

Heart to Heart: Caregiver & Child Connections in Times of Challenge

Presenter: Dr. Barbara Stroud, Ph.D. California Association for Infant Mental Health Inaugural President 2017-2019, Academy of ZERO TO THREE Fellow, IFECMH Reflective Practice Facilitator Mentor

During this period of crisis that has disrupted everyone's sense of normalcy, children and youth in foster care need excellent parenting more than ever. For young children in care, COVID-19 may feel like yet another instance in which the relationships and connections they have come to rely on have been disrupted. How we as parents and other caring adults respond to children's need for connection during this crisis situation can have enormous, long-term impacts on their lives.

In the latest webinar of the Quality Parenting Initiative's (QPI) "COVID-19: The New Normal" series, Dr. Barbara Stroud offers developmental research and brain science to underscore why loving caregiver relationship connections are especially critical to infant mental health. Through trauma-sensitive, culturally-responsive practice, Dr. Stroud tells us how to create emotional connections with children to support optimal development and healing.

Dr. Stroud reminds us that in moments of challenge, it's relationships that strengthen us and allow us to feel whole, connected and valued.

The information below provides a high-level snapshot of the key takeaways from this webinar presentation.

Infant Mental Health: refers to how well a child develops socially and emotionally from birth to three. It is the developing capacity of the child to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn.

Cultural context: Infant Mental Health remains contextual as it is held within a relationship with a caregiver, a family, a community and cultural expectations

Caregiving relationships should:

- Protect from harm –keeping everyone safe in relationship
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the child's needs –accurate cue reading
- Teach emotional understanding – naming feelings in the moment
- Co-regulate in times of distress – soothing when upset to build a healthy stress response system
- Infuse cultural identity via the relationship – family culture
- Delight in the child's successes – share joy

Connection Matters:

- Infants are born seeking connection and learn from the adult's specific contingent responses (aka sensitive to the child's needs)
- Before language young children are learning how caregivers see them, who they need to be to maintain a connection to caregivers, and developing an internal story that becomes their blue print for relationships –You are the teacher of relationship skills
- Young children are reading the adult's emotional rhythms and learning from you when they can be safe, when to worry or enjoy relationships based on the adult's non-verbal cues
- The story or memory of the relationship is written by the caregiver & the child

Power of emotional connection:

- Building an attachment/bond to the child creates an emotional link that lets the child know they are loved and cared for in and out of your presence
- This attachment is formed by the positive interaction effect of you noticing and responding sensitively to the child's needs
- In order to be present to the needs of the child, your emotional needs must also be supported
- Foundational to child development, learning, and successful relationships is the ability to understand and manage ones' emotions (aka emotional regulation)

Children need connection:

- To experience and express emotions in an adaptive manner
- To accurately read and respond to the emotions of others in a culturally appropriate manner
- To manage intense feeling states such that they do not interfere with social relationships and learning
- To demonstrate empathy for others
- To establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships

Remember:

- Every loving adult can be a positive source of healing for a traumatized child
- Caregiving relationships make a significant difference regardless of length of time together
- Relationships are co-created and happen moment to moment, every moment is an opportunity for a healing event
- How you see your child is who your child will become (mirror effect) see and name for your child that they are capable, lovable, confident, and resilient
- Children's behavior comes from somewhere and is a connection tool "please notice me and be in my world with me"