



Understanding “The House” (Bolick, 2000)

- Think of a house—built upon a strong foundation, the house stands tall, through sunshine and rain, calm and storm. It may sway in the breeze, but it doesn’t crumble. Its roof is the ultimate indication that things are “holding up.”
- Similarly, the overt behavior of a person rests upon the “foundation” and “stories” of development. To the extent that each level is “strong enough,” the person bends but doesn’t break when stressors occur. Strengths at one level help to compensate for glitches at another. Holes in the roof (overt behavior) can be understood by examining the integrity of the levels below.
- Within this model of human development, effective modifications and interventions are derived from our understanding of the strengths and challenges of each level (or domain) of development.
- In the beginning, there is **sensorimotor**. Infants are exquisitely designed to take in, explore, and understand a myriad of sensory data. Along the way, they also begin to act on the world. Their actions represent the earliest efforts at cognition—for how can we understand the world around us if we don’t observe the effects of our own actions?
- As infants become more skilled in perceiving and acting upon the world, they begin to discover how to **regulate** their own responses. **Self-regulation** allows the baby to begin to establish control over the “4 A’s”—arousal/alertness, attention, activity, and affect. Self-

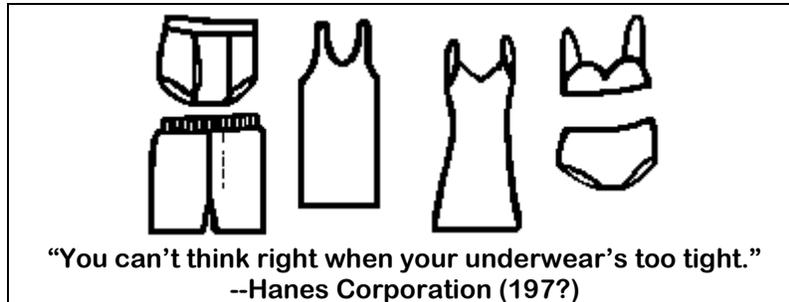
regulation and **adaptability** work hand in hand to support one's ability to be comfortable and to participate in the situation at hand.

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By elementary school, most students are able to manage sensorimotor and self-regulatory processes with relative ease. They don't have to think to screen out irrelevant sounds, sights, or feels. They don't have to think to move through space. They don't have to exert inordinate effort to manage their actions/behavior in familiar situations. In other words, most of these functions are now "underground," managed by lower level brain functions.

- As babies become more comfortable and settled in the world around them, they can devote their "brainpower" to the next level of development—that of **communication**. Remember that communication begins long before a baby utters his/her first word. But also remember that communication depends upon the ability to perceive the sights, sounds, and touches of the communicative behavior of others. It depends upon the ability to execute motor acts such as shifting eye gaze, smiling, cooing, and eventually vocalizing. It depends upon the ability to regulate arousal, attention, activity, and affect well enough to send and receive communicative information.
- Effective communication also aids sensorimotor processing and regulation. It allows us to let others know that we need help. It allows others to alert us to important incoming information. It allows them to explain input that confuses us. It allows them to soothe us when we cannot soothe ourselves. In fact, communication is one of the most efficient coping strategies available to human beings.
- **Cognition** is knowing. It includes our fund of information about the world. It includes our knowledge and mastery of problem solving skills. It includes the executive functions--our capacity to initiate, sustain, inhibit, and shift in our

problem solving efforts and to remember what we're trying to accomplish even as we move toward the goal.



- **Cognition** shares a reciprocal relationship with the other floors of the House, though. For example, “tight underwear” may not be such a constraint when we’re fascinated with what we’re doing. On the other hand, problems in filtering out sound/sight/smell may interfere dramatically when we’re learning a new, difficult, and less intriguing task. Similarly, “thinking” and “planning” may help a student overcome constraints in communication in some circumstances. However, constraints in communication can also interfere with the acquisition of knowledge and skill.
- **Social competence** refers to our growing ability to interact reciprocally with others, to understand their state of mind, and to govern our behavior on the basis of developmental or societal rules and expectations. Social competence depends upon emerging **emotional competence**. For how can we understand the feelings and thoughts of others if we are unable to identify and understand our own? And how can we govern our behavior according to rules if we are not able to modulate our emotions? Not surprisingly, social and emotional competence are inextricably intertwined with all other domains of development.
- **Overt behavior**, then, is determined by the contributions of each of these domains to the student’s functioning at any moment in time.