Supporting Young Learning through Responsive Parenting

By: Mary Charlotte R. Bonus
Teacher III-Mariveles National High School-Cabcaben

Young children’s acquisition of problem solving, language and social-emotional skills is facilitated by interactions with their parents. There is some evidence that the mechanism by which responsiveness supports a child’s development may be dependent on consistency across development in this parenting style. Responsive parenting is one of the aspects of parenting most frequently described when we try to understand the role the environment plays in children’s development. Research shows it has the potential to promote normal developmental trajectories for high-risk children, such as those from low-income backgrounds and/or those with very premature births. In contrast, unresponsive parenting may jeopardize children’s development, particularly those at higher risk for developmental problems.

The child-parent relationship has a major influence on most aspects of child development. Parenting skills and behaviours have a positive impact on children’s self-esteem, school achievement, cognitive development and behaviour. Children’s development of the cognitive and social skills needed for later success in school may be best supported by a parenting style known as responsive parenting. Responsiveness is an aspect of supportive parenting described across different theories and research frameworks (e.g. attachment, socio-cultural) as playing an important role in providing a strong foundation for children to develop optimally. Parenting that provides positive affection and high levels of warmth and is responsive in ways that are contingently linked to a young child’s signals (“contingent responsiveness”) are the affective-emotional aspects of a responsive style. These aspects, in combination with behaviours that are cognitively responsive to the child’s needs, including the provision of rich verbal input and
maintaining and expanding on the child’s interests, provide the range of support necessary for multiple aspects of a child’s learning.

Acceptance of the child’s interests with responses that are prompt and contingent to what the child signals supports learning, in part, by facilitating the child’s development of mechanisms for coping with stress and novelty in his or her environment. With repeated positive experiences, a trust and bond develop between the child and parent that in turn allow the child to ultimately internalize this trust and then generalize their learning to new experiences. This sensitive support promotes the child’s continued engagement in learning activities with his or her parent. Thus, these affective-emotional behaviours communicate the parent’s interest and acceptance, fostering self-regulation and cooperation, critically important behaviours for effective learning to occur. From a socio-cultural viewpoint, cognitively responsive behaviours (e.g. maintaining versus redirecting interests, rich verbal input) are thought to facilitate higher levels of learning because they provide a structure or scaffold for the young child’s immature skills, such as developing attentional and cognitive capacities. Responsive behaviours in this framework promote joint engagement and reciprocity in the parent-child interaction and help a child learn to assume a more active and ultimately independent role in the learning process. Responsive support for the child to become actively engaged in solving problems is often referred to as parental scaffolding, and is also thought to be key for facilitating children’s development of self-regulation and executive function skills, behaviours that allow the child to ultimately assume responsibility for their well-being.