

Resources for Implementation

Chapter and Case Study Discussion Activities

Chapter 4: Cultivating Strong Relationships: Developing Children's Relational Skills by Starting with Educators

In this chapter, we reviewed how strong relationships influence interactions in the classroom. We learned about competencies that help educators build strong relationships, and we reflected on strategies to improve relational skills. Use the following case study from Chapter 4, along with the questions below, to reflect on how concepts and key takeaways from the chapter apply to your professional work and setting.

Jada approaches the Pre-K room at the Explorations Early Learning Center with a smile on her face. She had missed the children when she was out part of last week caring for her son, and is happy to be back this Monday morning. But Jada's smile fades quickly as she steps into her classroom and takes in the glue-covered hands, shoes, floors, and tables. In one area, Maria and a group of children are doing paper-mâché; the rest of the classroom, through Jada's eyes, is filled with over-stimulated children — children running around and using "outside" voices, as they track the paste on their shoes around the room.

"Boys and girls—what are we doing?" Jada asks, with an edge to her voice. Maria smiles and excitedly responds for the children, "We're making paper-mâché planets!" Jada glances at the lesson plan posted on the wall and confirms there is no mention of paper-mâché today. "I didn't know we were doing a hands-on project this morning," Jada replies, brow lifted and jaw slightly clenched. Maria continues stirring glue and water as she explains, "I decided that the kids would really love to do a special one today." She hesitates and then continues, "You were out again on Friday, so I couldn't check with you."

Jada turns around before rolling her eyes or saying something she would regret. She puts her things down and grabs a paper towel to begin cleaning the paste-covered floor tiles. Her thoughts begin on an all-too-familiar train: "Maria should have stuck to the original plan, that I put a lot of work into. Besides, it's not my fault my son was sick. Maria knows I can't take him to childcare when his asthma flares up."

Jada sighs loudly and calls the first few children, Danya, Marco, and Jordan, over to the sink so she can clean their shoes. Wiping vigorously and nodding her head from side to side, Jada huffs, "We have a big mess to clean up, breakfast isn't even out yet, and it's almost 9:30." She can't help but feel like she does everything.

Maria is busy at the art table, but hears Jada's comment and notes her prickly tone. "Why is she so mad?" Maria wonders to herself: "Jada says she wants more hands-on art. And it always seems like she wants me to do more of the lesson planning. Now I make a plan—with hands-on art!—and she's mad?" Meanwhile, Jada turns from Danya's sneakers to Marco's. Marco senses Jada's anger and wonders if he did something wrong. His lower lip begins to tremble. Jada grabs Marco's foot a little tighter as she scrubs and says, "Why are you crying? I'm the one who has to clean up this mess."

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The Early Education Leader's Guide

Questions for Leaders to Consider

Jada and Maria need time and a space to talk through their differences. What structures and processes embedded in your professional work and setting can help people build strong relationships? What could be changed or tweaked?

Case Questions for Leaders to Use in Professional Learning Discussions

- What is the source of tension between Jada and Maria? How do Jada's and Maria's different perspectives impact their interactions? Whose perspective do you most identify with? Why?
- What behaviors and thoughts contribute to the tension in this situation? What could Jada or Maria have done differently to productively manage that tension and cultivate a strong relationship?
- We learned about four competencies to build strong relationships: perspective-taking and empathizing; understanding and interpreting social cues; navigating social situations; and working in collaboration with others through cooperation. Which of these competencies did Jada use when interacting with Maria? Which of these competencies could Jada strengthen to build a relationship with Maria?
- What would it sound like for Jada and Maria to have a respectful dialogue where they try to understand each others' point of view? When is a good time to have this conversation? From your experience and after reading the chapter, what is particularly important to remember in these types of conversations?
- How does Jada's and Maria's tension impact the students and their behavior in their classroom? How does the learning environment change once Jada becomes frustrated? Have you noticed changes in students when teachers have conflict? How have you interrupted a cycle frustration?
- How could the strategies suggested in the chapter- creating norms and analyzing case examples in professional learning communities- help Jada and Maria problem-solve? What other strategies have you used to help problem-solve tense situations with colleagues?

Self-Study Activity

This discussion highlighted four competencies to build strong relationships: perspective-taking and empathizing, understanding and interpreting social cues, navigating social situations, and working in collaboration with others.

- Which of these professional competencies is your greatest strength? Which is most challenging for you?
- Think of a time when more skillful use of one of these competencies would have improved the situation. Write down how you plan to intentionally use that competency in similar situations in the future.