RESILIENCE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Guide 2: Secure and stable relationships

A framework to promote resilience in children and families
We are The Benevolent Society
We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives.

We’re Australia’s first charity. We’re a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we’ve helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

Authors
The Resilience Practice Framework was developed in partnership by the Parenting Research Centre and The Benevolent Society. The framework was developed by:

Laura Baldwin
Senior Research Officer, Parenting Research Centre

Dr Robyn Mildon
Director, Knowledge Exchange, Parenting Research Centre

Greg Antcliff
Director, Professional Practice, The Benevolent Society

Acknowledgements
The Practice Resource Guides are based on the original guides in PracticeWise Evidence-Based Services (PWEBs) database, drawn from child and family therapeutic intervention outcome studies (PracticeWise, 2009), adapted with permission.

June 2015
Table of Contents

What the research tells us 6
Evidence informed practices:
  Teachable moments 8
  Following your child's lead 10
  Attending to your child 12
  Listening, talking and playing more 14
  Engaging an infant 16
  Descriptive praise 18
  Family time 21
  Family routines 23
References 25
Secure and stable relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of resilience (resilience strings)</th>
<th>Evidence informed practice</th>
<th>Practice elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td>Teachable moments</td>
<td>Use of everyday activities and routines to extend a child’s knowledge and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing books and stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td>Following your child’s lead</td>
<td>Allow child independence over activity choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Competencies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment on child’s activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Praise child’s ideas and creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Friendships</td>
<td>Attending to your child</td>
<td>Use eye contact and open body language to let the child know that the parent is paying attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refrain from asking questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure Base</td>
<td>Listening, talking and playing more</td>
<td>Describe activities and introduce new words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talents and Interests</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective and elaboration statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Competencies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Simplify language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Friendships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pause regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure Base</td>
<td>Engaging an infant</td>
<td>Provide education: Explanation that early interactions with their infant plays a part in the connecting and attachment processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competencies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have the parent smile at the infant and wait, watch for response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extend the interaction exercise with other expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure Base</td>
<td>Descriptive praise</td>
<td>Explain the role of attention in maintaining behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talents and Interests</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify behaviour parent wishes to increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competencies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Practise providing descriptive praise, e.g. practise difference between ‘good boy/girl’ and clear, descriptive praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide strategies to enhance praise, e.g. parent’s positive body language, ensure timing of praise is immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure Base</td>
<td>Family time and family routines</td>
<td>Family time, e.g. bedtime stories, sharing hobbies, ‘special time’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Values</td>
<td></td>
<td>Family routines. Guidelines to assist parents to create new routines to decrease stress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What the research tells us

Of the many different relationships people form over the course of the life span, the relationship between parent and child is among the most important. Positive parent–child interactions are characterised by warmth, acceptance, praise and positive attention. The reciprocity that develops as both parent and child respond and adapt to each other is the basis of a mutually satisfying relationship, and offers the security needed to help a child feel good about themselves. Having parents who are available and actively involved with their children is critical for positive child development, and is a key protective factor for children as they develop through early childhood and adolescence (Teti & Candelaria, 2002; Glascoe & Leew, 2010; Landry, Smith, Swank & Miller-Loncar, 2006; Guttenetag et al., 2006).

There are a number of common parenting practices that are linked with secure, predictable and dependable parent–child relationships. The majority of these strategies share a foundation in operant and social learning theory. For example, critical practice components of evidence-based parent training programs to strengthen parent–child interactions and improve child behaviour include teaching parents to use positive attention and tangible rewards (Chorpita, Daleiden & Weisz, 2005; Garland, Hawley, Brookman-Frazee & Hurlbut, 2007). Other highly effective strategies to improve the quality of parent–child interactions include teaching parents active listening skills, such as reflecting back the child’s words, teaching parents to interact with their children during play by allowing the child to take the lead and select play activities, and providing age-appropriate toys and activities for children (Wyatt Kaminski, Valle, Filene & Boyle, 2008). The therapeutic content of these practices has consistently been linked with stronger parent–child relationships, improved child behaviours and improved child emotional wellbeing (Brooks, 2005).

The following describes the way in which the application of these parenting practices can strengthen resilience and promote improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

**Promoting warmth, acceptance and positive attention**
Parent–child interactions that are characterised by warmth, acceptance, praise and positive attention help a child feel good about themselves.

Parents can use descriptive statements or give information about objects, events and activities that occur around them or their child. Listening and extending on what a child has said can be used to strengthen a child’s curiosity, encourage imaginative ideas and to have fun (Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006). Responding to what a child says or does in a meaningful way involves eye contact and body language to show enthusiasm and demonstrate to the child that the caregiver is paying attention to them. All of these things combine to show the child that they are great company and that the caregiver is deeply interested in what they are doing. This in turn helps to build confidence and trust. It is also important for children to see how positive interactions work, so that they can use them in their own interactions with others.

**The importance of parent interactions to promote language development**
The quality of the child’s home learning environment is more influential in the development of intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammoons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart 2004). Numerous studies have substantiated the association between engagement in literacy activities, such as reading or telling stories, and children’s language and cognitive development (Bennett, Weigel & Martin, 2002; Farver, Xu, Eppe & Lonigan, 2006; Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1994; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Taylor, Clayton & Rowley, 2004). In homes where there are a range of literacy resources and where adults converse and read to children regularly, young children develop oral language skills earlier than children whose homes do not provide such opportunities (Farver et al., 2006). Longitudinal evidence indicates that improving school readiness for children who may be socially or economically disadvantaged is associated with greater functioning throughout school and into adulthood (Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezy & Ramirez, 1999). For example, a child’s communication skills are associated with greater ability to regulate behaviour and therefore avoid behaviour problems, choose effective means of coping, and understand and cope with adversity (Condly, 2006). Furthermore, practices which support families to facilitate their child’s learning enable parents to be more knowledgeable and confident in their own abilities to provide support to children in this domain.

The importance of parent interactions to promote language development
**Strengthening family time and routines**

Regular and positive interactions between family members are important for every member of the family. This is particularly the case for families whose interactions are predominantly made up of negative or heavily consequence-driven exchanges. Children develop resilience in families that communicate well, work together to solve problems, and participate in enjoyable activities together. Routine gatherings, such as shared mealtimes, form the foundation for rituals that strengthen emotional bonds between family members (Kubicek, 2002).

Observational studies suggest that common family routines that are rich in verbal and non-verbal affective expressions offer opportunities for conversations about feelings and problem-solving family issues (Herot, 2002). Family time and routines offer high levels of stability, warmth and cohesion, which can be particularly important in times of stress (Cowan, Work & Wyman, 1997). Maintaining regular household rules and routines gives children a sense of security and can make it easier for children to manage stressors such as the birth of a new child, a divorce, the illness or death of a family member, or a move to a new city or country (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Having regular, predictable routines around daily family activities helps children to feel safe, secure and relaxed.

**Guide 2: Secure and stable relationships**

is designed to assist practitioners to teach parents important parent–child interaction skills, with a view to fostering good relationships between parents and children early in the child’s life, as well as giving parents positive parenting strategies to help shape appropriate behaviour in children.

**Teaching skills to increase secure and stable relationships**

The next section outlines in detail the name, the description, the rationale and the examples of each individual skill that is addressed in this module. The description is used as a brief way to describe what the parent skill means. The rationale is written as an example of how you could explain it to the parent the first time you use it, before you start teaching. In some cases teaching guidelines are also included, to inform you of important points to remember when teaching that skill.

When teaching the following skills, you will need to give the parent an opportunity to practise. Providing the parent with a model or demonstration of the skill first and then having the parent practise will lead to a higher level of success. Having a parent practise with their own child during sessions with practitioners has been consistently associated with more effective outcomes when working with parents. This is in contrast to training where no practise takes place, such as attendance at a parent information session. The chance to practise allows the parent to have a go, be reinforced for what they do well, and ensures the practitioner can provide feedback for mastery of the skills. See Guide 6: Practitioners’ skills: Parent skills training which outlines a detailed process of how you do this.
Teachable moments

WHO
Parent/caregiver; toddler, pre-school aged child, school-aged child

WHERE
Anywhere

HOW
One-on-one parent training; practitioner modelling

This skill is about incidental teaching. It happens when parents take advantage of opportunities in everyday activities and routines to extend a child’s knowledge and skills. It uses a child’s interests and natural motivation to learn new things and maximises the opportunities for verbal exchanges. Making the most of teachable moments from an early age gives kids a good head start for a range of academic outcomes.

Outcomes
• Encourages language development
• Increases quality time between parents and children
• Helps children to develop skills and confidence for reading
• Increases academic success.

How you do it:

You can provide parents with a range of ideas that encourage and promote language development.

For example:
• Letting kids see parents reading magazines, newspapers, instructions, books, signs, maps, and the computer.
• Pointing out words from other languages, for example, saying, “An Aboriginal word for children is ‘boorai’,“ or “That’s an Italian word, can you say that?“.
• Listening for and talking about sounds in the environment.
• Telling stories, singing songs and using rhymes.
• Encouraging and attending to your child when they are telling you a story.
• Looking at books at a library, in the community or at home.
• Thinking out loud, for example, saying “I think it might rain. We should take an umbrella.”
• Copying sounds and helping kids work out what the beginning sounds are in words.
• Asking and answering questions.
Tuning in to the environment around the child is useful because it lets kids know that they can obtain information from reading, watching and paying attention to the small things. You can provide parents with ideas that encourage kids to tune into things around them.

For example:

• Talking about everyday activities like bath time, bedtime or meal times.
• Letting kids see parents looking at pictures to get specific information (for example, “This picture shows me how to work the DVD player.”)
• Naming things, people and actions.
• Encouraging kids to play with pictures, games or puzzles.
• Pointing out writing (letters, words, symbols) wherever they see it.
• Using lots of descriptive language that teaches about concepts (such as size, colour, shape, quantities and qualities).
• Playing matching games with real objects, shapes, pictures or words.
• Playing games with kids to help them notice details, for example, “Look for the person wearing red shoes.”
• Helping kids get to know the letters in their names, especially the first letter.

Helpful hints and tips:

• Bite-sized moments work.
• The ideas listed above often work better with small children for short (one to two minute) interactions used frequently throughout the day, rather than long but infrequent interactions.
• Watch for the child’s cues.
• Encourage the parent to be aware of their child’s cues when they are doing activities. Suggest the parent moves on to something else if the child loses interest. Explain to the parent that there are many common and normal reasons why children move from activity to activity without finishing them. Knowing this can help prevent parents from becoming frustrated and angry with their child.
• Interactions should always be positive, fun and enriching.
• Encourage the parent to stop the activity or switch to another one if they feel agitated or angry.
Following your child’s lead

WHO
Parent/caregiver; toddler, pre-school aged child

WHERE
Home, during daily activities and events

HOW
One-on-one parent training; modelling

‘Following your child’s lead’ means watching your child and responding to what they say or do in a meaningful way. It goes beyond just giving descriptive praise and involves eye contact and body language to let the child know that the parent is paying attention to them. All of these things combine to show the child that they are great company and that the parent is deeply interested in what they are doing. This in turn helps to build confidence and trust.

Outcomes
• Boosts the child’s self-esteem and confidence
• Increases the child’s independence
• Increases the quality of parent–child interactions.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide rationale to parent**

• Children learn best when they are interested in the activity. Encourage the parent to notice what things interest their child.
• By following their child’s lead, the parent is helping their child to learn something new by keeping their attention focused a little bit longer than they might have done on their own.
• It also sends the message to the child that their parent is interested in them, finds them interesting and thinks their play is valuable.
• When parents try to direct their child during play, the child might find the experience unfulfilling because they might feel they are hearing lots of commands and corrections.
• Too much parent-directed play might affect the child’s imagination and creative skills, restricting their ability to play independently.

**STEP 2: Encourage the parent to let the child choose, and then follow their ideas and imagination**

• Encourage the parent to let their child choose the game or activity whenever possible and when safe. Encourage the parent to then let the child organise the activity and decide the rules and how things are done. This doesn’t have to be a time for teaching—there will be plenty of other opportunities for teaching to occur.
• Explain to the parent that their aim is to send the message to their child that they are interested in them and in what they’re doing and that the child can safely do the things they want while the parent is around.

**STEP 3: Get close**

• Encourage the parent to physically get down to the child’s level and try to make eye contact as often as they can (connection moment).
• For example, the parent might:
  » kneel next to their child
  » have the child sit on their lap
  » sit on the floor
  » hold their child
  » sit next to their child on the couch

**Following your child’s lead**

**WHO**
Parent/caregiver; toddler, pre-school aged child

**WHERE**
Home, during daily activities and events

**HOW**
One-on-one parent training; modelling

‘Following your child’s lead’ means watching your child and responding to what they say or do in a meaningful way. It goes beyond just giving descriptive praise and involves eye contact and body language to let the child know that the parent is paying attention to them. All of these things combine to show the child that they are great company and that the parent is deeply interested in what they are doing. This in turn helps to build confidence and trust.

Outcomes
• Boosts the child’s self-esteem and confidence
• Increases the child’s independence
• Increases the quality of parent–child interactions.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide rationale to parent**

• Children learn best when they are interested in the activity. Encourage the parent to notice what things interest their child.
• By following their child’s lead, the parent is helping their child to learn something new by keeping their attention focused a little bit longer than they might have done on their own.
• It also sends the message to the child that their parent is interested in them, finds them interesting and thinks their play is valuable.
• When parents try to direct their child during play, the child might find the experience unfulfilling because they might feel they are hearing lots of commands and corrections.
• Too much parent-directed play might affect the child’s imagination and creative skills, restricting their ability to play independently.

**STEP 2: Encourage the parent to let the child choose, and then follow their ideas and imagination**

• Encourage the parent to let their child choose the game or activity whenever possible and when safe. Encourage the parent to then let the child organise the activity and decide the rules and how things are done. This doesn’t have to be a time for teaching—there will be plenty of other opportunities for teaching to occur.
• Explain to the parent that their aim is to send the message to their child that they are interested in them and in what they’re doing and that the child can safely do the things they want while the parent is around.

**STEP 3: Get close**

• Encourage the parent to physically get down to the child’s level and try to make eye contact as often as they can (connection moment).
• For example, the parent might:
  » kneel next to their child
  » have the child sit on their lap
  » sit on the floor
  » hold their child
  » sit next to their child on the couch
STEP 4: Comment on the child’s activity without redirecting the child’s attention

- Encourage the parent to say something to the child about what they are doing, for example: “I see you like the red truck” (naming their initiative).
- Explain that describing what their child is doing shows that they are paying attention and are interested.
- Reassure the parent that there is no need to ask questions. Simply describe and comment on what the child is doing. This makes the child aware of positive attention and support whilst they play, and helps them to feel confident to continue exploring and learning.

STEP 5: Praise the child’s ideas and creativity (also see Descriptive praise page 18)

- The parent can also provide lots of praise for their child’s activities and abilities.
- A child’s play might not be logical—for example, cars might be able to fly and horses able to talk. This is normal and common in children’s play and can reflect a child’s developing cognitive, emotional and social skills.
- A parent might comment on this by saying: “I liked the game we played about the talking horse. It made me laugh a lot!”.

Using ‘Following your child’s lead’ as an opportunity to describe feelings (naming emotions):

- Parents can tune into their child’s play and activities to provide explanations for their child’s feelings and emotions. When the ball rolls out of reach or the mobile stops turning, the toddler feels frustration. They then feel relief when the parent retrieves the ball or winds up the mobile again. When a toy is very interesting, the toddler feels content. When it is hidden, they become curious. See also Guide 4: Improving empathy: Naming a child’s emotions.
- Encourage parents to tune into their child’s emotions during play and other daily interactions. They can do this by watching their child’s facial expressions or verbalisations. Parents can use these observations to begin labelling and talking about feelings early on. For example, “You can’t find your ball. You are upset; Mummy will help you find it.”

Helpful hints and tips:

- Bite-sized moments work.
- Tuning in even for a minute or two is effective, especially if this is done often, rather than occasionally.
- Choose age appropriate activities. For example, ensure selected toys are age appropriate. The most effective toys for teaching parent–child interactions tend to be constructional toys such as Duplos (3–5 year olds) and Lego (5–10 year olds); building blocks, chalkboards and coloured chalk and so on.
- Parents sometimes choose an activity that is too advanced for a child’s age or abilities. As they try to teach the child the activity, they might become increasingly frustrated with their child’s inability to master the task. Encourage the parent to stay in tune with the child’s cues. If the child is not interested in completing a puzzle or learning a game, encourage the parent to move on to something that their child does want to do.
- Interactions should always be positive, fun and enriching.
- Encourage parents to stop the activity or switch to another one if they feel agitated or angry, or if the child loses interest.
Attending to your child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/caregiver</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led; one-on-one; observe, practice, feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attending means tuning in to whatever the child is saying and doing without asking questions or giving commands or instructions. It also involves using eye contact and open body language to let the child know that you’re paying attention. When a parent shows their child attention through their body language and facial expressions, it sends the message to the child that their parent is interested in them and thinks their play is valuable. Along with active listening and descriptive praise, attending is a way for parents and caregivers to strengthen the quality of their interactions and relationships with children.

**Outcomes**
- Boosts the child’s self-esteem and confidence
- Increases the child’s independence
- Increases the quality of parent–child interactions
- Improves the quality of interactions between parent and child.

**How you do it:**

**STEP 1: Provide rationale**

(a) Attending is an important way to build the quality of the relationship between the child and their caregiver.

**For example:** “Attending to your child means showing them you are interested in them not only by what you say, but also through eye contact, facial expressions and body language. All of these things combine to show the child that she is great company and that you are deeply interested in what she is doing. This in turn helps to build confidence and trust.”

(b) Ask no questions and give no commands as this can disrupt the child’s play. Simply concentrate on watching and connecting with the child.

**For example:** “Asking questions about what the child is doing, or giving instructions or making suggestions about their play, takes the child out of their imaginary world. This can be disruptive, and it also places pressure on you to ‘do’ something. For now, simply observe and possibly comment on what your child is doing as he is doing it.”

(c) Attending also shows children that good behaviour attracts positive interest and attention.

**For example:** “Think of these moments as a win-win situation for you both. Your child hates upsetting you, and feels happier when he can see that you’re happy.”
STEP 2: Encourage attention through facial expressions and body language

Discuss all the ways parents can show their child they are attending to them through body language and facial expressions including smiling, looking at what the child is doing, making eye contact.

Positive attention includes:
- praise “Good sharing, Kezia”
- encouragement “Keep trying, Lachlan”
- physical affection, like cuddles.

For example: “There are a number of ways you can show your child that you are interested in what they are doing. It’s not only what you say, but your body language and facial expressions that tell your child you are interested in them. Getting up close, sitting next to your child, watching what they are doing, looking at them and smiling or winking all show your child that you are interested.”

STEP 3: Get close

For example: “You can sit on the floor, kneel in the grass, or squat beside your child’s chair. Face your child, move to her side rather than turning from across the room. Look into her eyes, uncross your arms, and smile, smile, smile.”

STEP 4: Encourage the parent to watch the child

For example: “If you take your cue from what your child says and does, you’ll see new skills and areas of interest as they emerge. These new interests provide golden opportunities to build your child’s confidence and help him explore the world.”

STEP 5: Prompt the parent to demonstrate interest in their child without leading or asking questions

Emphasise that there is no need to ask questions. This is the child’s time, and parents can build the relationship and trust and confidence simply by giving attention. Answer questions if the child has any, but parents do not need to ask any questions or provide any guidance. Just be there taking notice of and appreciating what she’s doing.

Encourage the parent to use some of the ways of attending that they have already identified. For example, prompt the parent to use the following when they are interacting with their child:
- Sitting near the child
- Watching what they are doing
- Using facial expressions and body language that show they are paying attention (e.g. looking at the child, smiling, nodding).

Helpful hints and tips:

The emphasis of reinforcing behaviours through attention should be provided. This can be referred to as “The Attention Trap”. You might say something like:

“If you pay more attention to difficult behaviour you may fall into the attention trap. Your child may find negative attention such as yelling or scolding powerful. It’s immediate, intense and personal. The trick is to pay more attention to the behaviour you want, and less to the behaviour you don’t want.”

For additional strategies that support attending and tuning in, see also: Listening, talking and playing more page 14, Descriptive praise page 18, Following your child’s lead page 10.
Listening, talking and playing more

LISTENING, TALKING AND PLAYING MORE

**WHO**
Parent/caregiver

**WHERE**
Home setting

**HOW**
One-on-one parent training; practitioner modelling

Listening and talking encourages a child’s language development and learning by making language fun. Describing the child’s activities provides lots of positive attention in a child’s play without being intrusive, and strengthens language development. Parents can use descriptive statements or give information about objects, events and activities that occur around them. Listening and talking more can also be used to strengthen a child’s curiosity, encourage imaginative ideas and to have fun.

**Outcomes**
- Promotes language development
- Increases the quality and quantity of parent–child conversation
- Increases child self-esteem
- Improves the parent–child bond and attachment.

**How you do it:**

**STEP 1: Describe activities and introduce new words**

Encourage the parent to comment on what their child is doing while their child is playing or carrying out an activity such as getting dressed or helping with the weekly supermarket shop.

Suggest the parent introduces new words—what things feel like (hot, cold, soft, scratchy), taste like or smell like. The comments don’t always need to be supportive. It is enough to simply state what the child is doing, with interest. For example: “Jimmy has a big red truck and he is SLAMMING it into the little yellow one!” (naming the child’s initiatives).

**STEP 2: Make reflective and elaborative statements that make the conversation enjoyable and fun**

When the child makes a statement, the parent could provide a reflective statement that mirrors what has been said. **For example:**

Child: “The cat is going to be friends with the chicken.”
Parent: “Oh—I see. The cat is going to be friends with the chicken.”

Encourage the parent to elaborate on the child’s statement to facilitate learning.

Child: “I made a big square.”
Parent: “That’s right! You made a big red square inside the yellow circle.”

**STEP 3: Simplify language to make meanings clearer or to emphasise a particular word**

Encourage parents to use short and simple sentences that can be repeated over and over again when talking with their young child. Researchers call this ‘parentese’.

**For example:** “Sam, look at that BIG elephant”— saying the child’s name first gets their attention which increases the likelihood of cooperation, and the emphasis on BIG highlights its importance to a listening toddler.

Parents can also exaggerate the sound and pitch of their voices or use a sing-song speech to help them communicate with babies and young children (warm voice tones create a positive atmosphere).

**For example:** a slurred ‘sweetbabe’ becomes a bright ‘sweeeeeeetbaaabeee’ when using parentese.
STEP 4: Pause regularly when talking with a child

Regular pauses (active waiting) in the conversation help to show the child that they have a role in the conversation. It encourages turn taking in language.

Examples to encourage listening and talking more with a child

Example: Playing
Child: Putting the car in the garage
Parent: “You’re putting the car in the garage. Now it is filling up with petrol!”

Example: Packing up toys
Siblings: Packing up toys in the toy box.
Parent: “Now Sarah’s putting the red crayons in the crayon box...Billy has got the ball and is throwing it in...Wow! Sarah has the blocks and there they go, red, blue, green and another blue.”

Example: People in community
Child: “Look, Mum, it’s a policeman.”
Parent: “Yes Jessica, here comes a policeman in his blue uniform and police hat. He helps to keep us safe.”

Examples to facilitate the child’s exploration:

“Look, you put soap on your feet.” (bath time)
“Why don’t we stack the blocks and make a tower?”
“What colour are these apples?” (shopping at the supermarket)
“You’re right, that’s a BIG dog.” (emphasis on ‘big’ to cement learning)
“Let’s add the flour to the mix and see what happens.” (cooking at home)

Where you do it:
» Playing  » Getting dressed  » Mealtimes
» In the car  » At the park  » While cooking
» Going to the toilet  » Brushing teeth  » In the supermarket

Helpful hints and tips:

- **Avoid asking questions.** Some parents might ask their child a string of questions about the activity the child is doing, for example, “What colour is this?” or “What are you making?”

- Although the goal is to facilitate learning, too many questions can lead to the child becoming reluctant to talk and play freely. Questions about what the child is going to make might also interrupt the child’s ability to explore their ideas. The child might change his mind in an effort to please or gain his parent’s interest.

- **Active waiting.** Naming what the child is doing then waiting until their next initiative pops up and naming that action or emotion. It is important to give a child time to have their next initiative. Parents sometimes go too fast for children. (See Attending to your child page 12)

- **It may feel strange at first – don’t give up!** Commenting on a child’s play or activity in this way might sound like a sports commentator providing a play-by-play description of the game. Because this is a new and different way of communicating, it might feel strange or forced the first few times.

- Encourage the parent not to give up but to keep practising in a variety of situations. Reassure the parent that they will soon feel more comfortable using this technique and that their child will enjoy the attention that comes from this style of communication. Their child might also begin to imitate their parent and provide a description themselves of what they are doing as they play.

- **You don’t always have to use words.** Using noises such as frog croaks or dog barking as well as ‘mmm hmmmms’ and ‘ooooohs’ to demonstrate interest are also methods of descriptive conversation.
Engaging an infant

WHO
Parent/caregiver; infant

WHERE
Home setting

HOW
One-on-one training

Teaching parents the benefits of smiling at their infants encourages reciprocal and interactive communication between the parent and infant, in which both are active participants. These interactions are vital to strengthening the parent–child relationship. When babies see an adult smile it also causes chemicals (opiates) to be released, which provides a sense of wellbeing and helps babies’ brains to grow.

Outcomes
- Increases self-esteem, bonding and intimacy
- Develops communication and trust
- The infant learns that interactions with their parents can be pleasurable, and is therefore more likely to respond positively to future interactions
- Allows an older sibling the chance to interact with the new baby and might help ease the siblings’ tension about the new baby
- Increases the release of neuropeptide in the prefrontal cortex, which plays a key role in our emotional life. This chemical helps build connections between nerve cells, stimulating brain development
- Increases the release of dopamine in the brain stem. This chemical helps brain cells absorb energy (in the form of glucose), helping new tissue to grow.

How you do it:

STEP 1: Explain to the parent that early interactions with their infant play a part in the connecting and attachment processes

Explain to parents that:
- Smiling at your baby makes your baby feel secure and safe, and helps him develop and learn about the world.
- Babies and young children read their parents’ faces. They use parents’ facial expressions as a guide for behaviour.
- The emotional experiences a child has with other people (especially during the first years) help shape their emotional responses throughout life.
- It is through interacting with other minds that children develop their own minds and emotions.

STEP 2: Encourage the parent to smile at the infant and wait for a response

- Ask the parent to sit on the floor with the infant close by.
- When the infant and parent’s eyes are fixed on each other, ask the parent to smile (connection moment).
- If the parent waits patiently for a moment, the infant will respond with a smile. A child needs to be shown a ‘good face’ in order to give a ‘good face’.
**STEP 3: Extend the interaction activity with other expressions**

- Ask the parent to frown at their infant. The baby might respond by frowning too. Or, he might look confused or distressed and turn away.
- Another activity is to ask the parent to open their mouth wide and wait for the infant to respond. After a brief time, the baby will open his mouth widely.
- These activities demonstrate that infants not only see facial expressions, but can also mimic and respond to them.

**STEP 4: Discuss any observations of the infant’s activity**

- After the parent has completed the activity, discuss with them what their infant did.
- The parent might also comment on their own response to the activity, such as feeling surprised or happy.

**Helpful hints and tips:**

- Follow the infant’s cues: if the infant smiles and then turns away, she could be overstimulated. The infant is disengaging from the activity to take a rest. Encourage the parent to follow the infant’s lead by quietly waiting until he begins to make eye contact again.
- Consider using the checklist below to help you decide the quality of an interaction between a parent and child.
- You may consider filming parents with their infants e.g. smiling at each other. This can be used to show what the parent is already doing right, and how the infant responds (for those trained in Marte Meo the Basic Manual 2nd Edition provides useful tips and checklists). Also refer to *Practice guide 8: Infants at risk of abuse and neglect* for tips on engaging an infant.

**Checklist: Using facial expressions to observe the quality of parent–child interaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Concerning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smiles at child</td>
<td>Non-responsive, passive facial expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affectionate mirroring</td>
<td>Flat, distant, tired or indifferent to child’s signals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of facial expression</td>
<td>Confused, disoriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracks child’s facial expression</td>
<td>Tense, angry, frightening or frightened facial expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable of ‘joy’ smiles</td>
<td>Predominantly irritable or angry mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can sustain positive expressions of emotion</td>
<td>Over aroused, excessive activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracks parent’s facial expression</td>
<td>Limp, inactive activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptive praise

### WHO
- Parent/caregiver

### WHERE
- Home and community

### HOW
- One-on-one training

Descriptive praise involves making a positive statement to someone about something they did that you liked. Examples include, “I like it when you...”; “You’re doing just what Mum wanted you to when you...”; “Thank you for...”; “You’ve done a great job of...”. Descriptive praise can make it more likely that a child will use positive behaviours at home. It can also strengthen the quality of their social interactions outside the home. For example, it has been shown that children who give many positive statements to others at school are likely to be more popular.

**Outcomes**
- Increases positive and prosocial behaviour
- Improves the parent–child relationship
- Increases the child’s self-esteem and positive sense of self
- Increases the likelihood of the child demonstrating positive behaviour in other places and with other people.

**How you do it:**

#### STEP 1: Provide the rationale for using praise

- There are many benefits for parents who use descriptive praise, and for their children.
- Descriptive praise can encourage desirable behaviour to be repeated.
- Descriptive praise can also encourage children to persevere with behaviours and tasks that they find difficult and not necessarily enjoyable.
- Children who receive praise are also more likely to use it with other people, including their parents. This can help to develop a positive home environment.
- The ‘emotional bank account’ is a useful metaphor to help explain why we use praise and how it works to build positive relationships.
- When parents give their child descriptive praise, it is as though they are depositing money into a bank account; they are building up credit in their relationship with their child. This helps to maintain a positive relationship. The parent can make a ‘withdrawal’ in the form of a refusal or when discipline needs to be used. The challenge for parents is to keep the bank account in the ‘black’—maintaining a high level of credit and not going ‘into the red’ by making too many withdrawals.
- Encourage the parent to consider other relationships they’ve had where there were more ‘withdrawals’ than ‘deposits’ and ask them to recall how this made them feel about the other person and their interactions.
STEP 2: Explain the role of attention in maintaining a behaviour

- People, particularly children, usually like the attention they receive from the important people in their lives, such as their parents and teachers. Children therefore often behave in ways that brings them attention.
- Attention can be a useful tool for parents to encourage and motivate their child to behave in ways they like and would like to see more often.
- If a child receives a lot of attention for misbehaving, such as being yelled at, but is ignored when behaving well, they may learn that they need to misbehave in order to get attention. They may also learn that behaving appropriately brings no attention. Sometimes, a child may think that negative attention, such as being yelled at or punished, is better than no attention.
- It can be helpful for parents to learn to notice and give praise for appropriate behaviours, such as sharing toys or playing quietly. This way their child learns that, “if I do these things Mum and Dad will pay attention to me”.
- Parents might find it helpful to remember to “catch their child being good” rather than waiting until there is a problem before giving attention and feedback.

STEP 3: Identify child behaviour to increase

- Encourage the parent to identify some positive behaviours that they would like see occur more often and shift their focus away from their child’s misbehaviour.
- If the parent has difficulty doing this, ask them, “What should your child be doing instead of...?” (creating new behaviour models).
- Ask the parent to choose a few behaviours they want to see their child do more. Write down these behaviours as clearly and descriptively as possible. For example, ‘sharing with his brother’, rather than ‘being good’, ‘using his manners’, rather than ‘being nicer’ and ‘putting his toys away in the toy box’ rather than ‘being tidier’.

STEP 4: Practise giving some descriptive praise

- Model giving descriptive praise using the behaviours the parent chose. For example, “That’s terrific, Jeremy, I really like the way you’re sharing your toys with your sister. Well done.” Or, “Mia, it was great the way you used your manners when talking to me. Thank you.”
- Encourage the parent to practise saying some of the statements.
- Be alert to the parent’s use of vague comments, such as ‘Good boy’ or ‘Good girl’.
- Give the parent descriptive praise for the effort and success of their practice. For example, “Great, Maria, that is a really good example of descriptive praise. Well done.”

STEP 5: Enhance the effectiveness of descriptive praise with other behaviours

- Descriptive praise can be enhanced by the parent’s body language, for example, making eye contact and smiling.
- It can also help if the parent uses an enthusiastic tone of voice and is sincere.
- For parents who feel uncomfortable with this initially, reassure them that the more they practise using descriptive praise the more natural it will feel. You could explain that it is like learning a new language—both for the parent and child—and that it will feel more natural with practise.
**STEP 6: Praise immediately**

- Praise loses its reinforcing value over time. While delayed praise is better than no praise, praise is most effective if it is given within five seconds of the behaviour.
- Praise can also encourage persistence. For example, encourage the parent to praise their child as soon as they begin to put away their toys, rather than waiting for the child to finish packing up.

**Helpful hints and tips:**

- Try to comment on something positive that the child is doing at least 12 times an hour—about once every five minutes.
- Try to give praise within five seconds of the positive behaviour.
- Try to praise children six times for every one critical statement.
- Try not to praise one child by comparing that child to another. This can easily lead to feelings of resentment and create unrealistic expectations.
- Encourage the parent to look for small changes and successes. If they wait until their child has done something perfectly to give praise, they might find themselves waiting forever! There are a number of steps along the way to success, so encourage the parent to provide plenty of praise at each stage of the target behaviour.
- Encourage the parent to model self-praise. For example, “I did a good job of fixing that curtain!” or “That was a tough situation at the supermarket but I think we handled it well.” By modelling self-praise, parents can teach their child to internalise positive self-talk and can strengthen self-esteem. This task might be particularly useful (and challenging) for a parent who has low self-esteem, because it encourages them to speak to themselves in positive statements and consciously create positive and accepting consequences for themselves.
- Focusing on rewarding and praising their own efforts means they will be more likely to do the same for their children.
- A few useful phrases are:
  - “I like it when you...”
  - “You’re doing exactly what Mum asked you to!”
  - “Great (walking, cutting, washing)!”
  - “You have done a great job of...”
  - “You’re such a big girl for...”
**Family time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/caregiver; children (all ages)</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family time creates happy memories, builds strong relationships, and provides the opportunity to talk about things. Time spent with family can be built into regular, everyday routines; it does not necessarily need to involve a great deal of cost, or the organisation of elaborate outings. The critical aim is for parents to make the most of everyday moments they share with their kids, e.g. bedtime, driving to football or swimming lessons. Planning special time together is another way of making a conscious effort to make meaningful ‘deposits’ in family relationships.

**Outcomes**
- Increased sense of safety and security
- Strengthened family relationships
- Increased opportunity for talking, listening and problem solving.

---

**Planning family time in everyday routines**

**STEP 1: Provide rationale**

The metaphor of the ‘emotional bank account’ might be useful to emphasise the importance of planning regular time together with the family.

*For example:* “Similar to a bank account, you can make withdrawals and deposits from each of your family relationships. Special time is one way of making a conscious effort to make meaningful deposits in these relationships. When your child’s bank account is full, he is more likely to cooperate and to develop responsible behaviours. When corrections are necessary, your child has reserves and resources to draw on and continues to know he is loved. This means the bank account stays full even when withdrawals are necessary.”

**STEP 2: Use the planner to locate and plan available time**

Ask the parent to think about the family’s daily or weekly routine. Have them consider everyday moment(s) that they have together. You might provide the parent with a weekly planner to help them get organised.

*For example:* “Let’s use this calendar to help us find some times during the week when you can aim to spend some quality time with Jack. Firstly, block out the times where you are at work, the kids are at school, or when you know you will be preoccupied (such as preparing meals).”

**STEP 3: Select time to spend with children in the week**

Once the parent has excluded busy periods, have them consider regular, everyday moments they have with the children.

*For example:* “Between 2.30 and 3.00pm I have at least 20 mins with Jack before Jessica is picked up from school.”

Have the parent think of one or two ways they might make this time more special with their child, no matter how simple the idea is.
Family time: Planning special time (See also: Following your child’s lead, page 10)

STEP 1: Outline the rationale of special time

Special time involves episodes of warmth and unconditional acceptance of the child. Children should be allowed a high degree of control over what happens during this time. Parents should avoid directing the child’s choices (whenever safe) and take care to defuse conflict, promote humour and laughter and avoid criticism. The aim is to use the episode to give the child the message that they are in control, and that their parent enjoys being with them.

STEP 2: Introduce the concept of special time

For example: “You and Jack tend to spend a lot of time struggling over his behavioural outbursts, and maybe you need some practise at being together feeling calm and relaxed. Here is one idea that might increase the instance of positive interactions between the two of you. Set aside an hour on Saturday morning. Jack, you decide what you would like to do with your Dad during that hour. Maybe read a story. Maybe kick the footy at the park. It is up to you, and needs to be something you want to do. Dad, your side of this is to allow this time to be fun and special. Allow Jack to be in control of what you do, and avoid getting into arguments.”

STEP 3: Reinforce concept of special time

Emphasise that special time occurs in spite of what has happened during that day or week. For example: “The aim of this activity is to help Jack feel that you can both still have fun time together, despite any difficult or angry stuff that has happened during the day/week.”

Ideas for special time:

- Whilst driving in the car, practise saying colours of the traffic lights. E.g. Parent says: “Green!” and child says: “Go!” and so on.
- Cooking together. For example: “use a readymade cake mix to bake a cake or cupcakes together (if short on time).”
- Reading a book together
- Going for a walk
- Active rough and tumble play

Helpful hints and tips:

- Reassure parents that special time will not spoil the child. If parents raise this with you, it may be important to explore this myth with them. Part of the discussion may centre on parents’ concerns that special time is teaching children that they have got away with breaking the rules and it will spoil them.
- Pair special time with attending to the child’s play. You might set special time as a homework activity in which to practise these strategies (See Following your child’s lead for further information on this, page 10).
Family routines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/caregiver; children (all ages)</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Routines are how families organise themselves to get things done, spend time together and have fun. Routines help family members know who should do what, when, in what order and how often. Routines and rituals can help build a sense of belonging and cohesion in families, as well as shared beliefs and values. Maintaining normal daily routines as much as possible can make it easier for children to deal with stressful events and remain resilient in the face of additional stressors.

**Outcomes**

- Increased sense of safety and security
- Strengthened relationships between parents and children
- Increased quality of sleep routines
- Decreased stress response in stressful situations or during difficult stages of development, such as puberty
- Increased organisation and reduced chaos in the home, leading to lower parental stress.

**How you do it:**

**STEP 1: Define the goal of the new family routine**

- Have the parent picture the end result of the routine. For example, the end goal a parent may describe as being an effective morning routine for the family may be: "Children at school by 8.30am, dressed, shoes on, had breakfast, teeth and hair brushed, school bag packed with everything needed for the day."

**STEP 2: List individual steps**

- Once the bigger picture of the family routine has been identified, break this task into manageable pieces.
- List the steps of the routine in the order in which they need to be done.
- Decide which part of the routine children can do themselves, and which part parents might need to help with. Ensure that everyone is clear about their specific role in the routine.

**STEP 3: Plan the timing of the routine**

- Assist the parent to plan for achieving the steps listed above by thinking through how much time is needed to start getting everything done. Include some extra time under each step to allow for the unexpected.
- Plan for what may need to be added or included. For example, if it is a new routine, does the family need a copy of the steps and roles assigned to family members displayed somewhere visible, such as on the fridge? If older children are being expected to take on more responsibility in getting up in the morning, does the family need to purchase an alarm clock for the child?

**STEP 4: Praise for efforts**

- Look out for signs of early cooperation and successes. Encourage parents to reinforce effort by giving praise or even special rewards until the routine becomes part of what children regularly do.
Routines for Daily Living:
- Getting ready in the morning.
- Going to bed at night.
- Eating meals.
- Hygiene and health. For example, brushing teeth and washing hands.

Routines for Household Responsibilities:
- Tidying up.
- Caring for pets.
- Chores. For example, setting the dinner table and packing away.
- Shopping.
- Establish after-school routines. For example, have children empty their bags of food, notes or newsletters when they come home from school. Reward this with a snack or provide praise.

Routines for Interacting and Fun:
- Greetings and goodbyes.
- Eating meals together.
- Regular play and talk times with a parent each day.
- Special one-on-one time with a parent.
- Special weekly meals (such as pancakes on Sunday).
- Family days (family activity).
- Family DVD nights.
- Story time (book reading).

Other ideas for organising family routines
- Use a weekly schedule. List all the child’s activities for the week in a weekly planner, for example, school, out-of-school activities, social events. For older children, have them allocate homework in times that suit them, as well as allowing for free time.
- Use reminder notes in the form of whiteboards, pin boards or chalkboards, which can be placed in the child’s room or kitchen with reminder notes.
- Make a home study area so that glue, scissors, pens and staplers are stored in one place. Allocate set times for access to the computer to ensure everyone gets the same amount of time.

Further resources

ONLINE VIDEO
- See the section on FAMILY ROUTINES: Getting everyone involved in changes to routine developed by the Raising Children Network. Retrieved at: http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/family_routines_how_and_why_they_work.html
References


To find out more information about our services, go to www.benevolent.org.au

National Office
Level 1, 188 Oxford Street
Paddington NSW 2021
PO Box 171
Paddington NSW 2021
T 02 8262 3400
F 02 9360 2319
Donations 1800 819 633
www.benevolent.org.au
or find us on 🌐

Queensland
9 Wilson Street
West End QLD 4101
PO Box 5347
West End QLD 4101
T 07 3170 4600
F 07 3255 2953