Mattering in Early Childhood:
Building a Strong Foundation for Life

WORKING PAPER

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The Importance of Mattering in Early Childhood

Recently, the concept of mattering—the feeling that we are valued and have value to add to the world—has gained momentum among scientists and practitioners, spanning the fields of sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. Experts in education, public health, and workforce development are exploring mattering as they try to understand what we all need to flourish. However, even as mattering has emerged as a key ingredient to well-being in these and other spaces, its presence is notably lacking in conversations about what young children need to thrive. While mattering is important to us all, our sense of whether or not we matter—to our loved ones, our communities, and the world at large—begins in the earliest days of infancy. And, while it's never too late to build a sense of mattering, by starting early, we can have an outsized positive effect on children's lifelong health and well-being.

When young children feel like they matter, it gives them emotional security, a stable foundation that supports their mental health in childhood and beyond. That emotional grounding helps fuel healthy development, fosters positive self-esteem, and gives children the confidence to try new things and take healthy risks. It can also serve as a powerful protective factor against increasing rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness that are well-documented in the United States among children and caregivers alike.

Mattering is both the assurance that our presence and actions are important to others and knowing that we are relied on. It's the uplifting feeling we get when we see that our contributions, regardless of how small, have made a difference.[1] Children who feel that they matter grow into adolescents and adults who feel that they matter, and who work to make those around them feel the same way. Parents, grandparents, early care providers, teachers, business owners, and policymakers have a role to play in building a sense of mattering, and there are steps we can all take today to help build a broader ecosystem of mattering that benefits us all.

Why We Need to Matter

Mattering has two essential ingredients: feeling valued and adding value.[2] Feeling valued is the intrinsic assurance that you are significant to the people and places around you. Adding value is the sense that others rely and depend on you for help. A healthy balance of both protects physical and mental health, fuels learning, and ripples outward into communities through individuals' prosocial participation and contributions to the well-being of others.[3] Mattering unites other key needs and concepts into one: It brings together feelings of connection, belonging, and purpose.

For children, thriving begins with meeting basic needs—access to nutritious food, stable housing, clean air and water, and safe places to play and learn—and mattering is an essential need for all of us. The foundation for mattering is laid in infancy, when the brain architecture that shapes our emotions, guides our behavior, and forms our emerging sense of self begins to take shape.[4] Like the construction of a house, the brain develops in a predictable sequence, and what's built first supports everything that

Mattering vs. Belonging

The importance of belonging is well understood, and its value is commonly considered in many settings, including in peer groups, schools, and the workplace. And while mattering and belonging hold much in common, they are not the same.[2] Whereas belonging refers to whether or not we fit into a community, mattering encompasses whether we feel valued within our communities and whether what we do makes a difference. You can belong to a classroom, a team, a workplace, even a family, and still not feel like you matter there. Mattering goes deeper. When you feel that you matter, it ensures not only that you have a place, but that your presence and contributions truly count to those around you.

comes after. Early experiences significantly impact the nature and quality of the brain's developing architecture by determining which circuits (connections between brain cells) are reinforced through repeated use and which are pruned away due to lack of use.[5] When those first foundational layers of brain architecture are anchored in "mattering"—consistent signals that you and your contributions are valued—they help create a foundation sturdy enough to handle the complex social interactions we all face throughout childhood, adolescence, and later in life.

Researchers describe mattering as double-edged: when we feel it, it protects our health and well-being, but when we don't, its absence can be deeply harmful.[6] Feeling valued as a child is a strong predictor of health and wellness as an adult, while feeling like we don't matter is linked to increased risk of disease and dysfunction.[2] When we feel like we don't matter, we are at greater risk of compromised immune function and upregulated inflammatory responses, which can contribute to higher rates of fatal heart attacks, infections, and cancer.[2] These effects last across the lifespan. One study found that adults aged 22 to 69 with a high sense of mattering showed significantly less "allostatic load" (a measure of the impact of stress on the body over time) than those with a moderate or low perception of mattering. In other words, a sense of mattering is protective against the negative, wear-and-tear effects of too much stress as we age.[12]

Mattering's double edge also gives name to what many caregivers, community members, workers, advocates, and policymakers articulate as some of their greatest challenges today: feeling disconnected from each other, balancing often competing demands of caregiving and working, and struggling to preserve the energy needed to be present and responsive to our children.

The power of mattering is that it is remarkably actionable.[6] Children feel they matter when adults listen, assign them real responsibilities, recognize their efforts, and create places and policies that make them feel included and important. As noted above, all of us can take steps to help the children in our communities feel that they matter, and through actions like these, we can help ensure every child is part of a broader mattering ecosystem that clearly demonstrates how children and their contributions are valued and needed.

Core Building Blocks of Mattering

Recognition—You and your actions are valued, and your absence would be felt. Offering recognition to young children may include listening attentively as they talk and keeping eye contact to show your interest and attention.

Attunement—You feel deeply understood and meaningfully responded to. This can include a caregiver attending to a child who is upset, even if the reason seems trivial from an adult perspective.

Reliance—You feel needed because others depend on you. For young children, even small chores—helping to sweep up after dinner at home or giving out snacks at daycare—can have a powerful impact.

Importance—You feel significant because you're prioritized. This might look like a young child receiving recognition in their preschool classroom for helping others or a community receiving investment for a new playground.

Ego Extension—You feel cared for because others are invested in your well-being. This could include things like a preschool teacher checking in with a child when they are struggling to complete a task, or a grandparent making time for a weekly call.[1]

The Importance of Feeling Valued

From the earliest years, children's sense of mattering is shaped both by feeling valued and by adding value to others. Feeling valued fulfills a deep psychological need for both significance and security and fosters self-worth, confidence, and emotional well-being. Young children who feel valued are more resilient, motivated, and better able to deal with stress. When children know that they are appreciated and recognized, they are less likely to experience depression and loneliness and have stronger self-esteem and self-efficacy. Feeling valued is even more fundamental than belonging; it goes beyond being accepted to knowing that you are significant and would be missed if you were absent.

When caregivers consistently respond to the needs of young children, show appreciation for their efforts, and acknowledge their feelings, young children learn that their presence has meaning. This recognition supports healthy emotional development, encourages self-confidence, and fosters secure relationships with caregivers, which in turn allows them to explore their environment and other relationships with curiosity and confidence. Without these affirming experiences, toddlers may struggle to internalize a sense of worth, making it harder for them to develop the trust and self-assurance needed for later stages of growth.

The following are some of the key building blocks—and benefits—of feeling valued:

Foundational bonds—From birth, the brain is prepared to form strong, lasting emotional connections to one or more caregivers. These strong connections begin as a survival need: Without the love and care of adults, a baby cannot survive. But survival is only the beginning. Beyond survival, the interactions between baby and caregiver are also the earliest expressions of the question, "Do I matter?"—and the earliest affirmations, "Yes, you matter to me."[4] While the building blocks of mattering begin at home, responsive, attentive relationships with caring adults in all spaces of a young child's developmental environment help build a strong foundation for lifelong health and well-being. In studies of children who have managed to thrive despite experiencing significant adversity, the most common finding is that they have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult. These relationships often begin with immediate caregivers, but can also extend to neighbors, early care and education providers, teachers, social workers, coaches, health care providers, and many others.[11] Indeed, the full mattering ecosystem plays a critical role, particularly when caregivers are stressed or spread thin. Stable, interactive relationships with a broad range of caring adults contribute to a love of learning, a positive sense of self, social skills, successful relationships, and a solid understanding of emotions and commitment—all of which are important for our lifelong well-being.[7]

> **The interactions between baby and caregiver are also the earliest expressions of the question, "Do I matter?"—and the earliest affirmations, "Yes, you matter to me."**

Rewarding interactions—When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds with eye contact, words, or a hug, this back-and-forth interaction—known as serve and return—helps to build and strengthen neural connections in the child's brain. These connections are essential for the development of communication and social skills.[7] These attentive exchanges also reinforce the idea that we matter and that mattering is beneficial, both to the child and the caregiver. Serve and return provides what nothing else in the world can offer—experiences that are attuned to each child's unique personality, build on the child's innate interests, capabilities, and motivation, and shape the child's self-awareness.[5] In infancy, positive social interaction sparks the release of chemical signals of reward and pleasure, such as dopamine and serotonin, acting as biological affirmations that a child is significant in someone else's eyes.

While the signals may change as we grow, the need remains unchanged. In adolescence and then adulthood, we continue to search for signs that our presence makes a difference, our actions are noticed, and our absence is felt. When we do feel that we matter, the same brain systems are activated, offering emotional reassurance and physiological benefits. Later in life, a sense of purpose, often rooted in a sense of mattering, also releases these neurobiological chemicals, which affect happiness as well as sleep, digestion, memory, and learning, and have anti-inflammatory properties that reduce pain and promote healing.[8]

> Supportive responses from adults, which calm the stress response, also signal to infants and young children that their needs matter and that their caregivers value them enough to respond.

Healthy brain development—Starting in the prenatal period, our experiences and exposures can cause structural adaptations in brain architecture. And, beginning in infancy, our earliest experiences—such as responsive serve and return interactions or neglect—shape the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region of the brain that monitors and appraises social acceptance and exclusion. Researchers have found that young children who were chronically rejected or had been emotionally abused or neglected had more active ACCs later in childhood and adolescence and therefore were more swayed by social feedback and peer pressure than children without such a history.[9] Further, researchers have used brain imaging to show that expressions of self-esteem, which can be increased by a sense of mattering, launch activity in circuits of the brain that link positive emotions and rewards to information about the self. These brain regions actually grow larger and stronger over time if fleeting moments of high self-esteem become a more stabilized sense of self-worth, potentially providing a buffer against conditions such as depression or anxiety.[10] Simply put, when we feel valued by others, this experience of mattering connects the brain's reward circuits to our long-term sense of self-worth, and over time, these repeated positive neural responses can strengthen into stable psychological well-being.

A protective shield—Mattering in early childhood is key to later positive health outcomes. When an infant experiences discomfort, they express it through crying and are dependent on the adults around them to respond. Discomfort and fear trigger the stress response system, releasing hormones such as cortisol and launching an immune response to help defend the body. Supportive responses by adult caregivers help calm the stress and immune responses, bringing the body's systems back to baseline. This cycle of activation and restoration teaches the body's systems how to operate in a healthy way.

These same kinds of supportive responses from adults, which calm the stress response, also signal to infants and young children that their needs matter and that their caregivers value them enough to respond. Indeed, repeated interactions with responsive caregivers likely serve as a protective factor well into adulthood. For example, studies indicate that children and adolescents who had strong bonds with their caregivers in their early years are better able to regulate their emotions, cope with stress, and engage in prosocial behaviors and positive peer relationships.[4]

On the other hand, too much stress for too long can produce physiological changes that have a wear-and-tear effect on the developing brain, cardiovascular and immune systems, and metabolic regulatory system, leading to increased long-term risk of heart disease, diabetes, depression, and a range of other chronic health conditions.[11] Experiencing neglect or exclusion is a stressful experience that threatens a child's sense of mattering and can harm their long-term physical and psychological well-being. Research has linked the experience of exclusion to stress, depression, suicide, and even participation in mass killings.[2] Fortunately, we can help children build a sense of mattering to counteract these experiences by investing in the

many places and relationships that form part of a child's larger mattering ecosystem.

The Importance of Adding Value

From the earliest years, children's sense of mattering is shaped not only by feeling valued but also by having opportunities to add value to others. Children need to know that they are capable of making a difference, and because of that, they are valuable to those around them. Developmental psychologists have found that children as young as 18 months show a strong intrinsic motivation to help and cooperate, offering assistance without being prompted and even at a personal cost.[2] For example, a toddler may bring an object to an adult who shows a need through a non-verbal cue, such as a hand gesture, even if the toddler must stop their own play to do so. A slightly older child might offer up a treasured belonging, like a blanket, to help or comfort an adult in need. When children's contributions are welcomed and recognized, they begin to internalize the belief that they are capable of making a difference and that they are someone others can depend on. Research indicates that early opportunities for prosocial behavior are associated with increased empathy, stronger peer relationships, and higher self-esteem later in childhood.[3]

The following are some of the key building blocks—and benefits—of feeling valued:

Making a Difference—An early sense of self-efficacy builds the foundation for believing that we can successfully add value to the world around us.[11] For example, even a very young baby will repeat an action if it produces a response that is pleasing to them or to an adult, such as seeing the adult smile or laugh. But if they do not see any effects from their actions, it can lead to "learned helplessness." When children feel that what they do won't have any effect—even when it's possible it will—the resulting feeling of helplessness can lead them to quit trying, hampering their potential to succeed. Witnessing a caregiver model perseverance—for example, working with a young child to complete a challenging puzzle or rebuild a block tower when it falls down—can also affect a child's sense of self-efficacy.[9] In short, early mastery of experiences and modeled perseverance help children internalize two essential truths of mattering—that they are capable of making a difference, and for that reason, they are valuable to those around them.

Being Entrusted to Make Meaningful Contributions—A child's foundational relationships set the stage for how they will understand and take part in their broader social environment. Giving young children age-appropriate tasks or chores allows them to play an active, contributing role. From a very young age, they can start adding value in small ways, such as helping a childcare provider choose a book to read together or helping a grandparent reach their eyeglasses. By age two, children can help with tasks both at home and in early care spaces, such as tidying up, filling a pet's water bowl, or assisting with meal or snack preparation.[4]

In addition to helping children build the skills and mindset that they can add value to others, when children take on chores—especially those that support the whole group—they practice perspective-taking, which allows them to understand the needs of those around them and how they might fill that need and add value.[15] Setting the table, feeding a pet, or handing out crayons to classmates requires noticing what others need and stepping in to meet that need. This shift, moving beyond their wants to seeing through someone else's eyes, forms the foundation of empathy and a pathway to adding value. Chores help children experience both sides of mattering—adding value by lightening someone else's load ("Dinner is easier because I set the table") and feeling valued by receiving recognition in return ("You helped us—we noticed"). Chores offer examples of what it means to matter to those around us.[15]

Building a Mattering Mindset—A sense of mattering can be strengthened by involving children in tasks that benefit the entire group, not just

themselves.[15] In early care settings or at home, these actions might include helping to tidy a shared play area after snack time, rather than simply cleaning up their own crumbs. Contributions that care for the collective signal to the child that their efforts have a ripple effect within their broader mattering ecosystem, in that their actions help the group function and feel cared for. Caregivers can further help children develop this mindset by linking tasks to the well-being of others. For example, "Dad is cooking dinner, so can you help by setting the table?" Or, "While your teacher is handing out the papers, can you be a helper and hand out the crayons?" When children take on jobs that meet real needs, they're practicing the skills of mattering, namely noticing genuine needs in their community and stepping in to meet them.

Feeling Appreciated—How we talk to young children about their contributions can shape their self-image and sense of mattering. One study of children ages 3 to 6 found that thanking kids for being a helper ("You're such a helper") rather than for helping ("Thanks for helping")—so, making it about an intrinsic trait vs. one specific action—significantly increased their desire to pitch in, integrating contribution as a part of who they are.[16] This framing reinforces the "feeling valued" side of mattering, allowing children to internalize that their helpfulness is not just a one-off act but an enduring and appreciated part of their identity.[16,20]

> Places that are predictable, welcoming, and responsive—like a neighborhood playground, a childcare center, or a grandparent's kitchen table—can become "mattering spaces," where children reliably experience safety, recognition, and opportunities to contribute.

Creating a Positive Feedback Loop—Over time, when children are relied on and receive consistent cues from adults that their efforts are essential, it creates a positive mattering feedback loop. As a child adds value, they feel valued, and feeling valued motivates them to continue contributing. And feeling relied upon to contribute, even in small ways, helps children see themselves as significant and valued members of their family, classroom, and community. When children are recognized not only for what they do but also for the value they bring as people, they begin to internalize a story about themselves as someone who matters to the world around them.

How Peers, Places, and Adults' Experiences Affect Young Children's Sense of Mattering

While an infant or young child's sense of mattering comes primarily from their closest caregivers—indeed, the roots of our mattering ecosystem often begin at home—their early confidence that they are valued and make a difference also grows from the many relationships, environments, and modeled experiences they encounter each day. Developmental research shows that children are attuned to cues of value and significance from peers, the spaces they inhabit, and interactions with familiar adults. Together, these layers create an ecosystem of mattering within a child's social environment.

The Power of Peer Influences—As young children grow and begin to have more interactions with peers, these relationships can reinforce or erode a child's budding sense of self-worth. Positive peer interactions, such as being invited to play, having one's ideas listened to, or receiving help from a friend, signal to a child that they matter and are valued. Over time, these moments accumulate, shaping a child's internal narrative that people want them there and that they have something to offer. In adolescence, feedback from peers can feel even more important than family relationships because of changes in brain development, making adolescents more sensitive to social rewards and increasing their desire to feel valued.[13,14] When teens feel like they matter to their peers and to the world around them, their academic records, school engagement, and participation in community events are higher, while their risk of suicide is lower.[2]

The Impact of Place—When it comes to a child's sense of mattering, place plays a critical role. Home

is the place where mattering begins, and forms a primary, inner circle that shapes a young child's sense of feeling valued. As children grow, places that are predictable, welcoming, and responsive—like a neighborhood playground, a childcare center, or a grandparent's kitchen table—can become "mattering spaces," or places where children reliably experience safety, recognition, and opportunities to contribute.[1] These spaces often provide a sense of routine that deepens a child's trust in the world and cements their belief that they have a place in it.[1]

By contrast, when the signals children receive from the world around them indicate that they do not matter—what psychologists have termed "anti-mattering"—it takes a concerted effort by their inner circle and extended network of adults to overcome that sense.[17] For example, policies, social media, school systems, law enforcement, and a lack of investment in communities can all communicate that certain people or neighborhoods do not merit as much attention as others, or deserve only negative attention. In the United States, the places where children live have been designed based on decisions over time, and our neighborhoods have been shaped by structural racism embedded in historic and current policies, such as redlining, a federally backed program that denied mortgage loans and financial services to residents of Black and low-income neighborhoods for nearly 40 years. Repeated signals from harmful, discriminatory policies like this—and through numerous other systemic inequalities—can seep into children through adults, as well as through their own experiences and observations as they grow.

The layering of signals from all levels of a child's developmental environment—from their social sphere to their built and natural environment, to the systemic influences that shape it all—can affect a child's sense of significance.[4] When children consistently receive signals of anti-mattering in the places where they live, grow, play, and learn, it makes it harder for the adults in children's lives—caregivers, early care providers, teachers, health care providers—to provide the steady affirmation of mattering children need. In this way, places can either reinforce mattering or undermine it, shaping whether children grow up believing they are valued and capable of adding value to others.

> **When we build a mattering ecosystem that helps adults feel valued and significant, we're creating the conditions for children to feel they matter, too.**

The Influence of Adult Mattering—In infancy and early childhood, the messages children receive from the world are filtered through their parents, older relatives, and other primary caregivers. When adults face threats to their own sense of social worth—such as eviction, discrimination, or feeling undervalued at work—stress and diminished self-worth can affect their mental health, which affects the young children in their care. Additionally, when an adult's own sense of mattering is under strain, the stress can seep into other parts of life. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the spillover–crossover effect, which describes how experiences from one domain, such as work, can influence our parenting and impact those closest to us.[18] In these moments, when a caregiver might still be physically present but their emotional availability subtly shifts, they may miss opportunities to attune to the child or have less bandwidth to handle conflict.

Conversely, adults who feel they matter are more likely to offer attuned, responsive care. And, when children see the adults in their lives acting and speaking as if they feel valued, and when those adults affirm that children are important, it creates a cycle where the adults' healthy sense of mattering strengthens the child's own foundation of feeling valued.[19] In other words, when we build a mattering ecosystem that helps adults feel valued and significant, we're creating the conditions for children to feel they matter, too. Policies and programs that support caregivers and minimize stressors—from paid family leave to housing subsidies—can play an important role in building this ecosystem and helping all our children to thrive.

11 Ways To Help Young Children Develop a Strong Sense of Mattering

The science of mattering can inform practical, actionable strategies that we all can use to build a strong ecosystem of mattering for young children, whether we are caregivers, providers, policymakers, or community members. By building the foundation for mattering in the earliest years, we can help our children thrive both in childhood and across their lifetimes. Below are suggestions for specific strategies for how to bring mattering into a child's developmental environment.

1. **Practice serve and return daily.** Responding warmly and promptly to a child's cues, whether it's a smile, a cry, or a question, shows them they are worthy of a caregiver's time and attention.
2. **Model repair.** When an adult intentionally reconnects after a conflict, it tells the child that the relationship is worth repairing because they are worth it, reinforcing that they matter and are valued even when things are hard.
3. **Know the child.** Notice what excites them, ask questions, and listen. It shows they're seen and valued for who they are.
4. **Watch for anti-mattering.** Be alert to messages that make children feel invisible or unwanted, especially those from marginalized groups. Every child should hear and see that they matter.
5. **Encourage them to contribute.** Help children build a mattering mindset in small, age-appropriate ways, like handing out spoons or putting away toys.
6. **Call them a "helper".** The language we use helps children see their contributions as part of who they are.
7. **Support excluded or isolated children.** Connect isolated children with counseling, mentors, or group activities to help rebuild trust, foster a sense of belonging, and feel valued.
8. **Value caregivers.** Parents, teachers, caseworkers, and other caregivers need to feel appreciated and supported so they can give their best to the children in their care.
9. **For nonprofit leaders.** In family programs, treat each person as an individual. Use names, listen fully, and respond with care to show they matter beyond their case file.
10. **For business leaders.** Reinforce to employees that they matter by involving them in decisions that affect their jobs, keeping workloads reasonable, and recognizing their impact. When employees feel they matter at work, they have more bandwidth to care for their families.
11. **For policymakers.** Invest in supports for children and caregivers, such as home visiting and paid leave, so that families feel valued and are able to thrive.

Jennifer B. Wallace/The Mattering Movement: For more suggestions, tips, and information about how to create communities where people know they matter, including toolkits for students, teachers, and parents, visit: jenniferbwallace.com/mattering-movement.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: For more information about brain architecture, serve and return, how place affects early childhood development, and the early origins of motivation, reward, and resilience, visit developingchild.harvard.edu.

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