



What Young Children Need to Succeed

When we ponder factors that influence a child's academic achievement, an adult's job performance or even one's ability to be a good neighbor, we would do well to look far back in that person's history for at least some of the answers. A wealth of research points to environments and experiences that increase the odds that a person will thrive and succeed in school and life. As summarized below, these critical experiences begin even before a child is born.

I. A healthy birth

A child's first environment is the womb, and its quality depends on good maternal nutrition and avoidance of tobacco, alcohol and other toxic substances. A healthy birth also is influenced by prenatal care — not only formal medical services, but informal support and care for the mother-to-be.

II. A secure foundation

Babies thrive when they have caregivers (especially parents) who respond sensitively to their cues and signals, fostering a strong sense of security. Within safe, predictable, loving relationships babies develop trust in others and confidence in their own ability to express needs and solicit the care they need. Soothed and comforted at times of distress, young children begin to develop the ability to calm themselves and, over time, to regulate emotions and impulses. Self-regulation is central to a child's ability to focus attention, accept direction and get along with others — essential skills for school and life.

III. A rich language environment

This means having caregivers who talk to a child long before he or she can talk back; engage the child with stories, songs and rhymes; ask "why" and "how" and "what if..." questions that stretch the child's mind and vocabulary; and introduce the child from the earliest months of life to the rich, expansive world of books. The child most likely to thrive and succeed has been engaged as an active, joyful learner, discovering the wonder and power of the spoken and written word.

IV. Safe and stimulating opportunities to play and explore

Infants and young children are naturally curious and eager to explore. They learn and advance their own development through active exploration and mastery of the world around them. Especially with encouragement and sensitive guidance from adults who support the child's growing autonomy, an actively exploring infant or toddler builds motor skills, develops confidence and initiative, and learns important cognitive concepts, such as cause and effect or the properties of — and relationships among — different objects.

V. Clear and reasonable limits

Even though children often raise a fuss when their desires are thwarted, without limits they feel insecure and overwhelmed by their impulses. Without clear limits, young children will be hard-pressed to learn to set reasonable limits for themselves as they get older. To learn and grow optimally, young children need limits expressed in clear, developmentally-appropriate language; simple reasons that teach the value behind the limit (e.g. “That’s dangerous” or “He feels sad when you take his toy”); natural or logical consequences when they violate limits; and recognition and encouragement when they behave positively. These lessons are magnified when, after a child misbehaves, adults help the child think about what she could have done differently and what she can do the next time a similar situation arises.

VI. Opportunities to make choices and handle responsibilities

The older children become, the more they are required to make decisions and handle tasks without adult supervision and guidance. Preparation for that increasing independence begins early in life – even with something as simple as a toddler’s choosing which of two healthy snacks she would like or deciding whether she wants to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt. And when a preschooler puts his toys away before a trip to the park or helps clear the table or fold laundry, he is building life skills and discovering he contributes to the common good.

VII. Protection from violence and trauma

Abuse, both physical and emotional, has devastating consequences for children’s development. Witnessing violence also does long-term harm to children. Longitudinal research shows that violence teaches young children the roles of both victim and perpetrator. Without appropriate intervention, these destructive patterns are likely to continue into future generations. Extreme stress and trauma have not only psychological, but physiological, effects on young children. Early exposure to stress and trauma, especially when not buffered by the presence of a sensitive, loving caregiver, affects brain chemistry in ways that undermine emotional regulation and thought processes.

Provided those foundational experiences and environments in the first five years of life, most children will be ready to avail themselves of all the learning opportunities their kindergarten classroom offers. And, given continued support and encouragement from the adults around them, they will be poised to succeed, both academically and socially, as they move toward adulthood.