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Strong Starts, Steady Bonds: Helping Young Children Thrive Through Change

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Event Materials

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Today's Presenter



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- Coordinates the early childhood education/early childhood special education and child, family, and community development undergraduate degree programs.
- Research interests focus on the inclusion of young children with disabilities, Part C early intervention, implementing family-centered practices, and personnel preparation

Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Identify two strategies for sustaining caregiver-child attachment during separations.
- Explain one method for maintaining early intervention support before a relocation and after.
- Recognize at least two responsive caregiving techniques to promote early development.

Our Mission for Today

- Why early relationships matter
- Responsive caregiving in the context of separation and transition
- Supporting emotional regulation and integrating early intervention into daily routines and across duty stations
- Fatherhood Focus
- Reflection and next steps

Why Early Relationships Matter

Early Experiences & the Developing Brain

- Rapid brain development occurs during the first three years
- Relationships are the foundation for learning and behavior
- Early experiences shape emotional regulation, trust and security, and stress-response systems



From Science to Practical Practice

- Layla, 14 months old
- Loves exploring, pulling toys off shelves, and pointing to things she wants
- Mom wonders if she is doing enough to support Layla's development

What everyday caregiver behaviors could support Layla's healthy brain development?



Attachment as the Foundation for Resilience

- Secure attachment develops through consistent, responsive care and is built through everyday interactions
- Secure attachment predicts stronger emotional regulation and resilience, even during stressful times



To view this video visit <https://youtu.be/DRejV6f-Y3c?si=sIctMnPtP7wP-mgH>

Let's Chat!

How would you describe the relationships between the caregiver and child? What specific behaviors led you to that impression?



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To view this video visit <https://youtu.be/DRejV6f-Y3c?si=sIctMnPtP7wP-mgH>

Let's Chat!

Thinking about both clips, what differences stood out to you in how the child used the caregiver – and what does that tell us about their sense of safety and trust?

How might these interaction patterns influence the child's ability to cope during times of stress or transition?



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Responsive Caregiving in the Context of Separation & Transition

What is Responsive Caregiving?

- Reading and responding promptly, appropriately, and consistently to the child's cues
- Predictability, routines, and emotional availability
- Understanding the need for co-regulation before self-regulation
 - Co-regulation helps children develop their own emotional regulation and coping skills
- Calm, consistent adults create safety
- Behavior is communication

Co-Regulation: An Example



Based on this scenario, how would you define co-regulation?

What might co-regulation look like for an infant?

Attachment in the Context of Separation & Deployment

- Military-related separations can be a cause of stress for young children
- While military-related separations can increase child stress responses, separation does not break secure attachments
- Responsive caregiving serves as a buffer to stress, supports adaptive coping, and builds confidence in relationships
- When we support caregiver emotional regulation and coping, the caregiver is better equipped to support the child

Let's Chat!

What strategies have you seen work well to support the connection between a caregiver who is deployed or at training and a young child?



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Supporting Connection During Separations

- Structured communication with deployed caregiver
- Use of visual and symbolic connection aids
- Facilitate predictability and consistent routines (to the extent possible)
- Prepare for reunification

Integrating Early Intervention into Daily Routines

Let's Chat!

How can the presence of a disability impact a young child's ability to self-regulate?



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Impact of a Disability on Self-Regulation

- Disrupts children's ability to manage emotions, attention, and sensory input
- May see increased meltdowns, impulsivity, and reliance on caregivers for regulation support

Early Intervention as Relationship-Based Support

- EI supports the caregiver, not just the child (caregiver coaching)
- Supporting caregiver confidence and competence
- Building caregiver capacity across settings

WWYD?

- Ava, two years old
- Early intervention for developmental delay
- Becomes overwhelmed during daily routines
- Cries, throws toys, and clings to caregiver

What strategies could help Ava regulate during daily routines?



DEC Recommended Practices

- The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) is a professional organization focused on improving outcomes for young children (birth-eight) with disabilities and their families.
- The Recommended Practices (RPs) provide evidence-based guidance that describes what practitioners should do to support young children and families.
- The RPs are widely used in early intervention, early childhood special education, and inclusive early learning settings.

View the RPs at:
www.dec-sped.org/dec-recommended-practices

Strategy	DEC Recommended Practice	Why It Aligns
Embed interventions into everyday routines	INS 1 INS2	DEC emphasizes that learning opportunities should occur within naturally occurring routines and activities where children already participate.
Inclusive, relationship-based approaches (connection before correction)	INT1 INT2	Relationship-based practice and responsiveness are central to the Interaction practices, which prioritize connection, attunement, and shared engagement.
Supports should be individualized, sensory-friendly, and implemented in predictable environments to foster a sense of safety and security	ENV1 ENV2 INS4	DEC environmental practices focus on creating accessible, predictable, and supportive environments that promote engagement and regulation.
Provide language for emotions (even before words)	INT3 INT4	Labeling emotions and modeling language during interactions supports communication development and emotional regulation.

Continuity of EI Services When Changing Duty Stations

- Transition-related service disruption
- Documentation and communication matter
- Supporting caregiver advocacy across systems

PCS Move

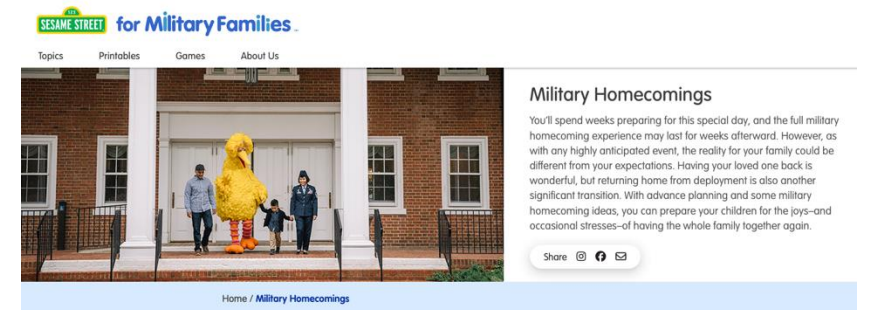


- Moving to a new duty station in 3 weeks
- Child receives EI services for speech delay
- Family worried about gap in services during the move

What steps would you encourage the family to take *before the move* to maintain support?

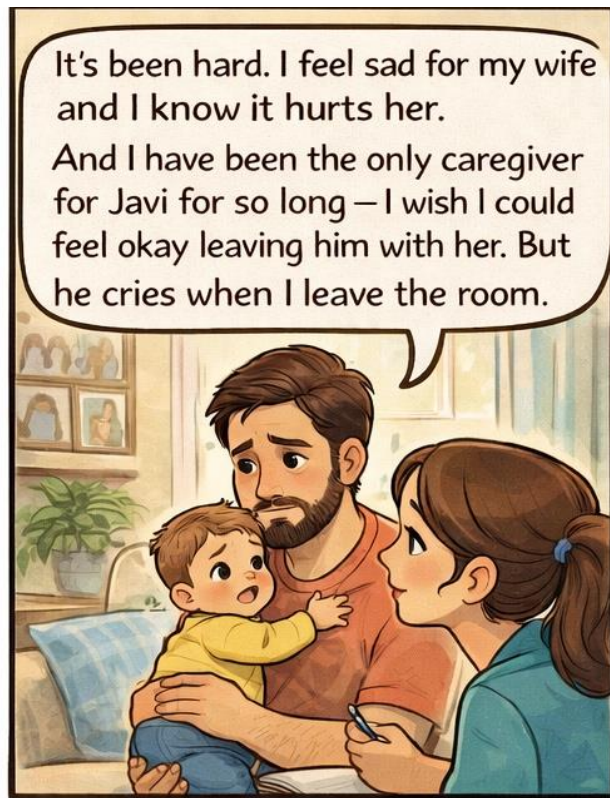
Supporting Caregivers Through Separations Transitions

- Validate caregiver stress
- Normalize emotional responses
- Encourage flexibility and self-compassion



Dear Elmo: Coming Home





How might you support this caregiver and family? What strategy might help here?



Home Again: Re-Connecting With Your Baby



ZERO TO THREE
Early Childhood Institute

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To view this video visit

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/home-again-reconnecting-with-your-baby/>

Reframing Transitions

- Development is not linear
- Regression during stress is common
- Resilience grows through responsive, developmentally appropriate support

Strategies to Support Transitions

- Maintain consistent daily routines to provide stability.
- Use predictable caregiving responses (soothing strategies, feeding routines).
- Respond to regression with comfort and patience rather than correction.
- Consider (re)introducing comfort supports such as rocking, singing, or transitional objects.
- Provide extra time for connection (holding, floor play, shared routines).
- Use simple language and emotional labeling (“You miss Daddy. He will talk to us later.”).
- Encourage safe exploration and play, which helps children process stress and build confidence.

Fatherhood Focus

The Importance of Secure Attachment Between Father & Child

- Fathers uniquely contribute to social, emotional, and cognitive development
- Secure father–child attachment is linked to better emotion regulation
- Paternal involvement enhances resilience during stress

Military Fathers – Attachment Considerations During Separations & Deployments

Before Deployment

- Promote predictable routines and co-regulated play
- Support shared caregiving roles and rituals

During Deployment

- Facilitate developmentally appropriate connection (video, recordings)
- Coaching for both at-home caregiver & deployed father

After Deployment

- Support reintegration and co-regulation
- Address shifts in routines & roles

Strategies to Support Secure Attachment with Fathers

Everyday Interaction Strategies

- Serve-and-return with eye contact & contingent responses
- Follow child's lead during play
- Narrate routines ("We're brushing your teeth!")

Rituals & Predictability

- Morning rituals fostering connection
- Deployment communication plan tailored to child's age
- Memory books and recorded messages

Tailored to Developmental Needs

- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), tactile cues, simplified language
- Sensory-friendly play that fathers can lead

Let's Chat!

What are effective ways you have seen professionals engage fathers or male caregivers in early intervention?



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Key Take Aways & Closing

- Secure attachments with caregivers build resilience in young children, even during stressful times such as military-related separations
- Responsive caregiving supports self-regulation in young children
- Caregivers are central to effective early intervention supports and continuity of services during transitions
- Fathers play a vital role in supporting secure attachment and self-regulation

Closing Reflection

- 1) What is something you'd like to learn more about? What step(s) will you take?
- 2) What is one idea from today you can apply immediately in your role?



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Any Questions?

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Upcoming Event



Practical Strategies for Supporting Preschoolers Through Change

Tuesday, April 14, 2026

This session will share ways to prepare young children for changes in caregivers, daily routines, and friends when they move. Real-life examples will show how teaching children to adapt helps create a strong foundation for future readiness.

Continuing education credit will be available for this session!

Continuing Education



This webinar has been approved for [# of credits] continuing education (CE) credits from the following organizations:

- American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (CFCS)
- Commission for Case Manager Certification
- Early Intervention Training Program
- Gateways to Opportunity (Illinois)
- National Council on Family Relations
- National Commission for Health Education Credentialing
- MiRegistry/Michigan Education Association Center for Leadership and Learning
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- Certificate of Attendance

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