The evidence is extensive that it is important for young children to have an interest in learning and that this interest is even more crucial to early school success than knowing specific letters, shapes, and numbers. “Learning” for children is not grounded in the more formal “teacher-learner-classroom” context that school-age children experience. Rather, preschool children learn constantly through their relationships, their interactions with materials, and all of their daily experiences. All settings in which young children are cared for need to provide the materials, physical environments, and adult support that encourage curiosity, investment in and persistence at a challenging task, and energy; all indicate that young children are acquiring appropriate attributes for undertaking later academic work. Young children actually gain pleasure from interacting with different situations to the extent that they result in attaining a desired outcome. This sense of mastery is an important aspect of their further motivation to learn.

Preschool children are not yet formally committed to “learning,” nor do they cognitively recognize that they are “learning” as they construct new knowledge from their ongoing experiences. However, healthy preschool children learn constantly through their relationships, observations, and daily experiences. Well-developing preschool children will constantly be engaged in activities from which they will learn. Children will be physically and psychologically able to be open to new information from the environment, to engage in interactive transactions with it, and to integrate the information into their current repertoire. Basically, the child must have an adequate energy level indicative of physical health and a feeling of psychological safety to be open to the continuous learning opportunities available in the immediate environment of daily experiences and interactions.

A preschool precursor to the more formal homework of the elementary years is exchanges between parents and preschools concerning developmentally appropriate activities. These can enable families at home to support curricular areas and emphases in school. Sharing ideas for activities and children’s responses to experiencing them both at home and in school can be a harmonious way for teachers and parents to interact and contribute to children’s sense of adults’ mutual investment in their learning.

In recent years, approaches to early literacy have emerged to ensure children’s readiness for learning to read and school achievement. Although there are a variety of research-based approaches, always cited is the relationship between language—the degree of frequent and rich oral exchange in a
family; a child’s being read to—and the development of literacy skills (e.g., symbolic representation). Specifically, reading to young children represents a major form of language enrichment and helps with the development of phonemic awareness (how sounds combine to form words), as does extending involvement with reading through library visits and similar activities.

Motivation to Mastery

The child responds to new experiences with curiosity and energy, resulting in the pleasure of mastering new learning and skills.

Motivation is a significant factor in positive human development, and as with so many, has its foundation in the early childhood experience. “Motivation, the child’s ability to be activity involved with their environment ... is a critical aspect of competence and resilience” (Bloom & Wachs, 2005, p. 23). To develop competence (already described as fundamental in the development of successful school-age children and adolescents), motivational systems must be in place. Motivation is encouraged by the close and supportive relationships that are described throughout this book, in interaction with the child’s basic temperament. Motivation thus leads to the need for mastery.

Mastery is “the drive to explore, manipulate, persist and derive pleasure in mastery-related behavior and achievement,” according to Robert White (as quoted in Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 152). Also referring to White, Masten and Coatsworth (1998) describe his “mastery motivation system” (p. 208) in human development as “readily observable in the inclination of young children to actively engage with the environment and to experience pleasure (feelings of efficacy) from effective interactions” (p. 208). Fortunately, most children feel that they can do what they are confronted with (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The ideal way to encourage mastery is through play, according to Erikson (e.g., Erikson, 1977; Roazen, 1997). “Play in childhood provides the infantile form of the human propensity to create model situations in which aspects of the past are re-lived, the present re-presented and renewed, and the future anticipated” (Erikson, 1977, p. 44). Enabling such mastery of a particularly difficult situation is part of the rationale for play therapy, although play’s role in enabling children to master their ongoing experience does not require a therapeutic frame to occur. All children can, and do, use play developmentally to help them in their overall developmental growth and strivings. The “arousal modulation” theory of play, which holds that stimuli from the external world motivate children to play (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005), further underscores the role of play in energizing and engaging children in productive transactions with their environment.

There are “dispositions” (e.g., Helm & Katz, 2001) that encourage engagement in learning that in turn lead to mastery. Such “dispositions” include curiosity. While temperamentally some children may be more inclined to approach new learning situations with energy and curiosity, adult support and offering of new and challenging activities (within the child’s ability to attain