

Unpacking the *Infant-Toddler* Pyramid Model



A Practical Guide for Teachers and Providers

Amy Hunter
Mary Louise Hemmeter
Kathryn M. Bigelow
Neal M. Horen
Foreword by
Brenda Jones Harden



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A Practical Guide for Teachers and Providers

by

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Foreword

As a young clinician, I became invested in harnessing the power of prevention to address social-emotional challenges in infants and toddlers and learned the importance of working with caregivers to foster young children's social-emotional functioning. For decades, I have turned to the Pyramid Model to frame my work with children within multiple caregiving contexts. However, at the time, the literature and materials on this model devoted less attention to infants and toddlers. In this volume, the field has a critical reference for professionals who are invested in promoting *infant-toddler* social-emotional competence.

We know that infancy and toddlerhood represent developmental periods characterized by heightened opportunity and vulnerability, due primarily to the “plasticity” of the brain. Thus, the environmental supports afforded infants and toddlers are immensely influential for their social-emotional development. Capitalizing on this evidence, the current volume addresses a broad range of topics and provides a set of essential strategies that should be utilized by early childhood care and education (ECE) programs to promote the social-emotional functioning of the youngest children. Grounded in clinical and empirical work showing that social-emotional functioning of infants and toddlers is inextricably linked to their relationships with their primary caregivers, especially the parents and teachers who respond to their needs on a moment-to-moment basis, the chapters on relationships—with infants and toddlers, families, and colleagues—are paramount.

Moreover, the current volume underscores the importance of understanding the emotional processes underlying behavior, including emotion regulation. I particularly appreciate the attention devoted to child exposure to trauma as a precipitant of problematic behavior, given the high rates of trauma exposure among young children. Even the chapters that focus on behavioral challenges and associated interventions accentuate the *meaning* of behavior and the contextual adversities that affect young child behavior.

The Pyramid Model has always highlighted the characteristics of the ECE environment in promoting young children's social-emotional competence. The authors focus on equipment and materials, but also on routines, transitions, and engagement with caregivers and peers. One important contextual factor that they address is creating an ECE environment that centers diversity, equity, and inclusion. Beginning with an elevation of an anti-racist approach, the authors encourage practitioners to be reflective about their own experiences with racism and to socialize young children to be inclusive of children from other cultures.

A major benefit of this volume is its accessibility to practitioners and focus on what to *do* in the ECE context to promote positive social-emotional development in infants and toddlers. The volume summarizes overarching practices and delineates strategies for intervening with young children who have learning differences and behavior challenges, as well as strategies for working with families. The authors also provide useful tools for caregivers to improve their skills as purveyors of social-emotional support, including reflective questions, checklists, and vignettes.

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Foreword

Overall, this volume has filled a substantial gap in the literature regarding how ECE practitioners can promote social-emotional competence in infants and toddlers. It has superbly accomplished this goal and advanced knowledge in the ECE field about the social-emotional needs of the youngest children.

Brenda Jones Harden, Ph.D.

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Introduction and Overview

Kathryn M. Bigelow, Amy Hunter, Tweety Yates, Mary Louise Hemmeter, and Lise Fox

Teachers in infant and toddler settings play an important role in helping the youngest children get a healthy start in life. This can be a challenging and sometimes exhausting job, but it can also be rewarding, meaningful, and inspiring. Few careers play such an important role in the earliest years of children's development and have the potential to make such a lasting impact on the lives of young children and their families. Our goal throughout this book is to provide teachers with practices that are easily understood and can be used by all teachers in infant and toddler care settings to promote social-emotional development.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Infant and toddler teachers create a warm, welcoming environment for children and their families, provide nurturing care, and promote engagement that fosters social-emotional development. Early social and emotional growth sets the foundation for school readiness and lifelong success. Research shows that children who have healthy social and emotional skills tend to learn better, are more likely to stay in school, and will be better able to make and keep lifelong friends. Early social-emotional learning has been linked to later outcomes such as mental health (Sklad et al., 2012), academic performance (Jones et al., 2015), healthy relationships (Durlak et al., 2011), employment (O'Conner et al., 2017), and lifelong well-being (Rock & Crow, 2017). Children who are identified as having better social skills such as sharing, cooperating, and helping other children are more likely to graduate from high school on time, more likely to get a college degree and have a full-time job, and less likely to be arrested or engage in substance abuse (Jones et al., 2015).

What Is Social-Emotional Development?

The term *social-emotional development* refers to the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture (Yates et al., 2008).

On the other hand, research has also shown that young children who have persistent challenging behavior or have trouble getting along with others or controlling negative emotions are at greater risk of emotional and behavior disorders as they get older (Jones et al., 2015; National Research Council, 2009). The American Academy of Pediatrics (Gleason et al., 2016) notes these difficulties can lead to low academic performance, stressful relationships, challenging behaviors, and physical and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Simply put, the first 3 years of life are critical. Early relationships help children learn how to trust others, love, learn, and feel safe, secure, and confident.

THE ROLE OF EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND TEACHERS

Decades of research have shown us that high-quality early education programs can support children's social and emotional learning. Early educators play a critically important role in this process. Even though early educators understand the importance of early social-emotional development, only about 20% of early educators report receiving training in a given year on *how* they can support children's social-emotional growth (Osofsky & Lieberman, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2015). Many teachers report they do not feel that they have the skills needed to address young children's challenging behavior and that this was one of their top training needs (Snell et al., 2012; USDHHS, 2015). National data have shown that preschoolers with challenging behavior are often suspended or expelled from their public preschool programs, and surveys of child care programs in states have documented the suspension and expulsion of infants and toddlers. These exclusionary practices disproportionately impact children of color and especially young Black boys (Gilliam, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2020) and Black boys and girls, American Indian or Alaska Native boys, and multiracial boys with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2020). The importance of addressing early social-emotional development and challenging behavior, as well as the frustrations of early educators who may not feel prepared to respond to challenging behavior in an effective and equitable manner, prompted the development of The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (see Figure 1.1). The Pyramid Model is a framework for organizing effective practices for promoting young children's social-emotional development and preventing and addressing challenging behavior (Fox et al., 2003; Hemmeter et al., 2006). Additional information about Pyramid Model research and how it can be implemented with early education programs to support infants and toddlers is found in Chapter 2.



Figure 1.1. The Pyramid Model Framework. (Reprinted from Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M. M., & Fox, L. [2021]. *Unpacking the Pyramid Model: A practical guide for preschool teachers*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.)

RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional learning happens in the context of relationships. Relationships grow out of the everyday interactions that take place, throughout the day, and within typical classroom routines, such as play, feeding, and diapering. Consistent patterns of warm, nurturing interactions that take place within safe, secure, and predictable environments help to create strong emotional connections between young children and their caregivers. It is through these relationships that children begin to learn that the world is a safe place, with caring people in it and that the people around them provide care, are responsive, and help meet their needs. When children feel safe and secure, within

a warm and nurturing environment, they are more likely to develop social-emotional competence. Children learn how to be in warm, positive relationships and that they are worthy and deserving of love, care, and respect, and this helps children develop the confidence to explore and learn.

INFANT AND TODDLER SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR

While we acknowledge that not all children follow the same path of development, we know that with nurturing and responsive relationships and high-quality supportive environments, most children will reach the milestones shown in Table 1.1 around the following ages.

Because infants and toddlers are still learning to understand and express their emotions and communicate their wants and needs, they can sometimes engage in behavior that can be challenging or difficult for the adults who care for them. Infants and toddlers get fussy, cry, have tantrums, withdraw, bite, and sometimes have conflicts with their peers. These behaviors can be difficult to deal with, but in most cases, these are behaviors that are considered typical for this age and stage of development. While we might call these behaviors “challenging behaviors,” we might also think of them as “challenging situations.” They are behaviors that are typical for this age group and are a natural part of the learning process but may seem challenging to adult caregivers. In fact, in most cases, behaviors like these are considered a form of communication. When we see these behaviors and think about what they mean, we are following children’s cues. Crying might mean a child is tired or hungry. Withdrawal might mean a child is overstimulated. Biting may mean that a favorite toy was just taken by another child in the room. Behaviors communicate how a child is feeling and their wants and needs, and so observing and thinking about why a child is engaging in such a behavior can help teachers know how to respond and what to teach.

Some children, however, may experience more intense or more persistent challenging behaviors. These behaviors may interfere with the child’s ability to develop relationships and engage in classroom activities, which can then have long-term consequences. These challenging behaviors may be related to disabilities or delays a child may experience, and in some cases, these challenges may not yet be identified or diagnosed. Teachers play an important role in recognizing delays in development and behavioral challenges and working together with families and other professionals to address these individualized needs.

Challenging behaviors may also be related to having experienced trauma. Trauma can occur when a frightening or harmful event overwhelms a child’s ability to cope or deal with that event. Trauma can also occur when children experience ongoing or recurrent experiences, such as abuse or witnessing intimate partner violence, or when they experience events such as natural disasters. Trauma may impact children in different ways, so teachers play an important role in recognizing and addressing signs of trauma in young children. To address the needs of children who have experienced trauma, early educators are guided to focus on nurturing relationships, provide predictable routines and classroom structure, and teach social-emotional skills to help children feel safe and secure (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). In these cases, partnering with families and other professionals is crucial to ensure that we are effectively addressing these challenges. While children who experience these challenges may need additional supports or services, the practices described in this book are critically important and beneficial to their social and emotional learning. The practices described here provide a foundation to build upon, so that we can ensure that all children receive the supports they need.

EQUITY, CULTURE, AND INCLUSION

In the implementation of the Pyramid Model, a commitment to equity, inclusion, and belonging and the use of culturally responsive practices are vital to the promotion of children’s social-emotional competence. Providing a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive program for all children and families is critical to promoting young children’s social-emotional growth and fostering partnerships with families and other caregivers. The infant and toddler classroom, as one of the first learning environments outside of a child’s home, should be a context where children learn that they and their families are valued. In an infant-toddler classroom, young children learn how to treat others with respect, develop a positive sense of self, and see that human differences are embraced and honored.

Table 1.1. Social-emotional milestones

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 2 months | Looks at your face Calms when spoken to or picked up Smiles in response to caregiver talk or smiles Seems happy when caregivers approach |
| 4 months | Smiles to get attention Chuckles (not a full laugh) when caregivers try to make them laugh Looks at you, moves, makes sounds to get or keep attention Makes sounds back when you talk to them Turns head toward the sound of your voice |
| 6 months | Knows familiar people Laughs Likes to look at self in mirror Takes turns making sounds with you |
| 9 months | Shy, clingy, or fearful around strangers Shows several facial expressions, such as happy, sad, angry, surprised Looks when their name is called Reacts when caregivers leave, by looking, reaching, crying Smiles or laughs during peek-a-boo Lifts arms up to be picked up |
| 12 months | Plays games, like pat-a-cake Calls parents/caregivers at home "Mama" or "Dada" or other special name Understands "no" (pauses briefly or stops when you say it) |
| 15 months | Imitates other children's play Shows you an object they like Shows affection with hugs, cuddles, kisses Follows directions given with both a gesture and words, such as holding out hand and saying, "Give me the toy." Points to ask for something or get help |
| 18 months | Moves away from you but looks to make sure you are close by Points to show you something interesting Looks at pages in a book together with you Follows one-step directions without gestures Shows defiant behavior or has tantrums |
| 24 months | Notices when others are hurt or upset Looks at your face to see how to react in a new situation Uses more gestures than just waving or pointing Shows affection or concern for friends Shows a wider range of emotions Separates from mom or dad easier |
| 30 months | Plays next to other children and sometimes with them Shows you what they can do by saying, "Look at me!" Follows simple routines when told, like picking up toys when you say, "Clean up time!" Follows two-step instructions, like "Put the toy down and close the door." |
| 36 months | Notices other children and joins them in play Calms down shortly after leaving at child care drop-off Shows cooperation skills |

From Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Important Milestones: Your Baby By Two Months*. CDC. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/>. (This information is available for free on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. Reference to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government, Department of Health and Human Services, or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

A commitment to equity, inclusion, belonging, and culturally responsive practices is demonstrated in the way that teachers and the program welcome all children and families and celebrate children's diverse cultural identities, unique abilities, different family structures, racial and gender identities, languages, and beliefs.

In the infant and toddler classroom, teachers seek to understand and honor each family's values, language, culture, and goals for their child; provide a classroom environment that reflects diversity; and promote the engagement of every family in a way that is flexible and matched to their interests, strengths, and preferences. In a commitment to inclusion, children with disabilities are welcomed and teachers provide the needed support to ensure the child's sense of belonging and membership, development of relationships, and meaningful engagement in activities.

An important aspect of equity and inclusion in the use of the Pyramid Model is the commitment to ensure that no children experience exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline refers to expelling or dismissing a child from the program due to challenging behavior, having a child stay home for several days, sending a child home early, removing a child from the classroom, or removing a child from activities because of their behavior. When children experience exclusion, it removes them from learning opportunities, can disrupt their development of relationships with adults and peers, and communicates to the child they are not valued. Further, it is often linked to a continued trajectory of exclusion across the school years. The use of exclusionary discipline also has harmful effects on families including issues with employment related to child care instability and increased family stress.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

An essential component of infant-toddler care, and the Pyramid Model, is the relationship between teachers and families. Actively working toward building trusting relationships between teachers and families is crucial in infant and toddler care. When teachers and families have warm and engaging interactions and build mutually respectful relationships, it helps children feel safe and secure. Focusing on family strengths can help families feel valued, trusted, and understood. Strong teacher-family partnerships can have a positive impact on a child's social-emotional learning. Teachers can learn how best to individualize care and support social-emotional learning, while families can learn and adopt positive child development practices and look to their teacher for support and guidance. These relationships, which grow out of positive day-to-day interactions, can promote lasting change for children and families and provide a foundation for healthy conversations when concerns or challenges arise.

UNIQUE ASPECTS OF INFANT-TODDLER CARE

In writing this book, we were committed both to adhering to the integrity of the Pyramid Model framework and to ensuring that the practices reflected the unique needs of infants and toddlers and the classrooms where they spend time. This required a focus on some unique aspects of infant-toddler care. We began with an understanding that routines are the context in which children learn language, social-emotional skills, and other important information or skills. Routines are familiar activities that happen with consistency and predictability and help children feel safe and secure. We understand that the routines and activities of classrooms for infants and young toddlers focus primarily on the routines of each individual child. Rather than having a snack time, a naptime, or a potty time for multiple children, each of those activities is implemented when and how each individual child needs them. More specifically, rather than focusing the schedule and routines on the classroom as a whole, routines and schedules are designed and carried out based on each individual child's needs, particularly during infancy. As children move into the toddler years, some of these activities can be planned for multiple children, but in the early years, having individualized schedules and routines helps children feel safe and secure and understand their environment. Routines provide the context for adults co-regulating with young children, which is key to later social-emotional development. The concept of co-regulation, helping a young child to identify, process, and manage emotions, will be discussed in multiple chapters throughout this book (see Chapter 12).

Another key practice with infants and toddlers is the use of primary caregiving, in which each infant has a primary caregiver in the classroom who is responsive to the child's individual needs. This is important from an attachment perspective and creates a context where children are more likely to feel safe and secure. This clearly has implications for how we think about classroom roles and responsibilities, as well as how teachers and families work together to meet the individual needs of each child.

THE PYRAMID MODEL IS OUR GUIDING FRAMEWORK

The Pyramid Model is our guiding framework for implementation of research-based practices for promoting the social-emotional competence of all young children. It was developed to support the implementation of research-based practices for promoting the social-emotional competence of all children, preventing social-emotional delays in children who are at risk for emotional or behavioral issues, and intervening effectively with the few children who experience ongoing persistent challenging behavior. The goal of the Pyramid Model is to ensure every child experiences the support, relationships, opportunities, instruction, and environments to thrive in their social-emotional development and learning. The Pyramid Model supports providing nurturing and responsive care and high-quality environments for all children, targeted social-emotional strategies (explicit instruction) for children who need additional support, and individualized intervention for children with persistent challenging behavior. All Pyramid Model practices are built on a foundation of a qualified and effective workforce and systems and policies that sustain the use of evidence-based practices.

THE BENEFIT OF THE PYRAMID MODEL

Pyramid Model practices can make a lifelong difference in the lives of young children and their families. The Pyramid Model framework is grounded in a commitment to the following values:

- Maintaining a prevention focus
- Creating a caring community
- Maintaining a family-centered focus
- Supporting equity, inclusion, and belonging
- Being trauma informed
- Implementing anti-bias practices
- Being data informed

When infant-toddler programs adhere to these values, they ensure they are ready to support every child, including children who have disabilities or delays, children who have experienced trauma, children who are dual language learners, and children with persistent challenging behavior.

SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PYRAMID MODEL

Caring for infants and toddlers is incredibly hard work. Teachers contribute to the brain development of young children in their care. Adopting new approaches or teaching practices can be difficult. While we encourage teachers to embrace these practices, implementing Pyramid Model practices is most successful when there is a program-wide commitment to the practices and the values that are at the core of the Pyramid Model. Implementation of Pyramid Model practices is done best when there are systems in place such as coaching support and a way to measure progress in the use of the practices, as well as in child social-emotional outcomes.

Reflective practice is an essential component for providing high-quality infant-toddler care and supporting young children's social-emotional development. Reflective practices support a teacher's work through building self-awareness and reflection about their use of practices. Reflective practices might involve teachers reflecting on the practices used when individualizing care, fostering relationships with families, supporting emotions and behavior, implementing inclusive

practices, or engaging in professional development. Reflective practices involve understanding of the importance of having strategies and time to support their own self-care and having access to professional development and coaching supports for implementing practices that promote social-emotional development.

Teachers have reported that when they receive the support they need, they are better able to adopt Pyramid Model practices and, consequently, see improvements in young children's social-emotional competence and behavior. Seeing growth in infants' and toddlers' development helps teachers feel successful and less stressed and enjoy their work. When teachers feel they are making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers, they are more likely to stay in their jobs, creating a caring community of lasting impactful relationships.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The focus of this book is on Pyramid Model practices for teachers of infants and toddlers. Throughout this book, we refer to the role of the "teacher," but this role includes lead teachers, co-teachers, paraprofessionals, or other early education providers who care for infants and toddlers up to 36 months of age. We also frequently refer to families or parents and the importance of partnerships between teachers and families. When we refer to families or parents, we are referring to the adults who care for or who play important roles in the lives of infants and toddlers. This may include biological, adoptive, foster, or stepparents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, extended family, or other trusted family members or members of the family network of trusted adults. We acknowledge that family—biological or chosen—includes those individuals connected through trust, shared experience, culture, language, traditions, and love.

Our goal for this book is to provide easy-to-understand strategies that teachers can implement right away. Many additional resources exist to support other aspects of the Pyramid Model (i.e., support for program-wide implementation or coaching); these are highlighted throughout the book where appropriate. After the introduction:

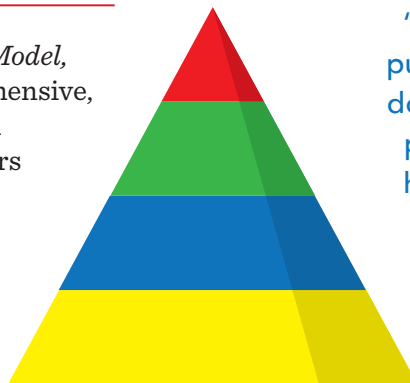
- Chapter 2 provides a more in-depth overview of the Pyramid Model.
- Chapter 3 provides critical information about caring for yourself. Self-care and caring for each other are essential components of early childhood education. Focusing on the health and well-being of teachers and caregivers makes teaching infants and toddlers more enjoyable and more rewarding and ultimately benefits young children.
- Chapter 4 offers information about creating anti-racist and inclusive early childhood environments. These practices have incredible potential to contribute to a more equitable society.
- Chapters 5–7 provide guidance and strategies for building relationships with infants, toddlers, families, and colleagues.
- Chapters 8–10 focus on routines, environments, and transitions—all critical elements of creating high-quality infant-toddler care.
- Chapter 11 covers important information about understanding the meaning of infant-toddler behavior. Understanding that young children's behavior is a form of communication is necessary to effectively meet children's needs and choose how to best respond.
- Chapters 12 and 13 provide strategies for supporting co-regulation, understanding, and regulating feelings and supporting peer relationships.
- Chapters 14 and 15 address the top of the Pyramid Model, offering strategies for effectively responding to challenging behavior (based on understanding its meaning) and designing individualized support.
- Chapter 16, the final chapter, offers information about monitoring your progress and determining the impact of the Pyramid Model practices. This chapter will answer important questions like "How do we collect data?" "What data do we collect?" and "How do we know we are making progress toward supporting infants' and toddlers' social-emotional development?"

Throughout the book, we have embedded information about engaging and partnering with families and collaborating with team members (this work is too hard to do alone). Our approach includes a strong commitment to promoting equity, anti-racism, and inclusion. We have provided strategies for supporting children with persistent challenging behaviors, children who have experienced trauma, and children with disabilities. Pyramid Model practices are not a substitute for formal psychotherapy, counseling, or developmental therapies; however, the nurturing relationships, high-quality environments, and practices of the Pyramid Model can contribute greatly to healing and growth in young children and their families. Our hope is that you will resonate with some of the vignettes offered in the book and see strategies you can quickly adopt into your care of infants and toddlers and work with their families. We hope you will join and contribute to program-wide, community-wide, and statewide efforts to embrace the Pyramid Model values and practices supporting social and emotional development of young children.

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The follow-up to *Unpacking the Pyramid Model*, this book is the first to provide a comprehensive, step-by-step overview of the widely used Pyramid Model Practices for infants and toddlers from birth to 3. Created by the Pyramid Model developers and experts with extensive training experience, this book gives readers a complete introduction to the framework, plus in-depth guidance, evidence-based practices, and checklists for implementing all levels of the Pyramid Model: universal, targeted, and individualized.



“This isn’t a book to read once and put down. This one will soon become dog-eared! Wherever you are in your professional journey, this book will help promote the social-emotional competence of all our smallest children and their families.”

–Marilou Hyson, Ph.D., Consultant,
Early Childhood Development
and Education

Teachers and providers will learn how to:

- Address their own **well-being** to prepare for their important work
- Build **positive partnerships** with families and colleagues
- Develop predictable and responsive **schedules, routines, and transitions**
- Promote children’s **social skills and emotional competencies**
- Create an **anti-racist and inclusive** early care environment
- Meet the needs of children who have experienced **trauma**
- Understand, prevent, and effectively respond to **challenging behavior**
- Use data to monitor **Pyramid Model practice implementation** and effects

Ideal for use in preservice and inservice training, this accessible guide expertly prepares teachers and providers to meet the unique needs of infants and toddlers—and boost their social-emotional development in the critical first years of life.

Includes **Checklists of Effective Practices** for each main topic and helpful tools for observation, planning, and reflection!

“With relationship at the heart and foundation of the Pyramid Model, this outstanding team of researcher-practitioners infuse each principle and practice with compassionate care for infants, families, and most importantly, care providers and educators themselves.”

–Junlei Li, Ph.D., Program Co-Chair,
Human Development and Education,
Saul Zaentz Senior Lecturer in Early
Childhood Education, Harvard Graduate
School of Education

“This book is full of easily digestible information, resources, reflections, and activities that can be used individually or in a group setting. Teachers, families, and children will benefit greatly from the work that was done in creating this book.”

–Christen Million, M.S., D.T.,
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