



Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guides

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This *CASEtool* describes the development and use of the *Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guide Series* for promoting and engaging the caregiver in responsive strategies for development-enhancing interactions between the caregiver and child. The four guides are based on current evidence-based practices for promoting development of young children within natural learning environments and focusing on child-interest activities and routines. The guides are designed to be used by caregivers to support their child's learning and development. Practitioners may also find the guides useful as observational teaching tools to help caregivers reflect and evaluate their use of responsive strategies to invite, engage, and teach their child.

INTRODUCTION

The main function of early childhood intervention is building parents' capacities to provide responsive care to their infant or toddler with a disability. This is often achieved using caregiver coaching in the context of the family's typical routines and activities. Many early childhood intervention providers struggle with how to best teach families the responsive interaction strategies that result in increased child engagement and learning during the family's everyday routines and activities. The purpose of this *CASEtool* is to describe the development and use of the *Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guide Series*. The four guides in the series focus on promoting the caregiver's use of development-enhancing interactions with their child. The guides are based on current evidence-based practices for promoting the development of young children within natural learning environments and focusing on child interest-based activities to enhance their development and learning (Landry et al., 2008; Trivette, 2003). The guides provide sequenced strategies related to child learning based on the principles of *invite*, *engage*, and *teach* (Davis, 2014). Practitioners can reinforce, teach, and encourage caregivers to use the strategies identified in the guides during and between early intervention visits.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION FOR THE GUIDES

Parents and caregivers are most successful at helping their child learn when their behavior intentionally promotes their child's "participation in interest-based, everyday learning opportunities" and they use "interactional styles that maintain, support, and encourage child learning and competence expression" (Dunst & Swanson, 2006, p.6).

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Research indicates that parent responsiveness to and support of child behavior in the context of everyday activities is a potent strategy for supporting and strengthening child competence and for promoting child acquisition of new abilities (Kassow & Dunst, 2004, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Responsive teaching, incidental teaching, and other instructional techniques and strategies emphasizing responsiveness to and support of child competence expression are especially effective when children are engaged in interactions with people and objects (Dunst et al., 1990; Kassari et al., 2010; Mahoney & Perales, 2019; Maye et al., 2020; Weitzman et al., 2017).

Responsive parent-child interaction strategies used across various parent-child intervention models share three common functions of creating inviting opportunities for learning, engaging children in learning activities, and strengthening or elaborating children's skill development. These three functions are the basis of a parent-mediated child natural learning model of intervention that promotes parents' and other primary caregivers' use of responsive strategies to support children's learning in naturally occurring everyday family and community activities (Dunst, 2006; Dunst et al., 2006; Swanson et al., 2011).

The *Responsive Guides* are based on the three functional roles identified in the natural learning model of responsive strategies: emotional direction, responsive parenting, and responsive teaching (Davis, 2014). Emotional direction strategies *invite* children to become involved in natural learning activities by setting and maintaining the emotional context of the activity. Responsive parenting strategies include contingent parent responses that *engage* children's participation or validate their current participation in natural learning activities once the inviting context has been established (Dunst et al., 2008). As children and parents are engaged in a shared activity, responsive *teaching* strategies facilitate children's learning by extending, elaborating upon, and enriching the ongoing experience (Davis, 2014).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUIDES

The *Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guides* were developed using a systematic review of the literature supporting the use of parent-child interactive strategies that promote child learning in natural contexts. A review of 11 evidence-based early intervention models that include responsive parenting strategies yielded 204 differently worded responsive strategies (Davis, 2014). Through an iterative process, the responsive strategies were reduced and categorized based on the function of the interaction

strategy. The common functions were identified as 1) creating *inviting* opportunities for learning; 2) *engaging* children in learning activities; and 3) strengthening or elaborating children's skill development, or *teaching* them. These three functions are also a logically sound and consistent fit to a parent-mediated child natural learning model of intervention. This model of intervention promotes parents' and other primary caregivers' use of responsive strategies to recognize children's interests and strengths, and engage children in naturally occurring everyday family and community activities as contexts to facilitate interest-based child learning (Dunst, 2006; Dunst et al., 2001; Dunst & Swanson, 2006). Once categorized, the strategies were organized into a guide and piloted with practitioners working in two early intervention programs, one in an urban area and one in a rural area of North Carolina. Based on formative feedback, the initial guide was refined (i.e., items were combined or reworded for clarity).

The need for and development of additional guides arose in three phases when early intervention providers requested a more explicit list of responsive strategies appropriate for use by parents of newborns, parents who were challenged by helping children regulate their behaviors, and parents of children with autism whose focus is improving social communication. Each *Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guide* uses the same foundational strategies gathered from the systematic literature review, however, describes the strategies using terms and contexts specific to the focus of the guide. The *Caregiver Responsive Strategies to Promote Child Learning* guide is general and can be used by any practitioner to help a caregiver or parent identify strategies that *invite*, *engage*, and *teach* the child during typical routines and activities. The *Newborn Observe & Respond Strategies* guide has been geared toward those strategies that are particularly effective in interpreting and responding to the cues of newborns. The *HUGS Responsive Caregiver Strategies* guide layers a framework on to the strategies to help caregivers use them to deescalate and curb tense interactions between the caregiver and child. The *Caregiver Responsive Strategies to Promote Social Engagement* guide was developed to situate the evidence-based responsive strategies that help caregivers develop shared attention and sustain interactions with their child with social communication delays and differences.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GUIDES

The *Responsive Guides* are intended to be used to enhance parent competence and confidence as parents intentionally plan to promote child learning in everyday

activities. The guides are used by practitioners in partnership with parents as a functional assessment of current responsive strategies and as a source of information regarding the use of new responsive strategies within natural learning activities. The introduction and instructions for use of the guides are based on an evidence-based model of parent capacity-building (Wilson et al., 2006) and adult learning coaching practices (Rush & Shelden, 2020).

Each guide provides responsive strategies categorized into three easy-to-remember categories: *invite*, *engage*, and *teach*. *Invite* strategies help caregivers tune in to their child's cues and set the stage for learning. As many interest-based family routines are out of reach for very young children without adult facilitation, early interventionists help caregivers practice reading children's cues so that they can initiate opportunities for children to participate in high child interest-based activities and routines which promote extended participation from the children leading to new learning. *Invite* strategies are used by caregivers to identify the child's interests and cue the child to participate (e.g., watching where the child is looking, noticing what makes the child smile or react positively, using a calm or excited voice, letting the child know that you are getting ready to help them do something the child finds interesting, offering a hand to the child). *Engage* strategies are ways caregivers can keep the child participating in an activity or routine (e.g., positioning the child to interact with materials or people, helping the child with difficult or frustrating parts of the activity, adding new materials to renew the child's interest). The longer children participate in an activity or routine, the more opportunities the child has to interact with objects and people in ways that are likely to promote learning and competencies (Dunst, 2006). *Teach* strategies are ways caregivers help the child practice existing skills or learn new skills to participate more successfully within an activity (e.g., showing the child new ways to use a familiar material, increasing how often the activity happens, varying the level of scaffolding provided to the child). When caregivers use *teach* strategies, they capitalize on the potential of an interest-based activity by helping the child participate in and learn from the experience.

Caregiver Responsive Strategies to Promote Child Learning

The *Caregiver Responsive Strategies to Promote Child Learning* guide is a general guide that provides responsive caregiving strategies to promote infant and toddler learning. The guide provides instructions for identifying a child's personal cues that signal the child is ready to

participate in an activity or routine. It also includes a list of *invite*, *engage*, and *teach* strategies caregivers can use to promote the child's participation and learning during the routine or activity. The guide is intended to be used under the facilitation of an early intervention provider to help the caregiver understand how the strategy is applied to the routines and activities that serve as the family's focus for child participation. Practitioners can use the guide during visits to introduce strategies to a caregiver and to help the caregiver practice during the family's real-life routine. Caregivers can also use the guide to increase their awareness and use of specific strategies that are found to be effective means of engaging the child's participation between visits.

Newborn Observe & Respond Strategies

The *Newborn Observe & Respond Strategies* guide provides strategies that are more applicable to newborns and infants under the age of six months. During this time, parents and caregivers are learning how their baby interacts with people and objects, when they like to play, eat, and sleep, and what calms and comforts them. The *invite* section helps the caregiver understand the infant's cues and identify appropriate ways to respond to the cues. Practitioners can use the questions within this section ("How do you know when the baby is ready to play?" and "How do you know when the baby wants to eat, rest, or sleep?") to help the parent identify and respond to the newborn's early communication signals. The *engage* and *teach* sections provide responsive strategies tailored to help caregivers engage with infants. Providers can use this guide during early intervention sessions to help caregivers understand the individualized cues the newborn or infant uses to communicate their needs, and caregivers can use it between sessions to prompt them to read and respond to their infant's cues.

HUGS Responsive Caregiver Strategies

The *HUGS Responsive Caregiver Strategies* guide is intended to be helpful in situations where the caregiver and the child are having frequent miscommunications and challenging interactions. Challenging interactions often result in what caregivers refer to as challenging behavior. The guide includes a section to help caregivers identify signs of heightened frustration in themselves and in their child. Recognizing the signs of frustration can help signal caregivers that the strategies in this guide can and should be used. *HUGS Responsive Caregiver Strategies* guide uses the *invite*, *engage*, and *teach* strategies to show caregivers how to deescalate a tense interaction and engage the child

differently. The *invite* strategies have been reinterpreted as *hearing* or tuning into the child's message and *understanding* the purpose behind the behavior. The *engage* strategies entail *giving* the child a response, or communicating to the child that their message is understood the way they intended and returning a response worded positively. Once the child knows they are understood, the guide instructs the caregiver on how to use the interaction to teach the child more desirable communication interactions through the repeated use of systematic and predictable process of *hear, understand, give*, referred to in the guide as *success*.

Caregiver Responsive Strategies to Promote Social Engagement

Children who exhibit differences in social communication have been found to exhibit different cues or communication signals than other children their age and have been found to respond to specific responsive strategies used systematically. The *Strategies to Promote Social Engagement* guide focuses on strategies that help caregivers engage children needing extra support with social engagement and places emphasis on encouraging joint attention using the child's individual interests (Kasari et al., 2014) and caregiver attunement to child behavior in relation to the child's interest and intent (Dunst & Kassow, 2008). This guide includes a section of *connect* strategies to help parents and caregivers learn how to enter the child's focus, especially if the child tends to avoid social interactions, and to help create fun and enjoyable parent/caregiver-child interactions. The *Strategies to Promote Social Engagement* guide includes a worksheet to help caregivers identify the unique communication cues of the child and the meaning or intent behind the cues. Those cues are then used to help the caregiver use *connect* strategies to help the caregiver and child be near one another and set the stage for a shared experience in which the child will engage and from which the child can learn. The caregiver may spend several sessions over the course of several weeks focusing on *connect* strategies. The *invite, engage, and teach* strategies are worded to be easily understood and applied in situations where the parent is supporting social communication within the context of the family's routines and activities.

CONCLUSION

Natural learning environment practices have become foundational to the practice of early intervention. Caregiver responsiveness is a necessary component of natural learning environment practices. Helping caregivers reflect on and

add new responsive strategies to their existing repertoire leads to enhanced caregiver strengths and improved child and family outcomes. The *Caregiver Responsive Strategies Guide Series* provides nuanced guidance to practitioners to help build the parent or caregiver's capacity to understand their child's cues and respond to them in ways that promote the child's participation and learning during the child and family's typical routines and activities.

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