... which, in turn, will make a positive difference in your life as a teacher.

We think you'll enjoy the process! ✨