Meeting Basic Needs and Getting Students on Track to Fulfill Their Potential

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Abstract

Children have many basic needs that must be met for them to grow into good learners and thriving people. We discuss the needs of young children and how these relate to child flourishing: responsivity, affectionate touch, positive social climate, social play, and a village of caring others. Though needs are first met in the home, we discuss ways that educators can help students meet these needs with a sustaining classroom that provides intentional guidance for purposeful, democratic participation. By reinvigorating and coordinating the child's network of support among family, community, and neighborhood institutions to build children's assets, educators foster flourishing both in the child and neighborhood. In this way, educators contribute to humanity's optimal ecological system of support, one that aligns with Korczak's ideals.

Keywords: basic needs, evolved nest, responsiveness, touch, play, community, classroom climate

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Everything alive has basic needs that must be fulfilled for living and thriving. Basic needs fulfillment is an area of research that is burgeoning (e.g., Ciarrochi, Kashdan & Harris, 2013). Although a great deal of attention is given to economic wellbeing (Evans, 2017), psychological and social wellbeing are more fundamental. Among adults, basic needs fulfillment is related to wellbeing in adult populations (Narvaez et al., 2018). Noble and colleagues noted that although thwarting of basic psychosocial needs was predictive of poor mental health outcomes in adults, positive fulfillment of needs was necessary for a feeling of wellbeing (Noble, Kurth, Narvaez, 2018a). This finding aligns with the World Health Organization's (1948) definition of overall health as not merely lacking disease but as encompassing physical, mental, and social wellbeing (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Children have many basic needs that must be met for them to grow into thriving people and good learners. Recognizing the importance of children's needs is repeatedly emphasized in Korczak's (1976b) teachings:

> It is not a question of how and what to demand from a child, not of bidding and forbidding, but of what he lacks, what he has in excess, what he desires, and how much he can afford to give of himself (p. 33).

Korczak encouraged educators to pay attention to every detail of a child's behavior because even small gestures could be the important symptoms that reflect his/her inner world. "What a fever, a cough or nausea is for a physician, so a smile, a tear, or a blush should be for an educator. Not a single symptom lacks significance" (1967c, p. 33).

As Korczak pointed out, at times, adults fail to take children and their needs seriously because they think children have a long life ahead of them, many years to find fulfillment, success and wellbeing—later (Korczak, 1967a). In essence, what Korczak is describing is how some adults minimize the importance of childhood, thinking that unmet needs early in life have little to no consequences—"children are resilient" (Lancy, 2015). However, failing to meet children's basic needs is not only disrespectful but creates life-long, sometimes insurmountable challenges for children in subsequent years (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Consequently, a greater awareness is needed regarding children's needs and how these relate to child flourishing, both in the home and in the classroom. Korczak understood the gap between awareness of needs and the educational community when he stated, "It is a fact—the teacher has not been taught" about children's needs (Korczak, 1976b, p. 34). The purpose of this chapter is to educate educators about children's basic needs.

Child Flourishing

Korczak's overarching aim was child flourishing, a sorely needed emphasis today. Flourishing is holistic and inclusive of physiological, emotional, psychological, social and moral health (Gleason & Narvaez, 2014). Flourishing involves the presence of good outcomes, rather than the absence or avoidance of poor outcomes or mere survival. Flourishing children show empathy and concern towards close others and, with cognitive maturation, the overall community. A flourishing person develops moral sensitivity and learns to prioritize moral values over other values by being proactive in moral situations. Korczak demonstrates what a spiritually flourishing adult looks like. A flourishing adult is autonomous, yet has a strong social community connection that reaches beyond the individual's own social community as a boundary for concern, to all of humanity and all living beings. How do we help children reach such heights of development?

Basic need fulfillment during childhood may be particularly important. For example, adults who have a sense of fulfilled needs during childhood have better outcomes; those who feel that their needs were not met in childhood are more likely to report poorer health, less wellbeing, and more depression as adults (Noble, Kurth, Narvaez, 2018b). A lack of basic needs fulfillment during childhood can be considered a form of stress. A nurturing early life is fundamental where basic needs are met in order to shape a healthy sociality.

Educators are often faced with children whose needs are not met adequately outside the classroom. We discuss two models of basic needs and how teachers can meet those needs within the classroom: neurobiological needs and core social motives.

Neurobiological Needs

In the current cultural climate, many children come to school having suffered unmet neurobiological needs. Educators are sometimes at a loss for how to help these suffering children, needing specific practical frameworks and methods for offsetting the consequences and burden of unmet needs.

Humans evolved more primary, neurobiological needs represented by the evolved nest, a developmental system for the highly immature human child who takes decades to develop fully (Konner, 2005; Narvaez, 2019). The common care practices of the evolved nest are listed in Table 1. Because many children today are not immersed in a supportive nest of care, they come to educational and community settings stressed, anxious and not ready to learn.[1] Young children entering school without needs met require additional nurturing. Their neurobiological systems are dysfunctional because of not receiving the nurturing they needed

[1] As Dr. Tatyana Tsyrlina-Spady points out: "Being a trained medical doctor, Korczak understood really well how stresses impact children and their ability to develop and learn. Korczak's way of teaching future teachers is well documented and some strategies became really well known, for example, the one when he brought a young elementary school student to the seminar which he conducted in the X-ray room, actually showing on the screen the rhythm of the heart of the stressed and nervous child (movie "Korczak" by A.Wajda, roughly minute 10-12)."

from infancy on. Being frequently and/or intensely stressed can be toxic in early years when the stress response and other physiological systems are setting their parameters for lifelong function (e.g., Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar & Heim, 2009). Too much stress during sensitive growth periods will lead to dysregulation, threat reactivity and a disposition towards social distrust and self-protection (Narvaez, 2008; 2014). Threat reactivity impairs openness and higher order thinking, making getting along challenging and learning difficult. This means educational institutions and community-based organizations must attend to some of children's basic needs in order to *prepare* them to suitably cooperate and learn (Narvaez, 2018).

We describe how educators can meet these needs. Obviously, birth and breastfeeding are not part of an educator's portfolio. However, the rest of the nest's components continue to be valuable throughout childhood (and into adulthood!). We mention a few examples of educational approaches that emphasize the particular component.

Responsivity. Classroom components outlined by the National Association for the Education of young Children (NAEYC, 2009) conform with Korczark's principles for educating children. NAEYC too emphasizes observation and knowledge about the child, which is a form of responsivity which in family settings supports prosocial and cooperative capacities (Kochanska, 2002; Sroufe et al., 2008). Another way to provide responsive care in the classroom is to respect the changes and seeming regressions of learning and development in children. Korczak (1967a) described this well when he passionately enunciated, "Respect for the mysteries and fluctuations of the toil of growth!" (p. 370). Educators can practice responsivity by first acknowledging that learning and development are in fact mysteries which require fluctuations, waxing and waning, progressing and regressing. With this in mind, the educator can better respect the child's developmental track, providing helpful and effective guidance in a responsive manner.

Touch. Affectionate touch (e.g., hugs, cuddles, holding, carrying) is an integral component of the development of secure attachment in young children (Feldman & Eidelman, 2004). Affectionate touch also facilities the development of social capacities (Narvaez, Panksepp, et al., 2013). What can teachers do, to meet children's needs for affection while respecting appropriate boundaries? For young children, group affection activities can be used to help students practice appropriate activities with peers, such as practicing friendly ways to say hello (McEvoy, Twardosz, & Bishop, 1990). In classrooms with older students, teachers can implement appropriate touch by allowing for personalized greetings at the door. These activities allow the children to guide interactions in a consensual and appropriate manner.

Social Climate. McMullen and McCormick (2016) believe that fostering self-respect can be achieved through a culture that honors who the child is, what the child believes, and what the child feels. By communicating respect to the child, she develops a sense that she is worthy of respect. Montessori classrooms echo this emphasis on respect (Montessori, 1966). Teachers can help promote relational wellbeing in the classroom by focusing on affinity, which can be promoted through affectionate touch and nurturance within a positive social climate (McMullen & McCormick, 2016). Another way to promote a positive climate in the classroom is for educators to practice a key philosophy of Korczak's pedagogy which is to first strive to understand the child, enter into their world and then, demonstrate respect towards him/her (Lewowicki, 1994). In this way, the teacher can set the tone for the classroom, providing a moral exemplar witness to the children, teaching other students how to respectfully engage one another and consequently, catalyze an environment of rich social support.

Play. Play is a normal part of childhood but has been shortchanged by schooling, and continues to diminish. The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes play, creativity, and

discovery for young children in a way that engages with the local community, such as exploring the neighborhood to observe particular phenomenon like rainstorms (Gandini, 2012). Other teachers effectively create a space for children to safely engage in rough-and-tumble play by setting clear expectations and boundaries about protecting and caring for one another in the play setting (Huber, 2016). Social play contributes to the development of emotion regulation and mitigates social aggression (Panksepp, 2007). Regular and multiple recesses in primary school increase focus during schooling tasks (Rhea & Rivchun, 2018).

Village. Teachers focus on promoting respectful communication among all members of the caregiving community: caregivers, children, and families. The goal of communication is mutual understanding, which contributes to wellbeing of all involved. The children themselves are part of the village. As Korczak (1976a) proclaimed, "Children account for a considerable portion of mankind, of the population, of nationals, residents, citizens and constant companions. They were, they will be and they are" (p. 336). Supporting children sets the trajectory for their developmental track and the future course of the community. By supporting each child, the teacher is helping not only that individual but the community as a whole.

Basic needs.

Several basic needs have been associated with school achievement. These needs must be met in order for an individual to commit to learning and socialization or else misbehavior and inattention can ensue. Social Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) identified three key basic needs: a sense of *belonging* in the group; feeling *competent* enough to complete the tasks assigned; feeling *autonomous*, like one's life is one's own. Additional needs have been identified by others, including having the self-control needed for a task (Zimmerman, 2000); having a sense of meaning or purpose (Staub, 2004); and opportunities for self-development

(Fiske, 2004). Often, educators can trace a student's uncooperative behavior to a missing basic need for that student in that moment of misbehavior (Watson & Ecken, 2018).

One model for describing basic needs is called "core social motives," the types of aims individuals have that are correlated with happiness and wellbeing. These include belonging, understanding, control, enhancing self, and a sense of trust (BUCET list; Fiske, 2004). Each of the BUCET list components are related generally to wellbeing, physical and mental health irrespective of socioeconomic status, indicating that psychosocial resources alone contribute to health outcomes (Noble et al., 2018a). We further examine each aspect of basic needs using the BUCET framework, and how teachers can help students meet those needs.

Belonging involves the need to form long-term, supportive relationships with others, and contributes to a person's sense of wellbeing as well as physical and mental health. When teachers care for and support students, helping them feel welcome and "known" by the teacher and respected by peers, students develop a greater sense of belonging, which fosters higher motivation and achievement. Educators in every classroom can seek to establish a secure relationship with each child. Individuals like to *understand* their lives and to have a sense of purpose, meaning and life coherence, all of which are associated with wellbeing and longevity. An example of communities that regularly practice awareness of their sense of purpose is found in several sustainable indigenous societies. Within these communities, understanding of oneself and the world around you means developing one's heart-mindedness, an integration of emotional intelligence and intuition (Narvaez, in press).

Several of the BUCET features cohere in classrooms. For example, the Child Development Project developed and studied caring school and classroom communities which support student development in multiple ways (Solomon, et al., 2002). One key aspect included control and autonomy, e.g., to choose activities and influence classroom practices.

Control reflects the ability to influence the outcomes of life events, which is closely related to psychological concepts of autonomy (freedom over one's own behavior) and competence (sense of efficacy in interactions with others). Those who feel in control tend to be healthier and happier, whereas those who lack a sense of control in various settings are at greater risk of depression and anxiety (Griffin, Fuhrer, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2002). Too many children arrive at school without having experienced a sense of control in their lives but teachers can rectify this, providing opportunities where students have authentic control over activities and practices. Korczak implemented this by means of providing each child with a sacred space for their own things.

In caring classroom communities, there are multiple possibilities to grow one's self through coached social skills and opportunities for students to help and collaborate with one another (Solomon et al., 2002). Such practices enhance the self. *Enhancing self* refers to the desire to feel confident in one's self-worth (self-esteem) and motivation for self-enhancement (Fiske, 2004). Self-esteem is related to physical and mental health: lack of self-esteem leads to adolescents' risky health behaviors such as problem eating and suicidal ideation (McGee & Williams, 2000). Feeling embedded in and skillful in sociality with one's community builds an experience and sense of *trust.* Trust involves the overall perception of the world as benevolent, a key aspect of general healthy development and a variable that is related to better health, longevity and lack of depression (Noble, Kurth & Narvaez, 2018a; 2018b).

Implications

How can teachers support meeting children's basic needs and thereby foster their wellbeing? Narvaez (2010) contrasted three kinds of classroom focus: mastery learning, caring community, and sustaining climate (see extensive discussion of the latter in Bock et al. chapter). *Mastery learning classrooms*, which foster high achievement, help students self-regulate their learning, foster deep learning, maintaining student interest and exhibit flexible

learning procedures. These approaches are considered “best practice” in teacher education. *Caring community classrooms* adds to the mastery classroom characteristics by giving students voice in classroom decisions and sharing responsibility for classroom tasks; teachers guide conflict resolution openly and justly, encouraging peer interaction and interpersonal sensitivity. Caring community classrooms provide the support students need for achievement and prosocial behavior (Battistich, 2008). A *sustaining classroom* adds to these by attending to basic needs, enhancing individual self-actualization and human potential. Ethical capacities and leadership skills are emphasized with global awareness and community partnerships to address a larger purpose for the group—who should we be?

The sustaining classroom and school employ effective practices for student self-development, beginning with meeting basic needs. For a student to be open to ongoing experience, their needs and individuality should be acknowledged and considered. The responsive educator expresses openness to mutual influence and acts as a model of unconditional acceptance and respect towards students and peers (Rogers, 1983) for the child’s “becoming” a prosocial member of the community. In such a relationship, the child can thrive as a person and as a student. Discipline becomes coached character development rather than punishment (Narvaez, 2008). Educators take up the mantle of nurturing that families cannot (see more in Chapter 11). They trust the students’ own inner compass towards reaching their potential and helping them on the pathway to a good life.

Children’s community potential is shaped by intentional guidance for purposeful, democratic participation (see Narvaez, 2011) where students care for one another’s welfare (Power & Higgins–D’Alessandro, 2008). Development occurs in a context of supportive relations that include not only the child’s family and classroom but also the wider community. Reinvigorating and coordinating the child’s network of support among family, community, and neighborhood institutions means that educators align goals to build assets

and foster flourishing both in the child and neighborhood (Lerner, Bornstein, & Smith, 2003). In this way, educators contribute to humanity's ideal ecological system of support, one that aligns with Korczak's ideals.

Table 1. Components of Humanity's Evolved Nest (Evolved Developmental Niche)

Humanity's Evolved Nest
Soothing perinatal experiences (e.g., no separation of mother and baby or imposed distress)
Extensive breastfeeding
Positive social **climate**
Responsivity to needs, keeping distress to a minimum
Positive affectionate **touch**
Allomothers, a "**village**" of multiple responsive adult caregivers
Self-directed **play** --with multi-aged playmates --in the natural world

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