

# Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework



In an education landscape dominated by debates on standards and testing, it is important to remember that strong academic skills alone are not enough to lead a child to a productive, fulfilling adulthood. What other qualities matter and how can adults nurture them? *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework* — the most comprehensive look to date at what research, theory and practice identify as the building blocks for life success — seeks to provide answers.

The new report, by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, synthesizes knowledge from the fields of youth development, psychology, sociology, education and the cognitive sciences. Drawing on decades of theory and research as well as insights from those who work with young people, it describes what children need to grow and learn, and how adults can foster their development in ways that lead to college and career success, healthy relationships and engaged citizenship. It also identifies the obstacles that children in poverty and children of color may face in achieving their potential and suggests how policy and practice can help overcome those challenges.

These three factors rest on four “foundational components,” qualities that adults can directly influence:

**Self-regulation**, the awareness of oneself and one’s surroundings, and management of one’s attention, emotions and behaviors to achieve goals.

**Knowledge and Skills**, information or understanding about oneself, other people and the world, and the ability to carry out tasks.

**Mindsets**, beliefs and attitudes about oneself, the world and the interaction between the two. They are the lenses individuals use to process everyday experiences.

**Values**, enduring, often culturally-defined, beliefs about what is good or bad and what one thinks is important in life.

These four qualities develop through every stage of life and reinforce each other. However, some are especially important for children to develop during certain stages to lay the groundwork for successful development in the next. For instance, learning self-regulation in the preschool years supports children in acquiring academic knowledge and skills throughout their schooling. Developing healthy mindsets becomes especially important during the middle school years, while deciding one’s values is an important task during middle adolescence, beginning at about the age of 15.

## THREE “KEY FACTORS” TO SUCCESS

The report identifies three desired outcomes of youth development, the “key factors” to life success:

**Agency**, shaping the course of one’s life rather than simply reacting to external forces.

**Integrated identity**, a strong sense of who one is, which provides an internal compass for actively making decisions consistent with one’s values, beliefs and goals.

**Competencies**, the abilities to be productive, effective and adaptable to the demands of different settings.

## WHAT ADULTS CAN DO

Children learn through experiences, including social interactions, and by reflecting on those experiences to make meaning of them. These experiences and reflections are most valuable for development when they take place amid sustained and supportive relationships between children and adults, as well as among peers.

Adults must build the relationships and create the experiences that lead to healthy development. They can do so by selecting experiences appropriate for children's developmental level and that consider all of the foundational components. Experiences must also be both active and reflective. Active developmental experiences are moments when children:

- **Encounter** both novel situations and more capable peers and adults who serve as role models;
- **Tinker**, i.e., test, discover, design, puzzle, build, experiment, create, play and imagine;
- **Choose** activities, companions, goals and ways of presenting oneself;
- **Practice** and receive feedback that helps them develop competence; and
- **Contribute** to the world in ways that they find meaningful and that others value.

Reflective developmental experiences, which help young people solidify what they have learned and make sense of their experiences, are moments when children:

- **Describe and evaluate** their lives, feelings, thoughts and experiences;
- **Connect** new experiences and ideas to what they already know;

- **Envision** themselves in the future, seeing both positive images of what they want to become and negative images of what they want to avoid becoming; and
- **Integrate** the insights, skills or other lessons from an experience into a larger sense of themselves.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND RESEARCH

All those who interact with children, from parents through classroom teachers and afterschool leaders, can benefit from support and current information on youth development. For professionals, a variety of supports such as curricula and professional development are needed for creating active and reflective developmental experiences for children. They also require strategies to address the special challenges facing many disadvantaged children, such as exposure to toxic stress, which can interfere with self-regulation and learning. Policies should aim to ensure that all children have consistent, supportive relationships and an abundance of developmental experiences through the arts, sports or other activities — inside and outside of school. Policies that promote all of the foundational components would help to create conditions that foster both the learning of academic content and the development of young people more holistically, better preparing them for a productive, fulfilling adulthood.

The report also raises a number of important questions for further research, such as:

- What practices and strategies best promote the development of identity and agency?
- If children seem to be falling behind in their development, how can we best intervene?
- How might practices in one setting (such as home or school) counteract negative developmental influences in another setting?
- How can the key factors and foundational components best be measured for different purposes?

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Download the full report online at [wallacefoundation.org](http://wallacefoundation.org) and [ccsr.uchicago.edu](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu)

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