WHY OBSERVE Parent Child Interactions?
Over the past three decades, research has consistently reflected the importance of nurturing, responsive interactions that children have with their parents and their caregivers as the basis for infant attachment, and more recently, for infant social and emotional development. The quality of parent-infant interaction during the first year of life plays a crucial role in social emotional development outcomes, not only in infancy, but throughout the life span. So, infants whose parents accurately identify and interpret their signals and respond in a sensitive manner tend to display more self-calming behaviors, less irritability, more positive attachment patterns, more positive social engagement, in general, and show more favorable social emotional developmental trajectories over time.
Moreover, children who consistently experience nurturing interactions with caregivers, beginning in early infancy and continuing through toddlerhood fare significantly better in social-emotional and communication outcomes by the time they enter kindergarten, as compared to children who don’t experience such consistency. Kathleen Baggett, national researcher in early intervention with young children who have challenging behaviors.

Michigan’s Part C law requires that the observation of parent-child interaction be one of the four components of the eligibility determination. Many practitioners struggle with this component. The following Tips and websites will help practitioners:
- hone their skills in making helpful observations and
- find the words to put those observations into writing objectively for the Integrative Report

A Few Tips:
- Pay attention to your own feelings as you observe
• Objectively describe what you see and hear; quote the family’s own words
• avoid interpretive judgments and generalizations
• Notice the overall tone of the interaction.
• What is the interactive style (actively observant, sensitive, forced, facilitative, controlling, intrusive, uninvolved, misinterpreting)?
• How does the parent help their child adjust to new people and/or activities?
• How is opposition and child assertiveness or negativity handled?
• How do the parent and child communicate with each other?
• How do they touch each other?
• How does the parent engage the child?
• How well does what parents say about their child match with what you see?
• Who takes the lead? How do others respond?

**Websites with practical, free or low cost information:**

1. [http://www.developingchild.org/aimssystem.html](http://www.developingchild.org/aimssystem.html)

**The AIMS System of Practice:** Developmental Indicators of Emotional Health incorporating the concepts or domains of: Attachment: Family Feelings; Interaction: Family Behaviors; Mastery: Family Capabilities; Support: Family Resources

The AIMS: Developmental Indicators of Emotional Health is a System of Practice designed to enhance the emotional development and well-being of young children from birth to age five and their families. Its primary purpose is to have positive impact on the ways physicians, nurses, educators, early interventionists, mental health providers, day care providers and others incorporate and support emotional health in early childhood. It provides a means for establishing relationships with young children and their families and enhances dialogue toward assessment and supportive intervention. It is a methodology for normalizing emotional health care across a variety of settings where professionals are engaged with the well-being of young children. It additionally assists in and supports the identification of young children at risk for or presenting with emotional issues and/or problems; assessment of the nature of the child(ren)'s and families' strengths and difficulties, and outlines appropriate, supportive interventions.
IPCI: Indicators of Parent Child Interaction: The Indicator of Parent-Child Interaction (IPCI) is one means of checking growth toward the important general outcome of interactions in which parents and other primary caregivers respond to their child in ways that promote positive social-emotional behaviors. This material is free to download and use. An administration manual gives clear directions of how to use the IPCI.

One of the most important charges of early intervention is to help children establish social-emotional competencies by supporting their parents and primary caregivers in providing the critical ingredients for fostering positive social-emotional behaviors. In a review of 17 home-based early intervention programs, one of the most highly rated outcome goals was the promotion of sensitive parenting behavior (Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This General Outcome is directly related to social-emotional competence, another highly accepted and valued General Outcome in Early Childhood.

Programs need to know when parents and other primary caregivers are making progress in interactions that foster social-emotional growth of their very young children. This is essential for programs to recognize and support parents and primary caregivers in their responsive roles with their children. Programs also need to know when to provide additional supports to help parents and primary caregivers respond in ways that foster positive social-emotional behaviors in their children. Checking growth in the responsiveness of parents’ and other primary caregivers’ interactions with their children is vital to understanding if and how parents and children are benefiting from early intervention aimed at promoting child social-emotional competencies through responsive interactions.

KIPS (Keys to Interactive Parenting Scale) is a practical, evidenced-based tool that reliably assesses the quality of parenting behaviors during free play with a young child. With valid family information, you can work more effectively to promote healthy child and family development. This program provides some language to describe what you see in the observation session. It organizes observations around 12 key qualities of parent interactions:

1. Sensitivity of response
2. Response to emotions
3. Encouragement
4. Promotes Exploration and Curiosity
5. Involvement in Child’s Activities
6. Language shared
7. Touch and physical interaction
8. Limits and consequences
9. Openness to child’s agenda
10. Reasonable expectations
11. Adapting strategies to fit the child
12. Supportive directions

The site has many video clips of parents interacting with infants and toddlers and discusses what can be observed about those interactions.

4. Resources on Temperament in Infants and Toddlers

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) has released its 23rd What Works Brief, *Understanding Temperament in Infants and Toddlers*, which explains why temperament is important, provides some clarifications about temperament, and explains how to use what you know about temperament to promote positive social-emotional development and behavior. A handout called the *Temperament Continuum* is also provided to help you analyze where your temperament is similar and different to the children you care for. It is available at [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/wwb/wwb23.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/wwb/wwb23.html)

The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation has developed a tool to help parents and caregivers to explore their own temperament traits, as well as those of a child for whom they provide care. Results from using the Infant Toddler Temperament Tool support parents and caregivers in understanding how adult and child similarities and differences in temperament traits may affect "goodness of fit" and provide tips to foster the unique temperament of each child within their care. Find the Tool and related information at [http://www.ecmhc.org/temperament/index.html](http://www.ecmhc.org/temperament/index.html)