

## Recommendations to Maintain Positive Interactions During COVID-19

As child care continues to be an essential service during this time, LENA turned inward to compile helpful tips on how to keep environments and relationships positive and nurturing. Over the next few weeks, many revised approaches to a consistent provision of child care will be explored and implemented nationwide. LENA is paying close attention to the ways in which child care may be changed by the COVID-19 crisis and developing recommendations and best practices based on its years of accumulated data. We hope the following will be a helpful tool for philanthropy, researchers, partners, advocates, and decisionmakers.

We also want to remember that positive interactions, responsive caregiving, and strong foundational relationships between children and their adult caregivers are more essential now than ever. In a recent discussion with some of our partners who work in public health, LENA explored the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and language development. This conversation reaffirmed [the power of positive adult/child interactions to act as a buffer against the effects of trauma and stress in early childhood](#). We encourage our network to use LENA as an opportunity to reinforce the positive role a parent, caregiver, or educator can have, through their interactions, on the way a child experiences these unique circumstances.

### New child care providers and emergency child care:

- It's important for those new to early child care to understand the critical impact frequent interactions with children have on their development. We've seen up to a 53% increase in the language abilities of children who were taught by educators with coaching in [conversational turns](#).
- Easy ways to increase classroom interactions include talking about what you're doing as you do it, using mealtimes to ask questions about how things taste or smell, and remembering to pause and take turns to allow a child to respond however they are able.
- Though technology can be a great tool to facilitate learning, relying on television, computers, or tablets/phones too frequently can cause fewer brain building adult-child interactions. Limit usage and consider other ways to entertain children. Sites like Zero to Three have [lists of activities sorted by age group](#).
- LENA uses a 10-week curriculum because dosage and frequency matter. When supporting those new to child care, consider what resources you can regularly post, send, or push out on social media to increase the likelihood of adoption by a new provider.

### Mixed age groups:

Child care providers are working with states and localities to meet the round-the-clock care needs of essential personnel. At the same time, they are adhering to new social distancing requirements, such as limiting the number of people in a room. This makes it likely that the makeup of classrooms is going to change. This might include more mixed age levels from birth through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

- We know effective adult-child interactions look different for different age levels. Providers who are caring for age levels they don't typically care for could review the [14 Talking Tips](#) and plan for how they might be used to increase conversational turns with different age levels.
- Older children tend to have more vocalizations. In a mixed age setting, this can lead to teachers focusing more time and effort on interacting with them. Encourage providers to stay tuned in to younger, less verbal children in the room as well. Looking at LENA data for individual children can help teachers maintain a focus on classroom equity. They can encourage older children to interact with younger children, too!

## **Changes in attendance:**

The daily changes as a result of COVID and the need for care for essential personnel might also mean more variability in attendance. Some children might not be used to being in care, or might only be coming once or twice a week.

- We know from surveys with teachers who have participated in LENA Grow that care providers who focus on increasing exchanges with shy or less verbal children report observing an increase in child vocalizations and classroom participation. Remind providers that they can help shy or new children feel supported by getting down on their level, following their lead, and commenting on what they're doing or looking at.
- This type of engagement helps to build a positive relationship between the provider and child which—and this cannot be emphasized enough—can serve as a buffer from stress in these uncertain times.

## **Atypical child care settings:**

Care might need to be conducted in emergency or atypical settings such as gymnasiums, which can have a big impact on the audio environment for young children.

- Young children process speech at about one fifth the speed of adults. An audio environment with less competing background noise means more conversational turns, which mean stronger outcomes for children.
- As you set up unorthodox settings, consider the audio environment and ask care providers for feedback on how to improve it. This may include constructing temporary walls or using fabric or other materials to keep sound from carrying.

## **Finally, LENA's basic principles still apply:**

### *Early talk is key.*

- Increasing interactive talk supports emotional health, social skills, self-control, and the ability to learn.
- Engaging in conversational turns (back and forth interactions) with the child is a more powerful way to promote brain development than just exposing them to language.

### *Parents, caregivers, and teachers are the secret sauce.*

- Teachers and families are the bedrock of young children's daily experiences so it's important to find ways to support and empower them.
- Using LENA's Talking Tips (download them [here](#)) can help caregivers find simple ways to increase engagement throughout their daily activities and routines without adding stress.

### *You can't improve what you don't measure.*

- Collecting formal data is often not a priority in a crisis, but even simple, informal check ins with care providers can help you understand what's happening and provide appropriate support.
- If your program is using LENA, feel encouraged to be creative and go off script by collecting data on how the circumstances have impacted engagement in your programs for future reflection.

To learn more, visit [www.LENA.org](http://www.LENA.org).