

Aki's story



Aki was excited because she knew that something special was about to happen. She waited for her mother, Hanae. Aki knew that they were about to have some fun together. Hanae found Aki waiting in the living room.

Hanae: *Come on, Aki. It's bathtime.*

Aki took her mother's hand and followed her to the bath, which was ready and warm and soapy, just the way she liked it. She got in and grabbed Croco, her squeezey crocodile bath toy.

Hanae: *So what did Croco do today, Aki?*

Aki (laughing): *Well, he sang about the farm animals.*

Hanae: *Oh, do you mean Old MacDonald?*

Aki: *Yes!*

Hanae: *Shall we sing it now?*

Aki: *Yes!*

Aki and Hanae sang Old MacDonald together while Aki splashed around with Croco and Hanae helped her pretend that the bath was a farm. It was like this every evening when it was bathtime and Aki knew it was also their special time together. Just her and mummy.

Typically when we think of families, the traditional nuclear and extended family who are biologically related may come to mind. However, a family can be made up of anyone a person considers to be their family. A family shares emotional bonds, common values, goals and responsibilities. Family members contribute significantly to the wellbeing of each other. When a family includes children, one or more adults may take on an involved role in the child's life and become a parent or carer. Parents and carers may not necessarily be biologically related to the child or even live with the child all the time. A child may have one or several parents or carers. In addition to their biological parents, this could include grandparents, step-parents, aunts and uncles, foster parents, adoptive parents, and any other person who fulfils a significant portion of the parenting and caregiving for the child.



What are healthy family relationships?

Healthy family relationships help all members of a family feel safe and connected to one another. Family relationships sometimes involve conflict, which is a normal part of family life. Conflicts can occur between adults, children or adults and children. Some examples of conflicts could be disagreements about household chores, parenting decisions, house rules or siblings wanting to watch different TV shows or not wanting to share toys. It is important that these conflicts are dealt with in a safe and respectful way. Healthy family relationships also mean that positive interactions between family members outnumber the difficult times.

Why are healthy family relationships important?

The relationships we experience with the people around us have a great influence on our wellbeing. Strong, positive relationships help us build trust and feel supported. Having people around us who can share positive and difficult times can also help us manage stress when things become tough.

Children first learn about relationships from their own families. Families give them a model from which they start to discover how to build relationships throughout their lives. Children who have a model of healthy relationships from their families are better able to create these relationships outside their families, that is, with other children and adults in their lives. When children learn the skills of building positive relationships, they can practise these skills over and over again as they meet new people. For example, when parents say 'thank you' to children when they help out, then children are more likely to say 'thank you' when their peers or other adults do something for them.

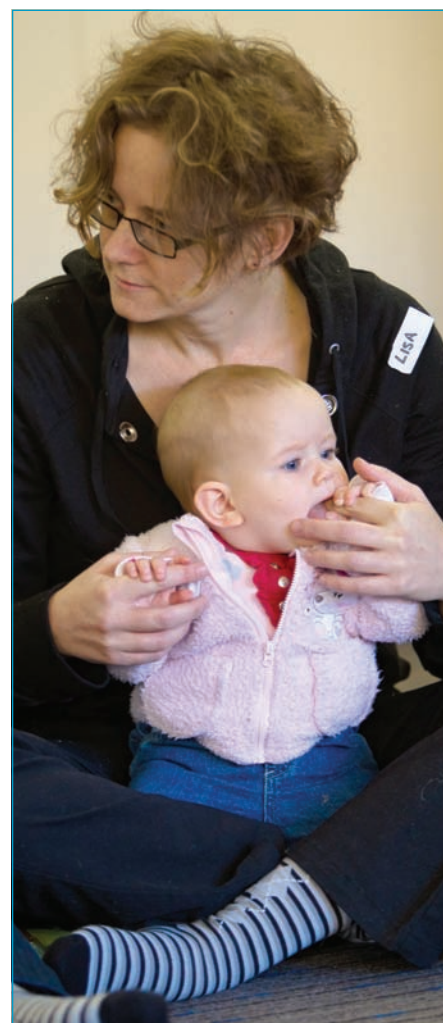
Children also feel safe when they know that their family members love and will protect one another. A warm and safe family environment helps children learn, develop and experience what strong relationships look like.



How to build healthy family relationships

Building and maintaining positive relationships with children and with all family members is not always easy. All families have times when tempers flare, feelings get hurt and misunderstandings occur. It helps to have good communication, flexibility and creativity to manage these situations and maintain positive connections.

Cultural background, family values and differences in family make-up (e.g., sole parents, step and blended families, same-sex parents) can influence the values and goals adults have for children's development. This may also lead to diverse relationship and support needs. Consider, for example, how your family values and cultural background has influenced your thinking and behaviour.



Making time for family members, communicating effectively and supporting each other are important ways to strengthen families and build positive relationships. Working together as a family is also helpful in building strong and caring family relationships. In times of conflict, families who are able to work together find effective ways to manage and learn from the experience. As conflict is a normal and healthy part of family life, children can learn to manage it. Parents and carers can help children identify the problem behind the conflict and guide them through a process of peaceful problem solving.

Some tips for building healthy family relationships:

- ▶ Try to spend regular quality time together as a whole family and with each child, even if it is for a few minutes each day.
- ▶ Show affection (e.g., hugs, kisses, kind words or a pat on the back).
- ▶ Offer help and support to one another.
- ▶ Do fun things and laugh together.
- ▶ Share values and engage in family rituals (e.g., family dinners, weekend walks or movie nights) to build a sense of belonging.
- ▶ Talk to each other.
- ▶ Tell each other what you like about your family (e.g., 'Dad, I like your hugs,' or 'Cara, you have a polite voice').
- ▶ Have family discussions to organise family events and to work through difficulties.
- ▶ Try to listen, understand and respect each other's feelings.
- ▶ Try to include children in decisions affecting them; give younger children choices to help them make a decision.
- ▶ Teach and model problem-solving skills to children so they become more confident at resolving their own conflicts.
- ▶ Set examples and send clear messages to children so they learn how to treat family members (e.g., speaking in a calm voice even when you disagree with a family member).

- ▶ Recognise and appreciate that everyone in the family will have different likes, needs and wants and this may sometimes create challenges within the family.
- ▶ Get support from family, friends or professionals when you need help juggling demands.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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