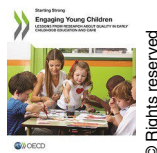


# Like adult, like child

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## Like adult, like child |

Image for  
Like adult,  
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cover of  
Engaging  
young  
children:  
Lessons  
from  
research  
about quality  
in early  
childhood  
education  
and care

**“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them,” said James Baldwin. Indeed, young children pick up most of their social and educational cues from their adult caretakers, as a recent—and unprecedented—OECD meta-analysis of 44 early childcare studies found. Collectively, these studies confirm that the quality of interactions between care staff and children is the key driver of children’s development in early childcare programmes.**

Children with positive staff interactions exhibited better academic skills, and in some cases, better behavioural and social skills, in their teenage years than children with average or negative interactions. Positive interactions are emotionally caring and educationally stimulating, and they occur within consistent, organised group routines. Negative interactions are emotionally cold and unresponsive to developmental needs, and happen within inconsistent, chaotic group routines. The effects of positive staff-child interactions are

strongest for the youngest babies. Babies reach peak brain sensitivity before the age of three. During this time, areas of the brain that control emotion regulation, social skills and language develop at an incredible rate. It is thus vital that children have consistent, positive interactions with childcare staff early on.

Although these findings may seem intuitive, they are surprising in the context of abundant rhetoric that prioritises more structural reforms within childcare programmes. These reports encourage increasing staff educational prerequisites, lowering staff-to-child ratios and choosing safer physical locations for care facilities.

While some structural reforms, like smaller staff-to-child ratios, do improve development outcomes, they do so by creating environments conducive to positive staff-child interactions. Smaller groups create warmer, more responsive and emotionally supportive interpersonal interactions. Other reforms often presumed to improve outcomes don't actually do so. For example, requiring staff to have 4-year rather than 2-year degrees doesn't significantly increase their ability to have emotionally supportive interaction with children. Reforms should rather favour initiatives like in-programme training workshops, which demonstrably increase the number of positive interactions between staff and children.

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## References

OECD (2018), *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en>