

The Three Types of Motivational Agendas

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1.) **Active Exploratory Learning to Gain Mastery Skills in the World**

Traditionally called “play,” active exploratory learning serves as one of the foundational motivations guiding children’s activity. This motivational agenda is essentially a positive, pleasure-based, approach system that motivates the child toward active exploration and learning. It is based on the pleasure-pain motivational system of the Affect-Body-Arousal Axis and so represents a “bottom-up” motivational press that is sensitive to currently experienced physiological and affective states. The child is motivated to seek those experiences that result in pleasure (i.e., that signal a nurturing positive experience) and to avoid experiences that cause pain (i.e., that signal danger, injury, or toxins).

2.) **Task-Oriented and Goal-Directed Behavior to Acquire Resources**

Traditionally called “work,” task-oriented/goal-directed activity is the primary motivational system guiding the activity of most adults. Task-Oriented/Goal-Directed motivation is based on the ability of our higher-order frontal lobe executive functions to suppress (inhibit) the more directly captivating pleasure-pain motivational agendas of the Affective-Body-Arousal Axis, which allows us to tolerate currently experienced discomfort in order to achieve longer-term goals (a process referred to as “impulse control,” “self-control,” and the “delay of gratification”). As children develop increasing capacity for frontal lobe inhibition of the Affective-Body-Arousal Axis, they become better able to organize and productively direct their goal-directed activity, and to delay their immediate gratification of impulses in the service of achieving longer-range and/or more abstract goals.

3.) **Relationship Motivations**

Young children are entirely dependent on the nurturing care of adults for survival. The most basic motivational agenda of all children is therefore to obtain this nurturing relationship with an adult caregiver. The intertwined relationship systems of Attachment and Intersubjectivity (Psychological Connection) are particularly important motivating systems for children because of children’s high level of vulnerability and dependence.

Of the three motivational agendas, **relationship motivations take precedence**. The other two motivational systems will not fully activate as long as relationship motivations are active. Within an evolutionary context, children who explore the world before establishing a secure relationship with an adult caregiver are vulnerable to predators and other environmental dangers. Likewise, children who commit the focused attention necessary for task-oriented and goal-directed activity before they have established a secure relationship with a supervising adult will lose their sensitivity to potential environmental cues of danger, so that they too will become vulnerable to the dangers of the world.

The primary motivational agenda for children is to establish secure and nurturing relationships. The other motivational agendas will not fully activate as long as the relationship motivations for Attachment and for Psychological Connection are active.