

HOW EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT RELATES TO LEARNING

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People often think that early learning consists of knowing the ABC's, reciting the correct names of objects on picture cards, or performing some other memory exercise. Actually, the process of learning begins through relationships as early as birth, when an infant and mother connect through their own unique form of communication.

Healthy relationships throughout childhood are critical to emotional development, which, in turn, creates a basis for learning in several important areas. These include the ability to communicate and use language, problem solving, and the development of self-esteem. Few would argue that all learning requires the development of these abilities. This means that parents, teachers, and other caregivers play a major role in a child's healthy emotional development and, therefore, in his ability to learn.

In the first four to five years of life, critical ideas or perceptions of life are learned as part of relationships. In these relationships, basic emotional stages are mastered (or not), and these very same milestones become the child's very first cognitive lessons. These combined emotional-cognitive lessons become the

basis for all subsequent learning. Therefore, to determine how to help children become capable of formal learning later on, we must pay attention to these early processes or stages.

There are four general stages of early development, each building upon the other, in which children develop emotionally. In turn, mastering these stages enables them to grow socially and cognitively as well. Ultimately, the ability to think — that is, to connect ideas and see relationship — is the result of this four-stage process that makes up the very foundation of learning.

Stage One: Engagement

In the first stage of emotional development, ordinarily in the first eight months of life, children are learning to attend and engage. This means simply the ability to share attention with another person. For a baby this would involve little Susie looking in her mother's eyes, focusing on her voice, or examining her mother's changing facial expressions. When shared attention is not developed, babies can become easily distracted or preoccupied.

Together with this capacity for shared

attention is the capacity for engaging or relating to another person with some warmth, positive emotion, and expectation of something useful or pleasurable happening in the interaction. We see this in normal development by age three to four months, when a baby eagerly brightens up with a smile, moves her arms and legs to the rhythm of her mother's voice, or vocalizes in response to mommy's and daddy's cadences. The pleasure this provides helps the baby not only develop a sense of security and intimacy, but also to progress in motor development and language acquisition. Her attitude about learning new things is also greatly enhanced. In the absence of trusting, positive expectations, distrust, suspiciousness, or apathy take their place — hardly a foundation for learning.

Stage Two: Two-Way Communication

Developing a capacity for two-way communication is the second stage that all children need to master; that is, the ability to signal one's own needs and intentions and also comprehend someone else's, and to be able to string these

together as part of an interaction. This ability for two-way communication, or intentional communication, is normally learned between 6 and 18 months. For example, five-month-old Eddie reaches out to be picked up and when he is picked up he makes accepting coos and sounds as though he is saying, "That's good. You did just what I wanted you to."

In a more advanced form, eighteen-month-old Sally is stringing together many of what we call "circles of communication" — taking her mother's hand, mother reaching her hand back, and Sally then walking with mother toward the playroom. Here, Sally takes initiative, mother responds, and Sally builds on her mother's response. One circle of communication has been closed. As they walk to the playroom, Sally makes a sound that sounds like "there." Mother responds, "Where?" and Sally points toward the toy chest. Another circle of communication has been closed. As they search for Sally's favorite toys, exchanging grunts, groans, gestures, and the like, many circles of communication are closed, opened, and closed. In normal toddler

EACH CHILD IS UNIQUE

Our system of caring for and educating children *must* be capable of addressing individual differences and needs, especially during early childhood when so many building blocks are forming for a lifetime. With ingenuity, we can find ways to work within the group situation to see that every child's unique abilities are considered. What follows are some typical child behaviors and ways to approach and respond to each one.

When a child is frequently clingy: We tend to either avoid or give in completely to this kind of behavior. An alternative is to use floor time to establish a new way of

relating. You can set limits on the child's intrusiveness by communicating through gestures. You can seek out a child and help her feel close. At the same time, she has to learn a magic word — WAIT. This allows the child to be close by without actually clinging.

When a child tends to withdraw or become overly passive: In this situation, it's important to respect the pace of the child; to take one step at a time, but not to withdraw from him. If the child is reluctant to enter into a group, you can serve as a facilitator in bringing only one other child into the picture first, and gradually another and then another. Be sure to choose a quiet place. If you introduce new ideas slowly, the child will feel more secure as he tries to master his environment. Using this approach during floor time will help the child to become more

two-way communication, we will see two and three circles closed in a row, leading up to eventually, at 18 months, as many as 10 or 20 circles being closed in a row.

Two-way communication is, of course, the basis for all language, without which much of learning is impossible. The response an adult gives a child, whose language is just beginning to develop, will play an important role in how confidently a child comprehends and expresses his ideas later on.

When Sally is about to pick up Mother's favorite china bowl, Mother can swoop in silently and pick Sally up (minimal communication). She can use motor, facial, and vocal gestures, as well as words backed up by limits to maximize learning.

Because two-way communication permits information to be shared between two people in a clear, logical manner, it enables a child to figure out important aspects of her social, emotional, and physical world. It is also essential for making assumptions or quick conclusions about whether one is safe or approved of, as well as for holding the kinds of minimal conversations or

exchanges of information that are necessary for all learning. For example, based on a few exchanges or gestures, a child can figure out, without words, when she is safe in a group of new people.

Stage Three: Shared Meanings

A third core process of early development is the ability for learning how to share meanings. This normally occurs between 18 and 36 months, as children learn how to relate their behaviors, sensations, and gestures to the world of ideas. We see this in their use of language when they say, "Give me that," "I am happy," or "I am sad." They are using an idea, as evidenced in their words, to communicate something about what they feel, want, or are going to do.

Children also show their ability to share meanings through ideas in pretend play. Whether the animals are fighting, the dolls are hugging, or there is a tea party, ideas are guiding this play. Through intentional use of language and pretend play, children show that they have reached this level of using ideas. The capacity to share meanings is

assertive and take more self-initiative.

When a child is very aggressive: Though difficult to deal with, aggressive behavior can often be transformed by pretend play, during which the child's feelings can be communicated through ideas rather than behavior. At the same time, it's important to use body gestures and tone of voice to set limits. A serious, somewhat stern tone and stance (which gradually gets more serious) is more appropriate (and more effective) than a punitive one. When increasing limits, however, it is important to also increase one's availability for floor time.

When a child is often inattentive: Often, this behavior gets ignored because it doesn't appear to present any serious problems in a group situation. However, children

who are frequently inattentive are communicating the need to be focused and engaged. Follow even the most minor signs that indicate a desire and willingness to open a circle of communication. Try to stretch out periods of focusing and relating, and encourage the child to close as many circles of communication as possible. Be sure to build on a child's favored ways of relating during these times (through sounds or movement, looking, etc.)

When a child is overwhelmed: Gradually find out the kinds of things that overwhelm the child (noises, lots of touching, intense emotions, etc.). Offer the child extra security and support when you think he is likely to experience whatever it is that is overwhelming. Learn how to find experiences that help the child feel organized and in control.

essential for sharing higher-level information. For example, with ideas, a child can say, "Me mad," or can hug or kiss rather than cling. He can also comprehend the teacher's wishes. When she says, "It's time to go outside!" he knows that it's time to have some fun. With ideas, a child can even master complex concepts like *up and down*, *hot and cold*: his experiences acquire meaning.

Sharing meanings at a symbolic level is essential for communicating much of the content of what school is all about — from the most basic pleasure of enjoying a story to understanding number and word concepts.

Stage Four: Emotional Thinking

The fourth process of early childhood development involves emotional thinking. In this stage, children who are three to five years old are organizing ideas or experiences, and learning how to make connections between different ideas. They are learning to organize all the experiences or ideas that have to do with themselves into a sense of self, as well as learning how to organize all the experiences and ideas that have to do with someone else into a picture of another. As part of their ability to organize a sense of who they are, they are also understanding what's inside of themselves and what's outside, what's subjective or objective; that is, they develop a sense of reality testing. As part of this ability to organize their experiences, they also organize a sense of themselves in terms of mood and self-esteem: Are they a positive person? Optimistic or pessimistic? Negative? Despondent? Thus a picture emerges that is an accumulation of experiences, and these pictures now become more organized.

Children now begin to see themselves in space and time. For example, the sense of time allows them to under-

stand that what they do will have implications for what is going to happen tomorrow. This helps them to have a more mature basis for controlling their impulses. "If I take my nap, I will be able to ride my trike when I wake up."

As part of their sense of space, children in this stage can picture where they are in the world. They know that if they are in school, their mommy is close by and they will see her later in the day. This also helps them to organize their different emotions. They can understand the differences between healthy, constructive assertiveness and destructive aggression, between excitement that's well controlled and excitement that's out of control.

Therefore, this stage of organizing ideas helps children with making connections between different ideas. They can now look for logical connections. Making logical connections is important for abilities like sharing and cooperation. "If I share, others will share with me." Or, "If I'm mean, others will be mean back to me, or I'll get punished, or I won't be liked."

This same ability to connect ideas is also important for understanding why they might feel a certain way. "I was upset today because my mommy was away..." But it is equally important for understanding basic cognitive concepts.

For example, working with puzzles and manipulatives, they learn bigger and smaller, and how to line things up and classify according to shapes and sizes. Virtually all learning — in the early years as well as later on — depends on the ability to connect two or more ideas. The ability to organize thinking and ideas into categories cannot be underestimated.

These four general stages are the foundations of intellectual, emotional, and social functioning in the first four to five years of life and are essential for learning throughout life.