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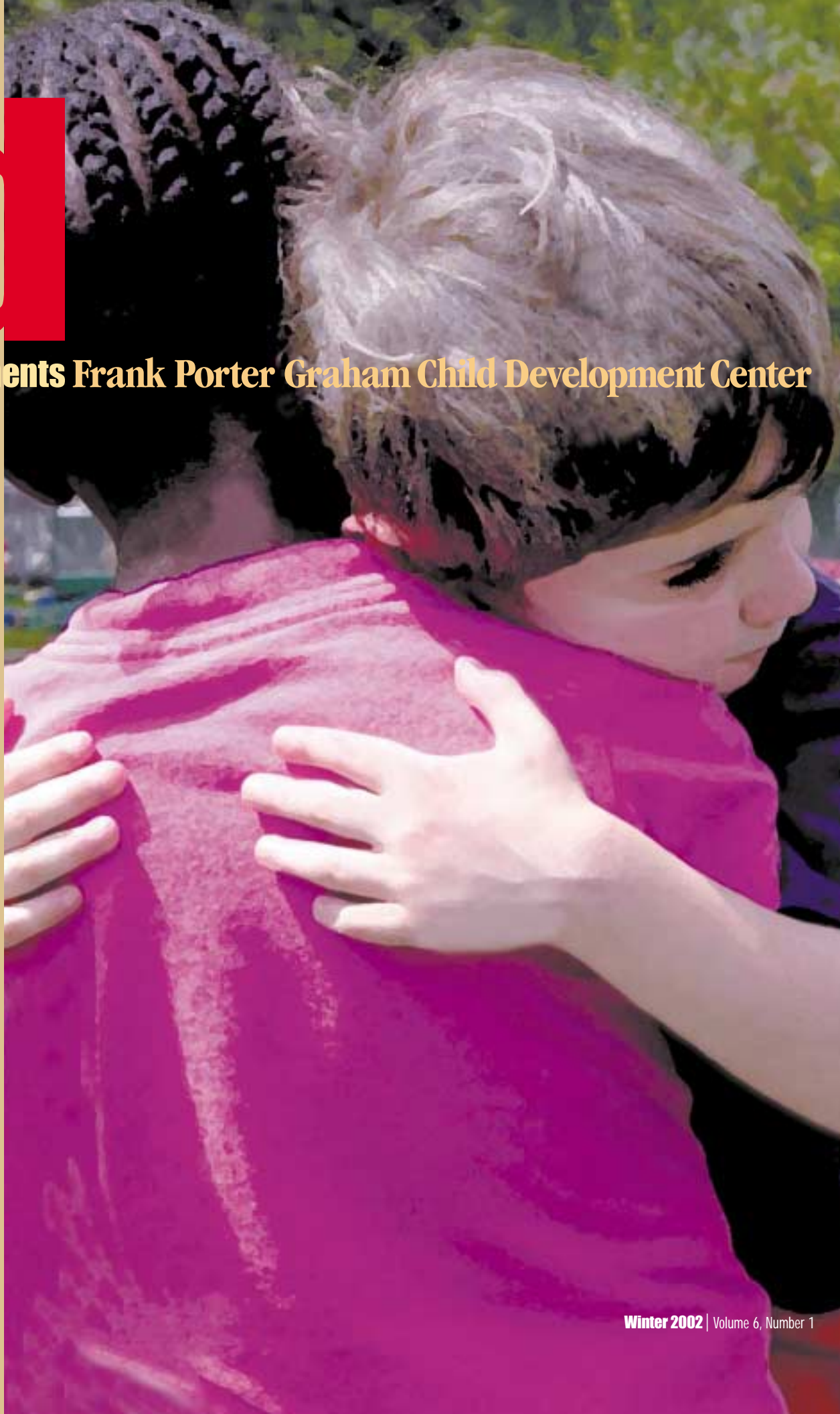
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**Social  
Processes  
and  
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# Relationships

critical to healthy development

by Don Bailey Director, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center



“HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS are the building blocks of healthy development.” This quote, from *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, a recent publication of the National Research Council of the Institute of Medicine, captures the essence of this issue of *Early Developments*. It also gets at the heart of current debates about the nature and consequences of organized programs for the care and education of young children.

Developmental psychologists and early childhood educators have long recognized that children are inherently social beings. From the moment of birth, infants and parents alike begin a process often referred to as attachment – the development of a close and enduring relationship based on mutual affection and caring. A secure attachment, one in which the child is confident of the loving and enduring nature of this relationship, is highly predictive of healthy social-emotional development. A healthy emotional relationship between parents and children also is important for healthy language and cognitive development. As children get older, they develop relationships with people other than their parents. These relationships include

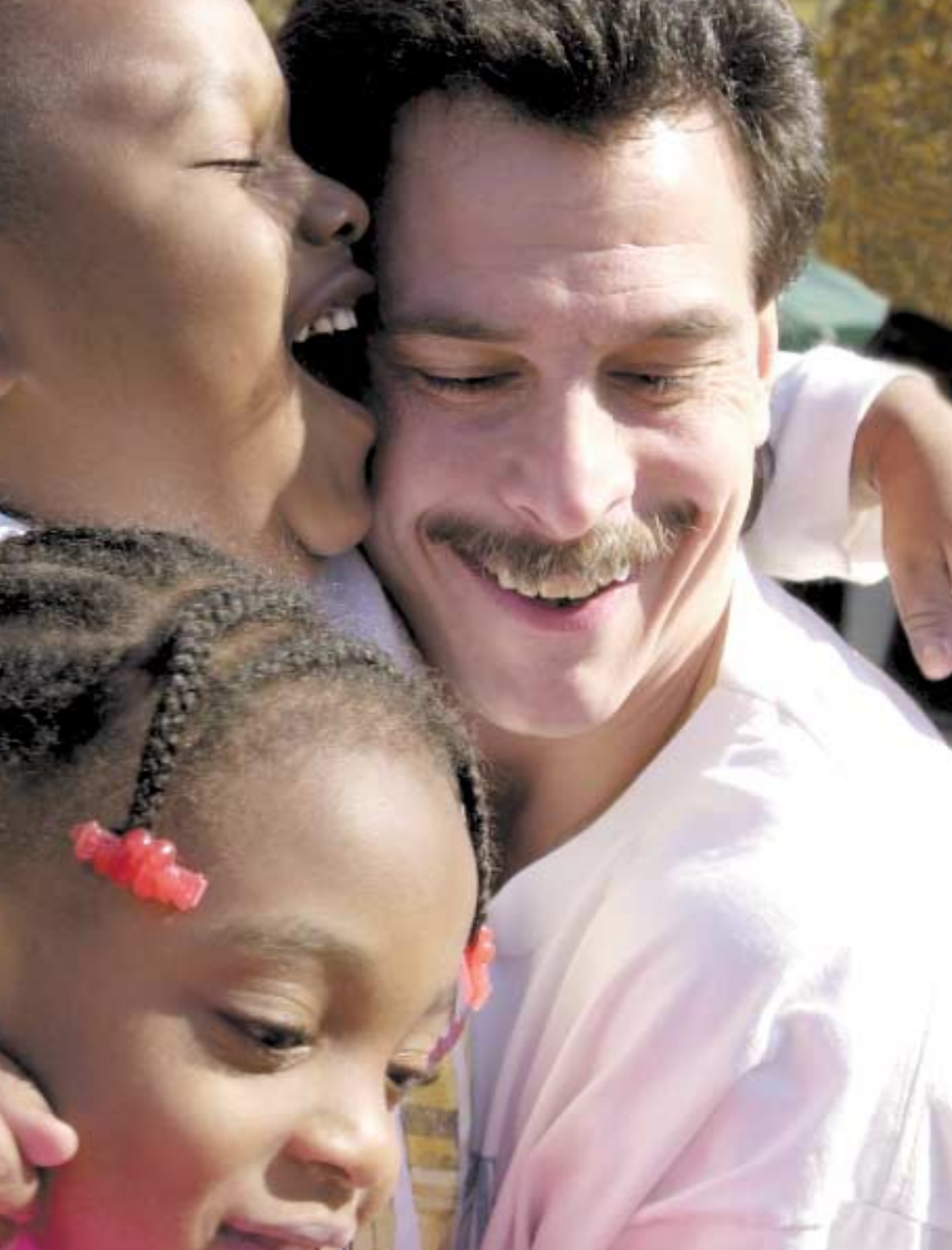
So what's all the fuss about? Why are social relationships the focus of much discussion in today's world of early childhood?



extended family members, neighbors, peers, child care professionals and teachers. These relationships are important because they provide other contexts in which children feel cared for and accepted. And it is in the context of these relationships that much learning occurs.

So what's all the fuss about? Why are social relationships the focus of much discussion in today's world of early childhood? Highly publicized and dramatic incidences of school violence propagated by students who don't fall into the traditional risk categories caused the nation to start asking questions about the roots of violence and looking to the early childhood period for answers. A recent study that linked aggressive behavior in young children with their participation in child care created headlines and led to lively debate among researchers about the findings and their implications for child care.

Another issue that has been the subject of much discussion is whether the growing emphasis on preparing children for academic success through pre-K programs might place too much emphasis on cognitive and literacy development to the detriment of social development. >



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These issues are complicated and often emotionally charged. At least six specific issues have emerged as areas in need of further research into the factors that enhance or inhibit social development in young children:

- (1) What factors challenge a healthy relationship between parents and children?
- (2) What interventions are effective when children exhibit early signs of aggression and antisocial behavior?
- (3) How does the placement of children in child care or early education programs affect their attachment relationships with their families and their social-emotional development?
- (4) What should early childhood programs do to maximize children's social development?
- (5) How can we balance the need to prepare children for success in school with the need to nourish social development?
- (6) What challenges do children face in developing social relationships with other children who differ from them in terms of race, ethnicity, gender or ability?

This issue of *Early Developments* highlights some current work at FPG related to these questions. As an organization, we believe that the Institute of Medicine statement regarding the importance of healthy human relationships is of central importance to the early childhood field. We should be concerned about children's social-emotional development during the early childhood years. We need to make sure that programs serving young children preserve the important bonds that children have with their families.

We also need to ensure that early childhood programs attend to children's needs for warm and nurturing relationships with adults and peers and that teachers and other caregivers foster these important relationships through a variety of environmental and instructional approaches. |ed|

