

# PLAIN Talk

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING ©

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN AND HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

By Craig T. Ramey, Ph.D. and Sharon L. Ramey, Ph.D.

### Editor's note:

We are extremely grateful to the Rameys for giving us permission to reprint four chapters from their book, *Going To School*. This newsletter is the first of a four-part series. *Going to School* and its companion book, *Right From Birth*, are available in the A+ Web Store on the CDL website at [www.cdl.org](http://www.cdl.org).

**R**esponsive care for very young children sets the stage for learning. Such care does not produce a self-centered or spoiled child. It teaches a child to trust, be curious, strive to learn new things, and be skillful in social interaction. All of these characteristics are essential to learning and school success.

One principle has been consistently supported by research findings: The adult a child will become is shaped by the totality of the child's experiences. It is the aggregate of everyday living that profoundly shapes how children grow and learn. There is a great deal of scientific evidence that children's home environment, the quality of parenting, and preschool experiences contribute in important ways to their emerging competencies in social, emotional, and academic development.

### A PRIMER ON EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

One great contribution of scientific research in recent years has been to show the power and growth of the brain in early childhood. These findings have profoundly affected our understanding of the impact of early care on children's growth, from language and social skills to cognitive and emotional development.

Your child has been learning since before birth. A child is born with an almost full complement of brain cells - some 100 billion. However, these cells, called neurons, are not fully connected or necessarily used at birth. The main task of the brain in early childhood is for these neurons to forge connections. By age three, the brain has formed an estimated 1,000 trillion of these connections, called synapses. An individual cell may be connected to as many as 15,000 others.



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## CDL'S MISSION

To improve the life chances of all children, especially those at high risk, by increasing school success.

## CDL'S GOAL

Activate and achieve sweeping systemic change in the way children are taught.

## CDL'S ACTION PLAN

Approach the problem of failing schools and school failure from several strategic directions simultaneously by bringing together parents, teachers, principals, university professors, judges, physicians and researchers as a united force.

## CDL'S CORE BELIEF

All children are born with an innate desire to learn, all children can learn to higher levels, and all children deserve equal opportunities to a solid education.

## CDL'S VISION

The very special uniqueness of every child will be identified, respected, honored, and celebrated.

## CALL TO ACTION

Only an informed public can come to the table and make informed decisions that lead to clear and focused action—action that will ensure a solid and equitable education for all children. When you have finished reading this newsletter, please share it with a teacher, a parent, another professional who works with children, or a community/business leader.

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Join CDL's voice in activating positive solutions for our nation's children. Contact us for more information about our programs and/or how you can help at 208 South Tyler Street, Covington, Louisiana 70433.

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This tremendous growth is fueled by the child's experiences, heredity, and maturation. The amount of positive stimulation a child receives is directly related to the child's behavioral and brain development. This positive stimulation includes responsive forms of play, affection, discovery, and language interactions. In situations where children are deprived of enough such early learning opportunities, brain and behavioral development slow or fail to progress in normal ways. Exactly *what* types and *how much* early stimulation young children need to promote "optimal" brain development is a topic of vigorous scientific inquiry.

During the first 10 to 12 years of life, it is estimated that approximately half the synapses formed in early childhood will be shed or pruned. Most likely, the synapses that are used repeatedly are strengthened and are more likely to endure. Those used less often are more likely to be pruned or re-configured. By early adolescence, the number of synapses will have declined to about half the number of those in the three-year-old's brain. A great deal of research is underway to understand these basic developmental processes and their practical significance.

What has been well documented for more than 30 years, however, is that the way in which the adult brain functions can be profoundly affected by early experiences. A lot of this research has focused on children from extremely deprived or enriched environments. Therefore, less is known about variations within the so-called normal range of life experiences.

## EARLY BRAIN WIRING

Recent research confirms that brains get "wired" in different ways to achieve positive ends. But a brain is not a living "computer" waiting for the "software" of experience. Evidence indicates that brains are as unique in their appearance and their functioning as everything else about us. There are many compensatory and probably idiosyncratic processes at work in the early years that contribute to each child's brain development.

What should parents do about brain development? Mostly they should do what good parents have done for generations. Be sure your child is well cared for, well nourished, rested, happy, engaged, and allowed to play and learn with all the delight and energy of each stage of development.

## THE MANY WAYS OF LEARNING: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN'S BRAINS (AND MINDS) WORK

Early brain development produces a large, complex brain by the age of three. A three-year-old's brain is estimated to be 90 percent of the adult brain in terms of structure and function. Yet the brain's development is far from complete. What children learn and do continues to affect the brain's function and refinement. Such changes will continue throughout life into old age—something not fully appreciated until recently. The primary basis for this refinement appears to be experience and active use of the brain.

There are many different forms of learning. Learning includes a wide range of human behavior characterized by the *active process* of acquiring new knowledge and skills, as well as creating new connections among existing knowledge and skills. Learning occurs in informal, everyday contexts as well as in structured learning situations. It involves associations or relationships between and among elements.

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These elements can include objects, representations of objects, actions, feelings, and many abstract ideas and concepts. In the early years of life, most learning occurs in the frequent transactions the child has with people and objects. Here are some examples of different forms of learning that occur early in life:

### Learning to ignore things

This is an important form of learning, called *habituation*, that occurs early in life. It allows the child to tune out “background” sights and sounds and irrelevant stimuli, such as the sound of the refrigerator making ice, or noise from a nearby playground. Habituation is important in setting the stage for the infant’s ability to concentrate.

At first, habituation may be reflexive. Infants initially respond vigorously to external events, such as sound, light, or touch. However, if a baby hears a bell ring repeatedly, she will soon stop turning her eyes or head to look for the source of the sound. This very early form of learning - making connections and adjusting one’s behavior to the external situation - is part of intelligence. An infant’s pattern of habituation is one of many behaviors that are correlated with later intelligence. As far as we know, this is not a form of learning that parents need to actively promote. Your child will likely have many opportunities to tune out or ignore repeated, inconsequential forms of stimulation.

### Forming concepts

This type of learning also originates in infancy, and becomes increasingly sophisticated and apparent during the school years. Concept formation is a type of abstraction. In the early years, such abstraction is closely linked to experiences with objects and events. As the child matures, the abstractions involve mental or physical manipulations of signs, symbols, or classes of events and objects.



One of the best-studied examples of concept learning involves object constancy - coming to know that an object continues to exist when it is out of sight. This discovery enables young children to enjoy playing peekaboo and “discovering” a hidden object. Object constancy includes understanding that an object can be seen, heard, or experienced in different ways. For example, an object rotated through space looks different from varying angles. Brain maturation and experience contribute to learning different aspects of object constancy.

As the child grows, more structured experiences are the basis for concept formation. Children’s toys and common household objects can promote the acquisition of concepts. For example, blocks, food, or clothing can be sorted by shape, color, or size. Shape, color, and size are abstract concepts that children typically begin to learn a lot about in the second and third years of life. They learn and test increasingly sophisticated concepts about properties of the physical world.

At the same time, children are learning concepts about intangibles, such as emotional expression and self-regulation of behavior. In the second and third years of life, children have quite well developed concepts about different emotions and what causes or ends them. Much of their learning about emotions occurs through direct experience and is assisted by parents attaching words to different feeling states and behaviors that reflect emotions.

Learning to read, spell and write involves a great deal of concept formation. These concepts include understanding that letters and letter combinations represent sounds; letter combinations represent words that can be decoded (analyzed and

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sounded-out); and words can be understood in context, such as getting hints from the words that come before and after, the pictures on the page, and the flow of the story.

## Learning Cause-and-Effect Relationships

This form of learning also begins early and continues throughout life. It is based on children's observations and experiments with things and people. Parents can help set the stage, although this is not necessary for much of the early cause-and-effect learning. Children naturally seek to make sense of their experiences and to find order and reliable patterns in what happens around them. It also is important for children to learn which of their behaviors produce desirable effects, and to eliminate those that do not. This cause-and-effect learning is the foundation for much of what happens in the first years of school. Teachers set up many situations where children can manipulate objects, solve problems, and observe orderly patterns and variations.

As children get older, cause-and-effect relationships contribute to their understanding of probability - that some things are more or less likely to occur under certain situations. This may be why very young children prefer a clear "yes" or "no" to "maybe." By eight years of age, however, most children would prefer a "maybe" to a "no" concerning something they want.

Scientists divide learning into different categories. The table below provides a partial list of these types of learning. Your child is engaged in almost all of these forms of learning, at one level or another, every day. What matters is that you encourage your child's natural curiosity in many ways. Even before children speak, parents can promote learning through example, play, reading, talking, and reinforcing positive behavior.

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### TYPES OF LEARNING

- Figuring out action-reaction and cause-and-effect relationships
- Learning through observation
- Copying others to learn new ways to do things
- Tuning out what's irrelevant to focus on what's important
- Distinguishing what's different and what's the same
- Classical conditioning, especially involving reflexes in early infancy (like Pavlov's dog)
- Trial and error (from informal to highly systematic experimentation)
- Conceptualizing ideas and themes
- Verbal learning involving words and gestures
- Logical or deductive reasoning

These types of learning can occur in and be applied to many areas, including creative arts, athletics, academics, social relationships, mechanics, imaginative or fantasy play, and other forms of adaptive behavior.

## SEVEN ESSENTIALS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Over a decade ago we began to look for a way to translate the wonderful and exciting findings about brain growth and child development into practical advice for parents. We felt the research was too valuable to be confined to the pages of academic journals, and it had to be shared with those who could benefit most - parents and children. And so our list of Seven Essentials was born - a synthesis of findings from more than a thousand research projects and scientific presentations.

### Editor's Note:

*As the Rameys have stated, these Seven Essentials are based on more than 1,000 research findings.*

*Although the main focus of the Rameys is early childhood, I urge you to consider these Seven Essentials as guideposts for effective interaction with your children from the time they are born until they reach adulthood.*

*We have included in this newsletter [The Seven Essentials](#) on a separate page, which we encourage you to put on your refrigerator door as a constant reminder of what you can do to help your child every day.*

## SEVEN ESSENTIALS PROVEN TO HELP YOUR CHILD EVERY DAY

**Encourage** exploration with all the senses, in familiar and new places, with others and alone, safely and with joy.

**Mentor** in basic skills, showing the whats and whens, the ins and outs, of how things and people work.

**Celebrate** development advances, for learning new skills, little and big, and for becoming a unique individual.

**Rehearse** and extend new skills, showing your child how to practice again and again, in the same and different ways, with new people and new things.

**Protect** from neglect and inappropriate disapproval, teasing, or punishment.

**Communicate** richly and responsibly with sounds, songs, gestures, and words; bring your child into the wonderful world of language and its many uses.

**Guide** and limit behavior to keep your child safe and to teach what's acceptable and what's not - the rules of being a cooperative, responsive, and caring person.

These Seven Essentials are based on studies about children's emerging intellectual and language competencies in the first five years of life. Based on the evidence, we recommend that every child have all Seven Essentials *every day* to be engaged in active learning, to remain positive about the

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challenges of learning, and to be well prepared for school. Children who receive lots of these Seven Essentials through their exchanges with parents and others show the healthiest and best development.

Think of these essentials as daily “vitamins and minerals” for your child’s heart and mind. They really are worth memorizing and doing every day. Most are fun and easy to do anytime, anywhere. A single activity can easily include several at once. There are many ways to personalize them to reflect your interests, your culture, and your values.

Your child will never outgrow the need for these essentials. Just adapt them to meet your child’s growing capabilities and changing interests. Over time, these Seven Essentials will help strengthen your child’s development in every way.



## 1. Encourage Exploration.

You should actively encourage your child’s curiosity and investigation of the world. Help your child to seek new experiences, new information, and new forms of stimulation. It is not enough just to allow your child to explore.

For the three-year-old, parents can point out new things when it is safe and profitable to check them out.

By age five or six, your child’s curiosity will be more selective and wider-ranging. You won’t need to have your child explore everything all the time. But you can point out delightful or unexpected opportunities for learning. Share the many ways that your child can explore - talking to experts, going to the library, visiting museums, going on outings, paying close attention to things in your house or yard, and conducting experiments. From five to eight years of age, many children are really impressed by what they can learn from such trial-and-error discovery.

## 2. Mentor in the Basics.

Mentoring for young children becomes increasingly direct and systematic. Mentoring is a form of teaching with love and appreciation for the individuality of the learner. From three to eight years of age, children are like sponges. They love to learn and share lots of facts and skills. They want to understand most things that interest them. They will question parents and others extensively. You may well need new books about topics your child is eager to learn more about. But what, exactly, are

the important “basics” to teach your child during this period of life?

For children to learn, parents do not necessarily need to create formal lesson plans or purchase expensive learning programs. Instead, you can “be yourself” and teach your child what you know and what interests you in everyday interactions. Such instruction and sharing are key components of mentoring. Also, when you teach what you enjoy, you invariably convey enthusiasm for learning and a love of knowledge – a powerful way to build your child’s enthusiasm for learning later in school.

Dr. Howard Gardner of Harvard University, a leading theorist and researcher in children’s learning and intelligence, strongly advocates that children be oriented to and accomplished in the familiar three “Rs” – reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic. Another “R” that he and most early childhood educators add is “reasoning” or higher-order thinking. Some add a fifth “R” – responsibility. We concur that all are important and can readily be provided by parents in their mentoring.

Most teachers do not think that parents need to teach reading *in a formal sense* before their child goes to school. Yet parents may want to know how to mentor for reading skills. Please note that there are stages in children’s reading. These stages are not exact, and your child does not need to learn these in a strict order. However, earlier skills are important for learning the later ones.



If your child is in a good school, the teacher will likely give you constructive suggestions for mentoring in school-related topics, including the three “Rs.”

Remember also to mentor in social skills, and include reasoning and responsibility. In all your mentoring, be loving, patient, encouraging. Provide lots of examples for your child to follow and learn from. Be sure you, too, are having fun.

## Activities for mentoring children in reading, writing, and spelling:

- Sound out the different letters of the alphabet.
- Say the name of a letter when you see the letter.
- Make sounds and guess what letter they stand for.
- Read single-syllable words, especially words you see often in books, on signs, or on objects at home.
- When reading point to words to show the direction of your reading.
- Try to match pictures and words.
- Learn lots of nursery rhymes and rhyming songs.
- Using easy-to-pronounce words, take turns thinking of rhymes.

- Combine or blend letters into sounds, especially those that create new and unexpected sounds. You'll probably enjoy thinking of the many combined letter-sound combinations, but you can also use a dictionary's "pronunciation key" and guides for sound-spelling correspondence.
- When your child is ready, try reading simple words in text, starting with books your child knows well and loves.
- Progress to practicing more difficult multi-syllable words. There are many excellent "learn to read" books that are graded according to children's ages that provide helpful hints to parents to encourage children's recognition of words in context.
- Play word detective games. Look for parts of words that give clues to their sound or form words inside of other words.
- Talk about words and what they are made of - letters, letter combinations, syllables, vowels, and consonants. Discuss prefixes and suffixes that give clues to the meaning of a word. (But remember that some of these are advanced concepts.)
- Identify words (with the same or different spellings) that sound the same but have different meanings, such as *weather* and *whether*; *they're*, *there*, and *their*; *be* and *bee*; *watch* (as in watching a movie) and *watch* (that tells time).
- Identify words that have the same spelling but can be pronounced differently and then mean different things, such as *wind* (that can howl), and *wind* (as in winding a clock); *read* (in the present and past tenses); and *lead* (as a horse) and *lead* (as in a pipe).
- Think of a letter that sounds like a word, such as *b* and *bee*, *t* and *tee*, *l* and *elle*.
- At all stages of your child's development, expand your child's vocabulary.
- Talk about how language can serve different purposes – providing information and instruction, conveying feelings, and being fun and interesting in its own right.
- Help your child to follow increasingly complex directions.
- Combine words into sentences aloud, or with printed words once your child recognizes them.
- Test your child's memory for details from a story, for arrangement of events, and for clues that help predict the ending. (You are likely to be impressed.)
- Think of words that start with different letters. As your child's vocabulary grows, try thinking of words that go from a to z, especially in a category, such as foods, animals, actions, or silly words.
- Read increasingly longer, more complex stories. Be sure your child continues to enjoy and follow them.



- Identify the main ideas or messages from conversation, stories, and books.

### 3. Celebrate Your Child's Accomplishments.

From age three on, there will be many opportunities to celebrate your child's remarkable advances. Every day your child will learn or do things that warrant your attention and praise. This will not make your child conceited or self-centered. Instead, there is ample evidence that children learn more and faster in positive circumstances. Research on brain chemistry shows that children are unlikely to direct their attention fully to the learning at hand when they are stressed, fearful, or confused. But pleasurable sensations help children want more of the events that produce these positive sensations. Acknowledging children's achievements helps them know that you notice their success in learning, and increases their enjoyment.



This does not call for unlimited or non-specific praise. Let your child know that you notice and value efforts to try new skills and learn new things. Sometimes your child may respond by saying, "It's not all that good," when you praise a drawing or a story. Or he may tell you, "It's really easy," after you have shown how impressed you are by some achievement. This does not mean that your positive words are not appreciated. Rather, your child is letting you know that he understands that some

achievements require more or less effort. He may have his own standards of accomplishment and be striving to do better.

Not every advance means your child will show the same maturity and intelligence at all times. She may show remarkable sensitivity to others one day, but not the next. Your child may be eager to read a challenging book aloud to you every day for a week and then refuse to read a book of comparable difficulty the next week, announcing, "This is too hard."

This pattern of "a step forward and then a pause, or step back" is normal. For example, children who learn to add "ed" to verbs to create the past tense often overuse their new skill, making mistakes in speech that were formerly correct. This is temporary and does not require vigorous intervention. Children's self-correcting, coupled with consistent (but not insistent) encouragement will do wonders.

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## 4. Rehearse and Extend New Skills.

The early years in school are filled with the need to practice. Yet some of the best ways to practice aren't repetitive, forced, or dull. Children love to see how a new skill can be used in different ways. Young children often love repetition of favorite stories or songs. Once again, brain chemistry is at work. Certain pathways linking positive emotional states and increasing comfort with a repeated task or experience are being activated and strengthened. It also is likely that new connections are being forged and that your child may be thinking in new ways about something familiar or already mastered. This happens often with numbers. Children who can answer correctly to simple addition or subtraction queries may suddenly want to experiment on their own with new ways to get the answer. They may be testing out new mental strategies or ways in which physical props can be helpful to solve more complicated problems.



Here are some suggestions for what parents can do with their children to practice academic and social skills:

- Ask them to show how they did something in class.
- Encourage them to keep journals to write and draw in at home, just like at school.
- Have them find new words in a book that you can read and practice together. Try remembering these new words and using them in an invented sentence or story.
- Teach children to call a friend or relative on the phone and use appropriate greetings, self-identification, and polite goodbyes.
- Have them practice manners and thoughtful acts at home and elsewhere. When your child begins to show empathy or generosity, find ways to follow through and do this again.
- Help your child write thank-you notes, create original artwork, and find other ways to let others know your child appreciates them.
- Try out new social lessons, such as “smiles are catching” or the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”).
- Help your child learn that some rules can be applied at the wrong times or in the wrong situations. Even if your five-year-old would love to have someone squirt him with a water gun, he should *not* apply the Golden Rule and do it to you without advance permission. Or your four-year-old may really want you to sleep with all her favorite stuffed animals and you may need to explain that not everyone likes to fall asleep in exactly the same surroundings.

## 5. Protect From Neglect and Inappropriate Disapproval, Teasing, or Punishment.

During the three- to eight-year-old age period, children will encounter more teasing and many more reprimands than in their earlier years. This is because they are more self-directed, and can understand and benefit from appropriate guidance and constructive criticism (as detailed in Essential number 7 about guiding and limiting behavior). But your child still should not receive overly harsh punishment for things that are not intentionally bad or harmful. Also, it is unreasonable to expect perfection in everything your child does. Here are examples of normal child behavior and appropriate responses:

**Behavior:** Your four-year-old is playing catch with you and runs through a patch of flowers in her eagerness to catch the ball. Several new buds are broken.

**Appropriate response:** “Great catch, but oops, you went into the flowers. Be careful and let’s move away so this does not happen again. When flowers are broken, they can’t be fixed.”



**Inappropriate response:**

“You killed those flowers. Don’t you ever look where you are going? What’s wrong with you? That’s the end of our game of catch.”

**Behavior:** Your six-year-old lost his first tooth. He is very embarrassed to go to school because he thinks he looks “terrible” and other children will laugh at him. That night, he begs to stay home the next day.

**Appropriate response:** You sympathize and say that you felt just the same way (or

that someone else in the family did). You ask what ideas he might have to look extra good even with his tooth missing. You also say that he looks like some other children in his class who lost teeth. Although you do not agree to let him stay home, you may plan a trip for an ice-cream cone the next day or tell him that he may invite a friend over for a favorite game. And the Tooth Fairy can pay a visit and leave a note to mark the occasion.

**Inappropriate response:** You get angry that your child is being so immature. You say, “Well, if you think the other children will laugh and make fun of you, I’ll do it now so you’ll get used to it!” You tell him the Tooth Fairy will not come at all because of his ridiculous feelings and behavior.

**Behavior:** Your second-grader is practicing spelling words. For two nights in a row, she got all the words right and was very cooperative. Tonight, she said, “I know them all and I don’t want to practice.” You insist it is good to practice and then she misspells the first word on the list when she recites the letters.

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**Appropriate response:** You continue through the spelling list and then ask her if she thinks she may have misspelled any of the words. You then can correct the errors or say, "Boy, it's lucky we are practicing. Even when you already know a word, sometimes when you are in a hurry or upset, you may not think and remember to be careful." Or you may ask her to write down the words so she can compare her written list to a master list. Thank her for practicing even when she didn't feel like doing it.

**Inappropriate response:** You immediately shout, "See, you aren't so smart and that serves you right for acting like a know-it-all. You don't even know that easy word. We are going to practice twice as long, and if you keep on making mistakes, you may not get to play tomorrow."

**Behavior:** Your family is at the dinner table ready to celebrate your birthday. Just as you start to eat, the phone rings. Your child jumps up and runs to answer it, shouting, "Maybe it's Grandma calling to wish me a happy birthday." In your house, you have a rule that everyone asks to be excused and waits for permission before leaving the table. Also, you usually let the phone be answered automatically when you are eating, so that your dinner together is not constantly interrupted.

**Appropriate response:** Because it is a special occasion, you simply ignore the behavior, since your child usually follows family rules. Or perhaps when your child returns to the table, disappointed it was not Grandma, you say, "Why don't we follow our usual rules and not answer the phone until after dinner? If Grandma leaves a message, we'll return her call right away."

**Inappropriate response:** The minute your child returns, you say, "You disobeyed the rules about asking to be excused, I want you to apologize. You will be punished and you won't be allowed to talk to Grandma when she calls."

These examples have two things in common. First, all the transgressions were relatively minor. Second, these behaviors are typical for children of the three- to-eight-year-old age period, especially when enthusiasm or fatigue can influence their judgment. None reflects willful, disruptive, or thoughtless behavior. Therefore, you should teach with this in mind. When parents respond inappropriately to such normal types of behavior, the toll on children can be great.

Some parents who treat their children harshly mistakenly believe they are doing their child a service. We cannot imagine



that this could ever be true. Rather, they are actively teaching their child to disregard the feelings of others, to ignore the big picture, and that if children are not perfect, adults will get mad at them.

Sadly, parents who ignore this Essential are often unaware that they are hurting their child or responding excessively to



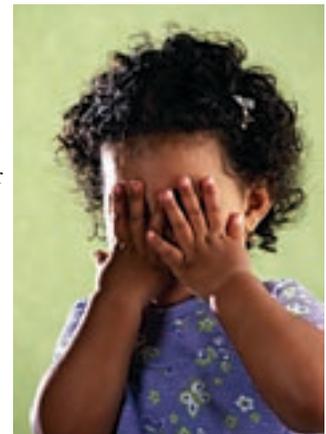
age-typical behavior. For example, all children make some messes in helping prepare food, and when at the table. Adults make the same mistakes, but usually less often or on a smaller scale because we are bigger, more coordinated, and more practiced. Some children are highly sensitive. Others seem not to care when they are teased or treated harshly for minor transgressions. Do not be fooled by appearances.

Many children learn to hide their feelings in the face of such treatment, sometimes to avoid a double dose of teasing and punishment.

This Essential extends to protecting your child from bullying and rude or insensitive behavior from others, including other children, friends, or relatives. Children typically tease each other, but innocently and at a level that they can handle. But when it gets out of hand or is the dominant form of interaction between your child and someone else, you should intervene. Whoever the consistent offender may be, you should be sure that contact between your child and this person is reduced or eliminated, at least for a while.

This Essential does not imply that children can never be reprimanded or gently teased in supportive ways, or that punishment can never be used.

But harsher parental behavior should match the child's behavior. Intentionally harmful, rude, or defiant behavior warrants a response - one that can teach your child the importance of positive behavior and the need to avoid the negative. Save parental guidance and limit-setting for what really counts at each age. Be consistent, clear, strong, and in control when you respond to inappropriate behavior.



Do not laugh about your child in front of him or others in ways that you know will be hurtful. Do not embarrass your child or tell stories about him that make him feel incompetent, or self-conscious, or that belittle his feelings. Show your child the same respect and thoughtfulness that you show to your friends, and that you expect from your child.

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## 6. PROVIDE A RICH LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT EVERY DAY FOR YOUR CHILD.

From age three on, and particularly during the first years of elementary school, this is the most important Essential for your child's school success. Your coaching and your use of language are important in helping your child become more adept.

Right from birth, children start learning their native language or languages. Infants discern the key features and many uses of language long before they speak. In the second year of life, when language growth is typically rapid, children show many signs of recognizing that language is both powerful and delightful.

Language reflects thoughts and thoughts help language. Language involves formal features, like vocabulary and grammar, but there are lots of implicit rules about body language and the ways that tone, volume, inflection, and gestures can alter the meaning of the words. Language is also the primary mode for teaching in our culture. Teachers in



elementary school spend more time on the language arts and on enhancing your child's language than on other areas of development.

Converse with your child. Use everyday exchanges as a natural way to teach new words for feelings, objects, events, places, time, and abstract ideas. Use books to help with language. Talk about the books after you read them. Let your child tell stories or "read" books, even before formal reading skills appear. Do the same for writing. Even three-year-olds can "write," and they can interpret the squiggly lines or pictures they draw to "write" down their story.

Remember that some topics and words are not appropriate for your child's age and comprehension. Many topics covered on the front page of newspapers and on the evening news may be unsuitable for your child's ears and mind. Be cautious. Be aware of how highly impressionable young children are. Children will be introduced naturally, and hopefully gradually, to the full range of human experiences and use of language, but this should not all occur in the three- to eight-year-old period.

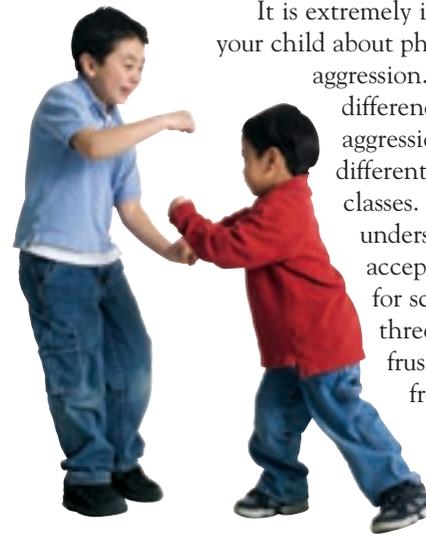
Beware that your child is likely to pick up some words that you do not approve of. Remember that most young children have no idea what those four-letter words mean. They just know they are "bad words." Also, children typically go through stages of telling "bathroom jokes" and being interested in their bodies and other children's, too. Deal with this appropriately - not excessively. Yes, you can shape your child's language and indicate that certain words are off limits and forbidden in your household. Should you use these forbidden words, expect your child to notice and comment!

## 7. GUIDE AND LIMIT YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR TO PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR AND TO AVOID HARM.

This Essential is about socialization and behavior modification, which are so important during the transition-to-school years. This is the time that your child will probably learn more rules about social conduct than at any other time in life. Children catch on quickly to many of these rules, but there typically are a few stubborn areas that they don't grasp as readily.

What areas need the most vigorous guidance? First, anything involving your child's health and safety. These issues must be addressed consistently and with appropriate explanations so that your child learns about such things as crossing streets, not running into traffic, not ingesting foreign substances, etc.

Basic civility is another vital area. Children typically need many prompts and reminders. They may go through periods of shyness. Help your child to know why thoughtful behavior matters. It will be very important for your child's acceptance and ease in school.



It is extremely important that you teach your child about physical play and aggression. There are documented differences in play and aggression among children from different cultures and social classes. But your child must understand the basics of acceptable play in preparation for school. Remember that three-year-olds handle frustration much differently from, and with less self-control than, a six-year-old. But even a three-year-old's behavior can be shaped in lots of

socially acceptable ways.

Do not try to teach that physical aggression, such as hitting, kicking, and biting, is unacceptable by doing these things to your child. This old-fashioned technique is not the best. It just teaches that parents are bigger and stronger.

Instead, use immediate and harsh verbal reprimands. If need be, physical restraint or removing your child from the situation may be in order. For some behaviors it may be effective to place your child in a time-out or other limited situation for a specified time, and be sure that you have explained clearly why the behavior is unacceptable and will not be allowed again. If such behavior continues, you may choose to end or deny enjoyable events, such as an outing, or playtime with a friend. Privileges also can be taken away from older children when they are mature enough to understand the connection between their behavior and the punishment.

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Many important forms of socializing actively encourage mature and thoughtful behavior. Your socialization should not focus only on preventing or eliminating unacceptable behavior. You can set a powerful example for your child by the way you behave. Also, as your child matures, you can read and discuss books about good behavior and the consequences of bad behavior. Relate what you read to your own life and to your child's actions and thoughts about these matters.

## PLAYING AND LEARNING

Play is an extremely important way that children learn. Play provides natural, fun ways to explore and to have trial-and-error experiences in a safe, enjoyable setting.

In fact, research shows that children learn best when they are having fun. When an emotion is engaged, events and ideas are committed to memory more strongly. Even as adults, we recall more easily events in the past that are associated with strong emotions, including those that delighted (as well as frightened) us. We also remember more from the classes we enjoyed than from those that didn't interest us. This is why young children learn more from interesting and creative play than from rote memory routines that are the staple of many accelerated learning programs.

Learning and memory are inextricably linked to emotions. Brain chemicals, called neurotransmitters, that affect and are affected by emotion can help the brain to be more receptive to new information, and better able to store and retrieve it. While negative emotions, such as fear and anger, can reinforce learning, the most beneficial learning occurs from lessons or experiences linked to enjoyment and pleasure.



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## ACTIVE AND PASSIVE LEARNING

There is a great deal of scientific evidence about the importance of children's own actions in learning. When children initiate activity or are actively engaged, they typically learn more. A key form of such activity is called response-contingent learning, in which a child learns that certain actions or words produce predictable results. Another highly effective form of learning is when parents teach about something that has already captured their child's attention.

Parents should be aware that television, in addition to its negative effects on children's behavior, is generally ineffective in teaching. This holds true even for so-called "educational" television. Such programs may not be truly harmful. Others may teach children some things, particularly when parents reinforce what is taught in active ways that engage the child.

## WHY CHILDREN ASK "WHY" SO OFTEN

Children's curiosity, inquisitiveness, and asking "Why?" are universal. What is the role of these behaviors in development and learning?

Without doubt, children's queries are a genuine expression of what is interesting or perplexing to them. Parents who answer their children's questions attentively and appropriately teach much more than just the answer. They are teaching their child that (1) asking questions is a good way to get information, (2) adults can be counted on to provide information, and (3) even trusted grownups don't know everything, because they often say, "I don't know," or "Let's go find out more about that." These are worthwhile lessons. And, of course, children often get the responses they are hoping for.

It is easy to overlook that children come into the world with little or perhaps no specific knowledge about how the world works. While children can seem remarkably intelligent and insightful, their reservoir of knowledge is limited. Children often use words correctly long before they know what they mean.

Your answers are a way to apply the Seven Essentials and a great way to proceed on the path of lifelong learning. You will undoubtedly enjoy how your child's comprehension of "why" questions and answers changes with age.

As a caring parent, you will get tired. You cannot be expected to answer all of your child's "why" questions. Sometimes you won't know the answer, don't have the time to answer, or may not want to answer. This is fine every now and then. Each parent must find the right balance between being a



responsive "parent-teacher" and meeting the demands of everyday life.

Use your friends, your family, and your social support network. If your child is very curious, enlist others who know about subjects that interest him. Arrange get-togethers and outings so they can explore and learn together. Also, get some good dictionaries, reference books, and encyclopedias that are ideal for young children. Expect to learn a lot yourself.

## HOW ACTIVELY SHOULD YOU PROMOTE LEARNING?

This is the question we are asked most often by parents. The answer is that parental teaching does, without question,

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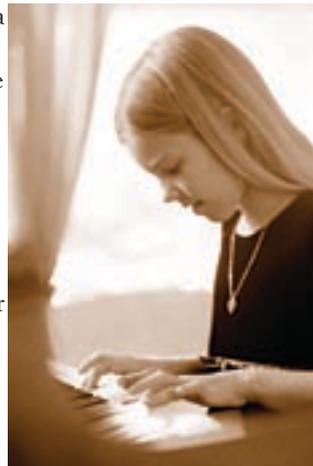
make a difference in what young children know and what their skills are. Whether such teaching needs to be planned, however, is a different matter. Many parents teach naturally and without awareness in their everyday exchanges with their children. Others are less comfortable or skilled in this role, especially with very young children who do not have well-developed verbal skills. Overly forceful and ambitious parental teaching seldom, if ever, works well. This can be frustrating to parents and children alike. It can also create negative emotions connected to later formal learning.

Each child is an individual. Pay attention to your child's interests, talents, curiosity. Capitalize on them. Do not waste time comparing your child to others at this stage. Instead, appreciate your child's uniqueness and remarkable development.

Children with few opportunities to learn, whose parents are not highly responsive, and whose families do not provide a rich language environment are at a decided disadvantage when they go to school. It is difficult for these children to make up for the years of inadequate encouragement, mentoring, celebration, practice, and language experiences. Even when these children learn a lot from what schools have to offer, they trail significantly behind their classmates who came from more enriched families.

The learning opportunities that preschool children in our country have are profound.

Children from families, preschools, and communities that are rich in the Seven Essentials - the natural forms of everyday teaching and encouragement that work best - are at a clear advantage when they go to school. These children are prepared for what schools do best - building and expanding children's competencies in academic and social areas.



In the long run, active parental teaching makes a huge difference. But effective parents balance the teaching of life skills and school skills. Good parent-teachers recognize the many ways that children learn from experience, observations and reflection.

Some children have learning differences, only partly understood at this time. But all children can and do

learn under the right conditions. And this learning is vital to their quality of life, their health and well-being, and the ways they will become contributing citizens as they grow up. Being close to a young child is the most precious reminder we have of how vital learning is to our society, how basic it is to want to know more, and how joyful it is to gain new skills and understanding.

Cherish your own sense of wonder at your child's remarkable growth and learning. Notice, too, how much you are learning and what a skillful teacher you are becoming.

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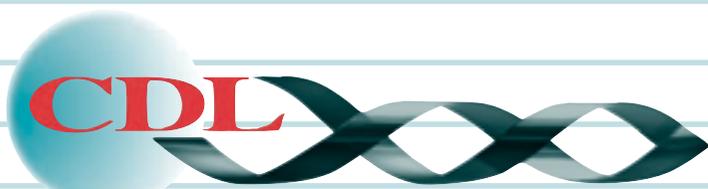
# PLAIN *Talk*

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