

High-Quality Interactions with Infants and Toddlers

Building trust, learning, and development through responsive relationships

Why It Matters

High-quality interactions are the foundation of early learning and emotional well-being. In the ITERS-3, many items emphasize the importance of how teachers engage with children, not just what they provide. Interactions that are warm, responsive, and intentional help infants and toddlers feel secure, curious, and capable.

These interactions are central to several ITERS-3 indicators, including:

- Item 3 – Helping Children Understand Language
- Item 4 – Using Language to Develop Communication Skills
- Item 5 – Encouraging Children to Use Language
- Item 10 – Staff Warmth, Respect, and Responsiveness
- Item 11 – Supervision of Play and Learning
- Item 31 – Quality of Feedback

1. Characteristics of High-Quality Interactions

High-quality interactions are more than kind words; They are responsive, intentional, and emotionally attuned. They show children that their thoughts, feelings, and actions matter.

- Warm and respectful tone of voice
- Frequent eye contact and shared smiles
- Gentle touch and positive physical presence
- Listening and responding to cues, gestures, or sounds
- Encouraging curiosity and persistence through supportive language
- Modeling calm emotional regulation

2. Types of Interactions

High-quality interactions can be grouped into three intentional types:

Nurturing Interactions

These interactions meet children’s emotional needs and build security.

- Use soft, reassuring tones.
- Offer comfort and gentle physical contact.
- Validate emotions: “You’re sad. I’m here with you.”

Learning Interactions

These interactions build understanding through language, modeling, and shared exploration.

- Narrate what children are doing: “You’re stacking the blue block on top.”

- Ask open-ended questions: “What do you think will happen next?”
- Expand on children’s ideas and discoveries.

Guidance Interactions

These interactions teach children how to manage feelings and relationships.

- Redirect gently with calm words.
- Model problem-solving: “You both want the truck. Let’s find another.”
- Help toddlers name emotions and choose appropriate actions.

3. Strategies for High-Quality Interactions

- Get down on the child’s level during play and routines.
- Follow the child’s lead. Respond to their focus of attention.
- Provide wait time for children to respond or initiate communication.
- Use positive feedback: “You worked so hard to stack those blocks!”
- Offer encouragement instead of evaluation: “You tried again!” instead of “Good job.”
- Balance talking and listening. Children need space to communicate in their own ways.

4. Teacher Self-Awareness and Presence

The quality of an interaction often reflects the teacher’s internal state. Being calm, present, and attuned helps children feel safe. Self-awareness allows teachers to respond intentionally rather than reactively.

- Take a breath before responding to challenging moments.
- Reflect on your tone, pace, and body language.
- Notice how your presence influences the energy of the room.
- Stay curious rather than corrective. Seek to understand the child’s perspective.

5. Examples of High-Quality Language Use

Interaction Type	Example Language
Responsive	Child: “Uh-oh!” Teacher: “You dropped it! Let’s pick it up together.”
Encouraging	“You’re trying so hard to fit that piece in.”
Expanding	Child: “Dog.” Teacher: “Yes, a big brown dog is running fast!”

Reflective

“You look proud of your tower.” “You did it all by yourself.”

Guiding

“I won’t let you hit. Let’s find another way to show you’re mad.”

6. Reflective Prompts for Teachers

- How do I show warmth and respect in my tone and body language?
- How do I balance talking, listening, and waiting for children’s responses?
- When a child is upset, how do I help them feel safe while guiding behavior?
- What strategies help me stay calm and responsive throughout the day?

7. Connection to ITERS-3 Indicators

High-quality interactions are woven throughout the ITERS-3 indicators. They are especially reflected in how teachers respond, guide, and communicate with sensitivity and respect. Consistent, responsive, and emotionally supportive exchanges promote both developmental growth and program quality.