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A Review of the Early Care and Education Literature: Evidence Base for Touchpoints

Brazelton Touchpoints Center EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary provides an empirical and theoretical foundation for Touchpoints, focusing on its developmental underpinnings, its relational approach, and its application in the child care context.

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Touchpoints is Developmental

The Touchpoints Theory

Departing from classic stage theorists by emphasizing the multidimensionality of development, Brazelton notes that a burst in one developmental thread often is linked with a backslide, or “regression” in another, and hypothesizes that these predictable periods of regression happen in service of development.

Empirical Background

- It is now commonly understood that early childhood is one of the most critical phases of the lifespan. There has been a veritable flood of early child development research in the past two decades, sparking an unprecedented public interest in the first years of a child’s life.¹
- Beginning in the late 19th century, several theorists began to mark out early childhood as a series of stages. These thinkers used linear models to describe children’s movement from infancy to adulthood, suggesting a continuum of critical periods of development, which were posited as universal, predictable and cumulative.^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12} Stage models have retained their modern influence, providing the conceptual underpinning for most subsequent thinking in the field. Nonetheless, they are largely considered today to be too reductive, too culturally-specific in their assertions of universalism, and too narrow to respond practically to the complexities of children’s lives.¹³
- Contemporary theories about stages of development has called into question the theories of linear progression of classic stages, regarding them as more variable, as happening in fits and starts, in *bursts and regressions*.^{14,15,16,17,18} Cognitive psychologists, have observed patterns of “U-shaped development,”¹⁹ whereby learning is characterized by the demonstration of a skill, followed by a seeming loss of or regression in that function or set of functions, and then a later re-emergence of the skill.^{18,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28} Research also supports neurobiological underpinnings of developmental surges and regressions in young children.^{29,30,31}
- Researchers^{14,32,33,34,35,36,37,29,38,39} have documented *relational* processes at work during periods of developmental reorganization, observing that regressive periods in functioning manifest themselves in predictable periods of increased conflict in the parent-child interaction. Even the timing of these developmental shifts may affect the affective, and therefore, interactional, dimensions of future parent-child relationships.^{40,41,42} Impact on parent-child relationships has implication for a broad range of child outcomes.⁴³

Touchpoints is Relational

The Touchpoints Approach

At its core, the Touchpoints Approach assumes that development occurs at the nexus of biological, environmental, and interactional influences, and highlights the centrality of caregiving relationships in determining developmental outcomes. Brazelton refers to periods of developmental regression followed by bursts as “touchpoints” because they provide opportunities for providers working with families to “touch” into the family system, helping parents reflect on their child’s behavior and anticipate and positively respond to periods of disorganization. Orienting and preparing families around these “touchpoints” nurtures the relationship between parent and child and supports families meet the medical, educational, social, and emotional needs of their children.

Empirical Background

- The ecological model of development, which suggests that the loci of study should be the interplay between person and contexts,^{44,45} has had a vast and consequential impact on the field of child development research, influencing methodologies,^{46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53} theoretical approaches,^{48,51,52,54,55,56,57,58,59,60} and programs and policies.^{1,61,62}
- It has been well-documented that parental sensitivity and responsiveness to a child’s genetically-determined temperament^{63,64} contributes to an interaction pattern in which the parent and infant are aware of and responsive to the affect and behavior of the other.^{65,66,67,68,69,70} The coordination of mother-infant interactions is central to the parent-child relationship.⁷¹
- Relationships, and the contexts in which they occur, are extraordinarily consequential for children’s development. Early parent-child relationships have powerful effects on later functioning,^{62,72,73,74,75} Early parent-child relationships have been shown to perform a regulatory role in brain architecture^{76,77} and support social-emotional development^{78,79,80} which in turn links to cognitive development and learning^{81,82} such as memory, attention, and decision making.⁸³
- The impact of children’s developmental shifts on parents is particularly noteworthy in the context of regression theories: **given the vulnerability of the child at these times, and the inevitability of the occurrence of regression, it is a time when parents need added support during these stressful periods.**^{15,16,35,84}

Touchpoints has Practical “Real-World” Applications

The Touchpoints *Early Child Care and Education Application*

Systems of caregiving surrounding the youngest children in the field of health and human services are often focused on the potential for deficits in child and parent functioning. This focus can be counter-productive; leaving families feeling under-valued and un-welcomed, and even perceived within systems of care as unwilling to engage.¹⁶¹ In its practical application, the Touchpoints Approach offers early education professionals a framework to build better partnerships with families around mutual strengths-based caregiving and parent engagement, all of which benefit child outcomes. Implementation of the model varies, depending on its venue, but usually early educators participate in an intensive training program whereby they engage in training about child development and relationship-building skills and strategies aimed to foster parenting skills and more enjoyable parent-child interactions. Professionals then return to their communities and incorporate the Approach into practice.

Empirical Background

- Ecological models of development make explicit the variety of settings in which children develop; most notable is early child care and education.^{1,85} Although some research has documented the negative impacts of full-time non-parental care for very young children on children’s cognitive and emotional development,^{86,87,88,89,90,91} other literature has shown high quality child care to have positive effects on child and parental well-being.^{1,92,93,94,95,96,97,98,99}
- There are myriad “best practice” elements that have been associated with higher quality child care centers and better child outcomes. Here we cite research in the areas most relevant to the Touchpoints Approach: **higher quality early education and care is related to:** higher quantity and quality of provider education and training,^{93,98,100,101,102,103,104,105,106,107, 108,109,110,111,112} training specific to child development and early education,^{102,113,114} continuity of care (lower rates of teacher turnover),^{1,115,116,117,118,119} positive teacher-child relationships,^{102,120,121,122, 123,124,125} and **positive parent-provider relationships.**^{126,127,128,129,130,131,132,133,134,135,136}
- The findings about the importance of relationships in children’s early childcare experience are particularly noteworthy in light of the current political emphasis on cognitive performance and accountability in early education settings. It is often implied in public discourse¹³⁷ that cognitive development-focused early education must be emphasized *at the expense of* social/emotional development-focused early education. Research suggests, however, that children’s social and emotional development (which occurs in the context of relationships) is inextricably connected with their cognitive capacities.^{1,138,139,140,141,142,143,144,145,146,147}
- Research has shown that it can be difficult for teachers and parents to establish and maintain positive relationships, both for logistical reasons (e.g., little face-to-face time, not enough modes of communication, etc.)^{148,149,150,151} and for more complex reasons, such as cultural differences between teachers and parents about childrearing,^{128,152,153,154,155,156,157} different opinions about how much communication is necessary or desirable,^{155,158,159} or other values and issues, such as whether the mother should work or stay home with her children.^{158,160}

The Touchpoints Approach has Proven Effectiveness

The Touchpoints *Early Care and Education Evaluation*

The effectiveness of the Touchpoints Approach has been carefully assessed in a large-scale evaluation effort collaboratively designed with BTC, and independently implemented and analyzed by the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development of Tufts University; under the direction of principal investigators, M. Ann Easterbooks, Ph.D and Francine Jacobs, Ph.D. ¹⁶²

Evaluation Design and Results

- A randomly assigned, matched wait-list control group experimental design was used to analyze dimensions of parental stress and relational functioning between parents and providers in urban, ethnically diverse early care centers which were provided Touchpoints training compared to centers whose providers had not yet received the training. ¹⁶²
- Providers and parents participated in completion of standardized measures including: (a) Parent Caregiver Relationship Scale (PCRS)¹⁶³ and (b) Parenting Stress Index (PSI)¹⁶⁴ at two time periods--baseline and 6 months follow-up.
- Results demonstrated that there were significant group differences over time regarding parent-provider quality of relationships and parenting stress, and both of these constructs were directly effected by the application of the Touchpoints Approach. ^{162, 165}
- *Families with providers trained in the Touchpoints Approach reported better quality relationships than did families without trained providers.*
- *Families with providers trained in the Touchpoints Approach showed more stable stress levels compared to families without trained providers, whose stress levels increased.*
- The developmental and relational intervention of Touchpoints implements strategies to provide strength-based, collaborative support for children and their families. The results of this study indicate that the Approach improves parents' experience of their relationships with their child's ECE provider, and that this improved relational functioning stabilizes parental stress during periods of known risk for disruption in familial and developmental functioning. ^{162, 165}

The Touchpoints Approach empowers families and child care providers alike. Touchpoints values parents as the “expert” and credits them to trust their own experiences, knowledge, and instincts in forming relationships with their children. From this standpoint, Touchpoints refocuses caregivers to build communication with families and focus on the parent-child relationship, with a special focus on predicting and supporting families through periods of increased stress associated with normative but challenging developmental regressions. The Approach represents a paradigmatic shift away from the idea of a child being placed in out-of-home care, and towards the idea of a provider joining with a family to create one unified system of care. The quality of children’s experience in Early Care and Education settings and within their families, is enhanced when parents and ECE providers collaborate as partners. Relationships between families and providers can have effects on parents’ behavior with children, wherein more positive relationships with providers can promote parental sensitivity and responsiveness to their child. Together, providers and families can make use of the Touchpoints Approach to establish shared, caregiving partnerships which link to outcomes such as increased parent engagement, positive parent-child interaction and provider/family/system-wide cooperation, all effects that have proven to enhance child outcomes. We see this outcome to be integral to our commitment to honor a child’s social and emotional development as occurring within the quality of their relationships, and as the foundation for their learning across all domains of development.¹⁶⁶

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