



**AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION**

# Top 10 Principles From Psychology For Families to Help Children Learn and Succeed in School

Families and other caregivers play a major role in children's learning and success in school. Psychologists have learned a great deal about how families can help their children learn and thrive in the classroom. Through conversations with caregivers and extensive research, psychologists have developed ideas about how children learn, what helps them to be motivated to do well, the role of children's behaviors and emotions in learning, and how assessments and tests can be used to help children. In this guide, we present 10 important principles from psychology that families can use to help their children succeed in school. For each of the 10, we define and explain the principle and provide relevant suggestions for what strategies families can use to help their children learn and succeed in school in the Pre-K, elementary, and secondary school years.

The principles identified for families are based on a guide for educators entitled the Top 20 Principles from Psychology for Pre-K-12 Teaching and Learning. This guide was developed by a group of psychologists with expertise in child psychology and education. They are members of the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education that is supported by the American Psychological Association. Members of this group believed that principles from psychology could be useful for families and thus this guide was developed.

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## PRINCIPLE 1

# Children Persist and Learn Better When They Believe Their Intelligence Can Grow

### EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

Children, and all people, have different ideas about their intelligence or abilities. Some believe that they have a certain amount of intelligence or certain abilities that can't change. Others believe that they can increase their intelligence and abilities by working hard and practicing or using different strategies. Which of these two beliefs children hold can make a big difference in how they go about learning. Children who believe intelligence and other abilities can grow work on tasks to try to master them and learn. They are more willing to try a challenging task. By contrast, children who believe their intelligence is fixed—that they are either good at something or they are not—work on tasks to try to show they are intelligent or avoid tasks so that they don't feel unintelligent. Because of this, they may be hesitant to try more challenging tasks and instead stick with easier ones. They may try to finish tasks quickly to show that, because they are smart, they don't have to work so hard. They are less likely to take risks and feel more pressure not to make mistakes. To them, making mistakes or trying hard means they are not as intelligent.

Families can play an important role in helping their children to form a view that their intelligence can change, and they can become “smarter” or better at various tasks and subjects. They can do this by focusing on children's effort or use of different strategies rather than ability when interpreting why a child performed the way they did. Effort or using different strategies is something that children can do something about. When provid-

ing positive feedback, families can praise the effort or how children went about the task rather than commenting on their overall ability (e.g., you're so smart!). Finally, families can provide and demonstrate a view that failure and setbacks are helpful, because they provide opportunities to learn and improve.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

More specifically, you can:

- Explain to your child that their successes and failures are a result of their efforts, rather than because of their ability. As in playing a sport, the more you practice, the better player you'll be. For example, if your child does well on a spelling exam, point out that they studied hard rather than they are a natural at spelling. When your child doesn't do so well, try to avoid ability statements. For instance, if your child does poorly on a spelling test, ask what they can do to do better next time rather than pointing out that spelling is just not their subject.
- Praise your child's persistence in trying to solve a problem. Point out strategies you noticed they used that worked and encourage them to try more challenging problems in the future.
- Convey that mistakes are an expected part of the learning process. Ask your child what they learned from the mistake and convey that they can use that information to do better next time. For example, you might say, “Everyone makes mistakes and making mistakes shows that you are reaching high. It is good to take on things that are challenging. What did you learn from this mistake?”
- Talk casually about a time you had a challenge and how you approached it with a different strategy, more effort, or more practice.
- When your child has challenging tasks to do, be aware of situations in which they don't seem to try very hard. They may be doing this because they are scared they will fail, and they don't want to look unintelligent. Here again, stress that failure and setbacks are part of the learning process.

Families can make a big difference in the way children view intelligence and this can have a big impact on children's learning and school success.

### RESOURCES

- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Dweck, C. S. Developing a growth mindset. [Developing a Growth Mindset with Carol Dweck - YouTube](#)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?vhiiFeMN7vbQ>
- [Professor Carol Dweck 'Teaching a growth mindset' at Young Minds 2013 - YouTube](#)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?vkXhbtCcmsyQ>



## PRINCIPLE 2

# Children's Prior Knowledge Shapes Their Learning

### EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

When your child enters an educational setting, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge acquired through their everyday experiences, social interactions, and previous learning. This is called *prior knowledge* and it plays a crucial role in shaping how they learn new information. Prior knowledge is essential for learning because it enables children to connect new information with their existing understanding of the world. For example, if your child is studying the atmosphere or climate in school, their prior knowledge about weather can help them understand the new information. In this way, prior knowledge acts as a bridge between what your child already knows and what they are learning.

In some cases, however, prior knowledge can also hinder learning. If your child's prior knowledge is inaccurate or does not align with the new material they are learning, it can make it more difficult for them to comprehend and retain new information. If your child has a misconception about a topic, for example, the relationship between rain and clouds, it can be challenging for them to learn the correct information.

As your child develops, their knowledge will change in response to their home, community, and school environments and interactions with others. They develop new concepts of how things work that replace their existing ones. With regard to the weather example, on a rainy day your child might have heard someone say that the clouds opened up and started pouring rain. As a result, your child might have taken from this statement that rain

comes out of holes in the clouds. However, as they learn more about meteorology and the weather in school, they might discover that clouds are made of water droplets and when the droplets join together they become heavy and fall to the earth. This new information challenges their existing understanding and can lead to a shift (or conceptual change) in their thinking about how clouds and rain work.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

By understanding the importance of prior knowledge in learning, you can take an active role in supporting your child's education and helping them succeed in school. For example, you can:

- Encourage your child to share their prior knowledge: Ask your child what they already know about a topic before they start learning something new. This can help them make connections between their existing knowledge and the new material.
- Help your child make connections: When your child is learning something new, help them make connections between the new material and their existing knowledge. For example, if your child is learning about weather, you could remind them of the time when they experienced a severe weather event. This experience can help them understand the new material.
- Consider your child's prior knowledge, skills and competencies when trying to change any existing concept. For example, if you know what your child understands about weather, you can use this knowledge as the basis for understanding another related topic such as climate.
- If your child has a misconception about a topic, take the time to help them change it. This can help prevent confusion and ensure that they are building upon accurate prior knowledge. To address misconceptions, state why their idea is a misconception and give them a new idea to replace it with. For example, you may state that rain doesn't come out of clouds like water comes out of a faucet. And instead, that clouds are made from water droplets and when they get heavy, they drop to earth.
- The new ideas will be more likely to stick if they make sense, seem possible, and are useful. For example, you can teach them about how rain droplets don't come out of holes, but instead fall when they get heavy and that when clouds get full of rain droplets, they get thicker, the sun can't shine through them, and they look gray instead of white. This is useful because now you know when and why it's likely to rain.
- Your child will learn new ideas better if they are taught in a meaningful or interesting way. You could go out on a rainy day in your rain jackets and talk about the clouds. They are more likely to remember this fun experience and the lesson that goes along with it.
- Finally, ask your child what they want to learn about something, such as rain clouds. Then investigate together.



## RESOURCES

- “Building Background Knowledge” by Susan Neuman, Tanya Kaefer, and Ashley Pinkham on Reading Rockets [Building Background Knowledge | Reading Rockets](#)
- Are You Tapping into Prior Knowledge Often Enough in Your Classroom?” by Rebecca Alber on Edutopia [Are You Tapping into Prior Knowledge Often Enough in Your Classroom? | Edutopia](#)
- “Understanding the Power of Parent Involvement” by NAEYC [Understanding the Power of Parent Involvement | NAEYC](#)

## PRINCIPLE 3

# Children’s Learning Occurs In Many Settings, Including School, Home and Community

### EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

Children’s learning occurs not only in classrooms but within a variety of settings, including their homes, communities, and peer groups. This learning occurs through interactions with people who are different from them, places that are unfamiliar, and experiences that are new to them. As family members, you play a crucial role in teaching and reinforcing important concepts in your home and when you are out in the community. For example, you might find that your child is learning about numbers in school and, in particular, how to divide numbers. Practicing this emerging math skill with resources and items in your home as well as daily activities in your community (e.g., grocery store, community center, walking around the neighborhood and noticing things to divide) can extend learning using different places and things in the real world. In the community, your child also learns about their role and the roles of others, and ways in which we interact, cooperate, and support one another.

As a result of teaching your child and providing learning opportunities for them in multiple contexts, they will build skills such as problem-solving and creativity that will support longer-term academic achievement and success outside of school.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- Work with teachers to extend classroom lessons at home and in the community. For example, if there is a lesson for your child on single digit addition, you can use items at home to count in different ways to get to the final number. For example, you can ask your child to get 4 forks and 4 knives to set the table for dinner. Then you can have your child count the total of items and say “4+4=8.”



- Provide experiences and opportunities to learn outside of school: Families can expose their children to a wide range of experiences, such as visiting museums, going on nature walks, or traveling to new places. These experiences can help build children’s background knowledge and prepare them for future learning. For example, if your child has visited a science museum and learned about different types of rocks, they may have an easier time understanding a lesson on geology in school.
- Communicate with teachers: By sharing information about your child’s interests, experiences, and background knowledge with teachers, you can help teachers make connections between new learning and what children already know. This can make learning more meaningful and engaging for children. For example, if your child is interested in dinosaurs, a teacher might use this interest to teach concepts in science or history.
- Help children make connections: Families can help their children make connections between what they are learning in school and their everyday experiences. This can reinforce and extend their learning. You can ask your child’s teacher what topics and lessons are coming up. If you find out, for example, that your child is learning about fractions in school, you can point out examples of fractions in everyday life, such as dividing a pizza or measuring ingredients for a recipe.
- Incorporate your child into daily activities at home and in the community to create teachable moments. By involving them in experiences at their level of understanding, they can learn new concepts from familiar adults. For example, when grocery shopping, encourage your child to help organize the items on the list before checkout. This can introduce them to different ways of organizing tasks. Some of the activities, such as help with chores, can also provide assistance in the household in addition to learning experiences.
- Support your child’s learning at home by understanding the themes and topics covered in the classroom. Teachers are often happy to provide information about what they are covering and how parents can reinforce learning at home.

You can ask teachers for resources in subjects such as social studies, health, history, math, science, arts, and extracurricular activities. This can provide new ways to reinforce and enhance learning using resources that are readily available.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity/social-cultural-context>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/contextual-learning-linking-learning-real-world>
- <https://www.edutopia.org/article/applying-learning-multiple-contexts>
- <https://news.stanford.edu/2015/09/23/language-learn-context-092315/>

## PRINCIPLE 4

# Children's Creativity Can Be Enhanced

## EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

Creativity is the ability to come up with new and interesting ideas or offer “out of the box” solutions to problems. The old saying about creativity, that “you either have it or you don’t,” is false. Creativity can be nurtured, and everyone has the ability to be more creative if given the right guidance and environment.

Children tend to be more creative when they are doing things that interest them and when they value what they are doing. They are also more likely to be creative when they do not feel that they are being judged or when they know that they have the time and freedom to experiment with different solutions to problems, without being criticized or ridiculed for making mistakes. Finally, they are more likely to be creative when what they are working on does not just have one correct solution, but instead can be solved in various ways and through the use of different skills and perspectives.

## WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

By understanding that children are creative in their own ways, you can take an active role in enhancing their creativity. For example, you can:

- Be open to your child’s unique ideas, even when it might not immediately make sense from your point of view. Just as children do not often understand the thoughts and actions of adults, adults themselves might need some time to fully understand children’s ideas, especially if those ideas are new and unique.

- When solving a problem or doing an activity, encourage your child to use what they know and the special skills that they have to solve the problem. Make them feel as if they are the expert. For example, when trying to come up with topics for a science fair, resist the urge to make suggestions based on what you, the adult, knows best. Instead, ask your child what topics they might be interested in and what they think would be fun to do. Help them to narrow their options and determine which are a better fit to the theme of the science fair. When they are interested in a topic and it is something they know well, they are more likely to succeed and be creative when doing the work.
- Create an environment in which your child can experiment with different solutions to a problem, or with different ways of doing things. Let them know that it is okay to experiment and to make mistakes.
- When giving your child guidance, ask them to “imagine if...,” “try to create...,” “what would happen if...,” and “consider other ways of...” These are powerful prompts that could get their creative juices flowing and could be used in different situations, such as in completing a writing assignment or an art or science project.
- Avoid the tendency to see children who are being creative as disruptive. “Out of the box thinking” often involves “out of the crowd” thinking, which could be beneficial in situations where creative thinking is desired. For example, when discussing potential topics for a school project, a child might have an idea that is not included in the suggested topics list. It would be important to give serious consideration to the child’s suggestion, as we know that creativity is more likely to occur when doing something enjoyable and personally meaningful, even if the task is different from those of others.
- Help your child identify situations when it is important to come up with one correct solution or answer—such as in a vocabulary test or when solving an addition problem—and when it might be useful and important to be think up new



ideas. The ability to make these shifts in thinking will help them successfully adapt to the demands of various situation.

## RESOURCES

- Beghetto, R. A. (2013). *Killing ideas softly? The promise and perils of creativity in the classroom*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Press.
- Kaufman, J. C., & Beghetto, R. A. (2013). In praise of Clark Kent: Creative metacognition and the importance of teaching kids when (not) to be creative. *Roeper Review: A Journal on Gifted Education*, 35, 155 – 165.
- Plucker, J., Beghetto, R. A., & Dow, G. (2004). Why isn't creativity more important to educational psychologists? Potential, pitfalls, and future directions in creativity research. *Educational Psychologist*, 39, 83-96.
- Runco, M. A., & Pritzker, S. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Encyclopedia of creativity* (2nd Edition). Boston: Academic Press.
- Sternberg, R. J., Grigorenko, E. L., & Singer, J. L. (Eds.). (2004). *Creativity: From potential to realization*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

## PRINCIPLE 5

# Children Learn Better When They Find the Material Interesting, Enjoyable, or Important



## EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

We engage in activities for different reasons. We do some things because they are fun or interesting. We don't need to be prompted to do them with rewards or incentives -- the good feelings we get from doing them are their own reward. These activities are intrinsically motivated. When we are intrinsically motivated, we feel competent to make things happen and we feel like we are choosing to do the things and are not pushed or coerced. But some things that we do are not fun in and of themselves. These are extrinsically motivated activities. Extrinsic motivation means we are doing things for some other reason. For example, we can do things because we think they are important to do even if they aren't fun or interesting. Or, we can do things to get a reward or avoid a punishment.

Children will behave and learn best if they are doing things because they are fun or interesting or they see the value or importance of the activity or material. In both these cases, they are likely to pay more attention, organize information more effectively, and relate it to things they already know. By contrast, when children are doing things that don't seem to have any value to them or they are doing it because they feel pushed by others or just to get a good grade, they may do minimal work. As a result, their learning will be more superficial and they may get discouraged quickly if they don't do as well as they would like.

## WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

There are lots of things families can do to facilitate children's intrinsic motivation and help them move from doing relatively uninteresting things only because they must to doing them because they see their value or importance.

- Try to follow your child's lead when they are interested in a topic. See if there are ways to enhance interest. For example, if your child is interested in dinosaurs, take them to a museum or take out a book on dinosaurs from the library.
- Choose activities that your child likes, such as puzzles or games, that are just a bit above their skill level without being overly difficult or impossible for them to complete. Activities will be more interesting if they are just a bit challenging – just above what your child is able to do right now
- Avoid using rewards for activities that your child enjoys. Rewards can turn activities that are fun into activities that your child does only for a reward and that may undermine their fun.

Next are some strategies to try for activities that might not be fun or immediately interesting, or for activities that children don't seem to find important:

- Try to understand your child's view point or perspective about the activity. Let them know you get them (even if you don't agree). For example, if your child says he doesn't like studying plants, you might say, "I understand that studying



plants doesn't seem to be the most fun topic for you."

- Provide reasons for the things you are asking children to do. Try to make those reasons match up with your child's goals. For example, if you are doing math homework, explain that being able to divide can come in really handy when they want to see how many weeks of allowance it will take to save up for a new bicycle.
- Provide some choice in how things get done (even if the child has to do them). For example, you might ask your child if they want to start homework before or after dinner, or to do their English or math homework first.
- Avoid using pushy language like "you should" and "you have to." Instead of saying you have to do your homework now, try using a more neutral phrase like "it's homework time."
- Problem solve with your child when things aren't going well. Come up with solutions together. For example, if your child doesn't want to do their homework, ask them what is getting in the way and what ideas they have for getting it done.
- If your child doesn't find an activity fun and doesn't seem to see meaning in it, a small incentive, such as doing a fun activity together, might get them to try it. And they might find it is more interesting than they thought!

## RESOURCES

- Grolnick, W.S. (2009). The role of parents in facilitating autonomous self-regulation for education. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7, 165-174.
- Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2017). *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. Guilford Press.
- <https://www.parentingforbrain.com/intrinsic-motivation/>
- <https://www.psy-ed.com/wpblog/autonomy-supportive-parenting/>

## PRINCIPLE 6

# Children Do Better When They Have Clear Expectations About What To Do

## EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

When we have a task to do, we might not know just where to start or how to do it. Or we might think others expect us to do something, but may not be sure just what they have in mind. Families have many expectations for children, whether it be



about doing their schoolwork, completing chores, or using their screens and other devices. How families communicate their expectations will likely influence how well children respond to and meet those expectations. Children's learning and behavior can be improved when expectations are communicated consistently, specifically, and clearly over time. They also need to get timely feedback from you on how well they did at meeting those expectations. Clear expectations and feedback help children know what to do and feel competent to meet the expectations.

Along with providing clear expectations, it makes a difference how expectations are conveyed. If children feel pushed or pressured and feel like the expectations are being imposed on them, they might be less open to hearing about them and may even push back. So, unless the expectation is related to the safety of the child or others (such as rules about crossing streets) conveying expectations in a way that involves children and invites discussion and input can really help them in following through.

## WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

By setting clear and appropriate expectations and involving them in setting the expectations, you can help your child succeed. You can, for example:

- Be specific. For example, rather than saying, "I expect you to do your homework carefully," you might say "Please make sure to finish all of the questions on the worksheet and check over your answers."
- Provide expectations that are a little above what your child can currently do. This conveys to your child that you believe in them and see them growing. But make sure your expectations are not too difficult for your child's developmental level. For example, a first grader might not be able to walk the dog on his or her own.
- Engage your child in helping to set up the expectations for various activities such as scheduling after-school time, access to devices, or getting ready for school. Get their

ideas and incorporate them into your expectations.

- Once you have clarified expectations for a particular activity with your child, create a predictable schedule to carry out the expected behaviors or tasks. For example, if homework needs to be started before dinner, set up a schedule for what happens when children come home from school such as having a snack, going outside for a half hour, and then beginning homework.
- If things aren't going as expected, figure out with your child what is creating the problem and how to fix it. Try to do this at a time when both you and your child are feeling calm and can tackle this together. For example, if you have the expectation that devices will be turned off during homework or bedtime and this is not happening, discuss why it is hard for your child to do so and what methods might make it easier to follow this guideline. Use if-then statements to help children understand what can happen if expectations are not met.

Families can also provide feedback about whether children are meeting expectations. You can:

- Try to keep your tone positive and focus on what your child is doing correctly. Provide information about what they can do to improve, rather than criticizing what they did wrong.
- Provide positive feedback frequently after seeing initial improvement. This will help them recognize progress and stay with it. It's best to praise specifically. For example, rather than saying, "I was proud of how you did your homework today," try saying "I really liked how you started your homework without being asked and stayed with it to the end!"



## RESOURCES

- Carpentier, J., & Mageau, G. A. (2013). When change-oriented feedback enhances motivation, well-being and performance: A look at autonomy-supportive feedback in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14(3), 423-435. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.01.003>
- Grolnick, W.S., Raftery, J.N., Marbell-Pierre, K., Flamm, E., Cardemil, E.V., & Sanchez, M. (2014). Parental provision of structure: Its implementation, correlates and outcomes in three domains. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 60, 355-384.
- <https://opportunitiescanada.org/effects-of-parents-expectations-on-st>

## PRINCIPLE 7

# Children Persist and Do Better When They Set Goals

## EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

A goal is something that a child wishes to achieve. It is important for children to identify goals they want to accomplish. The kinds of goals that children set for themselves can make a difference in how much they achieve academically. Goals can be pretty general, such as "I want to be a good reader," or more specific, such as "I want to learn 10 new words every day." Having goals is important because children with a goal and a belief that they can achieve that goal (self-efficacy) are more likely to engage in the activities that can help them attain it.

Three aspects of goal setting are especially important for motivation. First, short-term goals, ones that children can achieve pretty quickly, are more motivating than long-term goals. This is because it is easier to tell when progress has been made. Second, specific goals are easier to quantify and monitor. For example, it's easier for a child to determine if they've "finished 20 addition facts with 100% accuracy" than if their goal was to "try to do their best." Third, moderately difficult goals rather than very hard or very easy goals are the most likely to motivate children because moderately difficult goals typically will be perceived as challenging but attainable.

It is also important to understand what your child is trying to accomplish as they go to school each day. If a child's goal is to learn something, to understand instructional material, or to gain competence in a particular academic subject, then you can be fairly confident that your child is on the right track. However, if their goal is simply get a good grade or to be the best in the class without aiming to understand and master material, this approach will not be as effective for your child's learning in the long run.



Children often have goals in addition to learning that are important to achieve. For example, being successful at school is dependent on adhering to rules for social conduct such as paying attention, cooperating with others, and refraining from aggressive or disruptive behavior. Pursuit of goals to behave in these positive ways can have social but also academic benefits, and families can help their children think about ways to achieve these outcomes at school in addition to learning.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Families can help children set effective goals using a number of different strategies. You can:

- At the beginning of the school year and periodically sit down with your child and ask them what goals they have for themselves at school. This can include academic outcomes (“I want to explore American history”), but also social outcomes (“I want to form a study group with my friends”). You can also ask your child about goals for a particular topic they are studying in school or a social goal they have at a particular time (e.g., connect with more kids at recess). Revisit the goals periodically and ask your child how they think they are doing in reaching the goal.
- Help your child set goals that are “moderately challenging”—not too difficult and not too easy. You can help them set these goals by having them reflect on what they already know and on their current abilities and set goals that are just beyond their current level.
- Help your child establish goals that are short-term (“I will finish all of the problems assigned in today’s class”) and then link them to more long-term goals (“I will finish all of the assignments by the end of the month”). Dividing up long-term goals into these shorter “sub-goals” helps your child set goals that are measurable and makes achieving the long-term goals more manageable.
- Help your child develop specific goals (“I will read two chapters for next class”), rather than general goals (“I’ll do some reading for next class”).
- Encourage your child to focus on setting goals designed to learn something new or improve their skills (“I want to learn about how to work with fractions”) rather than earning a grade or competing with others (“I will be best in math class”). Goals to learn will reduce the pressure they feel to perform and lead them to take on more challenges and risks and thus learn more.
- Help your child to set their own goals. When children feel they are the owners of their goals, they are more likely to work on them. Revisit goals with your child and set aside time to help them think about how they are doing and what they still might have to do to achieve them.



### RESOURCES

- Elias, M. (2019). A Framework for Student Goal-Setting <https://www.edutopia.org/article/framework-student-goal-setting/>
- Evitt, M (2019). 7 Tips for Teaching Kids How to Set Goals (And Reach Them!) <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/style/how-to-teach-kids-perseverance-goal-setting/>
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- Wentzel, K. R. (2020). What is it that I want to do? Classroom goals. (p. 17-52). *Motivating students to learn* (4th edition). New York, NY: Taylor Francis.

### PRINCIPLE 8

## Children Are Influenced by Relationships With the People Around Them Including Teachers, Friends and Peers, and Others in the Community

### EXPLANATION OF PRINCIPLE

All children have needs for belonging and connection. Caregivers, teachers, adults in the community (e.g., coaches, clergy, camp counselors), and peers can all provide the connections that help youth flourish. Feelings of belonging and connection can lead to healthy engagement in academics, sports, arts, or other activities. Yet, these same needs for belonging and connection can sometimes lead to risk-taking behavior or disengagement from school.

Your role in your child's relationships will likely change as they grow and develop. Typically, you'll have more say about your child's relationships when they are in preschool, kindergarten, and the early elementary school grades, and less as they get older. Adult relationships remain important to children throughout life. You may have heard that for adolescents, autonomy is more important than relationships with adults. In fact, that's not true. Adolescents actually need *both* autonomy and high-quality relationships with adults. As children become adolescents, their relationships with adults will change. For instance, you may be doing more monitoring of a teen's activities rather than "direct parenting" like what you did when they were younger.

### ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

High quality relationships between your child and their teacher and other adults can benefit your child academically and socially. To start, we know that high quality teacher-student relationships are important. In elementary school children, you can recognize the quality of teacher-student relationships by sizing up whether or not your child's teacher appears interested in your child and attuned to their interests and moods. In the middle and high school years, high quality relationships take a different form – often, youth will talk about teachers who really care about them as a person, notice them, show investment in their success and are willing to step in and give them the support that they need to learn. During the middle and high school years, your child may have teachers that they really connect to and others, less so. That is typical and normal. It is important that your child

has at least one or two adults in school with whom they feel safe and can go to if they are experiencing stress.

Many children spend time with adults outside of school in after-school programs, such as religious organizations, sports, or music activities. These adults also play an important role in your child's development, often serving as role models. Plus, during times of stress, it is very beneficial for children to have more than just close family to support them. Notice the adults that your child talks to in settings outside of school and make an effort to meet them. Those adults can be important "go to" people for help with your child during challenging times.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Families can support children's development of healthy relationships. You can:

- Model positive relationships with your child's teacher for your child, and if needed, model productive approaches to resolving conflict. (Remember that there are times when it is better to keep your opinions about your child's teacher to yourself.)
- If you notice your child talking about a lot of conflict with their teacher, listen carefully and try not to take sides. See if you can talk to the teacher (without your child present) to understand the teacher's perspective. It can be convenient to blame teachers for negative experiences at school, but this often backfires and your child will then use the excuse "I have a bad teacher" to explain why they are no longer doing the work that is expected of them.
- Encourage your child to find ways to spend time with teachers who you think can be good role models, whether it's through brief after-school conversations or casual visits at lunch (if that's allowed).

### PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Children practice their social skills with peers and so these relationships are critically important for healthy development. Three-year-olds will play in school or in a park easily with most children their age, but by age four or five, children develop friendships and will prefer to play with some children more than others. Many children prefer same-sex peers in the later elementary school grades, while mixed gender peer groups become more prevalent during the middle and high school years.

Children will naturally gravitate toward friends who are similar to them – same gender (often), race, ethnicity, and/or social class. Those relationships will help them affirm their own identity. However, children also benefit from having relationships with people who are different from them. This prepares them to be curious about others and aware that people have different experiences and opinions about topics.

By adolescence, social media is everywhere, and it amplifies the impact of peers in the lives of children and youth. Because of its prevalence, kids can have constant access to their peer



groups and that can be healthy or unhealthy, depending on the nature of the relationships and the amount of time children spend on social media.

### WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Families can support children's development of healthy peer relationships. You can:

- Support your child's cultivation of friendships where you see that your child is actively engaged and involved. Encourage your child to be with and play with other children on a full range of activities, not only electronically based games and on-line activities.
- Talk to your child about how they spend their time on social media and encourage your child to talk about how it makes them feel. Often kids feel worse after comparing themselves to others on Instagram or other platforms. Helping them become aware of this can help your child understand why in-person time with friends can be more valuable than on-line.
- Establish limits on how much time they spend with friends on digital devices. This will depend on the age of your child, with more time as they get older. Having a trusting relationship and open communication with your child is essential to make this work. Explain to them why you are limiting time or sites that might be harmful to them.
- It is fine to encourage some friendships more than others because you are concerned about the influence peers have on your child. However, beyond issues of safety, keep in mind that families cannot (and should not) control their child's choice of friends.
- Help your child stretch and expand their friendship circle because it will teach them how to take other people's perspectives, show empathy, and solve conflict productively.

### RESOURCES

- American Psychological Association (2023). Health advisory on social media use in adolescence. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>
- Greater Good Science Center (2023). 36 questions to help kids make friends. *Greater Good in Action*. Retrieved from: [https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/36\\_questions\\_to\\_help\\_kids\\_make\\_friends](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/36_questions_to_help_kids_make_friends)
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019). *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>
- Rimm-Kaufman, S.E. & Sandilos, L. (2015). Improving Students' Relationships with Teachers to Provide Essential Support for Learning. Published on-line at: <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx>
- Yeager, D. S. (2017). Social and emotional learning programs for



adolescents. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 73-94. Available on-line at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219022?seq=4>

### PRINCIPLE 9

## Children and Adolescents Can Learn to Regulate Emotions and Behavior in Challenging Situations

### EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

When children are babies, adults play a critical role in helping them regulate their emotions and behaviors. So, when a baby cries, they don't need to calm themselves because a caring adult will pick them up and attend to their needs until they feel calm. But, as children age, one critically important skill for them to learn is how to regulate their own emotions and behaviors. Children need to progress from co-regulation (with adults helping them manage emotions and behaviors) to self-regulation (management of their emotions and behaviors by themselves). Self-regulation, defined as the ability to manage thoughts, emotions and behaviors to achieve goals and adapt to situations, evolves over time, contributes to overall well-being, and promotes effective coping with everyday stresses and challenges.

Self-regulation skills include being able to focus and sustain attention on tasks and activities, organizing thoughts and materials, controlling behavior to match expectations in a given situation (e.g., follow the household rule about no screen time during homework), planning ahead to achieve short- and



long-term goals, and managing how emotions and feelings are expressed in the face of challenges. Although these skills may develop as children get older, they also can be taught or enhanced through instruction, modeling, support, and structure in the home and school. Of course, there is great variability in how strongly children react to challenges and how easily they adapt. It is important to recognize that this is part of who children are and they may be doing the best they can at the moment.

Families can help children learn self-regulatory skills by instructing them in the use of skills as well as demonstrating control of their own behavior and emotions. Also, families can organize the home to promote children's self-regulation. In a similar fashion, families can influence children's sense of control over their emotions and their overall emotional well-being by showing children that they are valued and respected.

## WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Some specific strategies you can do to help your child learn to self-regulate include:

- Present tasks or chores very clearly to your child. State exactly what you want to be accomplished so that the child can adjust their behavior to match your or a teacher's expectations.
- Try breaking tasks into "bite-size" components and clearly communicate what successful performance looks like. When asking younger children to complete a chore or task that has multiple steps, give them instructions one step at a time. Also, for younger children, take a picture of the completed task (e.g., clean bedroom) to give them a clear idea of what success looks like.
- Encourage your child to practice self-regulation before and during a challenging situation. Prompt them to state how they need to behave prior to the situation (e.g., stay close to you while in a grocery store where they may be tempted to stray) and praise them periodically during the situation when they are following through on expectations. For older children, ask them to monitor their own behavior and give themselves feedback.
- Help children identify and evaluate the short- and long-term consequences of their decisions as a way to help manage their behavior in the immediate moment. For example, if a child is refusing to complete homework, they can be prompted to consider the short- (e.g., parent and teacher reprimands) and long- (e.g., poor report card grade) term consequences that may follow that decision. In this way, they will learn to make decisions that connect their immediate actions (e.g., homework refusal) with the likely outcomes, which are primarily negative in this example.
- Use positive statements and rewards (as opposed to negative consequences and punishment) to encourage children to practice behavior and emotion regulation skills.
- Use emotional vocabulary to help your child label emotions (e.g., happy, sad, fearful, angry). For instance, when your child shows signs of sadness, say, "You look like you feel sad because you have a frown on your face." When you're reading a book together, talk about the feelings of the characters in the book. For instance, "This girl looks really proud of herself because she just learned to ride a bike."
- Model appropriate feelings, emotional expressions, and reactions, especially when facing challenging situations. Let's say you're trying to get a jar open in the kitchen and you're getting frustrated. Model how you handled that frustration by saying, "I'm really frustrated by this jar. I'm going to take a break and take a deep breath and then I'll try again."
- Teach your child to manage their emotions by encouraging them to use deep breathing, take a break, or to "stop and think before acting." When your child is calmed, talk about what happened to make them sad or angry and how they can handle tricky situations in the future. You can even role play the situation, with you and your child taking turns acting out different roles.
- Encourage your child to understand the emotions of other people and to demonstrate empathy and compassion. For example, when watching a television show, periodically pause the show to ask your child how different characters are feeling and how your child could support that character if they were in that situation.
- Ask older children and adolescents to set self-regulation goals (e.g., fully complete school assignment when faced with distractions) in advance of challenging situations (e.g., working on a major school project) and then following the situation, ask them to evaluate the degree to which they met those goals.

## RESOURCES

- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). (2023). *CASEL Program Guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs*. Retrieved from <https://pg.casel.org/>
- Galinsky, E. (2010). *Mind in the making: The seven essential life skills every child needs*. HarperCollins.
- Leading with SEL (2023). *Leading with SEL Parent Toolkit*. <https://leadingwithsel.org>



# Knowing Why and How Schools Test and Assess Children Can Help Families Act in Their Children's Best Interests

## EXPLANATION OF THE PRINCIPLE

Family members play an important role in understanding and affecting their children's progress in all academic subjects as well as their challenges and areas of growth. Family members can work with teachers or other professionals in the school (e.g., learning specialists) to gain knowledge and understanding of the assessments that are completed with their children potentially several times during the academic year. Using that knowledge and understanding, family members can support their children outside of the classroom to help increase their academic and personal success.

In school, your child will be given assessments by teachers and others at certain times during the school year at each grade level. These assessments will identify what your child has learned and any areas that can be improved. These may include assessments of language, cognitive abilities, attention, or exceptional abilities that can guide future instruction. Depending on the developmental or grade level of your child, these assessments can be in the form of quizzes, exams, assignments (written and oral), portfolios, projects, observations, and/or one-on-one interactions. The information gathered from these assessments helps teachers to know how best to support your child's learning in and out of the classroom. It is important to note that the information from these assessments is only one indicator of your child's progress and efforts in their academic journey. And, if you hear something that sounds concerning, it is important to remember that the information from assessments will be used to generate ways for your child to improve their skills and move beyond these results. In addition, all assessments have some amount of error so one test score should never be used alone to make important decisions or label your child.

## WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Families can learn more about assessments so they can support their children. You can:

- Ask your child's teacher when within an academic year your child will be assessed and in what areas.
- At a parent/teacher conference or other meeting, ask about the screening and assessment process and what you can do to support your child in challenges and areas of growth.

- Ask about the purpose of all assessments and how assessment scores will be used. This can be helpful in advocating for your child when important educational decisions are being made based on those scores.
- Use assessments to learn about your child's strengths. This can be excellent information that can be used to compensate for challenges and areas of growth. For example, students with good listening comprehension skills but poor word decoding skills can still be encouraged to enjoy books read to them aloud by caregivers or listening to audiobooks. Reading aloud books will build background knowledge and vocabulary, which may build a child's confidence in one area of reading while they continue work on decoding.
- Ask teachers for more information and example activities that can be implemented at home and within the community to support areas of growth and enrichment across academic subject matter and developmental areas.
- Ask teachers for additional resources that will help you understand the purpose of assessments for your child's personal and academic success.
- Ask how assessments were developed and if there is evidence that the assessment is appropriate for students from your child's cultural, language, racial/ethnic, gender, and/or disability group.
- If you suspect that your child might have a disability, you can request additional assessments to determine if your child qualifies for special education services. These services may include specialized instruction or access to assistive technology or, in some instances, an extended school year.

## RESOURCES

- [CSAI-Update Parent Guide on Assessment.pdf \(wested.org\)](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Psychoeducational Evaluations | The Foreign Service Journal - December 2013 \(afsa.org\)](#)
- [Learn About Leveled Reading \(scholastic.com\)](#)
- [Early Childhood Assessment: Resources for Early Learning](#)
- [Right to Evaluation of Child for Special Education Services](#)
- [Right to Independent Evaluation](#) (by a psychologist or qualified evaluator)