

# Handout 1.1 Interaction – Ask the Expert

## Dr. Jeanette McCollum Answers Questions about Early Interactions



### What Does the Research Say?

Research on the importance of early interactions is very clear. In the child development research, specific characteristics of interactions have been linked to virtually every area of early development and learning in children, both during the same developmental period, and as predictive to later development and learning. Areas where research studies have explored these linkages have included relationships with parents and caregivers, peer relationships and friendships, language development, self-regulation, executive functioning, and even later academic achievement and learning. Three characteristics of early interactions, in particular, have been linked to many different types of development and learning outcomes. These three are sensitivity, responsiveness, and contingency, all of which tie what the interaction partner does to the child's focus of attention, intentions, and emotions. Although most of the developmental research conducted in this area has been with children who are typically developing, the same linkages also have been found in studies of children with or at risk for having disabilities.

Intervention research based on these same principles also has established these linkages. Adults, whether parents or other caregivers, interventionists from different backgrounds, and even other young children, can change the characteristics of their own interactions with target children, to become more sensitive, responsive and contingent. While less common, experimental research has also demonstrated the link between specific strategies based on these principles and changes in specific areas of children's development and learning. But there are limitations to what we know. With some exceptions related to bodies of research around a specific disability (such as autism) or a specific type of child outcome (e.g., language development), both development and intervention research is still sparse when viewed across different populations of children, different developmental and learning outcomes, and different models for fostering these three qualities of interaction.

### Why Is This Important?

An understanding of the three primary characteristics of interpersonal interaction that have been linked to children's development and learning is important in at least three different ways. First, for interventionists, it can become a pervasive way of thinking that makes them continually aware of their own and others' interactions with children, and gives them a way of interpreting what they are observing. Second, this research provides a foundation for understanding and bringing into focus many different intervention models and individual strategies represented in the research literature. The widely used Hanen approach for promoting language development in children who are language delayed is one example. In that model, using the basic principles of observing and responding to a child's communicative signals, parents, teachers and other caregivers learn to use strategies such as imitation and expansion to join the child's focus of attention and establish turn-taking sequences. There are many other models that are also founded on these principles and that incorporate similar strategies. But the pervasiveness of these three principles in early childhood

education and intervention goes beyond full-scale models, and can be found in widely-accepted practice strategies such as following the child's lead and extending on the child's interest.

## Why Is This Important for Children with Disabilities?

Third, this research may be particularly important with children with disabilities. Depending on the disability as well as on other characteristics that would apply to any child, the child may communicate in unfamiliar or unexpected ways that make it harder for the interaction partner to understand and respond contingently to the child's focus of attention, intentions, and emotions. This may be easiest to understand for children with low incidence disabilities such as visual impairment or cerebral palsy, where the child may signal in ways that are not easily interpreted by the adult. But it may also apply to children whose verbal or non-verbal communications differs from more typical interactions because they have emotional or cognitive disabilities that change their ways of interacting. The same considerations apply to a child's interactions with other children, who might also find it hard to interpret what their peer is feeling, understanding or trying to communicate; perhaps for this reason, socially competent peers, who already possess skills in adapting to social partners, are often selected for studies in which the peer takes the role of interventionist. In general, the particular interaction abilities of the child may influence the child's opportunities for interaction as well as the quality of the interpersonal exchanges that the child experiences. So observing to figure out that child's ways of showing interest and initiating interaction is critical to responding contingently.

## Bottom Line

The research on early interactions has shown that whether at home, in early childhood classrooms, or other environments, family members, practitioners, and peers can use a number of evidence-based practices and interventions to promote children's social-emotional, social, communication, cognitive, and problem-solving skills.

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## About the Expert

**Jeanette McCollum** is retired from the University of Illinois, where she developed, administered, and taught in the graduate program in Early Childhood Special Education within the Department of Special Education. With colleagues, she developed the PIWI approach to parent-child interaction intervention, and also conducted cross-cultural research on parent-child interaction in families whose children had disabilities. Currently she serves as a consultant on several state projects related to the quality of inclusive early childhood programs for children with and without disabilities and their families.

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