
THE THREE CS

The Three Cs: Critical Ingredients for Healthy Child and Youth Development

Research and community wisdom converge to point the way to essential experiences that allow children and youth to grow up to be caring, responsible adults. Even in the face of high-risk conditions, these "three Cs" can serve as important protective factors that enable children to rise above risk. So where are the opportunities for children to experience these three Cs at each stage of their development? And what can each of us do in our own families, communities, and workplaces to ensure that all children have enough of the three Cs to see them through?

CONNECTION

Research shows that the number one protective factor in a child's life is enduring connections to caring, supportive adults. These essential connections begin in the earliest days of a child's life, ideally in the context of the family where strong, secure attachments to parents and other sensitive, responsive caregivers lay the foundation for later development. As children move into the school years, connections to teachers and other caring adults, and also to peers, become increasingly important, allowing children to feel a sense of belonging not only in the family, but in the larger community as well.

These connections provide the context for building lifelong social skills and for focusing attention and energy into academic learning and the development of special interests and talents. Even as children become teens with increasing autonomy and responsibility for self, strong connections to parents and other caring adults continue to be the touchstone from which young people spread their wings and practice the roles that will carry them through to a healthy, satisfying adult life.

COMPETENCE

At each stage of development a child needs to experience what it means to be effective, to influence what happens, to handle the challenges of day to day life, and to discover what it means to do something well. A baby has her first experience of competence when her cries and sighs and babbles are effective in drawing adults to her to offer comfort or stimulation. Gradually, the child who has been comforted by others develops the ability to calm herself and to regulate feelings and impulses -- a central feature of social-emotional competence.

Beyond infancy, from the toddler years through the teens, young people are most likely to thrive when others teach, coach, facilitate and model positive social skills and coping strategies. And they shine when, regardless of their innate ability, they are helped to develop at least one domain of competence, be it the arts, sports, or academics. True confidence and self-worth are grounded not in superficial praise, but in real experiences of mastery and accomplishment. Especially for young children,

these critical experiences of competence happen most often in the context of relationships with caring, supportive adults.

CONTRIBUTION

Building on connection and competence, the third C captures the importance of engaging children in ways that allow them to discover what they can contribute to the wellbeing of their family and community. From the toddler who gently pats mom's back when she doesn't feel well or the preschooler who does his part to clean up after free play, to the fourth grader who reads to the kindergartner or the high school student who launches a conflict resolution program, young people need to be allowed, encouraged and supported in identifying and using their unique qualities and skills for the common good.

At each stage of life, children need to be valued as full participants in -- and contributors to -- the communities in which they live and grow.

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