

Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.
Five Step Method for Promoting Successful Learning*

Connect Feeling rooted gives children a foundation of security. Children need unconditional love from one or both parents and benefit when they have close ties to their extended family, feel part of their school, and help care for pets.

Play Make sure your child's / student's free time isn't too programmed and regimented. Open-ended play, in which children can invent scenarios and solve problems by themselves, helps them discover their talents and use their own resources.

Practice When kids find out what they're good at, they'll want to do it again and again. But sometimes you may have to do some gentle nudging to ensure that your child /student sticks to an activity and experiences a sense of accomplishment.

Mastery From practice comes mastery. When children achieve a skill -- whether it's learning to tie their shoes, play the piano, draw a flower, complete a math problem, or build a birdhouse -- they're further motivated to tackle new challenges. And that leads to a can-do attitude.

Recognition Approval and support from one's parents, teachers, and peers for a job well done reconnect children to the wider world. When kids think what they do affects their family, classmates, and team, they're more likely to exhibit moral behavior and, ultimately, to feel good about themselves.

Fortunately, one step leads naturally to the next and the cycle is self-perpetuated, explains Dr. Hallowell. You can lay the groundwork at an early age. Give a child these five key qualities and you will greatly increase his or her chances of leading a joyful, meaningful life.

* Adapted from The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness: Five Steps to Help Kids Create and Sustain Lifelong Joy , Edward M. Hallowell, M.D. (Ballantine, 2002)

What Goes Into A Connected Childhood *

A chapter in the Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness is devoted to practical suggestions for a creating a connected childhood. I offer tips on each of the twelve kinds of connectedness that go into a connected childhood. Don't feel that you need to address every area; some will be impossible or simply of no interest to you. But if you can address more than one or two, you will be on your way to a connected life, for your child and for yourself. And connectedness is the most important ingredient of a happy life.

1. Unconditional Love and Family Togetherness

This first element is the most crucial of all. Regardless of family structure, all you have to do is put your love for your children into action.

There is conflict in connected families. In fact, the presence of conflict is a good indicator that there is a connection. The opposite of connectedness is not conflict but indifference. So if you argue and get angry and yell and do all those things that families do, that's good! You are connecting.

2. Friends, Neighborhood, Community

We all know that friends matter. How much, and in what ways, are the subjects of considerable debate, but for the purposes of most parents and teachers, it is enough to know that friends matter, and they matter a lot. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam speaks of your friends as being a life asset, social capital, as important as money in the bank. As Putnam documents in his scholarly book *Bowling Alone*, numerous studies show that your friends constitute not only an emotional support but a health asset as well; if you are rich in friends, your chances for a healthy and happy life dramatically rise.

3. Chores, Work, Responsibility to Contribute

I am simply going to state the fact that doing chores and assuming other responsibilities are an important part of growing up that we parents should not let slide. Studies show (the most famous being the longitudinal studies done by George Vaillant) that children who do chores around the house and then, when they are old enough, get a paid job outside the home for a few hours a week tend to develop the can-do, want-to-do feeling that Erik Erikson called "industry." If you do not develop that feeling, whether you call it industry or use my term, a can-do, want-to-do feeling, then you tend to hold back, not because you are lazy (which is simply a useless, behavioral description) but because you feel inferior.

4. Activities, Sports

Most children naturally want to get involved with sports and various other activities or some kind of hobby. Unfortunately, as they add time to standard academics, many schools are cutting back in these domains. Parents need to try to make up the difference. Remember, the goal for your child is to connect with the sport or the activity, not necessarily excel at it. Provide the opportunity to try as many sports and other activities as you can. The more you can expose a child to, the more chances that the child will find a lifelong interest.

5. A Sense of the Past

By helping your child develop a connection to the past, you help her understand where she came from and where she might be going. As you plant in your children the seeds of a connection to the past, you never know what those seeds will grow into. But you can be sure that you are extending the range of influences that will shape your child's life, you are deepening the kinds of meaning your child might discover, and you are reducing the likelihood that your child will feel isolated and alone as an adult.

6. The Arts

The connection with the world of arts is one that parents might not immediately think of when considering the ingredients of a connected childhood. But as you give it some thought, I think you will agree that children are natural connoisseurs of beauty even though they may not like certain museums. What you expose your children to, and how you expose them to it, can determine whether they develop a lifelong interest – or not.

7. Nature

Most kids naturally connect with nature if given the chance. In fact, childhood is when most people are often more connected with nature than at any other time in their lives. Children should be outdoors a lot. The great competition the outdoor faces in vying for children's time these days is electronics: TV, the Net, Nintendo, and so forth. There are many ways to deal with the competition and promote your child's connection with nature.

8. Pets and Other Animals

There is a lot of research that shows how wonderful pets are in almost every conceivable way. Pets are not only good for children, they are good for grown-ups and senior citizens as well. If you are unable to have pets you still can nurture your child's relationship with pets through stories and stuffed animals. Every child should have a stuffed animal, preferably many.

9. Ideas and Information

It is important that parents and teachers help children learn about the mind each child has. No two minds or brains are alike and the practical implications of this fact are profound. We need to focus in identifying strengths and talents as well as target areas of weakness. It is a grave error to focus on grades and ignore the emotions involved in learning.

10. Institutions and Organizations

It is important that children learn how to get along in the sometimes amorphous groups of people we call institutions and organizations (school, clubs, leagues, teams, associations). Learning how to thrive and grow within these institutions and organizations is a life skill of major value, right up there with learning to read and write.

11. God and/or a Spiritual Life

Children are naturally curious about what makes things happen in this world. They wonder what happens to people after they die and they wonder why some people do evil. Membership in some religion used to be a given in a child's life. Now, in many families, not belonging to a religion is a given for a child. This has created a void, but it also has created a great opportunity. We have the gift of religious freedom in this country; it is indeed a precious gift, one for which millions of people have died throughout history. I urge us parents to use this freedom to its fullest rather than ignore it or take it for granted.

12. The Connection You Make with Yourself

This final kind of connection, the one you make with yourself, is, like the connection to the world of the spirit, private and personal. Like the spiritual connection, it also evolves and changes over the course of a lifetime. The way it develops in a childhood often determines whether it is basically a pleasant or an unpleasant connection. Self-acceptance is an internal state that derives from external experience. You need to make sure your child has moments during which he is enjoying who he is and other people are enjoying who he is as well.

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