

# Professional relational competence

Anne Linder

A guide to better interaction for  
professionals

## **Professional relational competence**

This booklet introduces the concept of ‘professional relational competence’.

Relationships are the source of life itself, and our relational circumstances are central to our survival, life, learning and development, contributing to our perception of a good life.

Relationships are invisible, psychological ties that bind people together.

Education is an interpersonal activity, and the quality of what takes place in the spaces between people is an important factor in education. However, the importance of relational circumstances in educational work is often underestimated. This is probably due to a number of factors. For one thing, relational circumstances probably feel so natural and obvious that we are not aware of the tremendous power that is contained within them. And, for another, we have only just started to develop a joint specialised terminology for ‘good interaction’ in a professional sense.

Research into pattern breaking shows how ‘more than anything else, qualitative relationships have been decisive factors in individual pattern breakouts’ (Elsborg, 1999). But what are ‘qualitative relationships’, and what skills do professionals need in order to make an active contribution to individual pattern breakouts? This booklet introduces the eight interaction themes that are important in the development and understanding of relational competence.

It is aimed at all professionals in the field of education.

I hope you will enjoy reading it.

Anne Linder

Dansk Center for ICDP

The booklet can be purchased from [www.danskcenterfor-icdp.dk](http://www.danskcenterfor-icdp.dk)

## Contents

<i>Professional relational competence</i> .....	2
<i>What is relational competence?</i> .....	3
<i>The eight interaction themes</i> .....	4
<i>Suggested uses of the booklet</i> .....	5
<i>Interaction theme 1. Show joy and positive emotions to the child</i> .....	6
<i>Interaction theme 2. Look for the child's initiative and adapt yourself</i> .....	7
<i>Interaction theme 3. Invite the child to a dialogue – listen and answer</i> .....	8
<i>Interaction theme 4. Appreciate what the child is capable of</i> .....	9
<i>Interaction theme 5. Catch the child's attention</i> .....	10
<i>Interaction theme 6. Keep the child's attention – show emotions and enthusiasm</i> .....	11
<i>Interaction theme 7. Expand the child's experience – elaborate and explain</i> .....	12
<i>Interaction theme 8. Establish a framework and a structure. Guide the child. Step by step</i> .....	13
<i>Relationship circle</i> .....	14



### **What is relational competence?**

Previously, there was no joint specialised technical language for relational circumstances. However, with the advent of the ICDP (International Child Development Programme), created by the Norwegian professor of psychology Karsten Hundeide (2004), we now have an interaction manual containing three different forms of dialogue that are the core components of good interaction.

## **The eight interaction themes**

### **The emotional dialogue** (Interaction themes 1–4)

Used to create and optimise mutual contact between the child and the professional.

- 1. Show joy and positive emotions to the child**
- 2. Look for the child's initiative and adapt yourself**
- 3. Invite the child to a dialogue – listen and answer**
- 4. Appreciate what the child is capable of**

**The learning dialogue** (Interaction themes 4–7). Used to catch the child's attention on something – outside the relationship.

- 5. Catch the child's attention**
- 6. Keep the child's attention – show emotions and enthusiasm**
- 7. Expand the child's experience – elaborate and explain**

**The guiding dialogue** (Interaction theme 8). Used to aid the child in doing the most appropriate thing within the social context.

- 8. Establish a framework and a structure. Guide the child. Step by step**

Using the interaction guide can reactivate and develop the silent knowledge that professionals possess, so that the relational circumstances can be used as a professional and personal resource in educational work. Once people have mastered the eight

interaction themes, they are relationally competent. This is defined as follows:

‘Relational competence is the ability to establish and maintain an emotional contact, and on the basis of this contact to create a learning and informative dialogue.’

### **Suggested uses of the booklet**

The booklet has been primarily designed as an introduction to relationship work in an educational context. The eight interaction themes are the joint specialised language for relational circumstances. You can read through the booklet, either alone or in a group, and reflect on your own relational interaction skills and/or those of others.

**Complete the relationship circle** (p. 15) and you may discover that some of the children for whom you are responsible may be in the relational risk zone. The interaction themes can provide you with specific guidelines on what to do in order to improve the interaction.

The **introspection form** (on the last page) can be used as an analysis model

- Of relational circumstances that are perceived as problematical
- Of relational circumstances that are perceived as good and strong

The booklet can also be used for

- Self-evaluation of specific relational circumstances
- Educational discussions about relational circumstances
- Supervision and guidance
- Shadowing colleagues and feedback

## Interaction theme 1. Show joy and positive emotions to the child

It is important for people to be received in a positive way by others. A smile confirms that you are emotionally available, signalling that you are in a positive mood and open to contact. Positive emotions expand and open up your own mental capacity, which makes it easier for you to be attentive when interacting with the child's.

Of course, it is not possible to smile cheerfully every day and at all times of the day, but generally it is important for you to signal your openness to efforts by the children to make contact. Some children can find making contact difficult, but by smiling you encourage their attempts at doing so. In the contact establishment phase, in particular, it is important for others to feel that you are acknowledging their hesitant efforts to make contact.

Some children are shy and insecure when it comes to making contact with you. You need to be particularly aware of these children, as they are very sensitive to your signals about 'availability'.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

### Self-assessment

A. To what extent do you show positive emotions to the child? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you show positive emotions in practice.

C. How do you think children perceive their day at the institution/school if they are met with indifference by the staff?

D. Try to describe your capacity to show positive emotions.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to show positive emotions?

F. Do you find it easier to be receptive to some children than others?

The emotional dialogue

## **Interaction theme 2. Look for the child's initiative and adapt yourself**

Identity and self-esteem are developed by interaction with other people. It is by interacting with others that we become who we are. We continue to develop and maintain our self-esteem throughout our entire lives, including through positive reactions to our initiatives from our surroundings. These initiatives may be linguistic, emotional or behavioural. A clear example of a linguistic initiative may be when the child approaches and asks a direct question about something, or tries to make eye contact with you.

However, these efforts to make contact can also be less visible – for example, where the child hovers around you despite not making actual contact.

It is also important to be able to adapt emotionally, i.e. for you to try to tune into the same emotional frequency as that of the child. Children find it a positive experience to have their emotions reflected.

Adapting physically means, for example, getting down to the child's eye level – even if the child is crawling around on the floor or sitting on the roof of the playhouse. Or where the teacher kneels down to get down to the child's eye level.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

### **Self-assessment**

A. To what extent do you manage to adapt to the child, and to what extent do you try to adapt your behaviour to that of the child? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you adapt in practice.

C. How do you think children perceive their day-to-day life at the institution/school if they are overlooked by the staff?

D. Try to describe your capacity to adapt.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to adapt?

F. Are there some children whose opening moves/initiatives you can detect faster than those of others?

### **Interaction theme 3. Invite the child to a dialogue – listen and answer**

Listening and answering are fundamental elements of human communication. Taking turns to communicate in this way is important to all people. Taking turns creates a two-way process and gives a feeling of being part of a microsocial community.

On a normal busy day, this taking turns and concept of a two-way process can run into difficulties – for example, if the professional asks the child too many questions too quickly. It is important to be able to cope with ‘breaks’ in the interaction process. It takes time to consider things. Some children think slowly and therefore need more time to reply to your questions.

You are surely familiar with that feeling of uncertainty or dissatisfaction that you can experience on the dance floor when you are unable to capture the rhythm of the dance. When communication is out of rhythm, it can leave the same feeling of inadequacy. Both verbal and non-verbal communication create an emotional tie between people and contribute to our experience of valuing ourselves and others.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

#### **Self-assessment**

A. To what extent do you manage to be open to the child’s emotional and communication initiatives? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you invite people to a dialogue.

C. How do you think children perceive their day-to-day life at the institution/school if they rarely or never find that they capture the rhythm of the conversation/dialogue?

D. Try to describe your capacity to take turns in communication.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to listen and answer?

F. Do you find it easier to get ‘into rhythm with’ some children than others?

## Interaction theme 4. Appreciate what the child is capable of

Friendliness and appreciation vitalise meetings between people. We can all recall situations where we were not received in a friendly way. Being friendly adds positive energy to the interaction process, enhancing the other person's well-being.

Appreciation is about 'acknowledging as having validity', which is close to the concept of 'valuing'. By appreciating yourself or others, you are valuing yourself or others in a positive way. Appreciation is our psychological oxygen. We feel mentally uplifted and infused with new energy. A good life depends on feeling joy and positive emotions.

When you show appreciation, you are conveying a feeling of human importance to others, which contrasts with behaviour that overlooks and ignores other people.

Appreciation is different to praise. Appreciation is about confirming the other person, while praise is more to do with assessing the other person. Or, to put it in slightly simple terms, appreciation relates to what the child 'is' – i.e. accepting them as they are, with all their paradoxes and contradictions – while praise relates to what the child 'does'.

When you show friendliness and appreciation to the child, you may perhaps say something positive, followed by a smile, a pat on the shoulder, a friendly look or nod – or simply a 'thumbs up'.

### Self-assessment

A. To what extent do you manage to show appreciation? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you show appreciation in practice.

C. How do you think children perceive their day-to-day life at the institution/school if they are overlooked or ignored by the staff?

D. Try to describe your capacity to provide appreciation.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to show appreciation?

F. Do you find it easier to show appreciation to some children than others?

## Interaction theme 5. Catch the child's attention

Children already begin to point before they reach their first birthday. Pointing is a biological and social signal that tells you that the child is now cognitively mature enough to start taking an interest in the world around. This biological and social readiness is finely tuned and developed throughout our entire lives. Gradually, this pointing is supplemented or replaced by a joint direction of gaze. When other people point or look in a particular direction, we are biologically pre-programmed to focus our attention on the same point.

However, we can have difficulty gathering our attention and remaining focused. For example, it can be hard to maintain your attention if you are feeling unsure or insecure. In some situations, children may need help in focusing their attention on things or situations around them. You could say 'Look here, in the book,' while pointing to and showing what you would like the child to look at. Focused attention on a joint third object (the book) outside the relationship is a prerequisite for helping the child's learning. Joint and mutual attention is a prerequisite for learning.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

### Self-assessment

A. To what extent do you manage to create joint attention? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you create joint attention.

C. How do you think children will develop if they are unable to share their experiences with professionals?

D. Try to describe your capacity to create joint attention.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to create joint attention?

F. Do you find it easier to create joint attention with some children than others?

## Interaction theme 6. Keep the child’s attention – show emotions and enthusiasm

Describing something that you experience together with emotion and enthusiasm will make the experience a vivid one for the child. When a professional uses emotions to describe, for example, a book or an activity to the child – for example, ‘It’s a *really* good book’ or ‘It’s a really *funny* game’ – then this conveys meaningfulness. By using their own emotions, professionals can interpret and convey meaning to the child’s. Day-to-day life consists of many experiences, but what children remember best are those episodes that strike a clear emotional note. To keep the children’s attention, professionals need to ‘pledge themselves as security’ by using their own positive emotions. There is a greater chance of a learning situation being perceived in a positive light if the child feels that the professional is engaged and committed in the individual learning situation.

When the child’s attention is retained, it trains the concentration – a useful skill in teaching.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

### Self-assessment

A. To what extent do you manage to keep the child’s attention by showing emotions and enthusiasm? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you show emotions and enthusiasm.

C. How do you think children perceive their day-to-day life at the institution/school if they rarely/never have experience of a committed professional?

D. Try to describe your commitment.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to keep children’s attention?

F. Do you find it easier to keep some children’s attention than others?

## Interaction theme 7. Expand the child's experience – elaborate and explain

In order for children's knowledge to expand, adults need to elaborate on and explain the joint experiences. Children gain their first sense of time through the stories and explanations provided by adults. What is being experienced *right now* can be linked to a past and a future, and this is a necessary template for learning. People learn through a combination of processes throughout the course of their lives, one where past experiences are woven into the present and gain significance for the future. All the time, we try to make sense of things in our encounter with the world around us. The child's current desires and needs are current desires/needs, but they originate from previous/past experiences. When, in a professional capacity, you oblige the young person's desires/needs, you can influence the future and the learning process if you can manage to 'exceed' or perhaps 'outbid' the current needs. This will be done by creating continuity with both the past and the future. This is a necessary and important part of the child's intellectual development.

Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

### Self-assessment

A. To what extent do you manage to expand the current experience by drawing on a relevant previous and/or future experience? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

B. Provide some examples of how you expand on the child's experiences.

C. How will a person develop if rarely able to expand his or her experience?

D. Try to describe your capacity to unravel other people's experiences.

E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to unravel the child's experiences?

F. Do you find it easier to open up to some children more than others, both personally and professionally?

**Interaction theme 8. Establish a framework and a structure. Guide the child. Step by step**

The institution/school is a semi-public space, with its own formal and informal rules on interaction. Children need to have behavioural expectations explained and made clear to them. Tell them what is expected in behavioural terms by providing clear instructions on how to act. It is much easier for children to do the right thing if they know what the right thing is. It is exhausting and unpleasant for people to have to keep trying to find their way forward – perhaps failing time and again and being met with negative orders and prohibitions. It is easiest for all parties when clear instructions are given on how to act (‘When you’re riding the bicycles in the playground, you can by all means...’). Instructions on how to act are different from orders and prohibitions (‘When you’re riding the bicycles you must not...’). Everyone needs to be guided and given instructions when entering into unknown social arenas. Children also need help in developing their self-control. In order for them to manage their emotional make-up, it is important for children to develop a sense of a time framework. For this reason, professionals need to mark out clearer beginnings and ends: ‘We’re starting now...’ or ‘We’ll be stopping shortly...’ These linguistic markers in the interaction make it easier for children to plan and keep going. Some children are very slow. It is important, too, to give slow people time.

**Self-assessment**

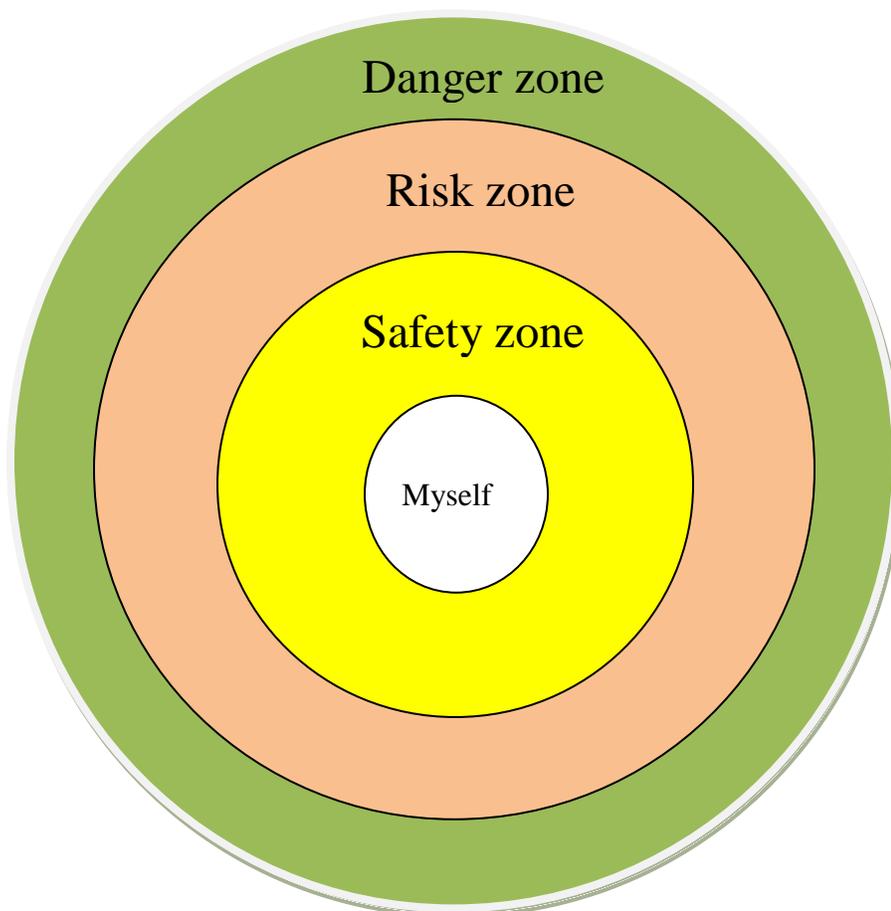
A. To what extent do you manage to guide and instruct the child? (Tick the appropriate box)

1. To a large extent	2. To a considerable extent	3. To an average extent	4. To a small extent	5. Not at all

- B. Provide some examples of how you guide and instruct.
- C. How will a person react who is rarely given guidance and instruction?
- D. Try to describe your capacity to guide and instruct.
- E. How do you think that your colleagues would describe your capacity to guide and instruct?
- F. Do you find it easier to guide and instruct some children than others?

## Relationship circle

The relational distance between you and the children in your children's group



### Instructions

Write your own name in the middle. Think about your group of children/pupils. Enter the children's names in the model.

**Safety zone:** The children you are sure you have a good relationship with in terms of supporting their development

**Risk zone:** The children you have a slightly/somewhat problematical/uncertain relationship with

**Danger zone:** The children you have a very problematical/very uncertain relationship with

Relationships enhance our feeling of belonging to a community. When we experience the presence, openness and interest of others, our well-being as humans is enhanced and we perceive our life as good.

However, relationships can also be onerous. This booklet introduces eight themes for good interaction, which professionals can use in relationship work in an educational context.

Anne Linder