

1

The School Is Preventive and Promotive

James P. Comer

Well-functioning schools challenge students with developmentally appropriate tasks that help them gain essential skills, behaviors, and ways of understanding the world that they will need to develop into well-functioning adults. To explain the relationship of children's growth and development to their success in school and in later life, child psychiatrist and founder of the School Development Program (SDP) James P. Comer employs four key principles: (1) Children are immersed in their social networks; (2) a child from a poorly functioning family is more likely to enter school without adequate preparation; (3) healthy development along all of the six developmental pathways prepares children to meet life's tasks; and (4) the school is a continuous presence in the lives of children and adolescents. Schools that use the SDP model function as a portal through which the potential benefits of the larger society enter children's daily school and family life, and through which the children and their families emerge to participate fully in the larger society.

A poor school experience interferes with academic achievement and leads to psychological, social, and behavioral problems. In contrast, a good school experience can prevent school failure and promote students' chances of being successful in life. Well-functioning schools expose students to a variety of ideas and challenge them with developmentally appropriate tasks. These schools produce

NOTE: Copyright © 2004 by The Yale School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. All rights reserved. Reproduction authorized only for the local school site that has purchased this book. Reprinted from *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success*. For information, contact Corwin Press, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, California 91360; www.corwinpress.com.

4 SIX PATHWAYS TO HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

students who gain essential skills, knowledge, habits, attitudes, behaviors, ways of approaching problems, and ways of understanding the world that they will be able to rely on in order to develop into well-functioning adults.

People ask me why we have to promote these qualities in children: “Why won’t children develop them on their own?” I answer that there are multiple forces at play in the life of a child. Some are negative and some are positive. Children are not born with the capacity to distinguish between them, nor are they necessarily influenced by the positive. Therefore all the adults around them—in their family, their community, and their schools—should be involved in the process of helping them avoid the negative and adopt the positive.

People also ask me: “Is this the role of schools?” I answer that the mission of the school is to prepare people to be successful in school and in life. Whether in school, or in life in general, you need more than preparation for academic success. You need to begin to know (1) how to get along with other people, (2) how not to be victimized by others, (3) how to solve problems without compromising the rights and needs of other people, and (4) how to establish habits that are going to be useful in moving you toward success in the world and that enable you to meet your life tasks and responsibilities. Because all of these skills are necessary, the school limits its own opportunity to be successful when it focuses only on academic material.

The federal government’s involvement in education is based on the general welfare clause of the Constitution. The school is the most effective leverage point to help children grow in ways that are in the best interest of themselves, their families, their communities, and in turn, the larger society. Schools shouldn’t have to do it all, but given the fact that we have allowed communities to decline, we can use the school as an institution that can help regenerate the vitality of communities and help students grow.

When I say that schools have a preventive and promotive role, I’m speaking primarily of their role in relation to the children. The people working in the institutions around the children are important because the children are influenced by them and can internalize their attitudes, values, and ways of functioning in the world. They will continue to need helpful people and institutions around them all the way along their journey toward maturation.

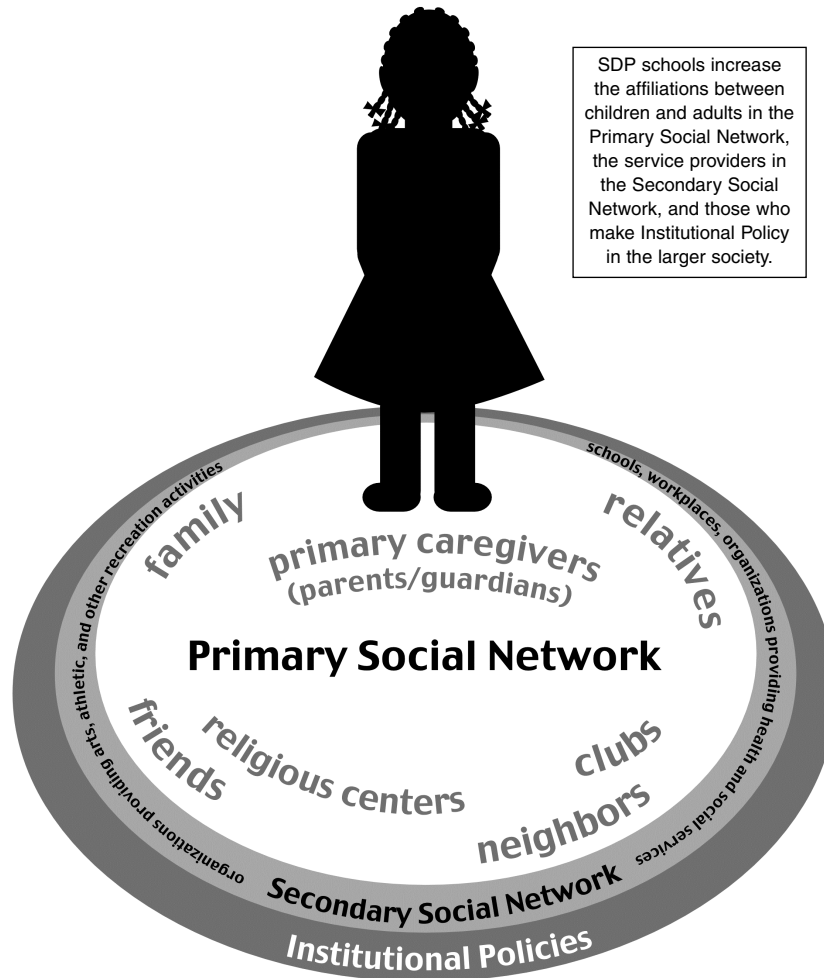
There is another important point: The way we traditionally use schools is very wasteful. We limit a myriad of adults to 20 percent of what they could do. The other 80 percent of what is possible would be to help children develop and become successful citizens. Countries whose schools have a real focus on development are getting much more out of their workforce.

To illustrate the relationship of children’s growth and development to their success in school and in later life, I have developed a four-panel poster titled “The School Is Preventive and Promotive” (Figures 1.1–1.4). This chapter discusses each of those panels.

CHILDREN ARE IMMERSSED IN THEIR SOCIAL NETWORKS

In Panel 1 of the poster (Figure 1.1), I show that children are nurtured in nested environments, depicted as platforms of increasing size. I call the central platform the

Figure 1.1 Children are immersed in their social networks



Panel 1

SOURCE: Copyright © 2004 by The Yale School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action*, by James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner, and Michael Ben-Avie. Reproduction authorized only for the local school site that has purchased this book. www.corwinpress.com.

“Primary Social Network,” which includes primary caregivers (parents, guardians); immediate family and close relatives; and significant groups such as religious centers, clubs, and friends and neighbors of the family. These groups are those to which the primary caregivers and children feel a sense of belonging. The parents and guardians are the carriers of the attitudes, habits, values, and ways of this Primary Social Network, and they pass them on to the children.

In a complex society like ours, the platform outside the Primary Social Network is what I call the “Secondary Social Network.” Organizations in this network provide arts, athletics, and other recreational activities. Included in this network are schools, workplaces, and organizations providing health and social services. Within

6 SIX PATHWAYS TO HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

the Secondary Social Network are all of the organizations that provide the essential services that families need in order to function in the society. The workplace—the job—is a very special kind of essential service because a job, or source of income, is necessary in order to afford all of the other services.

Families may or may not feel that they are a part of the network of service and community organizations. Children from families that feel that they belong in and would like to be in the mainstream of American society are more often prepared to elicit support and respect from the mainstream of society. They feel the school is their school. It's there for them. However, many families are marginalized by societal messages that suggest they're not valued people. Children from these families sometimes do not view the school as their place. Their parents may feel the same way in the workplace and the other places that they go, and transmit to their children this feeling of being marginalized and unimportant.

But in school as in psychotherapy, the people and the environment are part of the instrumentation of learning and development. Therefore the classroom teacher must create the conditions in which the child feels that he or she belongs. Teachers must make an emotional attachment to the children and the children have to make an emotional attachment to the teachers because that's what makes it possible for the child to *imitate, identify with, and internalize* the attitudes of the best teacher and the best school people. Without that emotional contact there may be rejection, ambivalence, or a reluctance to get involved.

The School Development Program (SDP) increases opportunities for these emotional connections by increasing the quantity and quality of affiliations between the children and adults who are in the Primary Social Network, and the adults who provide services in the Secondary Social Network. In effect, SDP moves the school from its position in the Secondary Social Network into a close, positive attachment with the child's Primary Social Network.

I call the platform outside the Secondary Social Network, "Institutional Policies." These are the operating rules, procedures, and actions taken by government, business, and organizations in the larger society. These policies and actions can also be preventive and promotive, but unfortunately, what they prevent and promote is not always in the best interest of the healthy development and life success of all children.

SDP schools and school systems try to influence institutional policies at all levels. In this way they are a continual reminder to those who do not usually spend time in schools that children's well-being should in some way be a central concern of all public and private institutions. Furthermore, through school activities that prepare students for community involvement, children and adults in SDP schools develop essential habits of involved citizenship. It is SDP's vision of the future that many of these students will someday directly influence institutional policies as they work in civil service, hold elected positions in government, and become leaders of private industry.

SDP connects strongly to the Primary Social Network, partners with other institutions in the Secondary Social Network, and continually seeks to partner with and influence those who establish institutional policies. In this way, SDP models a portal through which potential benefits of the larger society enter the children's daily school and family life, and through which the children and their families emerge to participate fully in the larger society.

CHILDREN FROM POORLY FUNCTIONING FAMILIES ARE LIKELY TO ENTER SCHOOL WITHOUT ADEQUATE PREPARATION

Families that experience themselves in the mainstream of society feel that they belong. Families that experience rejection and not being valued receive the message that they are expected to remain where they are—at the margins of society—regardless of their talents.

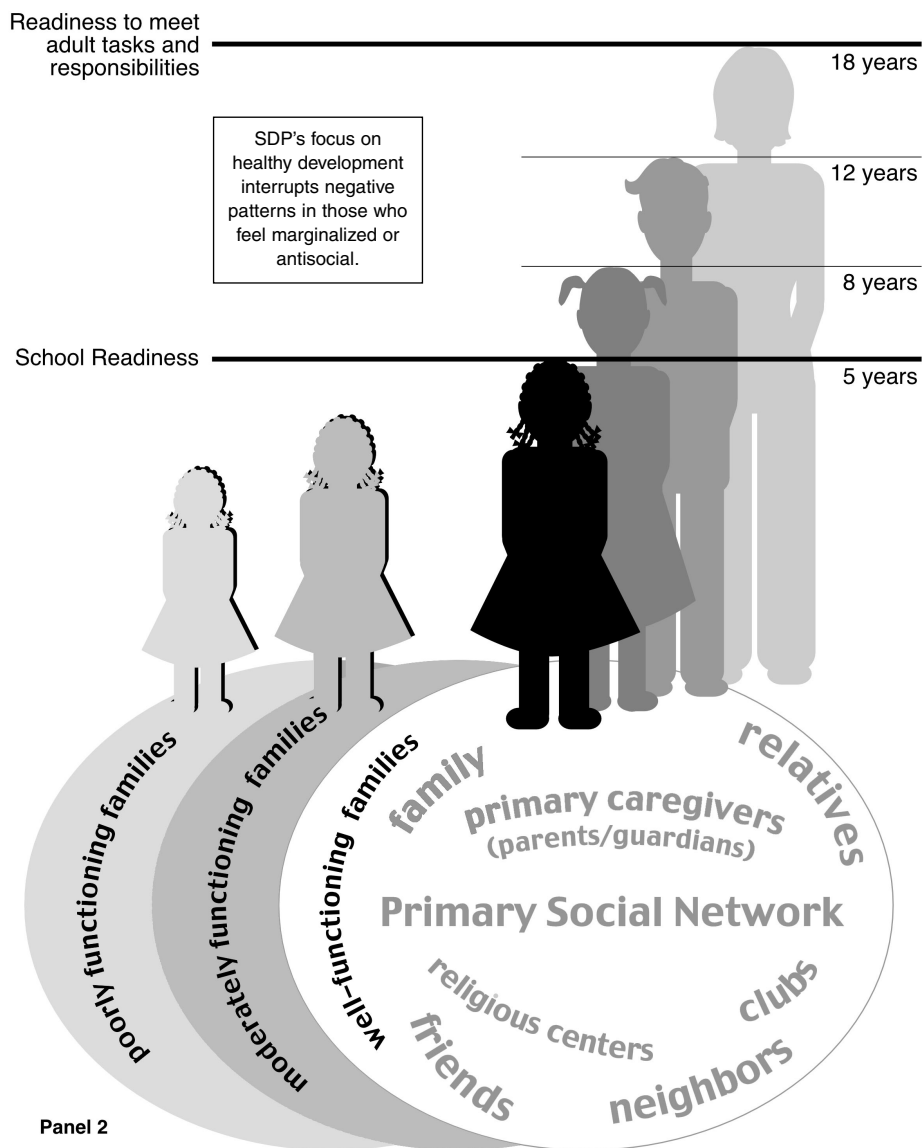
There is a third category of families as shown in Panel 2 (Figure 1.2): Antisocial children and families who feel so undervalued and unwanted that they cannot identify with mainstream attitudes, habits, values, and mores. Children in this category begin to act out in a manner that traps them in antisocial activities and ways of life. Their values and behaviors are going to get them into very grave trouble as they interact with the mainstream. Children who come from moderately functioning families can be pulled into this antisocial group or they can be pulled into the mainstream. The school has a responsibility to give everyone an opportunity to participate in the mainstream.

Unfortunately, we can already identify the “winners” and “losers” in kindergarten. The losers are the children who are acting up and acting out. They can’t sit still. They can’t identify with the attitudes, habits, values, and ways that are going to lead to successful performance and opportunities for success in life. Even in poorly functioning schools, some of those children will have positive developmental experiences in school. Maybe some will turn out to be athletically gifted or musically gifted or have some other talent. They may break into a mainstream pattern that gives them an opportunity because of that talent. But even though they enter the mainstream, they may not be able to sustain themselves there. They may “self-destruct” because they do not develop in ways that allow them to make the most of their mainstream opportunities.

Children elicit positive or negative responses. The winners have been taught how to behave by their parents and their caretakers. For example, at a park my two-year-old granddaughter got on a slide, and a little boy was in her way. The children had been told at the nursery school to politely tell their friends: “You’re in my space; please get out of my space.” Being really upset with the boy, she said in a pushy manner, “You’re in my space!” And she was really upset with him. Her mother told her, “No, Nicole. It’s his turn to be in that space now.” Nicole is fortunate in that she has many adults giving her instruction about how to handle situations, and also helping her practice. When her behavior is inappropriate, her mother and the other adults help her correct it. That is what mainstream children receive.

Teachers need to understand that they can interact with children from families that are not functioning well in ways that will give the children the capacity to improve their chances of being successful in school and in the world. When children are behaving in ways that will get them in trouble, teachers can interrupt the pattern by providing them with alternative ways to respond. Having children examine the decisions they make will help children previously destined to become losers have a chance to become winners and to make it in the world.

Figure 1.2 Children from poorly functioning families are likely to enter school without adequate preparation



SOURCE: Copyright © 2004 by The Yale School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action*, by James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner, and Michael Ben-Avie. Reproduction authorized only for the local school site that has purchased this book. www.corwinpress.com.

All children elicit positive, apathetic, or negative feelings and behaviors from their caretakers and those around them. Children who display desirable behaviors reinforce their teachers' continued positive response. If they display apathetic or negative behavior, they reinforce their teachers' response in apathetic or negative ways. The opposite is also true: The teachers' positive, apathetic, or negative feelings and behaviors can trigger the children's response. For example, as a school superintendent,

my brother used to stand at the door and find one positive thing to say to each child, even to the most troubled child. Then, the teachers tried it. They came back to my brother and told him that even difficult children smiled or touched them. The kids were “looking up” all day because of their positive attachment with the teacher. This positive connection is often like an oasis in the desert. It’s very powerful and very important because that’s all the positive feedback some children receive.

SDP provides extensive training so that both adults and children can interrupt these apathetic or negative feelings and behaviors and enter into a healthy cycle of mutually eliciting positive feelings and behaviors from one another. Here’s an example of how we got teachers to begin to work this way: A teacher came out of a meeting at which we had talked about not yelling at the kids. Kids were running down the hall, and she started to yell. Then—“Oops!”—she caught herself. The discussion had prompted the interruption of the pattern, but the habit was not there yet. She caught herself. So the next time she could catch herself even earlier—before she yelled. Then she would have changed her pattern.

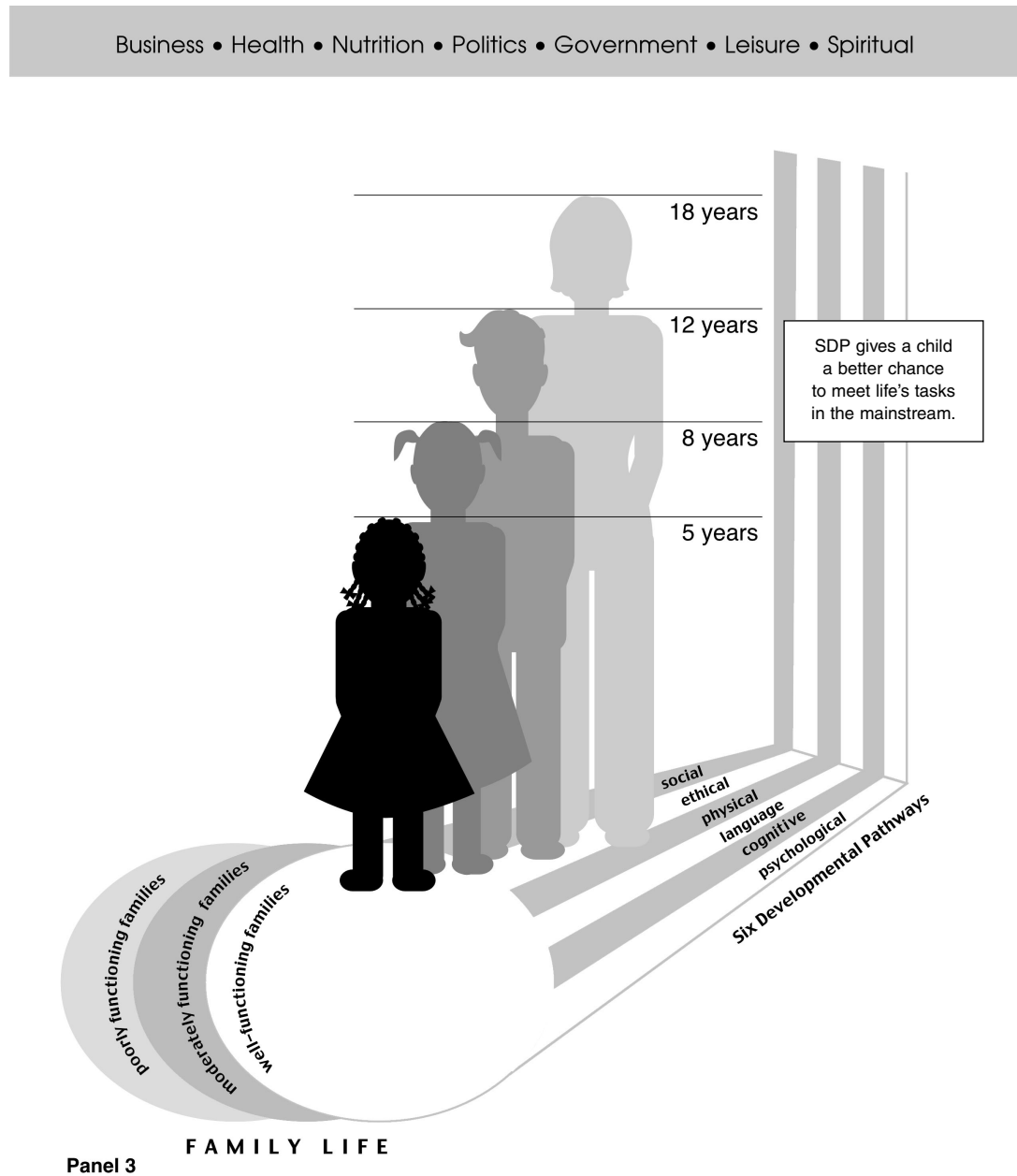
HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT PREPARES CHILDREN TO MEET LIFE’S TASKS

Panel 3 (Figure 1.3) conveys the essential nature of healthy development and what the school can do to support that development through curriculum and programs. To meet life’s tasks, children need precursor experiences, good health and nutrition, a spiritual life, and leisure time activities. Schools that successfully prepare children to meet their adult responsibilities do so by creating a curriculum that is geared to doing all of these things. Successful schools begin preparing children from the first day in kindergarten: How do you make decisions about things? How do you understand? How do you watch for somebody trying to pull the wool over your eyes? (Children need to know how to be wary and yet not feel anxious all the time.) Adults begin teaching children how to think, how to manage their lives, how to be involved in all the institutions in society, and how to manage in those institutions—and this is done throughout their education.

Schools need to prepare children to take care of themselves in the areas of health, nutrition, politics and government, leisure, spiritual activities, and business and economics. We have one of the lowest voting rates in the postindustrial world, and that’s disgraceful. Even people who can afford health care and take care of themselves are increasingly becoming obese and have a host of other health problems. There are people who can’t handle themselves on the weekend because their lives are not structured, so they get drunk, use drugs, and then pull themselves together to go back to work. People have to be able to handle their leisure time and engage in spiritual activities and other formal and informal activities, but children are not being prepared to take care of themselves.

People ask me whether this is the role of the school. I respond: “Why not the school? And if not the school, who?” People then suggest: “The family.” I say that the family needs more help today because the family is no longer in control of all of the information and all the forces that impinge on the child. The child has to manage more by himself or herself. Increasingly, children have to make decisions on their own about what they should do, what they shouldn’t do, what they can do, what they’re going to do. The family has less influence. The school is there and doesn’t

Figure 1.3 Healthy development along all of the six developmental pathways prepares children to meet life's tasks



SOURCE: Copyright © 2004 by The Yale School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action*, by James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner, and Michael Ben-Avie. Reproduction authorized only for the local school site that has purchased this book. www.corwinpress.com.

take advantage of its potential to help the kids and society at large. The more kids are helped to make good, reasonable decisions, the better off the society. The school also is able to provide consistent support: Although some children are homeless, few are school-less.

There are well-functioning families that are able to guide their children. Currently, it's possible that most families are not able to guide their children adequately. Even when the parents are present, in many families the parents don't see guidance as their activity. A woman at a health center told me that she was irritated by the school's wanting her to participate. She said: "I send my kids to school. I don't want to be bothered with that. They should teach them." The school has to challenge that notion and, at the same time, both support the development of the child and help the parent understand that he or she needs to be involved. Children need their parents to support their development and to think of additional ways to continue that development.

Right now many schools do not recognize their role as child developers. They've been told that their job is to give children academic material. There was a time when, if that was all schools did, and the children didn't do too well, it didn't matter that much because the children eventually could go out and get a job in spite of not having a good education. Scientific and technological advances, however, are increasing the level of development needed to succeed. That level is now the highest that has ever been required in the history of the world. We cannot afford to allow so many able children to be unprepared to function well in life. The school has to be more active in creating the conditions that will allow children to be successful in school and in life.

In SDP schools, we encourage teachers to create these conditions by participating in the life of the school and by supporting the development of the children in their classrooms. They serve on the School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) or subcommittees. In the classroom, they are encouraged not to yell at the children, overcontrol them, punish them, or have low expectations of them. They elicit positive responses from the children and teach the children how to elicit positive responses from the adults in their lives.

Parents are the first child developers and teachers, but some must be encouraged to think differently. I talk about three mind-sets of parenting: As the owner of children, as the servant of children, and as the developer of children. If you're the owner, you try to control your kids because you believe that they belong to you. You might think that if you *make* the children do what they're supposed to do, you will have kids who are capable of thinking and of managing themselves. But, it's more likely that they will rebel strongly against you.

Taking on the role of the servant leads to children's troublesome behavior because that role encourages permissiveness: Whatever they want, you let them do it. This does not allow children to develop the skills they will need in order to cope with disappointment and stress, to learn to find substitutes for unacceptable behavior, or to tolerate some frustration in the present while they work to accomplish future goals.

In contrast, when you're the developer of your children, you help them internalize attitudes, habits, values, and ways that lead to academic and life success. You understand that they're not necessarily going to do well in the beginning, that they're a work in progress, and that your job is to help them keep coming back to what they can do and what they can become.

A teacher does the same thing. Basic child development starts with the parent, and then becomes the responsibility of more and more people as the child comes into the school. The coach, or the government teacher, or the choral club director, or print shop teacher must also be a child developer. When I was a student, our print shop

teacher said to us one day, "You know, we're not all going to be Albert Einsteins, but we're going to be successful if we take care of our families and develop ourselves as good neighbors and good citizens." They don't even have print shop anymore but those words have stuck with me all my life. He was valuable to me as more than just a print shop teacher because he was an adult in my life who gave me a way of thinking that has been terribly important.

THE SCHOOL IS A CONTINUOUS PRESENCE IN THE LIFE OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

When an SDP school is working well, it is a model of a just society. There's growth and learning and success for the adults as well as the children, and no one is left behind. Consensus and collaboration in the positive climate that is supported by the principle of no-fault allows great benefits to flow naturally among the family, school, and community (see Panel 4—Figure 1.4).

The SDP school is a training academy for the rest of life. In order to help students prepare for adult life, the school must actually be reflective of every other aspect of society. Many educators have removed themselves from the world. They have these children over here, and they're pouring information in the general direction of their heads, not asking whether that information has anything to do with what the children are going to be asked to do in life. By way of contrast, SDP provides schools not only with an intellectual focus, but also with a set of logical, progressive steps with which to actually get in there and develop the child's entire being.

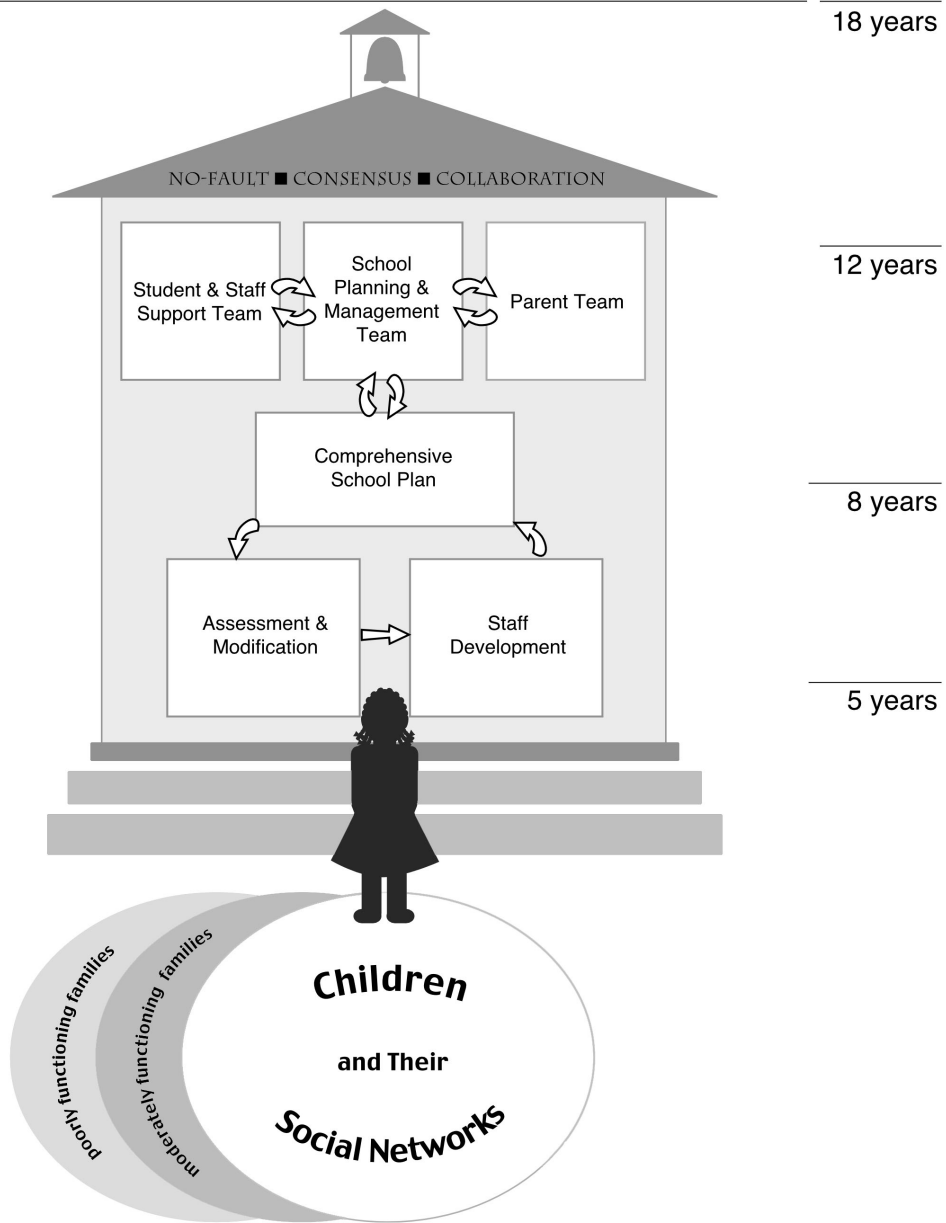
I hear new teachers talk about why they go into education. They want to help these poor kids. They want to smother them with love. My response is this: "Don't do that. Care about them, but teach them. Kids aren't born with the capacity of functioning in the world. You have to teach them that. Create caring, but expectant, conditions that will allow them to manage the world as they go out into it."

For example, we want to help children learn how to compete and lose and get up to compete again. One of the lowest income schools in Detroit had the highest fourth-grade test scores in the state. When I visited, they were excited because there was a basketball tournament coming up that they were sure they were going to win. But they lost. The principal told me that she knew they were going to be devastated. How do you make that into a learning opportunity? The next day, at the morning assembly, she talked about how important it is to work as hard as you can to achieve your goals, but that no matter how hard you work sometimes you lose, and you're going to be disappointed. She told them that it's okay to mourn your loss and to feel badly, but then you get over it, get up, and try again. You teach people how to be competitive, how to win graciously and lose graciously, and at the same time, to be determined to try to win tomorrow.

This is a life lesson in self-management: You do the best you can, and when you don't achieve your personal best you are willing and open enough to ask for the help you need. I've seen kids in medical school who almost flunked out because they couldn't ask anybody for help. Successful people are able to look at what is interfering with their successes and are able to deal with it. Teachers must instill the notion that we're not perfect and should not expect perfection of ourselves. We're all just trying to be successful and trying to handle our feelings about not being successful.

Figure 1.4 The school is a continuous presence in the life of children and adolescents

Schools are the only universally accessible institutions in which there are enough adults to foster development along all six pathways. The adults do this by interacting appropriately with children and adolescents and by helping them to manage the information that bombards them.



Panel 4

SOURCE: Copyright © 2004 by The Yale School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action*, by James P. Comer, Edward T. Joyner, and Michael Ben-Avie. Reproduction authorized only for the local school site that has purchased this book. www.corwinpress.com.

14 SIX PATHWAYS TO HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

In SDP schools the teachers try to instill this notion: Do the best you can, and try to be supportive of each other. At assemblies, if the kids laugh at somebody who is having difficulty, the teachers explain: "You don't laugh. He's doing the best he can do, and you need to help him." And eventually, nobody laughs. But adults must help them behave in this way. Kids who have problems are initially targets of ridicule. But in SDP schools, it is established that it is good to help people who have problems. Students gain a sense of worth and value and confidence by helping others, and then they can also expect others to help them. That makes the whole environment so much safer: knowing that nobody is allowed to be a target. I argue that human beings have a potential for being good and constructive, and bad and destructive. The conditions of the school will determine which one gets favored. We must try to create an environment that brings out and respects that which is good, helpful, and supportive.

When I am feeling down and tired, I acknowledge that and feel it. I am honest with myself about where I am. John Dow, the former superintendent of schools in New Haven, Connecticut, told me that he visited a kindergarten when he felt down and tired. He saw the hopefulness on the faces of the kids, and that helped him. I am determined to help more people understand the importance of child development. When I'm feeling that I'm not making headway and am about to give up, before long I'm back to thinking about how to make it happen. This is deeply rooted in my early experiences: You don't give up.