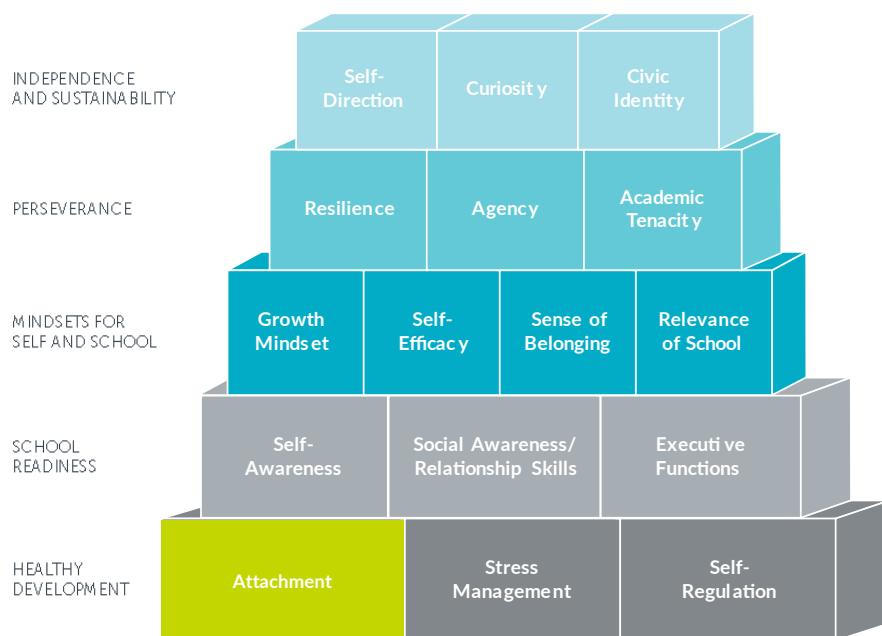


Relationships as the Foundation



The Building Blocks for Learning is a framework for healthy student development that names the skills and mindsets critical for success at school and beyond. All of the “blocks” develop in an interdependent and integrated way, with lower-order blocks being foundational.

Relationships play a key role in student skill and mindset development, beginning with the most foundational blocks of **attachment**, stress management and self-regulation, and all of the skills and mindsets above them. Early in life, an infant's relationship with primary caregivers is a critical foundation. Relationships in infancy begin to build brain architecture through reciprocal interactions, called “**serve and return**” interactions.

Attachment: A deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time, context and space. Attachment (1) provides feelings of security so that children can explore freely and (2) forms the basis for socializing children.

In these interactions, a baby “serves” a sound or a gesture to an adult, to which they typically “return” an action like a smile, hug, or vocalization. Through these back-and-forth interactions, neural connections are built and strengthened to support the development of communication and social skills. When a caring adult is sensitive and responsive to a child's signals and needs, it lays the foundation of both healthy brain architecture and a **secure attachment** that provides the child with a “safe base” from which to learn and explore, as well as return to for comfort and reassurance in times of anxiety and stress.

On the other hand, an **insecure attachment** can be created by interactions with unresponsive or hostile adults, unpredictability, adult mental illness, or situations of abuse or trauma. Children with insecure attachments may show clinginess, attention seeking, avoidance of caretakers in times of stress, or difficulty showing warmth and affection. The absence of a responsive relationship limits the sensory input and integration that builds interconnected brain architecture and also activates a stress response that can negatively impact the development of Building Blocks skills and mindsets.

While teachers and other adults will not form these same levels of attachment with individual students, the characteristics of supportive early interactions are mirrored in **positive developmental relationships**, such as those between educators and students. Positive developmental relationships are characterized by (1) an enduring emotional attachment, (2) shared, joint activity, (3) progressive complexity and (4) balance of power that shifts from the adult to the child. The promise of the Building Blocks framework is that it articulates malleable skills – they can be taught and developed in all learners, with the right supports. Through a trusting relationship with an attuned and responsive adult as the cornerstone of all development, caring adults can support students from any starting point.

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