



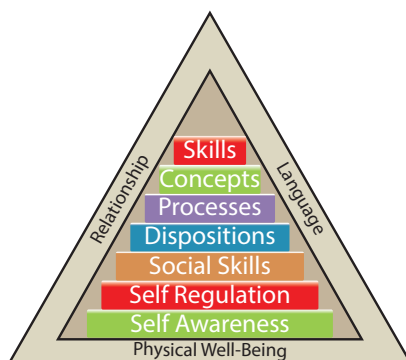
# THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING

*Dr. Barbara Sorrels*

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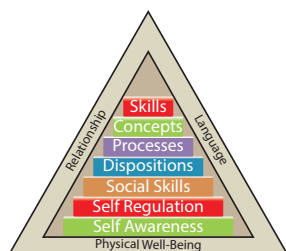
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# THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING PYRAMID

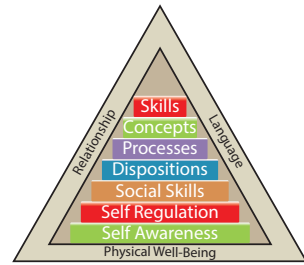
This is a tool to help early childhood professionals and parents understand important components of early learning and school readiness. Despite the national focus on early childhood education over the past two decades there still remains serious misguided understandings regarding effective learning environments for young children and what it means for a child to be “ready.” Many early learning environments look more like elementary school classrooms where the central focus is on acquiring “readiness” skills—namely letters, numbers, colors, sounds and shapes. These skills are taught in isolation through flash cards, worksheets and skill and drill exercises. These programs are often joyless places where the love of learning is noticeably absent.

As we look at the Foundations of Learning Pyramid, it is important to first identify the assumptions upon which it is built. The first assumption is that all typically developing children enter into the world ready to learn. The second assumption is that the first national goal and the ensuing conversation about readiness implies a readiness to learn in a group environment that we call school—and does not refer to just a global capacity to learn. All children enter the world ready to learn, but not all children enter a school environment ready to adjust to the cultural expectations and demands of that particular environment. And third, we believe that learning and readiness to learn in a group environment is basically a function of nurture—well nurtured children learn and adjust more easily to group learning environments. What do we mean by nurture? It simply means that children’s developmental needs are met at optimal stages in the life of the child.



*Barbara Sorrels*

# RELATIONSHIPS



In the early years of life relationships with invested adults lay the foundation and set the course for all aspects of a child's development and learning. Warm, responsive relationships with adults are important both at home, in child care and at school.



## Well nurtured children enjoy warm and responsive relationships with parents, teachers and caregivers.

Findings from neuroscience have confirmed that babies are born with a biological need and drive to form emotional connections to the people around them. The quality and richness of early relationships and life experiences actually shape the circuitry of the brain and lay the foundation for mental health and the capacity for learning. As the infant's feelings, needs and interests are responded to and met in a timely and sensitive manner, the baby develops a sense of trust that he can count on others to care for him and provide his needs.

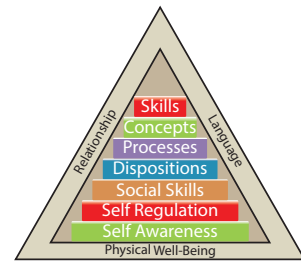
### Serve and return interactions are the building blocks of relationships.

Much like a game of tennis, one partner "serves" the other with an invitation to interact and the partner "returns" with an appropriate response. A baby giggles and reaches for mom. Mom strokes the baby's cheek and giggles back. A child chants, "you can't catch me," and dad playfully chases after him.

This sets the stage for the baby have the confidence and security to venture out into the world with curiosity and optimism—key ingredients for successful learning. Authentic, caring relationships continue to be important throughout the early childhood years. Children who are convinced that parents, caregivers and teachers genuinely care about them and can be counted on to meet their needs are able to devote their energies to learning and exploring rather than merely coping.



# LANGUAGE



The first three years are considered to be the “sensitive period” for language development. This means that in these early years children are biologically primed and ready to gain the necessary tools to communicate with and learn from those with whom they have a relationship.

Nurturing environments are rich in language—a crucial ingredient for successful learning. Why is language so important? Language is the conduit of thinking. When people have a rich vocabulary and complex language skills, they are able to think in more flexible ways. As children go about the complex process of learning to read and write, their success will be highly influenced by the amount of language they have acquired. If a child cannot speak it, he will surely not be able to read and write it.

Children acquire language out of a desire to communicate and have a relationship with those who love and care for them.

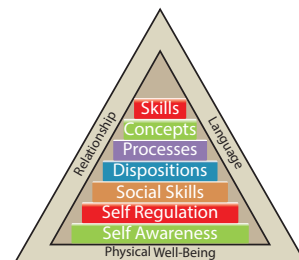
If children are afraid or lack a sense of connection to the adults in their life, language development will be compromised. Parents and caregivers need to talk to children about things that are important to the child. Interest is everything when it comes to language development. Children are more likely to engage in extended conversations when they are talking about things that really matter to them. Rich, life experiences are also important. Children who are given many opportunities to see and experience the world around them typically have a richer vocabulary. Giving children lots to talk about is the goal of an early childhood environment.



Giving children lots to talk by providing a wide variety of intriguing materials and life experiences is the goal of the early childhood environment..



# PHYSICAL WELL-BEING



Well nurtured children are well nourished, rested, clean and receive medical care when needed. A sick, hungry or tired child can't learn. Early childhood professionals are on the front lines of identifying children whose physical well-being is in jeopardy.

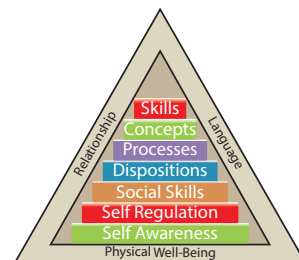
Physical health and motor development of young children is foundational to healthy growth and learning. Healthy children are able to fully enjoy the opportunities and experiences afforded to them whereas those with poor health or significant developmental issues must deal with limitations, discomfort and dependence on others. Physical health begins before birth and is dramatically impacted by the prenatal environment. Prenatal exposure to alcohol, drugs, tobacco, poor nutrition, environmental toxins and chronically high levels of maternal stress increases a child's vulnerability to on-going health problems and learning disabilities. Access to quality health care is crucial before and after birth and early identification of illness and disability is a must for healthy growth and learning.

In addition to general health, the development of motor skills is important. Gross motor, fine motor, sensorimotor and oral skills play an integral role in growth and learning. Unfortunately, many early childhood environments are eliminating outdoor play because it is deemed to be non-essential to the real work of school. This misguided notion fails to recognize the intrinsic brain-body connection and the important role that movement plays in the learning process. Young children are made to move...they are not made to sit quietly at tables filling out endless workbook pages. They are designed to jump, skip hop and wiggle their way into learning.

*Physical safety and well-being are critical for healthy brain development in early childhood.*



# SELF AWARENESS



A well nurtured child has a positive sense of self that allows him to approach the learning environment with an “I can do it” attitude.

The most fundamental understanding that a child needs to acquire in the first year of life is a view of himself as someone who is loveable and worthy of care. Children who are convinced of their own value and worth approach the world and the learning environment with optimism and confidence. They are curious children who aren't afraid to try new things, who respond well to instruction and correction and who make friends easily. Children who doubt their own value and worth will, in a sense, go looking for love in all the wrong places. Lacking the confidence that secure attachment to parents and caregivers provides, the child's ability to function and learn in a group setting will be compromised.

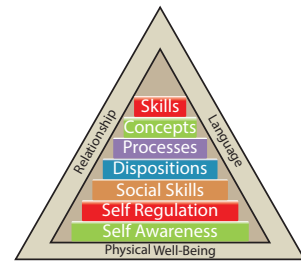
As children move into the toddlers' years, another aspect of self awareness emerges and that is an understanding of an independent or autonomous self. They begin to realize that have their own feelings, thoughts, and desires separate from those around them. They learn that they can do many things for themselves and make things happen within their sphere of influence. They proclaim their new found sense of autonomy to anyone who will listen as “no” becomes their favorite word and a personal declaration of independence. Research indicates that a strong sense of autonomy predicts successful adjustment to learning in group settings.

*The birthright of every child is to know that they are valuable and precious.*

*Dr. Karyn Purvis*



# SELF REGULATION



## Self-regulation is the ability to control one's emotions, behavior and thinking.

It is seen as the cornerstone of development as this important capacity touches all aspects of life and living across the entire life span. In fact, human development is viewed as essentially the increasing capacity to self regulate. A self-regulated child is able to handle the range of emotions experienced during a typical school day as he engages in learning activities and as he interacts with peers. A child must be able to manage frustration when he encounters a new and challenging task. He must be able to manage his anger when another child interferes with his goals.



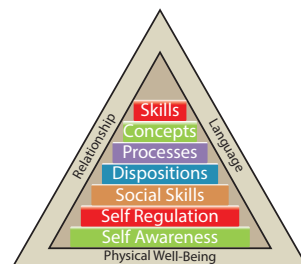
## Successful learners are able to manage their behavior and impulses.

They are able to sit in group time without pinching their neighbor or constantly blurting out every thought that pops into their heads. Successful learners are able to control their thinking. They are able to screen out extraneous stimuli and focus on the most important aspects of the learning environment. They are able to plan, set goals, and stay focused for significant periods of time in order to fully participate in learning opportunities. Children who fail to develop this important capacity in the first five years of life will struggle to learn and function in many aspects of life.





# SOCIAL SKILLS



The early childhood environment is a relational laboratory in which children learn important social skills that allow them to enjoy relationships with peers and the adults who teach and care for them. The capacity to connect with others is an asset that will serve children well throughout their lives.

Learning in group settings requires an ability to get along with others. Knowing how to be a friend and make a friend is a fundamental human capacity that adds richness to life and is a skill that children develop in the first 5 years. Research indicates that children who struggle with social skills are less successful in school, less likely to graduate, more likely to engage in aggressive behavior and more likely to experience serious mental and emotional problems later in life. Imagine for a moment what the typical child is thinking about as he or she rides the bus to school. Most likely they are not thinking about what they are going to learn—they are thinking about who they will play with at recess or who will sit next to them at lunch.

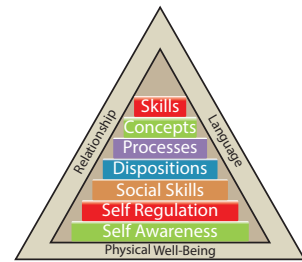
Because of the social nature of school, it is a frustrating and lonely experience for those who struggle with social skills. Knowing how to share, take turns, negotiate, resolve conflicts and enter into existing play are skills that take a great deal of practice and are best developed in play-based learning environments. Children who enter formal schooling without these fundamental skills will likely struggle throughout their entire school career. It is a difficult and challenging task to help a child recover these basic skills when they are not acquired early in life. Children will experience alienation and rejection and struggle to develop a positive view of themselves.



## Friendship

Learning how to be a friend and make a friend requires the ability to express empathy, control strong emotions and communicate well.

# DISPOSITIONS



A well-nurtured child approaches the learning environment with a positive outlook and takes great pleasure and joy in learning. They are able to persevere through challenges and frustrations without being overwhelmed by discouragement.

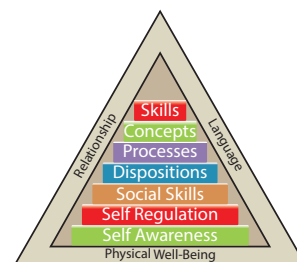
A disposition is simply an attitude or a typical way of responding to a given situation or experience. A child's attitude toward learning and toward the learning environment will have an enormous impact on his success. Important attitudes that need to be nurtured and cultivated in the early years of life are curiosity, persistence, creativity, independence, and skepticism. Curiosity has been identified as the primary motivator of learning. Children are born with enormous curiosity and drive to master their world.

In the first two years of life infants and toddlers are touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and looking at everything in the environment. Curiosity continues to grow and flourish as children engage in rich play-based learning with intriguing materials. In order to keep curiosity alive, how we teach is just as important as what we teach. The biggest danger of highly academic environments that require young children to sit quietly, color in the lines, do worksheets and respond to flash cards is the high potential of extinguishing curiosity. Learning becomes a joyless, drab experience and the goal becomes to simply get through it. In the context of play children have many opportunities to persevere and find solutions to dilemmas, express their creativity, develop their independence and ask many questions.

*The primary task of the early childhood educator is to fan the flame of curiosity for it is the prime motivator of learning.*



# PROCESSES OF LEARNING



Well nurtured children aren't threatened by what they don't know and understand how to take steps to find answers to their questions. They are able to try new things and take reasonable risks to discover new information.

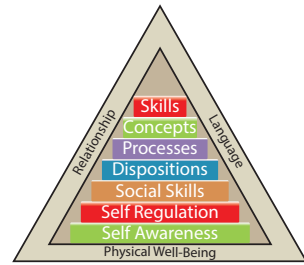
Children are born thinking like scientists. On a moment by moment basis, children apply the processes of learning to figure out the world and how it works. As they make observations, they form theories that are constantly tested and revised as they learn new information. For example, 18 month old Johnny is on a walk with mom when he sees a furry, brown, four-legged creature walking down the sidewalk. He points and mom says, "dog." Johnny forms a theory in his mind of what it means to be a dog. We typically don't know what children's understandings of the world are until they make a mistake. The next day Johnny sees a furry, four-legged, striped creature and he says, "dog." But mom says, "No, that's a cat." Johnny now must revise his theory of what it means to be a dog and create a new theory for what it means to be a cat.

The following day Johnny sees a furry, four-legged creature with a white strip and he says, "cat." But mom says, "No, that's a skunk." Johnny must now revise his theory of what it means to be a dog and a cat and create a new theory of what it means to be a skunk. Children work through the scientific process over and over again as they make sense of the world. When we put young children in highly academic environments that emphasize skills over processes, we squeeze the scientist out of the child. Play based environments with intriguing materials and opportunities for exploration and discovery keep scientific thinking alive.



The role of the teacher is to provide materials and experiences that spark intrigue and ignite the desire to figure things out.

# CONCEPTS



Well nurtured children are given a broad variety of life experiences that help them develop conceptual understandings that explain the world. These experiences need not be expensive or out of the ordinary. It requires and invested adult who orients and introduces them to the world.

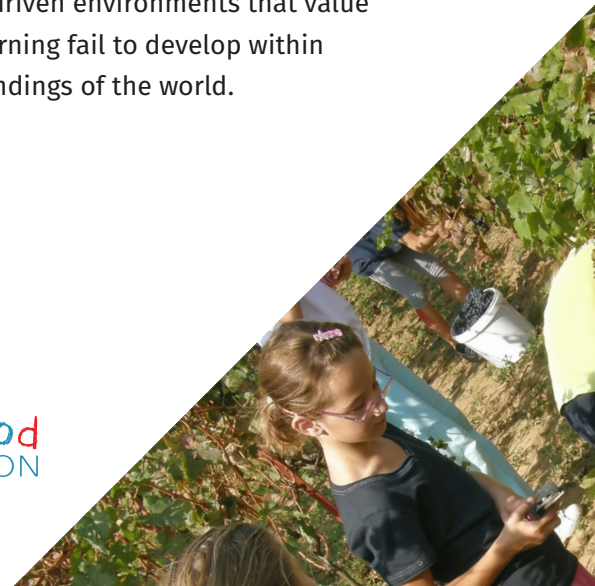
## As children explore their world and interact with people they begin to develop conceptual understandings of how things work



**The environment is the second teacher.** Learning spaces that are conceptually rich and engaging are thoughtfully planned spaces that beckon children to explore and discover. Children are encouraged to touch, taste, listen, observe, smell, take apart, put together and act upon materials.

For example, babies are not born understanding the concept of gravity—they develop this enduring understanding when they act upon and observe the properties of objects in their environment. The baby drops his spoon from the high chair over and over again and observes that the spoon never goes up—it always fall down to the floor. Though he doesn't know the word, “gravity” he develops an intuitive understanding of gravity's impact on objects.

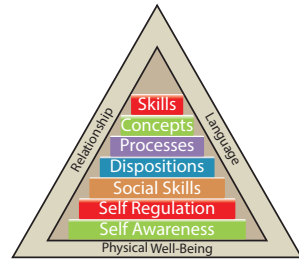
A rich conceptual understanding of the world is crucial to being a successful learner in school, especially with regard to reading comprehension. Children need to know some things about the properties of liquids, the life cycles of plants and animals, or how simple machines such as levers and pulleys work. The richness of a child's life experience and exposure to books will impact the depth of a child's conceptual understanding of the world. Once again, how we teach children matters as much as what we teach children. Highly didactic, teacher driven environments that value skill and drill over experiential learning fail to develop within children rich conceptual understandings of the world.







# SKILLS



Well nurtured children have the basic skills that they need to be successful in school but their understanding goes beyond merely parroting information. They know how to apply their skills in meaningful ways that promote thinking, imagination, problem solving and creativity.

The current focus on accountability and standardized testing across our nation has led to an educational environment where isolated facts and skills are the primary goal of education. In many instances the goal of early learning environments is simply the memorization of letters, numbers, colors, sounds and shapes. Many parents, caregivers and teachers believe that as long as children know these basic skills they are “ready” for school. Skills are important but they should never be the single-minded focus of learning. The reality is that these skills are a primarily a function of visual and auditory perception and memory—not higher level thinking. They are necessary but not enough.

Once again, how skills are taught is just as important as what skills are acquired. Children quickly and readily learn and assimilate skills when they are embedded in meaningful experiences rather than isolated drills, worksheets and flash cards. The acquisition of skills is meaningless if in the process the child’s curiosity, creative thinking and enthusiasm for learning is extinguished.

*Skills are only the tools children need to accomplish more complex ways of thinking and being in the world. They are not an end in themselves.*

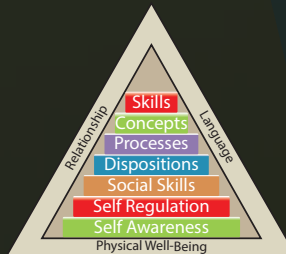






Dr. Barbara Sorrels is Executive Director of The Institute for Childhood Education and the author of the award-winning book, *Reaching and Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma*. She has worked in the field of early childhood education for over 40 years serving as a teacher, program director and university professor. She holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood from the University of Maryland; a master's in education from Southwestern Seminary and a doctorate

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