

The ABCDE of Learners' Needs

Autonomy: "I want to have a say in what happens to me."

A

Autonomy is the need for independence and self-determination; the ability to make choices, to create, to explore, and to express oneself freely; to have sufficient space, to move around, and to feel unrestricted in determining choices and free will. To achieve this, students need independence, options, choices, autonomy, and liberty in both physical and psychological aspects. Freedom in a school setting can be as basic as getting a drink when you need it, walking down the hall at your own pace, or choosing partners for an activity.

Belonging: "I want to feel connected to and valued by those around me."

B

Belonging is our psychological need to love and care for others and to believe that we are loved and cared for in family relationships, friendships, and working relationships. To belong, we must connect with people by cooperating, caring, sharing, and being involved. In school settings, students need to feel accepted by classmates and adults, know they are making a worthwhile contribution, and feel their presence is valuable to the people in this setting who are important to them. To achieve this, students need to have a role that is relevant and important to them as an individual student, as well as to a group. Students who feel they do not belong are experiencing an unmet need that can extend to behavior, learning, and academic difficulties.

Competence: "I want to feel a sense of significance, worth, and accomplishment."

C

Competence is defined by the need to be able, to be capable. For students to feel self-worth, they need a sense of empowerment, worthiness, self-efficacy, and achievement. It is an inner sense of achievement, accomplishment, pride, importance, and self-esteem and an outer sense of being heard and respected and feeling competent and attaining recognition. Competence in a school setting may be defined by the student's ability to make choices and be an equal contributor in learning.

Developmental Appropriateness: "I can only do what my brain and body are ready to do."

D

Human development research indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur throughout the human lifespan. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development – physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. Knowledge of typical development of learners within the age span served by the program provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences.

Engagement: "I want to have fun and be actively involved."

E

Fun is a basic need that all humans seek to meet daily, and it is "evolution's reward for learning." Fun can happen through play and laughter, but humans also derive pleasure from active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, and evaluation. To meet the need for engagement in schools, students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks.