BRIEF #1

Relationships Are the Beating Heart of a Flourishing 2-K Program

A Brief from *What Will It Take to Fulfill the Promise of 2-K?*

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The forthcoming **expansion of publicly funded child care for two-year-olds (2-K)** is a critical opportunity to support New York's youngest residents during a formative period of development. In the first few years, brain development is characterized by an overgrowth of neurons, but around the age of two, the brain begins to "prune" connections that aren't used.[1] Each child's daily interactions with caregivers directly shape which connections grow stronger, and which are eliminated.[2] These everyday interactions with sensitive caregivers foundationally guide brain networks that scaffold lifelong language, socioemotional and cognitive development.[3]

Recently, experts gathered in New York City to articulate opportunities to fulfill the promise of 2-K. While many factors will be important to the program's success, one theme was clear across sessions: **relationships are fundamental to children's development and essential to high-quality programs**. In this brief, we summarize the extensive scientific literature that affirms the importance of nurturing relationships for children's development, and articulate key policy opportunities to leverage the science in support of New York City's two-year-olds — all 97,081 of them.[4]

Bank Street Straus Institute for Thriving Children & Families
Trust for Learning
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New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute

Relationships are foundational for infant and toddler development

A 2025 consensus report on early relational health from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine begins with a clear synthesis of what matters most in early childhood: *relationships are biologically necessary for children's development*.[5]

Indeed, infants are born seeking and expecting these nurturing interactions.[6] From the first days of life, babies tune in to what matters in their environment by interacting with caregivers, educators and peers. Even very young children are active social partners, co-creating the rhythm of interactions.[7] This give-and-take "dyadic dance" can be observed in patterns of touch, heart rate, emotional expression, vocalization, eye gaze and brain activity.[8] Scientific evidence on early mechanisms of development in relationships has blossomed in the last 20 years, but renowned pedagogical approaches — including Bank Street's — have centered nurturing relationships for decades. Many indigenous communities in the United States and elsewhere have longstanding, relational approaches to early childhood development.[9] Nurturing relationships represent **one of the pillars of ideal learning environments**, a national framework of early childhood programs aligned with developmental science[10] and a commitment to racial equity and inclusion.

"One of the important shifts in developmental science that we've seen over the past few decades is moving away from thinking of relationships as simply something good for children and instead recognizing that they're actually part of the biological environment that the developing brain expects."

— Dr. Natalie Brito, Associate Professor of Psychology, Columbia University

Photos courtesy of Friends Center for Children

Disrupted relationships disrupt development

Researchers agree that key features define effective early relationships with early caregivers — both parents and child care educators. These include: warmth, consistency, attunement, and joint engagement.[11] Nurturing relationships are a developmental necessity. When children miss out entirely on sensitive caregiver interactions during the first few years of life, their development suffers in ways that later support cannot fully mitigate.[12]

Relationships unfold in real time. A caregiver's love for or attachment to a child may not always translate into the capacity for the responsive interactions that shape development. There is abundant evidence that nurturing caregiver-child interactions can be disrupted by individual and systemic factors.

Recent evidence has shown that "technoference" — interruptions to caregiver-child interactions caused by smartphones and other digital devices — can disrupt the exquisitely timed, responsive exchanges that are foundational to healthy development. This challenge is likely to continue as generative AI toys and devices designed for young children enter the market.[15]

1. Individual factors

At the individual level, stress and mental health can disrupt caregiver-child interactions. When a caregiver experiences stress, young children can feel that stress through changes in heart rate and physiology.[13] Many studies have shown that caregiver mental health issues, including common challenges like anxiety and depression, can influence a caregiver's ability to engage in the brain-building interactions that shape development.[14] To support two-year-olds' development, we must support the well-being and mental health of all their caregivers — parental and professional — and work to reduce systemic socioeconomic stressors experienced by caregivers of young children in the United States.

2. Systemic factors

Beyond disruptions at the individual level, systemic inequities create conditions that make it harder for many children to experience the stable, nurturing relationships with parents and teachers that support healthy development and learning.[16]

These systemic factors represent critical opportunities for policy actions. Educator transitions are costly, and they represent a relational disruption for every young child who loses a caregiver they were attached to. Children who are experiencing socioeconomic adversity are at greater risk of relational disruption due to educator turnover[17], yet they are also the children most likely to benefit from the protective effects of nurturing relationships.[18]

Photo courtesy of Educare Learning Network

Photo courtesy of Tools of the Mind

Relationships between leaders, educators, and families are essential to ideal learning environments

Ideal learning environments for young children are embedded within a culture of healthy relationships that can be seen and felt in every part of the child care home or center. While individual nurturing relationships with adults are important, children thrive when multiple adults in their lives reinforce familiar patterns, and when adults scaffold relationships with peers who play a central role in learning.[19] Ideally, family-educator relationships are trusting and mutually supportive, as children benefit when educators build strong relationships with families.[20]

Many **best practices exist** to scaffold the development of strong, reciprocal partnerships between parents and child care educators. At the Forum, child care educators described the importance of building real, personal relationships with families and meeting each child and family with an open mind, especially across lines of difference. This is especially important in a city as diverse as New York. Roughly 44% of children under six speak a language other than English at home, according to the 2024 Census Bureau data. As a profession, child care educators are themselves diverse and reflective of New York's many cultures and languages — this is a core strength that policy can support.

Nurturing relationships are also the foundation of effective educator development. As discussed at the Forum, skilled educators build strong relationships with children, families, and colleagues, and continuously engage in reflective inquiry to examine and mitigate how their experiences and biases may shape their practice and professional identity. Relationship-based coaching models, such as those advanced by **Bank Street** and **CUNY PDI**, recognize that educators learn best through ongoing, collaborative partnerships rather than one-time trainings. Such models of **reflective coaching** support more responsive teaching, stronger relationships with children, families, and colleagues, and higher-quality learning environments.

Finally, building relationships across siloes and sectors is a shared responsibility of everyone involved in an early childhood system. A recent analysis of successful early childhood programs in the UK found that success was not tied to a single program or intervention, but rather the degree of coordination across the entire system.[21]

"In early childhood, relationships are not just an addition to learning- they are the very foundation of it. Because parents are a child's first and most important teachers, when educators build trusting, intentional partnerships with families, we create a vital consistency between home and the classroom that helps children feel safe, supported, and truly ready to learn. These relationships strengthen not only the child's holistic development but also the confidence and connection that families bring to their child's educational journey."

— Janna Rodriguez, Founder and Owner of The Innovative Daycare Corp, a NAFCC-accredited home-based childcare program in Freeport, NY

Policy Opportunities

Individual programs aligned with the principles of ideal learning environments are already flourishing in all five boroughs of NYC, creating a wealth of expertise to inform expansion. These centers and family child care homes have prioritized nurturing relationships, often in a challenging policy climate. What will it take to ensure that every two-year-old experiences nurturing relationships every day in their 2-K program?

Delivering on the promise of 2-K will require coordinated action across government, higher education, philanthropy, intermediary organizations, providers, and families. As educational leaders and stakeholders explored at the Forum, the 2-K expansion creates new opportunities for policymakers to design policies that strengthen the early relationships needed for healthy development at multiple levels: between children and educators, families and educators, educators and program leaders, providers and professional support organizations, and providers and public agencies.

Key policy opportunities:

- Design 2-K quality standards that embed relationship-based practice as a core indicator of program quality.
- Develop a shared culture of early relational health among caregivers and families through public engagement and educational media campaigns in tandem with program rollout. Offer families tools to help them identify a program aligned with the science of early relational health.
- Elevate family voices in the design, implementation, and continuous improvement of the 2-K program.
- Enact workforce compensation, benefits, and wellness policies that mitigate educator stress and turnover.
- Provide opportunities for reflective coaching practices that nurture educators as adult learners. Coaching and professional learning opportunities should focus on developing educators' observation, reflection, and relationship-building skills.
- Strengthen coordination between 2-K and early intervention services to improve continuity of care and learning.
- Align quality standards with best practices on screen time in early learning settings, based on the NYS Council on Children and Families' **Screen Use in the Early Years brief**.

A flourishing 2-K program will have a robust set of policies and regulations to guide implementation, but the most meaningful infrastructure we can support is relational. From child to caregiver, caregiver to parent, center leaders to staff and families, and leaders across the city, we can build relationships around a common vision of what's possible for two-year-olds in New York.

Trust for Learning *is a national philanthropic partnership working to expand ideal learning environments for all young children and families, prenatal to age eight.*
Use this link to join the Trust for Learning mailing list*.*
Contact us at ***info@trustforlearning.org****.*

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On June 16, 2026, Bank Street's ***Straus Institute for Thriving Children and Families****, the* ***New York Professional Development Institute*** *at CUNY, and* ***Trust for Learning*** *convened a daylong policy and research forum to support New York City's public child care expansion for two-year-olds (2-K). Findings and recommendations from the forum are examined in a* ***series of companion briefs*** *addressing specific themes that emerged during the forum discussions.*

The event brought together policymakers, researchers, and educators to discuss the demographics, workforce development, and cultural responsiveness required for high-quality toddler care. It also shed a light on the true costs of high-quality care. Ultimately, the forum identified key themes important for 2-K's success, including:

- *High-quality care for two-year-olds relies on stable, responsive relationships, which may be threatened by low wages and high staff turnover.*
- *Integrating early intervention service, and tailoring outreach for trust-building within communities is critical for children's development and program reach.*
- *Higher education reforms in support of early educators should include student-centered programs and resources, such as paid internships and business training.*

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