

STAY TUNED

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Building Competence Begins in Childhood

We are the only species that creates the environment that creates who we become.

Our lives are framed and developed by the environment in which we find ourselves. It starts as simply as where we were born. Was it a neighborhood of single family homes in the suburbs, an apartment in the city, on acreage in a rural part of the county or a host of other possibilities?

I was born in San Francisco (third generation). My early years were spent going downtown or to the library with my grandmother on buses and streetcars, or riding my bicycle 10 blocks to play with my cousins. All this was before I was 10. The local elementary school was the same one my mother attended. All the neighbors knew my name and I knew theirs. The small grocery store around the corner was family owned, and as a child, I could buy an ice cream cone and put it on "grandma's account."

All this is to say our personal view of the world is framed by those early years where we develop a sense of our immediate world and our place in it.

What we know today is that we are not born intelligent — only with a capacity to be so. Each day, every thing we do can enhance, stifle or diminish our intellectual, social and emotional capacity. Opportunities abounded in my early environment — opportunities that didn't cost money but did involve time and resourcefulness.

By 10, I had built a coaster from a wooden refrigerator box with two big wheels at the back. The front axle was a 2x4 with skates, and a rope attached to both sides of the 2x4 acted as a steering mechanism. A wooden stick bolted to the side was a brake. The challenge was pulling this box up the streets (San Francisco is a city of hills) and descending down at record speeds without crashing. Summer was making cardboard sleds from boxes and racing down the dry grass on the hill. In spring, it was making kites out of butcher paper and sticks, then flying them from the top of that same hill.

Each and every opportunity allows a child to gain confidence and skill. These experiences become the foundation of believing that competence is something that you can develop in your everyday life.

It is not so easy today for our youngsters to develop a sense of their competencies. Television, cell phones and other visual media have showed them what others can do, what others wear, what activities others participate in — and often their developing years are spent as bystanders. Their participation in sports is a group activity directed by an adult with the ultimate goal of winning over the other team. Not a negative process, but how do we develop that sense of self and what we are capable of doing?

Schools today are caught up in the testing madness that has overtaken our country, giving all students the same test, the same amount of time to take it, then believing that the "score" that it presents tells you something about the individual and their personal capacities. A test is much like a blood pressure reading, simply recording one moment in time, and that outcome becomes part of how we identify ourselves and how others see us.

Where are the dioramas, the science projects that demand in-depth thinking and investigating, the field studies that build understanding in the natural world that surrounds us, and a sense of what to do with math and reading and writing outside of school that would enhance your own life?

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