

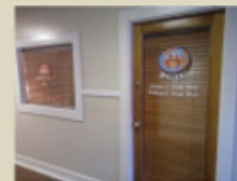


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Developing Positive Family & School Environments

Healthy organisms can only develop within healthy, nurturing environments. When fish or animals begin to die or decrease in numbers, we seek to find the answer to the problem by investigating the quality of their ecosystem or environment. Are necessary nutrients lacking or, toxins present in the environment? Likewise, when plants fail to grow and thrive, we ask, "What is the problem with their environment that needs correcting?" Is there too little or too much water or sunlight, a lack of nutrients in the soil, etc.?

However, when children fail to thrive, succeed or develop in a healthy, positive manner, we ask instead, "*What is wrong with this child; what disorder or dysfunction does he/she suffer from and what medication or intervention will correct his/her disorder?*" Indeed, a leading psychiatrist recently wrote an article questioning the current tendency to all too readily diagnose and label children entitled, "*No Child Left Undiagnosed.*" Research evidence however increasingly indicates that, like all living organisms, children's family and school environments play a critical role in both preventing adjustment difficulties and promoting optimal, healthy child development including academic, behavioral, and social-emotional.

Over the past few decades, we have begun to learn more and more about the factors which lead to the healthy social-emotional development and academic-career success of children. The findings have been very consistent. Healthy child/adolescent development occurs when they, like all living things, grow within positive, supportive social environments; this includes the family, the school and the community. A longitudinal study on factors predicting healthy adolescent development published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found a sense of connection and support in the home and school environments to be the two best predictors of positive adolescent development and overall wellbeing.

Studies on resilient children, i.e., those who succeed despite trying life circumstances, consistently find the availability of supportive relationships in the home, school and community to be the determining factor. One study found that children living in the most impoverished neighborhoods where drugs, crime and gangs thrive, had only a 6% chance of ever engaging in problem behaviors if they had a stable and safe family life. If the family was unstable and unsafe, the risk factor for problems increased by 1500%! The style of parenting employed in the home has also been demonstrated to strongly predict not only children's social development and emotional/behavioral wellbeing but their academic achievement and aspirations as well!

Similarly, numerous educational studies on effective schools have consistently found a positive school culture or ethos with warm, supportive relationships between students and teachers to be the #1 factor determining school effectiveness. The school curriculum and organizational structure were found to be neutral or non-predictors of school effectiveness. The same findings occur in studies on highly effective teachers. Positive classroom climate, i.e. positive, supportive and encouraging student-teacher relationships, is the single best predictor of student outcomes, both behavioral and academic.

This raises an obvious question. If children, like all living things, develop best within a healthy, supportive environment, just exactly what does a positive family, classroom or school look like? What are the characteristics of high-functioning, positive, supportive family and school environments? After reviewing the research evidence, the **Resilience Counseling & Training Center** has identified what we refer to as the '*Five Maintenance Tasks*' of effective families, classrooms, and schools. High functioning families and classrooms are found to address all five tasks in a consistent and balanced manner. Those experiencing chronic problems and conflicts, on the other hand, are typically found to be either underperforming or improperly performing in one or more of these five essential:

'Maintenance Task' areas:

1. **Safety Maintenance:** Everyone's need to feel safe is met (physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, and verbally). Abusive behaviors, threats, coercion, criticism and other forms of maltreatment adversely impact a child's psychological, social-emotional, and cognitive development!

2. **Life Skills Maintenance:** To be successful, one needs **BOTH** academic competencies as well as social-emotional competencies. Effective families and teachers actively teach and model both skill areas. Unfortunately, over recent decades we've increasingly focused almost exclusively on academic skills and abandoned the teaching of social-emotional skills. For living successful lives, we all need certain social-emotional competences. These include skills in understanding & respecting others, empathy, problem solving, communication, cooperation, as well as personal and social responsibility (i.e., for self & others). Interestingly, the research evidence suggests the latter skills, social-emotional, are even more important for life success than are the academic skills!

3. **Cohesion Maintenance:** This task is consistently identified as the #1 predictor of a healthy family or school/classroom culture. Simply put, healthy families and classrooms take time to get have fun together and seek to foster a deep sense of belonging and connection among all members.

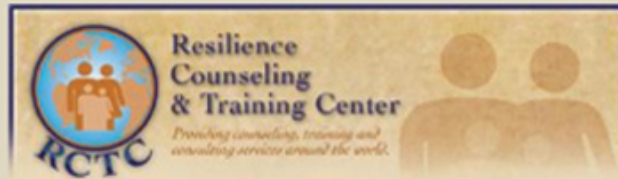
4. **Behavioral Maintenance:** Processes must also be in place for effectively fostering positive behavior as well as handling problem behaviors in a firm, fair and appropriate manner. "Discipline" is understood as an educational, not punitive, process whereby limits are set and consequences are designed to teach, not hurt or punish. Most importantly, a parent/ teacher's ability to handle behavior problems effectively is directly related to how well they fulfill the Cohesion Maintenance Task!

5. **Boundary Maintenance:** As we say in New England, "*Good fences makes for good neighbors*". Children's individual interests and sense of autonomy must be respected and supported. As well, the marital relationship must be actively maintained separate from parenting. Also, sibling relationships are respected and not forced or manipulated. Effective parents and teachers avoid both over-controlling and under controlling leadership styles, both lead to problems. Adults serve as supportive mentors/guides. They are not friends/pals, nor are they

dictators trying to direct and control all aspects of children's lives!

As a parent, rate your level of functioning in each Maintenance Task on a scale from 1-10. Then determine which maintenance task(s) might be in need of strengthening in your household. Similarly, teachers and school administrators can do the same for their respective classroom environments and school culture. By focusing on strengthening the quality of these two primary environments in which children grow and develop, we can more effectively facilitate optimal child development.

For more information or training in developing positive family or school environments, contact our Resilience Counseling & Training Center office for information.



Monica A. Nicoll, Ph.D., LCMHC

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