

PART 1 Relationships

Young children in digital contexts interact, engage, access and learn how to use digital technologies in relationship with other people, including the adults (e.g. family members, parents, kinship members, educators) and peers (e.g. friends, siblings, extended family members) in their lives. These relationships facilitate and influence children's engagement with digital technologies.

The guiding principle for Relationships is: Young children's relationships with adults and peers matter in digital contexts.



1.1 Children, adults and digital technologies

Positive child–adult relationships are well recognised as essential to children’s healthy development and learning (Osher et al., 2021). Research shows that it is through the formation of relationships and attachment with caregivers that children develop cultural competence, a sense of identity, language skills, and knowledge about the world around them (Frosch et al., 2019). In building relationships with young children, adults play a key role in modelling skills and sharing cultural knowledge about social behaviours—including behaviours that involve the use of digital technologies.

Digital technologies can be used to support positive child–adult relationships. For example, adults and children can share positive experiences by co-viewing and discussing digital media content and playing digital games together (Toh & Lim, 2021). Infants and toddlers often enjoy looking at digital photographs and videos of themselves, family members and peers. These images and videos can be revisited by educators and children to promote opportunities for collaborative language development. Using technologies together with adults helps young children to understand that digital technologies can be used to facilitate communication within person-to-person relationships (Stuckelman et al., 2023).

Young children can also use digital technologies for purposeful communication in their relationships with adults, by sending and receiving digital photos, sharing social media with adults, or creating text messages and emails. Research shows that using digital technologies for video communication can be socially beneficial for young and very young children (Glick et al., 2022). Many children maintain relationships with geographically distant family members or other important people in their lives using video-chat or messaging (Hood, 2024; Johnson & Rogers, 2023).

While children can benefit from co-using digital technologies with adults, it is important that adults model person-to-person relationships that do not always involve using digital technologies and moderate their own use of digital technologies. Research shows that when adult family members are distracted by digital technology when with their children, they are less attentive and responsive to their child (Komanchuk et al., 2023). Attentive engagement is a fundamental part of relationship-building between children and adults. For example, in early childhood education and care settings, educators should avoid using digital documentation platforms during routines with infants and toddlers, such as meal or sleep times. If adults are preoccupied with their own digital technology use, this may reduce the quality of the child–adult interaction.

Adults can model self-regulated digital technology use during sustained social interactions with children. During sustained interactions, adults and children listen to, respond to, and pay attention to each other (Reyhing & Perren, 2023). For example, when sharing stories, cultural rhymes or going on a walk with young children, adults can have conversations with children that build language and social skills—without checking their digital devices. Modelling self-regulated digital technology use helps children learn that people can make active decisions about how, where and when they engage with digital technologies. It is appropriate for children and adults to focus on person-to-person interactions that do not always involve digital technologies.

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Interacting with digital technologies by voice is available to children in internet-connected toys as well as conversational agents in smart speakers, tablets and smartphones (like Siri and Alexa). AI can make these verbal interactions feel like interacting with another person. When children interact with conversational agents, they might form what are called 'parasocial' relationships. Children often have parasocial relationships with fictional characters from their preferred popular culture experiences that offer socioemotional connections (Bond et al., 2025). Research shows that children treat AI conversational agents as human-like and trusted social figures (Girouard-Hallam & Danovitch, 2022; Abbasi et al., 2024). Children's parasocial relationships with conversational agents or popular culture figures can provide benefits such as learning social interactions, developing empathy and experiencing a sense of belonging. However, it is important that adults help children understand that these conversational agents and popular cultural characters are not like their real, trusted adults.

1.2 Children, peers and digital technologies

Child-to-child relationships involve social interactions with same-age peers, older children, siblings and other young kinship members. These relationships help children develop social and emotional capacities such as interpreting the perspectives of other people, paying joint attention to a task or topic, self-regulating behaviour and improving impulse control (Osher et al., 2021).

Digital technologies can be used within child-to-child relationships in ways that create opportunities for social and emotional development. Many young children enjoy using digital technologies with others. Children are interested in sharing how they have learned to use digital technologies and will often actively teach each other the functions of different technologies (Nolan & Moore, 2025). During these interactions, children benefit from listening to others and appreciating that other people may have a different point of view.

In educational settings, educators can create opportunities for children to use digital technologies collaboratively. This could involve creating content, developing ideas and documenting learning. For example, two or more children might use a digital

microscope to examine natural materials found in the outdoor environment, then share these observations with their peers on a large display screen (Undheim, 2022). Drawing other children into the experience creates opportunities for discussion, to sustain thinking and revisit ideas. Learning to collaborate with technologies is an important 21st century skill.

Young children are usually able to touch, swipe and press touchscreens by 15 to 18 months of age (Ziemer et al., 2021). However, being able to use a device is not the same as being socially ready to collaborate with another person. Adults can help children with turn-taking, sharing and listening to others when co-using technologies in the same way they help children learn pro-social skills in other activities, such as waiting for a turn on a tricycle, sharing a digging tool or having conversations about different points of view. Children's relationships with other children at home and in their communities influence how and why they use digital technologies. Research shows that younger children often learn digital technology skills by using technologies with their families. Early digital technology skills used by young children include turning devices on and off, taking photographs, recording videos, making phone calls, sending and receiving messages, and navigating media and game content. Family uses of technology where children learn these skills can include sharing devices, contacting friends and family members, helping others learn how to use an application or play a game, and seeking permission to take images or videos of others (Scott, 2021).

Younger children can also be exposed to social media and texting through the digital technology use of their siblings and older family members. When young children see other people using social media and texting, they may incorporate this into their own play scenarios. When children incorporate social media and texting into their role-play, educators can use this as an opportunity to help children learn about how digital technologies are used by people to communicate and share information. Building children's knowledge about how to participate in digital contexts through role-play helps children understand the safe and appropriate use of digital technologies with other people.

1.3 Educator and family partnerships

Strong partnerships between educators and families are important for young children's wellbeing and developmental outcomes. Research shows that collaboration between educators and families improves young children's social and emotional outcomes (Ma et al., 2016). Children benefit from observing their educators and families respectfully sharing information about their learning and their lives at home. Educators and families benefit from feeling heard and respected (Oke et al., 2021). Educators are accustomed to working in partnership with families in many areas of children's lives—from sleep and self-care routines through to behaviour and social skills. Now that young children are growing up in digital contexts, it's also important for educators and families to work in partnership regarding the use of digital technologies with, by and for young children.

All families have different perspectives on digital technologies. These perspectives may reflect the values parents and caregivers place on the role of digital technologies in their own lives, and those of their children. Family perspectives shape young children's access to, and experiences with, digital technologies at home and in the community (Lewis et al., 2023). Some families may view digital technologies as useful tools for accessing and enjoying digital content and information. Other families might prefer their children to have more limited interactions with technologies. Being aware of differing family perspectives helps educators consider the range of experiences young children have with technologies.

An important area of partnership between educators and families is regular communication about children's learning, development and routines when participating in educational settings (Murphy et al., 2021). For many years, educators have documented and assessed young children's learning and development (Cowan & Flewitt, 2021). This has taken the form of checklists, observations, work samples, videos and photographs, family discussions (Pyle et al., 2020) and Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2012). As social media has evolved, educators now frequently document children's learning using combinations of digital photographs, comments and videos (Stratigos & Fenech, 2020). The *National Model Code* (ACECQA, 2024) confirms educators who document children's

learning and development using visual and audio formats and share this with family members should only use service-owned devices. Using documentation apps can provide a flexible way for educators to communicate with families and provide opportunities to make learning in the service visible. While families may appreciate being able to see updates of their children's learning and activities on their mobile devices, they may not always feel comfortable adding comments to posts (Cowan & Flewitt, 2021). When using digital documentation platforms, educators should always consider the security of children's digital data and the privacy of children and families (Restiglian et al., 2023). Children's active participation in digital documentation is important to their learning about giving and respecting consent for the use of images online (Blaisdell et al., 2021). Educators and families should understand how digital data about children is being used, stored and shared.

Partnership also concerns how educators and families model digital technology use in front of children. For example, when children enter and leave early childhood education and care settings, adults may be involved in their own digital technology use. Using digital technologies when children are present can interfere with the adult's ability to provide children with attentive interactions. This can result in reduced language opportunities for children, children making increased bids for attention through higher activity levels, or lower levels of adult supervision of children (Komanchuk et al., 2023). Educators and families may consider developing policies or shared expectations about digital technology use during these periods. For example, services might decide that educators will not use digital technologies when children are entering and leaving a service so they can devote their full attention to welcoming and farewelling children. Services might share these expectations with families and encourage them to also avoid using digital devices at these times. Other services may consider these periods as opportunities for co-viewing children's digital documentation with families. This can create extended conversations between educators, children and their families about a child's learning and daily activities and promote reflection. Educators and families can work in partnership to make decisions about how and why digital technologies are used by adults during these situations.



Relationships

Principle: Young children's relationships with adults and peers matter in digital contexts

Practice advice:

01

Use digital technologies in early childhood education and care settings with children, peers and adults to promote and sustain social interactions.

02

Support children in turn-taking and learning to share when using digital technologies in collaboration with others.

03

Foster children's peer-to-peer interactions as opportunities for co-learning about and with digital technologies.

04

Model self-regulated digital technology use with children and families that recognises the importance of sustained social interactions between children and adults without technologies.

05

Help children to understand that digital assistants and popular culture characters are different from their trusted adults.

06

Invite children's active contribution to digital documentation and model consent for the use of digital images and videos online.

07

Create shared understandings between families, educators and services about how adults use digital technology in front of children.