

WITH THE WHOLE CHILD IN MIND

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Placing Child Development at the Center

My dream was to go out into the real world and bring about school improvement at a level that would impact national thinking, practice, and policy. . . . We began with two of the lowest achieving, most troublesome elementary schools in the city. The usual focus at the time was on the students. But from my own experience, and my public health and child psychiatry background, I knew that we had to focus on the system and the child . . . not just the child.

—James P. Comer, Foreword to *The Kids Got Smarter*

When James Comer visited Baldwin Elementary School in New Haven, Connecticut, in the fall of 1968, his experience, as he described it, was shocking:

On the first day of school, I walked down the hall at Baldwin School and I was almost attacked by a teacher in trouble. She was anxious, wild-eyed. She grabbed my arm and said, “Help me! Help me!” and literally pulled me into her classroom. What I saw was almost unbelievable. Children were yelling and screaming, milling around, hitting each other, calling each other names, and calling the teacher names. When the teacher called for order, she was ignored. When I called for order, I was ignored. That had never happened to me before. We headed for the hall, confused and in despair. Her classroom was not the only one in trouble.

The school was chaotic and noisy . . . teachers and administrators raced back and forth . . . teachers could not find supplies. . . . The first week was a short one—Thursday, September 5 and Friday, September 6. We left for the weekend shaken, with mixed feelings of impending doom and some vague hope that all would be better next week . . . my denial mechanisms were operating at top form. I suppose I just could not bear to admit the extent of the problem we had. (Comer, 1980, pp. 76–77)

Comer was then a young child psychiatrist at the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, where he had just launched the School Development Program (SDP). Baldwin and King elementary schools, where Comer began his work, were among the lowest achieving of New Haven's 31 public schools. More than 50 percent of the students were on government assistance, students were chronically truant, student behavior was disruptive, and morale among the staff was low.

A few years later, however, the picture was very different. The schools had become peaceful, purposeful, and happy environments for children, welcoming to parents, and supportive of staff. A later analysis of achievement in the two New Haven pioneer schools found that between 1969 and 1984, 4th grade students' grade equivalent scores increased from about 3rd grade level in reading and math to 6th grade level in reading and 5th grade level in math. By 1984, these schools were two of the highest-performing schools in New Haven and had near-perfect attendance (Comer, 1988).

Although many rounds of school reform have come and gone in the 50 years since this work began, the School Development Program has withstood the test of time, quietly revolutionizing the purpose and organization of some of the most troubled schools in the United States, empowering teachers and parents as decision makers; fostering healthy development of students; and producing noteworthy outcomes for student behavior, positive attachment to school and adults, and achievement. The SDP builds on the science of child

development, creating a whole child framework for reform that takes a systems approach toward reorganizing the school. It aims to ensure that all members of the school community—students, teachers, principals, parents, support providers—are knowledgeable about child development and supported in working together as interdependent, valued, and respected partners, simultaneously empowered to make decisions together for the express benefit of every child.

The School Development Program builds on and conveys shared professional knowledge about how children and adults develop and learn that should, in an ideal world, be readily available to every educator. It is not a cookie-cutter program, but rather a means for enabling educators and schools to support social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development for children—a foundational approach that research has found is critically important for success in both school and life (Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018; Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018).

This whole child approach has been difficult for many schools to engage in during the era of test-based accountability ushered in by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), when U.S. education policies focused intently on raising student test scores, often to the exclusion of other goals, such as student health and welfare; physical, social, emotional, and psychological development; critical and creative thinking; and communication and collaboration abilities.

Under the threat of public shaming, staff firings, or school closures if scores did not climb each year, schools often adopted a “drill and kill,” “test and punish,” “no excuses” agenda that caused many of the nation’s most vulnerable children to experience a narrowly defined, scripted curriculum and a hostile, compliance-oriented climate that pushed many of them out of school (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In this context, many schools were not focused on enabling students to acquire the broader life skills they need or the sense of self to achieve their full potential. For example, a 2006 study of more than 148,000 6th to 12th graders reported the following findings:

- Only 29 percent of the students felt their school provided a caring, encouraging environment.
- Fewer than half of the students reported they had social competencies such as empathy, decision-making skills, and conflict-resolution skills (from 29 percent to 45 percent, depending on the competency).
- Thirty percent of high school students reported engaging in multiple high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, sex, violence, and attempted suicide. (Durlak, Weissberger, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011)

These conditions contribute to school failure and high dropout rates. Research shows that narrowly conceived, standardized, and punitive approaches to instruction and student treatment undermine student motivation and learning and facilitate student disengagement from school. Almost three-quarters of a million students in the United States—disproportionately students of color, those with disabilities, and those from low-income families—do not complete high school each year, costing society hundreds of thousands of dollars per student over the course of their lifetimes (Rumberger, 2012). The costs of this disengagement and the subsequent exclusion of students from educational opportunity are devastating and lasting for individuals and for society as a whole. Yet we know a great deal about how to support students and enable success by attending to their development in ways that foster relationships and promote learning.

At a time when the education world is seeking to recalibrate after the No Child Left Behind era, it is appropriate to refocus on how this kind of knowledge can be planted and nurtured in schools. This book offers an account of one well-vetted way to support the development of whole child education in the context of whole school reform. We connect this work to the emerging science of learning and development and the implications for practice of building schools in alignment with how children develop and learn.

The School Development Program

The School Development Program, also known as the Comer Model or Comer Process, was established in 1968 in two struggling elementary schools as a collaborative effort between the Yale Child Study Center and New Haven Public Schools. Since then, the SDP has been implemented in more than 1,000 schools in 26 states in the United States, the District of Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, England, and Ireland (see the Comer School Program website, <https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/communitypartnerships/comer>).

At the heart of the SDP approach is a value for relationships that are understood to provide the foundation for children's healthy development. This insight about the context for child development was what led Comer to his first epiphany about what a school improvement program might seek to do. His reflection started with a question:

Why was I able, and why were my brothers and sisters and others who came from similar backgrounds able, to succeed in school and have opportunities when I had friends who were just as able but went downhill? They had different developmental experiences. Systems were created to pass on the [false] belief that our abilities are largely genetically determined. All the scientific evidence that has accumulated gets ignored because we keep focusing on curriculum, instruction, assessment. The education enterprise focuses on it, the public believes it, and practice confirms it—what you end up doing is showing that kids who are prepared for school receive support for development and do well, and those who are not, don't do well.

Comer emphasizes that if children are not doing well in school, or if they are behaving in ways that are counterproductive, adults must understand that the child is not trying to be “bad” but is exhibiting

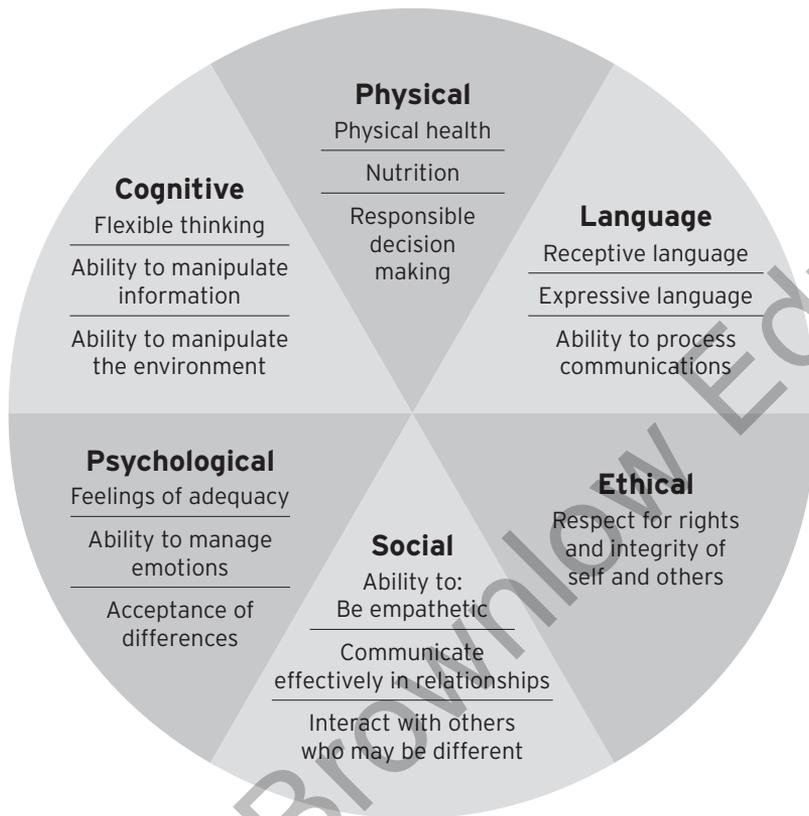
a need for attention—often related to deeper concerns that need to be surfaced and understood—or a need for explicit teaching about how to behave productively in the classroom context. When adults assume that children are deliberately misbehaving and jump to punishing the behavior rather than seeking to understand it and model alternatives, students fail to learn how to build a repertoire for problem solving. Furthermore, they can adopt an oppositional stance to the teacher and the school.

In schools that are underperforming, where students and adults are often trapped in a vicious cycle of frustration, isolation, and helplessness, Comer's process for school reform trains educators, in partnership with parents, to take specific, developmentally sound steps toward holistic school change that creates a productive context for each child's development. The goal is for all educators to use the principles of child and adolescent development to create positive interactions between students and school staff members, and ultimately to transform school culture by also drawing on family and community resources (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000).

The developmental pathways

The School Development Program focuses on six developmental pathways—cognitive, social, psychological, physical, linguistic, and ethical—as a foundation for successful learning and healthy development (see Figure 1.1). Educators and parents are provided with a framework that helps them support the healthy development of children along all six pathways by engaging in a coordinated set of student-support processes and by using three guiding principles for their own work: collaboration, consensus, and no-fault problem solving. With an approach to teaching, learning, and classroom and school management that is student-centered and developmentally appropriate, the program emphasizes the importance of reflection by both children and adults to promote better thinking, better management of feelings, and more desirable social behavior.

FIGURE 1.1 | The Developmental Pathways



Source: From Yale Child Study Center, School Development Program. Copyright 2008 by Yale Child Study Center. Reprinted with permission.

In schools using the Comer Process, far more is expected from students than just cognitive development. Children’s development is multifaceted, and children need support in developing their full repertoire of skills. As described in *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success* (Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 2004), educators play a role in supporting children’s development along multiple pathways.

Promoting the *physical* development of children and adolescents encompasses physical health, nutrition, and responsible decision making, especially regarding adolescent sexual conduct and use

of drugs and alcohol. The *cognitive* pathway involves helping children and adolescents increase their capacity to think for themselves, to plan strategically and effectively, to solve problems in different contexts, to set goals for themselves, and to work with focused attention to accomplish those goals. This pathway also includes recognizing when one's own resources are not sufficient to carry out a task and when to ask for and receive help. A focus on the *psychological* pathway includes training children and adolescents to manage their emotions in socially acceptable ways and increasing their capacity for self-acceptance and self-confidence during the ongoing process of identity formation. Establishing a safe classroom climate is essential for students to grow in confidence and feel they can take risks and learn.

Language is a part of everything that occurs within the school. Communication skills—listening and speaking, reading and writing—are essential for students to become successful and productive in our diverse society. To ensure mastery of language, teachers must deliberately teach and model language and communication skills, for children do not all come into the classroom with the same exposure or experience with language. Promoting development along the *social* pathway involves developing children's and adolescents' capacity to build healthy relationships, to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and to demonstrate empathy toward others. The *ethical* pathway is concerned with helping children and adolescents to develop the capacity for acting with justice and fairness toward themselves and others, including showing respect and having integrity. Encouraging students' involvement in designing the classroom codes for verbal and nonverbal behavior provides them with an opportunity to apply the ethical pathway to their everyday experience. Across all of these pathways, students benefit from having adult role models.

This framework helps educators and parents better understand their children and themselves, and it is used to address student, adult,

and community issues. To promote children's academic success, the two most important objectives are developing a comprehensive understanding of what needs to be done in the best interests of every child, and then making the deliberate effort to meet the needs of every child effectively (Comer et al., 2004).

The developmental pathways framework can be used as part of the process of student planning, to understand developmental issues that children are experiencing using a whole child lens. For example, a child may sleep in class for reasons that are physical (lack of sleep), cognitive (boredom with the task), or psychological (to disguise feelings of inadequacy). The pathways approach encourages considering multiple causes and generating solutions without blame to address the needs of each child holistically. It can also be applied to curriculum, instruction, and classroom management. Teachers can categorize what they are doing according to the pathways to identify ways that they are supporting students' development along each pathway and brainstorm ways that they can augment support for any pathways as needed. Teachers can also use the pathways to assess their own well-being and interactions with students (Comer et al., 2004).

The pathways framework is also a guide for schools to assess programs that are being considered for implementation. For example, the School Planning and Management Team, which is part of the SDP structure, might examine a program by creating a grid that looks at the populations served and the pathways addressed to make sure the program is truly meeting the needs of students and addresses most, if not all, of the six pathways. Educating parents about the six pathways allows parents to understand their children more fully and to learn the benefits of interacting with them from a perspective of whole child development. The pathways framework provides teachers, students, and parents with a common language.

A child-focused developmental perspective extends the principle of no-fault problem solving to relationships with children;