

Respect, Reflect, Relate

Guiding Principles to Enhance Relationships

Lisa Matter and Eva Jankovsky, Colorado Office of Early Childhood

Laurene Phillips, Boulder, Colorado

Sandra Petersen, Conifer, Colorado

Abstract

Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care is a professional development initiative that is relationship-based on every level. It is administrated by the Colorado Office of Early Childhood. Instructors get intensive training and become members of the Infant Toddler Specialist network. Every level of the EQ Initiative uses an open framework called Respect (observe what others do and say), Reflect (on the intentions and needs of others and your own internal reactions), and Relate (determine and act on your most helpful response). It works wonderfully as an approach to relationships and interactions with infants and toddlers! It has become our framework—our way of being.

"Transformational!" "I see babies as competent, curious learners." "I know I'm a professional." "EQIT has changed the way I am with other people." "I see myself as a learner." "I see all of the relationships in my life differently." "EQIT has given me confidence, knowing I am using best practices as I care for young children."

Transformation is a lot to ask from a training for infant and toddler care teachers. Still, with more than 19,000 teachers trained in the Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care (EQIT) course over 23 years, transformational is the word most often used by participants and infant toddler specialists. The EQIT 48-hour training course is a component of The EQ Initiative which works to increase the quality and availability of responsive care for infants and toddlers throughout Colorado. The EQ Initiative began as a collaboration between the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Child Care and the Colorado Department of Education in 1999, the first year of the infant–toddler set-aside in the Child Care Development Block Grant. It was administered and nurtured by the Colorado Department of Education until the Colorado Department of Human Services created an Office of Early Childhood and the EQ Initiative found a new home. In addition to the EQIT course, the initiative has a coaching component, supports Touchpoints® training, implements LENA® (Language ENvironment Analysis) Grow in some communities, and other infant–toddler specific training and coaching.

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Respect, Reflect, and Relate

In early childhood, relationships are transformational. The framework of both the EQ Initiative and the EQIT course is respect, reflect, and relate (Wittmer & Petersen, 2018). Although it was introduced as a way to think about observing and understanding children, it has become the framework of every aspect of the Initiative. It is our way of being. During the EQIT course, infant and toddler early care educators are encouraged to practice the following steps:

- **Respect:** A thoughtful observation. Observe the child over time and in different situations with a high regard for individuality.
- **Reflect:** Wonder about the meaning and intention of the behavior; consider your own internal reactions to what is happening.
- **Relate:** Respond in ways that support the efforts you believe the child is making to interpret their environment, to learn, or to interact with you.

The EQ Initiative works to increase the quality and availability of infant–toddler care that meets the unique developmental need infants and toddlers have for responsive relationships through a specific focus on improving caregiver–child interactions. Significant emphasis is focused on perspective taking so that considering the child's perspective is embedded in the EQ Initiative's way of being. Pausing to proceed through the steps of respect, reflect, relate serves as a reminder to contemplate the child's experience in the moment.

The relationship-based foundation of the EQIT course applies to all aspects of life, not limited to the care environment. The respect, reflect, relate framework in and of itself is not enough to lead to transformation in the way of being of participants, rather consistent, structured experiences that reinforce the process are necessary. Opportunities to practice applying respect, reflect, relate are woven into each module in the EQIT curriculum as well as the EQ RELATE Coaching model.

EQIT Course

EQIT is a 48-hour training in infant and toddler care. The curriculum provides current information in the learning domains and best practices in the field. It is offered in more than 24 communities, in-person or, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually. There is no cost or a small cost to the participants, and the majority of the costs are supported through the Child Care Development Block Grant infant–toddler set-aside. Completion of the training is accepted by child care licensing as a step toward roles such as director, early childhood teacher, and infant program supervisor, as well as for specialized family child care licenses. Participants can also receive community college course credit with additional work.

The modules are:

- The Wonder of the First Three Years
- Care of the Spirit: Emotional Learning and Development
- Responsive Caregiving for Healthy Relationships
- Our Partners, The Families
- The Cornerstones of Quality: Safety, Health and Nutrition
- Responsiveness and Resilience
- The Power of Places and Spaces
- Day to Day the Relationship Way: Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers
- Exploring Early Learning
- Nurturing Language: Talk to the Babies
- Discovering Literacy
- Babies in Motion
- Bringing Cultural Responsiveness to Infant-Toddler Care
- Inclusion: Welcoming Infants and Toddlers With Disabilities
- Cheers for Peers: Social Competence Through Positive Guidance
- Celebrating Our Profession

Learning, Pausing, and Reflecting

The EQIT curriculum is a comprehensive course, with each module focusing on deepening specific knowledge and practicing skills for all care teachers with hearts and hands



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In early childhood, relationships are transformational.

on a baby. During each class, participants have time to fully delve into selected and vitally important ideas. For example, in Responsive Caregiving for Healthy Relationships, the main topics are:

- Responsive care is important for infants' and toddlers' learning and development in every domain and to have a sense of themselves as being competent and effective.
- Infants, toddlers, children, and adults share the same relationship needs—being treated with kindness, caring, and understanding.
- Specific care teacher strategies are a part of responsive care.

The act of pausing and self-reflecting may be a new experience to some, while familiar to others. In either case, the opportunity to practice is critical for it to be assimilated into a way of being. After engaging with the content area of each module, participants engage in a consistent routine of reflection through the use of the RELATE Reflection tool, with a twofold purpose of considering the content and planning for implementation into practice. Sharing their reflections is encouraged as a learning opportunity for all in the community of learners. The RELATE Reflection is revisited at the next class, reinforcing the importance of reflection and the resulting change in practice, contributing to the way of being.

Each of the 16 EQIT modules has an in-depth section providing current science and best practices for that topic to the certified infant toddler specialists who facilitate the course. The actual session consists of interactive learning experiences which participants do with partners or small groups and discuss with the entire class. The learning experiences honor the participants' knowledge and experience, while responsively introducing new information. That is, the EQIT course is a parallel experience—just as infants and toddlers should have days filled with interactive, hands-on learning experiences



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The Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care Initiative works to increase the quality and availability of infant-toddler care.

in relationship with peers and teachers, their care teachers should have interactive learning experiences in our classes. For example, the first learning experience in *Care of the Spirit: Emotional Learning and Development* asks participants how they might advise parents who have questions about typical child development. The questions include:

- Parent Question: My 3-month-old baby is suddenly smiling! I love it. What should I do to keep this new connection going?
- Parent Question: My 1-year-old looks very concerned when another child is crying. What should I do to support their empathy without their getting too upset?

Instructors keep these main points in mind while they facilitate this learning experience:

- Infants and toddlers need relationships.
- Adults use co-regulation to help infants and toddlers manage their feelings and reactions.
- Adults help infants and toddlers make sense of and understand their experiences.

This experience honors knowledge that participants bring to the class, promotes relationships among the participants, and provides an opportunity to practice the responsive care framework. Participants consider the parents' questions and their partners' responses with respect. Together, the partners reflect on the meaning of the question to the parent and their own internal responses to the questions. Then, the partners decide how they would relate to the parents with helpful responses. The whole group discusses their answers, giving the instructors opportunities to share information on child learning and development while emphasizing the three main points listed above.

Respect, reflect, and relate have evolved into our way of being in leadership, among infant toddler specialists, and with participants. Participants report that applying respect, reflect,

and relate provides a useful framework for their work with peers, with children, and with families.

Infant Toddler Specialists

In 2021, 61 EQIT courses were taught in 22 communities, to more than 800 participants, by 76 annually recertified infant toddler specialists. These specialists have the opportunity to meet with the directors, Lisa Matter and Eva Jankovsky, during monthly office hours. All trained specialists are invited to an annual state meeting to continue their own ongoing growth and development. The topic for the virtual 2021 Annual Statewide Meeting was Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. This year, The EQ Initiative is offering monthly trainings looking at the modules through the lens of attachment.

To become a certified infant toddler specialist, a person needs to complete EQIT as a participant and then complete an intensive, 80-hour Infant Toddler Specialist Foundation Course in addition to participating in other system elements such as Colorado's Coach and Trainer Credentialing system. Participants experience respect, reflect, and relate in each of the 16 modules through the Learning Experiences and the overall structure of the classes. For example, each session begins with a reflective conversation about how they used the information from the previous class and ends with a conversation about how they will use today's information over the course of the next week. A sense of trust and community is built over the course of the sessions.

The Coaching Process

EQIT is grounded in the idea that responsive, reflective, and strengths-based professional development makes a difference to both infant-toddler care teachers and to the families and children they serve. Research (Elek & Page, 2019; Moreno et al., 2014) has found that coaching relationships are essential to applying new learning to work with children. The EQ RELATE Coaching Process supports care teachers in implementing a responsive, relationship-based approach in their programs and models the same approach that care teachers are taught in the course to apply in their care of infants and toddlers. Certified infant toddler specialist coaches receive training in this specific process and use the EQ RELATE Coaching Manual with its clear instructions and examples. The open framework of respecting and observing the competence of infants and toddlers, guiding reflection on child and caregivers' experiences, and continuing to relate is at the core of this coaching process and contributes to the coach's way of being.

Eight hours of coaching is available to each participant. Additional hours are offered by some local early childhood councils. Coaches are trained by EQ Initiative leadership and working coaches. The purpose of coaching is to improve care teachers' practice and to help participants appreciate their own skills and knowledge. Coaches usually observe a care teacher in their classroom and then meet to discuss the interactions. Some watched a classroom live via video-based platforms;

others watched a video made by the care teacher, with the care teacher.

Appreciative Inquiry

In 2018 the EQ Initiative chose to add Appreciative Inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), a positive, strengths-based approach to learn more about our participants at the beginning of the coaching relationship. One conversation prompt asks participants to share a story about a time in their life with infants, toddlers, and their families that makes them smile when they look back on it. Other prompts include, “What has been your best day on the job”, “What qualities have you brought to the job?”, and “If you could make three wishes to make your life as a teacher or make teaching better, what would they be? How can we make these a reality?”

The variety of responses offer a window into the individual experiences of each person, allowing the coach to meet them where they are, creating a foundation to build the relationship on. The establishment and maintenance of this relationship involves trust, communication, responsiveness, a strengths-based perspective, and culturally relevant practices.

EQIT Is Embedded in Colorado’s System of Care

The Colorado Office of Early Childhood has worked over the years to build a system that supports the evolution of caregiving into a profession and improve the quality and availability of infant and toddler care. Completion of the EQIT course fulfills one of the licensing requirements for certification as an early childhood teacher or an infant program supervisor.

There are challenges to maintaining a relationship-based project within the protocols of a state department. In Colorado, there are 34 Early Childhood Councils designed to increase and sustain the local early childhood system. Dollars are sent to the local council when EQIT courses and coaching are requested. The council pays the community instructors and coaches. Some communities are able to offer additional coaching hours or the use of LENA in programs. LENA uses technology to illuminate for care teachers or families how often the adult is talking to the child and how many conversational turn-takings occur each day. A coaching component helps care teachers learn how to use rich vocabulary and extend turn-taking conversations.

Pivoting for COVID-19

Colorado was put on complete lockdown on March 13, 2020, due to COVID-19. This event felt devastating to the leadership and infant toddler specialists, whose experience had shown them the importance of building strong relationships through small- and large-group interactions—face-to-face interactions. Many of the learning experiences also seemed to depend on people being able to work in physical proximity to each other.

EQIT needed to pivot from face-to-face experiences to virtual classes. Two of the authors, the state-level directors, decided



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The curriculum provides current information in the learning domains and best practices in the field.

to provide the first virtual training, letting local instructors sit in but not participate. Video platforms allowed participants to work in small groups, and the authors checked in with each group as they worked. Participants were able to write directly on the slide deck or take turns speaking to the group, when the whole in-person class would have had a discussion. They met over the course of 16 weeks. A private online classroom for certified instructors was established that offered recordings from virtually led courses, virtual working agendas, updated slidedecks, and resources for each of the modules. Weekly office hours began as an open forum for virtual teaching updates as well as a type of support group for everyone who was grieving the many changes that abounded both personally and professionally.

Community instructors came up with creative solutions to adapting the learning experiences. One experience on brain development involves the group making a circle and creating a network by tossing a ball of yellow yarn across the circle while naming a healthy, positive experience for the brain. When a strong network is created, the instructor introduces a ball of blue yarn and the participants toss the ball naming experiences that stress the brain architecture. Adapting this exercise for a virtual presentation, participants each had their own drawing of a brain and wrapped the yarn around it in response to each person’s statement. Instead of tossing the yarn to another person, participants would call out another person’s name, for their turn. In another learning experience, participants play a Bingo game to explore diverse cultures. In person, people would take their Bingo cards and approach classmates to ask questions such as “Did you grow up in a family that honored babies?”. Online, participants would send private messages to others to ask their questions.

The orientation before starting the course became very important. Community instructors met online with a few participants at a time. In a face-to-face course, relationships usually begin to emerge by the fourth or fifth module. Virtually,



Photo: Paul Camilla

Coaches usually observe a care teacher in their classroom and then meet to discuss the interactions.

relationships tended to develop around the eighth module. It was important for the instructors to check in with the small groups while they were working. Instructors frequently needed to remind participants to keep their cameras on, although bandwidth created challenges depending on the time of day. Focus and attention were also challenging.

Relationship-Based Leadership

Leadership in the EQ Initiative has always been relationship-based. In the early stages, in the early 2000s, the EQIT training of trainers was taught as an intensive course for community instructors, as they were then known. The original authors taught the modules in two, 1-week sessions, 6 months apart. Participants and the EQIT teachers stayed at a hotel, together, and got to know each other on a personal level. It set up a parallel process for how the instructors would work with the participants in their classes.

Continuously applying the framework of respect, reflect, and relate at every level prompted the leadership to evolve this training-of-trainers model. We began to see that the relationships that grew and developed in the training of trainers and subsequently through facilitating the EQIT course transformed the people who taught as much as the participants in the EQIT course. Each person became so much more than a trainer or EQIT instructor. They grew into an infant toddler specialist—someone with a wealth of specific knowledge about infant-toddler development and good practice, learned through both their experiences provided by the EQ Initiative and, more importantly, what they learned from each and every infant-toddler early care educator they served. We therefore shifted the training of trainers to the Infant Toddler Specialist Foundation Course, mapping the name more closely to the outcomes.

We were just about to begin the third Infant Toddler Specialist Foundation Course in March of 2020. In a matter of days, we first made the decision to cancel our scheduled full week

of in-person training and then the decision to continue our plan virtually. At the same time, we asked all community-based EQIT courses to pause and then to finish virtually the last handful of modules. Both of these pivots were both the hardest and easiest things the EQ Initiative has done in our 20-plus years. Hardest because we always thought that the element of physical proximity in both our Infant Toddler Specialist Foundation Course and our EQIT course were the key secret ingredient that made the transformation happen. Easiest because it turned out that the proximity was not our secret ingredient—relationships were and are. When we applied the lens of respect, reflect, relate to our choices, they became easy.

This excerpt from a March 2022 business email from Ms. Matter to the community instructors provides a sense of the tone of EQIT leadership.

When I sat down to write you this note, I pulled up emails I sent to you on March 13, 2020, when everything was suddenly different. It turned out that, everything that matters is still the same. We value relationships. We trust in the strengths of children, their caregivers, their families, and each other. Thank you for everything you have done over the past two years, for everything you have had your heart, mind, and hands on to serve infants, toddlers, families, and caregivers. Thank you.

Lisa Matter, MA, IMH-E Infant Family Specialist, began her work in early childhood at age 2, when her mom began a co-operative preschool in order to get them both out of the house. The most important educational period of life, infancy and toddlerhood, has been a central passion and theme throughout Ms. Matter's career. The majority of her time with children has been with the remarkable age group of 1- and 2-year-olds in a variety of high-quality child care settings. After teaching infants and toddlers for 15 years she joined the Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care (EQ) statewide team as the senior infant toddler specialist at the Colorado Department of Education. Currently, she manages the EQ Initiative at the Colorado Department of Human Services. Ms. Matter now teaches adults about infant and toddler development with a focus on building the reflective capacity of caregivers in order to ensure each and every child has access to the responsive adult relationships that signify quality care in the first 3 years. She is deeply committed to improving experiences for all infants and toddlers and believes that our convictions need only be equaled by our compassion in order to see the changes that will ensure a meaningful life for babies and those who care for them.

Eva Jankovsky, MA, is the Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care (EQIT) training specialist for the Colorado Office of Early Childhood, joining in 2017. In her current work with EQIT, Ms Jankovsky works to support strengths-based, relationship-based, and reflection-based approaches with adult learners. She began working in early childhood in 2000 where she

developed her first love as an infant teacher in Colorado and worked as a care teacher, then early childhood coach and faculty member at Colorado Mountain College for 15 years. Ms. Jankovsky deeply enjoys building relationships with early childhood professionals who are working to expand responsive care. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado in religious studies. Ms. Jankovsky has traveled to more than 20 countries and loves to learn about global perspectives. She is a Buell Fellow, receiving her master's of arts in education administration and policy, early childhood leadership in 2011 from the University of Denver. She considers supporting early childhood professionals, families, and children her life work and loves to experience this with a new lens through the observation of her 3-year-old daughter. She currently resides in Glenwood Springs, CO, with her family.

Laurene Phillips, BSN, MA, has been in the field of ECE for more than 40 years and has had a variety of experiences working directly with children and families including: as a nurse, at camp programs for children with special needs, and as founding director and owner of a toddler program. Ms. Phillips has been a training facilitator and coach for more

than 22 years for programs including Expanding Quality in Infant and Toddler Care (EQIT), the Touchpoints Approach, and other quality improvement initiatives. Between 2007 and 2019, she was adjunct faculty in the Early Childhood Education Program at Naropa University. Ms. Phillips is passionate about supporting early care teachers in providing high-quality responsive care to young children and their families

Sandra Petersen, MA, retired from early childhood in 2016, but never stopped working. After several years of teaching and directing, she became the director of personnel development for Part C at the Colorado Department of Education. From 1988–1991, she was a ZERO TO THREE Fellow. In 1999, in a wide collaboration, she began Expanding Quality in Infant Toddler Care (EQIT). In 1999, she accepted a position with ZERO TO THREE and worked there for 17 years, all on Head Start contracts. She co-authored, with Betty Bardige, *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups*. She has co-authored, with Donna Wittmer, three popular textbooks on early development and teaching. For 25 years, Ms. Petersen taught the workshop on special needs for WestEd's Program for Infant Toddler Care. She is currently revising the EQIT curriculum.

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