

Getting the Picture

Using the Digital Camera as a Tool to Support Reflective Practice and Responsive Care

Julia Luckenbill

After two weeks of intense crying at naptime, today 7-month-old Pia has been soothed by her new caregiver, Shawna, and is asleep at last. Shawna's face wears a look of soft wonder and joy. Julia, the master teacher in the classroom, observes the moment and reaches into her pocket for the small camera. She photographs the moment, then moves on to support children during their diaper changes. Later in the day, Julia shows the photograph to Shawna. "What do you think of that?" asks Julia. "I was so proud," replies Shawna. "I thought she'd never sleep for me, but she did." "You worked hard to build her trust," says Julia, "and now she feels safe with you."

portfolios and give them to children and their families as mementos at the end of the year. In our classrooms, we use photography on a daily basis to document children's adventures and share them with families. In addition, mentor teachers in our classrooms use the camera as a tool to support caregivers' reflective practices to refine their ability to read cues and respond mindfully to the children.

Many early childhood educators use cameras to share the charming things that children do and the artwork they make. Programs often bind these photographs into

Julia Luckenbill, MA, is program coordinator for the infant and toddler components of the NAEYC-accredited Early Childhood Laboratory School at the UC–Davis Center for Child and Family Studies. She has directed preschool programs in California and presents on child development topics for parents, teachers, and students. Her special interests include integrating Reggio Emilia philosophy into US schools, documenting children's learning through photography, and designing a farm-to-school gardening program for infants and toddlers. jaluckenbill@ucdavis.edu

Note: The names and stories in this article have been slightly fictionalized to protect caregiver and child privacy

Photos © Julia Luckenbill except as indicated.

A study guide for this article is available through www.naeyc.org/memberlogin.

naeyc® 1, 2, 3



© Trudi Schwarz



The connection between reflective practice and responsive care

Responsive care is defined as “the process of understanding the child’s experience and knowing how to respond appropriately” (Wittmer & Petersen 2006, 225). Young children need to experience responsive care for healthy social and emotional development (Ainsworth 1969). In the time period just after World War II, most very young children were cared for in the home, and it was unusual for mothers to work. For this reason, initial attachment research by Mary Ainsworth focused on supporting responsive relationships between mothers and children in the home. Now, as more and more children enter full-day care, we realize the importance of fostering responsive caregiving in child care settings as well. For this reason, researchers have identified responsive caregiving as one of the key ingredients that defines high-quality care. This is evidenced in its inclusion in a range of classroom quality assessment tools, including the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales (Cryer, Harms, & Riley 2005, 61).

Reflective practice is an approach traditionally used in therapeutic settings to guide therapists in reflection. Experts Deborah Weatherson and Barbara and Robert Weigand in the academic journal *Zero to Three* (2010) define engaging in reflective practice as

- regularly examining thoughts, feelings, strengths, and growth areas;

This caregiver is tuned in to the toddler’s communications and interests, mimicking the symbolic gesture for train as the train arrives. She has worked hard to form a connection with the toddler over the 10-week placement, which is often reflected in her journal about the process. The photo highlights the connection for the caregiver.

- collaborating with mentors and peers; and
- reflecting with a mentor or peer about your own needs and the needs of the children and families you serve. (24)

A simpler way to state this concept is that the participants in reflective process are “observing, listening, wondering, and responding” (Tomlin, Sturm, & Koch 2009).

Weatherson, Weigand, and Weigand assert that when adult caregivers engage in reflective practice, everyone benefits. Children develop a sense of efficacy and value in a setting where adults understand their needs. Adults feel competent and valued as they learn the complex “dance” of interaction, learning to meet individual children’s needs and interests: “Reflection is a critical component of competency for all professionals working with young children and their families” (2010, 22–30). Adults build competency in responsive practice through reflection.

Supporting responsive caregiving

How can we weave reflective practice into the classroom routine in order to support responsive caregiving? Human developmentalists Elita Virmani and Lenna Ontai at the University of California–Davis found that “opportunities afforded by reflective supervision and training in the child care environment influence caregivers’ ability to be insightful with the children in their care” (2010, 29). Their study, which was conducted in part in our classrooms at the UC–Davis Center for Child and Family Studies Laboratory School, found that “caregivers’ ability to reflect upon the intentions underlying children’s behavior and upon their own actions in response to children’s behaviors is likely to contribute to their own capacity for responsive caregiving” (2010, 19). In other words, caregivers who have opportunities to reflect on their feelings and needs in relation to teaching are more likely to become responsive caregivers. For example, caregivers who spent 10 weeks writing journals and discussing their care of children in the classroom displayed more in-tune behaviors with the children in their care.



Reflective practice in action

What does reflective practice look like in the classroom? In their study, Virmani and Ontai observed caregivers who spent time reflecting in journals, meeting in small groups at the end of each day to talk about their needs and feelings with a mentor teacher, and engaging in activities designed to examine emotional triggers. All these activities guided caregivers to think about their own actions and reactions to the children in their care, and to consider their impact. To implement and support reflective practice, programs must provide time and space in the classroom for mentor teachers to write and talk about each caregiver's interactions with the children. Caregivers are encouraged to reflect on the importance of relationships and their effects on children's development (Ritchie & Howes 2003). To do so, the caregiver must feel safe and supported by the mentor teacher, rather than rushed and judged (Gilkerson 2004). This may require setting ground rules of respect at the start of small group reflection, and checking in regularly to make sure that caregivers' needs are met.

In our classrooms, tools for reflection include in-class jotting, after-class journaling, daily small-group discussions, and periodic one-on-one meetings. These methods are common in other early childhood settings that engage in reflective practice (Craven & Taylor 2010).

How do these methods work in practice? As you enter our classrooms after the children leave, you see caregivers jotting anecdotes, reflecting in journals, discussing children's behavior challenges, and engaging in coursework that details the typical development and social-emotional needs of each child. Later in the day you would also encounter mentor teachers meeting in small groups and pairs to reflect. We consult with each other to explore a range of ideas for dealing with classroom challenges. Later in the week you would notice mentor teachers reading and responding to caregivers' journal entries. The design of our program allows for this reflection time. We value the practice as important for the implementation of high-quality care.

Using the digital camera as a tool for reflection and training

In addition to the tools traditionally used for reflection, in the last five years or so we have increasingly relied on the digital camera (and its video function) as a way to lead new caregivers down the reflective path to responsive care. The digital camera is an exciting tool we added to our bag of tricks to promote reflection. In our setting, mentor teach-

To implement and support reflective practice, programs must provide time and space in the classroom for mentor teachers to write and talk about each caregiver's interactions with the children.

ers carry a small digital camera with video capabilities in their apron pockets, ready to use when teachable moments occur.

We use the camera and the video function of the digital camera frequently as a tool to train caregivers for several reasons:

- The camera quickly snaps passing moments for later discussion and reflection.
- Visual images trigger caregiver memories of past responses to cues.
- The camera can show children's "tuned-in" expressions and can capture child cues for future interpretation, for example, showing a child's shift in body language and expression in response to a caregiver's actions.
- The camera illustrates child milestones for use in articulating developmental stages and needs of children, increasing intentionality of classroom planning and curriculum design.



This photo was one in a series of 10 showing the back-and-forth interactions between a Korean-speaking infant and his German-speaking caregiver. Their language and connection transcended the two cultures. This photo was meaningful for the caregiver because it showed the connection she had worked hard to make with the infant.



- The camera can document children’s interests and patterns of behavior, assisting caregivers in following the children’s lead.
- The camera/video camera can pinpoint environmental stimuli and caregiver behavior patterns that may be triggering problematic behaviors.
- The photographs can also be used to illustrate children’s growth and learning for use in Reggio Emilia-style documentation (photo narrative) for parent–teacher conferences and for children’s portfolios.

Using the camera to capture valuable information for teachers requires skill and intentionality. The photographer is not seeking to document the child posing in a cute manner. What is central is to notice and then quickly photograph the child and the caregiver tuned in to each other or to an environmental stimulus. The photographer seeking this type of interaction will find that the child and caregiver are rarely looking into the camera lens.



Tips for taking photos and videos

Here are some tips for capturing important moments:

- Obtain consent for your photo subjects from parents or guardians. Be sensitive to the cultural views of families, and staff as there are many ways to reflect without photography.
- Begin by telling adults and children the purpose of taking the photos or making the video clips. I explain to curious children that I am “taking pictures of how we play so I can show your family later on.” I tell caregivers that I am trying to find moments when they are in tune with the children, and when children demonstrate milestones. I explain that the photos often create opportunities for discussion and reflection. Usually this decreases the amount of self-consciousness the camera provokes.

What is central is to notice and then quickly photograph the child and the caregiver tuned in to each other or to an environmental stimulus.

- Watch children and caregivers interacting before you take a photograph. It is important to develop an eye for teachable moments in order to capture them successfully.
- Make sure you have quick access to a camera. When the teachable moment happens, leaving to get the camera will mean missing the ideal photograph. It is far easier to avoid missing key moments when you can pull the camera out of your pocket.

This caregiver and an infant in her group are investigating the connection between the Open button and the drawer. Neither is looking at the camera. This photograph was taken on the second day this caregiver was caring for the infant. It shows the new connection in a concrete way that could stimulate reflection.

- Seek images where the child and the caregiver are sharing a special moment. Zoom in on the subjects' faces and look for reciprocal exchanges. Well-photographed moments can lead to conversations with the caregiver about the interaction.
- Begin with the positive so the camera is seen as a helpful and complimentary tool. Photograph challenges later, once you have built a trusting relationship with a new caregiver.



© Stephanie Nuccitelli

The caregiver pictured above expressed pride when she saw this photo. She explained that she had identified an activity that her entire group enjoyed, and she found that it was easier to supervise them outside once she was in tune with this group of children. The caregiver has placed herself where she can see her entire group, and is busy reading their cues. She is using parallel talk (narrating what the child is doing for the child) to show that she is tuned in to the children and she is using the Program for Infant and Toddler Caregivers recommended watch-ask-adapt model (Lally et al. 1990) to decide when to step in to coach children, and when they do not need help.

© Stephanie Nuccitelli



Using A Digital Camera

A digital camera with a fast shutter speed and the ability to take several photographs in a row (sports setting) works well. It is easy to snap a series of back-and-forth expressions between a child and caregiver, or a series of movements—such as a child learning to walk to a caregiver—without having to wait for the camera to process the first image.

It is okay to take numerous digital photos in the interest of capturing one key moment—this is what the Delete button is for. Alternatively, this would be a good time to switch to the video setting if you prefer to include the sounds and shifts in expression of a longer interaction.

This photo of me shows a key concept—child curiosity. In the toddler room we place broken point-and-shoot cameras in the cognitive area, the area of the classroom dedicated to puzzles, technology, and manipulatives, for the children to explore. Having these cameras available is useful for redirecting toddlers who want to imitate us as we document the classroom. This toddler has been redirected from my camera and is “taking a picture” of me with his own.



This infant is learning to walk. These images narrate his caregiver's ability to shift focus with him as he points out something he notices, then resumes the task of walking to her. The caregiver is responsive and the photograph captures her skill for later reflection.

The value of video

We have found that the video option on the camera is especially useful when caregivers are struggling to reflect on a complex behavior challenge. This comes into play in our classroom if there are caregivers who are working on an advanced teaching technique, such as running a toddler circle time. Showing video clips to caregivers who are struggling to interpret a child's behavior can be eye-opening. For example, an infant room caregiver had been expressing frustration about the behavior of a child in her care group:

We videotaped a snack time interaction between a caregiver and a child because the caregiver had been complaining that she could not get one of the children in her group to stay seated. In the clip, 12-month-old Aziz is standing in his chair, reaching for his water cup in the center of the table. His caregiver, Selena, who had been spoon-feeding 11-month-old Jihee, gazes back at him and says, "We sit when we eat." Reseating him and pointing to the Cheerios on the table in front of him, Selena says, "You still have some snack." As soon as she turns to continue feeding Jihee, Aziz again stands, reaching for the water cup.

When viewing the video, I asked Selena, "What do you think he wants?" She looked at the clip. "The water?" "What if you tried putting it closer to him?" I asked. Selena explained that she had placed it there so he would not dump it off the table. "Could you let Jihee try eating with the spoon for a while so that Aziz can try using his cup more with your help?" "Jihee makes such a mess," explained Selena. "In my culture, you don't waste food like that." "So it's hard to see the yogurt she gets on the table?" "Yes, and it kind of grosses me out," Selena admitted. "So snack time is pushing a lot of buttons for you?" I asked. "Yeah," she said. "It's hard for me to just let them try."

Later, Selena confided to me that viewing and discussing the video recording had been one of the most helpful things she had experienced with us. It was more effective than the still photo images because it caught the nonverbal cuing: she had not noticed that when he stood up he was telling her with a gesture that he needed something. Video allowed her to see her own behavior more clearly. "It helped me to step outside and see the interaction without being so frustrated," she explained. This ability to watch, ask, and adapt to a child's cues or challenging behaviors is an indicator of responsive care (Lally et al. 1990).

Showing video clips to caregivers who are struggling to interpret a child's behavior can be eye-opening.

Organizing Photographs and Videos

- Download and organize your photos and video clips onto the computer soon after taking them. It is helpful to have a computer nearby to help staff get into the habit of downloading photos quickly and regularly. Easy access to a computer can allow staff to share a video clip with an intern on the same day it is recorded.
- Label each downloaded image with the day it was taken and the classroom name. Mentor teachers can use the photographs to record child and caregiver growth over time when conferencing with families, and use concrete images to support thoughts, anecdotes, and observations.
- Back up your photos on an external hard drive on a regular basis. This preserves the photos in case of possible computer failure. Saving video clips and older photo files to a hard drive and then deleting them from the computer can ensure enough memory on the hard drive to avoid slowing the computer down.

It is worth noting that video recording in the classroom can be more challenging than taking still photos. Ambient noise, such as parents checking in with other caregivers, can drown out quiet infant-toddler communication, and other children frequently interrupt video efforts by grasping the camera, walking into the frame for a hug, or crying. Still, with persistence it is possible to get strong footage of interactions and communications.

Talking about the photos

I have found that when meeting with an individual or group to share photos, it is best to begin with images of competence. I select photos where the caregiver is clearly in tune with the child, and is providing responsive caregiving. I preface the photo session with prompts, such as, “Why do you think I took this photo? What was I trying to show you?”

A typical response from the caregiver might be, “I am seated at the level of the child and making eye contact.”

I then articulate other tools the caregiver used that were effective. “And you used your face and voice to reflect the emotions that each child was feeling.”

If a caregiver is struggling with a concept, I generally mention my observations in his or her journal. “It looked like you were really struggling to get Gigi to the diaper change area today. What do you think was happening that made it take 10 minutes?”

After back-and-forth journaling and sometimes one-on-one discussion about reasons behind the struggle, I try to photograph images of the caregiver doing elements of the technique successfully. I share that I saw things working well in the photographed case and describe what I saw, and then I wonder aloud what went differently in the other instance. Often the caregiver can reflect back on what happened and use those successes to refine his or her overall technique. “Oh, I have been saying, ‘I wonder if you want to go to diaper change?’ and they keep saying no. I need to use two choices more often. That really worked when she chose to dance to diaper change instead of being carried.”

I select photos where the caregiver is clearly in tune with the child, and is providing responsive caregiving.

The reflective journaling paired with images provokes the caregiver to reflect on what happened in the interaction, not with the mindset that the child was “trying to drive me crazy,” but with awareness of her own interactions and communications and their effects on a toddler who needs to feel autonomous.

In our classrooms, as caregivers move on to new positions, we take the time to give them several of our favorite images of themselves engaging in best practice with the children. We select these photos over a span of time, reflecting growth through photographs. We share these photos with the caregivers for their professional portfolios and to help them keep in mind the kind of responsive interactions and relationships that are important in infant-toddler settings. Photographic portfolios, compiled over time, are an excellent way to share each caregiver’s growing confidence in his or her work with children.





This caregiver, pictured earlier one-on-one with a toddler, has grown a great deal in her time with the program. She has developed an eye for the safety and coordination of larger groups. Her growing confidence shows as she takes on new levels of responsibility and forms relationships with every toddler in the group.



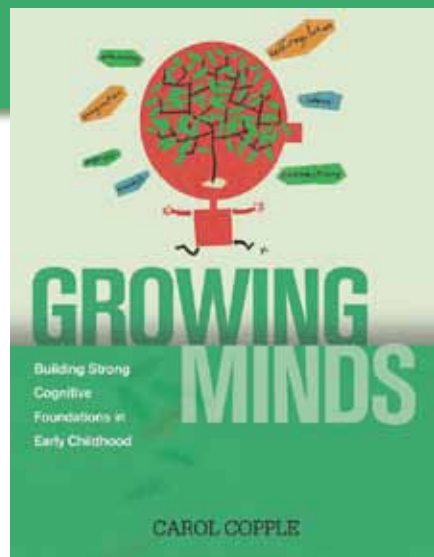
Overall, I have found digital and video cameras to be excellent tools in supporting responsive care through reflective practice. Caregivers have shared that it is useful to see what they are doing well, and they feel that they have been closely and thoughtfully observed in practice. Staff find it pleasant to photograph each other in moments of best practice and to share photo observations and reflections. With this type of feedback, the quality of care provided by the caregivers in our classrooms radically improves over their 10-week placements. Mentor teachers also enjoy reflecting on their own successes and techniques using the digital camera, most notably the video function. Not only are we able to articulate growth visually, but everyone in our programs leaves with a concrete record as well as lasting, meaningful images of their personal journey and growth.

References

- Ainsworth, M.D.S. 1969. "Object Relations, Dependency and Attachment: A Theoretical Review of the Infant–Mother Relationship." *Child Development* 40: 969–1025.
- Craven, L., & R. Taylor. 2010. "Using Reflective Supervision to Enhance Teachers' Professional Growth and Development." Lecture presented at the NAEYC Annual Conference, Anaheim, CA.

- Cryer, D., T. Harms, & C. Riley. 2005. *All about the ECERS-R: A Detailed Guide in Words & Pictures to Be Used with the ECERS-R*. Lewisville, NC: K Press Publishing.
- Gilkerson, L. 2004. "Reflective Supervision in Infant–Family Programs: Adding Clinical Process to Nonclinical Settings." *Infant Mental Health Journal* 25 (5): 424–39.
- Lally, J.R., P.L. Mangione, S. Signer, G.O. Butterfield, & S. Gilford. 1990. *Getting in Tune: Creating Nurturing Relationships with Infants and Toddlers* [DVD]. The Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers (developed collaboratively by the California Department of Education and WestEd). www.pitc.org/cs/pitclib/view/pitc_res/816.
- Ritchie, S., & C. Howes. 2003. "Program Practices, Caregiver Stability, and Child Caregiver Relationships." *Applied Developmental Psychology* 24: 497–516.
- Tomlin, A.M., L. Sturm, & S. Koch. 2009. "Observe, Listen, Wonder and Respond: A Preliminary Exploration of Reflective Function Skills in Early Care Providers." *Infant Mental Health Journal* 30 (6): 634–47.
- Virmani, E.A., & L.L. Ontai. 2010. "Supervision and Training in Child Care: Does Reflective Supervision Foster Caregiver Insightfulness?" *Infant Mental Health Journal* 31 (1): 16–32.
- Weatherston, D., R.F. Weigand, & B. Weigand. 2010. "Reflective Supervision: Supporting Reflection as a Cornerstone for Competency." *Zero to Three* 31 (2): 22–30. ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families.
- Wittmer, D.S., & S.H. Petersen. 2006. *Infant and Toddler Development and Responsive Program Planning: A Relationship-Based Approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill–Prentice Hall.

Copyright © 2012 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.



ISBN: 9781928896791 • Item #362
\$25 • Member: \$20 20% savings

NEW FROM NAEYC!

Growing Minds

Building Strong Cognitive Foundations in Early Childhood

Carol Copple, Editor

Young children need to learn about the physical and social worlds they live in, acquire language, and gain competence in literacy, mathematics, science, and other knowledge domains. From the coeditor of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* comes this collection of readings that provides both an overview of young children's cognition and strategies for promoting their cognitive development.

A Comprehensive Member Benefit



Scan for a preview

naeyc®

Order online at www.naeyc.org/store

or call **800-424-2460** option 5 (9:00 A.M. – 5:00 P.M. EST, Mon.–Fri.)