

The Importance of Dispositions

When thinking about children's development it is easy to think about all the skills they need to develop and all the facts and knowledge they need to attain. Children will learn how to walk and how to talk, and they will learn how to read and how to add a column of numbers. Over time they will learn the concepts important to such subject areas as science, history, and geography. They may even be evaluated according to how quickly they develop these skills and how deeply they understand the concepts. All of this skill and concept development is important but so is something else children develop over time: dispositions.

A disposition is an attitude or approach that we have towards our experiences in life. Examples of dispositions are curiosity, perseverance, and patience. Our dispositions can influence how we respond to the opportunities, problems, and challenges we encounter in our daily experiences.

It turns out that it's not enough to only help children develop the kinds of skills and attain the types of knowledge described earlier without considering dispositions. For example, it's not enough to learn how to read if you don't also develop the disposition to read. You might learn the facts of history and geography but without a curiosity about the subjects these facts become just uninteresting, disconnected details that don't have much meaning for you - disconnected facts that you have to learn for a test. Learning the steps in solving an arithmetic problem isn't very helpful if you don't have the patience to work your way through those steps and if you don't have the perseverance to stick with it when you make an error in your calculations.

How do we help children develop these important dispositions in life? First, children need to have positive models in their lives, people who model and demonstrate the dispositions themselves. For example, developing the disposition to read is facilitated when children see their own parents reading; this modeling suggests that reading is enjoyable and important. Children learn the value of patience when they have the opportunity to observe older siblings and parents engaged in an activity that involves a number of steps and takes time. These types of activities might include preparing a multi-course meal, refinishing a piece of furniture, or putting a 1000 piece puzzle together. The message sent by these types of activities is that sometimes accomplishing a task requires multiple parts and can't be done quickly; in other words, it requires patience.

In addition to providing positive models, we need to reflect on how we are teaching skills and knowledge to make sure our methods aren't inadvertently hindering the development of the dispositions themselves. It may be possible that in our desire to have children learn the skills and knowledge we are "killing" the interest children may have in the subject. We can all probably think back to our own schooling and remember those classes when the subject matter was only there as something we had to learn in order to pass the test. The material wasn't presented to us as something to be curious about or as something about which we might actually develop a passion. As a result, as

soon as the test was over, the material was forgotten. Sadly, there actually may be children in our schools who are learning the skills of reading but because of the methods used to teach those skills are not becoming readers.

Skills and knowledge are important but they are only two parts of the triangle of learning and development. The disposition to put those skills to use and to be interested in the knowledge is just as important.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Founder, The Corcoran School