

Gianna Cassetta AND Margaret Wilson



the caring teacher

Sample pages

Strategies for
Working Through
Our Own Difficulties
with Students

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How Much Should We Care About Each Other?

Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to the error that counts.

Nikki Giovanni
*Black Feelings,
Black Talk, Black Judgement*

You may say to yourself, as have I and many teachers I've met, supervised, and coached over the years, "We're just human—we can't care for everyone." At first glance, this statement seems eminently reasonable. It is just human to like some children more than others, just as we like some adults more than others. Some adults we choose to spend the rest of our lives with, others we interact with as pleasant acquaintances, and others we avoid completely. We have the parents we love meeting with and others who make us want to call in sick to avoid. We have the colleagues we go to dinner with and the others we pretend we don't see when we pass them in the supermarket. It's absolutely normal.

Is it normal to feel less affection for the child who doesn't seem to like us? For the child who hurts others, either physically or through words? For the child who has habits or opinions we find distasteful? Yes, it's normal.

It's normal, but it has a hefty price for the child. The actions we don't take (not greeting a child warmly; not being eager to learn who she is, what she cares about and wants to know, and what information, experiences, and culture she brings into the classroom; and not figuring out how to help that child transcend difficulty) and the actions we do take because we feel it is our right (showing disdain for a child, using punishment to motivate a child, limiting a child's opportunity for engagement and agency in her learning) create a cage around that child, restraining her from exploring the world and becoming a fully realized human being in the classroom and the school community.

And our actions carry a price for us too. They limit us. They isolate us from the children and families we could be connected to, and when the actions become part of

our daily interactions with others, they define us as angry, frightened, overwhelmed, and uncertain.

As professionals who have chosen to work with children, we must ask ourselves these questions: How can we be OK with liking many of our students so much less than others? How can we be OK with feeling defeated by them, feeling challenged or threatened, or ignoring them?

These can be uncomfortable questions. But the uncomfortable questions are often the most salient ones to ask ourselves. If we choose to self-monitor, to be metacognitive, to really listen to our thoughts and feelings, we can allow the discomfort to tell us we have some important work to do.

The reality is that something's not working in schools; many of us would say a lot isn't working. Educators, teachers especially, aren't held in particularly high esteem in our country, and the salaries, evaluation practices, and public comments are evidence of that. It's easy to follow the momentum of that negativity, which often leaves us feeling like victims of a system rather than agents of change. But if we look at the data—whether it is teacher turnover data, student suspension data, or school-to-prison pipeline data—we know that redefining ourselves as agents of change is the only way we are going to fix things.

This book's intention is to create space and a pathway for you to find your way to that agency, which will result in caring relationships between you and your students.

Considering How Relationships Impact Children's Capacity to Learn

One of Margaret's experiences as a coach illuminates the negative downward spiral that comes from not reckoning with our feelings. Once she was observing a third-grade teacher in action. All year she had heard from Derek about how challenging his class was and how one student in particular, Allen, was awful—disrespectful, impossible, and unmotivated. So Margaret went to watch. The lesson was a disaster. No sooner had Derek started to speak than Allen interrupted him to ask, "Why are we doing this? This is pointless."

Derek looked at him with disgust and maybe a little fear, apparently realizing that little he did or said would change the child's behavior, and said, "Stop interrupting." In that moment, Allen stopped, but he made his feelings known in other ways—through loud sighs, eye rolls, and under-the-breath comments. But then

he interrupted again a few minutes later with another sarcastic comment. And so it continued. Derek was able to get the directions out in fits and starts, and most students finally started on their assignment, but Allen never did. Instead he sat slouched in a posture universally recognized as meaning, “You can’t make me do this,” and responded with increasing defiance to the teacher’s threats of what was going to happen if he didn’t get to work. From this observation, several things were apparent: (1) Derek appeared to be right that this child demonstrated behaviors that are often described as problematic in the classroom setting, (2) Derek did not like the child, and (3) the child absolutely knew it.

And then, serendipitously, the next day Margaret had the chance to see the same child and class with a different teacher, Shelly, who was doing a demonstration lesson. Shelly had taught many of the students, including Allen, the year before. She had built strong relationships with them, and it was evident from the moment she sat in front of them that she cared for them—Allen in particular. Her feelings were as obvious as those of the teacher the day before—she smiled warmly, greeted them, hugged Allen and a few others, and then told them she had picked out a book especially for them. She said she knew they would love it, and she winked at Allen as if to say, “I thought of you especially when I picked it out.” And for an hour, that class, including Allen, looked like different students from the ones the day before. They were engaged, cooperative, and smiling, even though, as Shelly would later admit she regretted, she kept them sitting on the carpet with her for an hour, far longer than was appropriate for third graders.

We have had too much experience in the real world to think that one teacher’s ability to care for Allen explained all the difference between these two classrooms or that learning to like a student is some type of magic cure for all of that student’s troubles. Obviously, there was more at play here than how Shelly felt about her students. Her lesson was strong and addressed bullying, a topic Allen and his classmates were all concerned about, in a really interesting way. She had indeed chosen a great book. Her lesson was engaging and interactive as well.

We are not throwing stones at Derek; Allen’s behaviors could be challenging. Even Shelly, who cared for him a great deal, knew this. Learning was not easy for him, and so planning lessons that included him and created an adjusted pathway on which he could be successful took time and effort. He required frequent check-ins to stay connected emotionally and checks for understanding to stay connected intellectually. His teacher had to consider which seating locations, resources, and support structures Allen needed on a daily, if not hourly, basis. If all of those things

weren't going right, he'd let his teacher know in a way that was not polite. And for some teachers, like Derek, that reality made Allen unlikeable.

That reality raises important questions for any of us who work directly with children. What is it that makes us feel more connection to some students than to others? Is it biases, preconceptions, or cultural preferences? Is it expectations about good versus bad behavior? Is it fear of what others (administrators, colleagues) will think or say if our class looks out of control? In what ways do we define the role of the teacher, and what boundaries separate what we see as our responsibility and what we see as out of our hands? Is it our job to work through the mind-sets and past experiences that inhibit our sense of connection? How much should we care about each other?

Our answer is that we have to care a lot about all of the children we teach. So much so that the trappings from performance stress to behavioral expectations to cultural superiority are worth examining and overcoming. We have to care enough so that all children who are in our classrooms, especially the ones who *feel* hardest to like, know without a doubt that we care about them.

In the words of Rita Pierson, in her famous TED talk "Every Child Needs a Champion," "Kids don't learn from people they don't like" (2013). Research supports this assertion. Secure relationships with children allow them to safely explore and engage in challenging learning tasks, which improves children's competence and autonomy (Birch and Ladd 1997; Pianta 1999). When students are in caring classroom communities with positive teacher-student relationships, they do better socially and academically (e.g., Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles 2003; Roorda et al. 2011; Watson and Battistich 2006).

The experience with Allen and many other experiences over the years have led us to believe that when we can focus on specific strategies to build and improve relationships with students, even the ones that seem the most challenging, we can find success with every student. Success doesn't mean perfection, but it does mean recognizing the ways in which every child can and does learn. And these daily successes make a difference—often a life-changing one.

Sadly, we have also come to the conclusion that the opposite is also true. When a teacher dislikes a child, no good can come from it. That year is most likely to be a lost one for the child, and when teachers feel that way year upon year, it can lead to even bigger losses.

We have to care enough so that all children who are in our classrooms, especially the ones who feel hardest to like, know without a doubt that we care about them.

We've written this book to show why we need to move past our initial reactions to students and act for their best interests as people, not just for the children who do what we say when we say it, not just for the ones who are easy to like, but for the ones who are hardest to understand and connect with. While we can't be responsible for everything that happens in a child's life, we are responsible for how our interactions in the school building make them feel about themselves. We have to learn to appreciate and care for these students. We can't accept that there will be some students each year that we just won't connect with. That can't be defined as our normal. So if that isn't our normal, it's worth examining what is.

Facing the Challenge of Caring for Every Child

It is easy to have compassion for students we like. One student who stands out in my mind is Modric. Modric came to our school as a first grader and remained until he graduated from eighth grade. His parents had sent him from a civil war in his homeland to a safer life with a more financially stable aunt and uncle in the United States. He'd come alone; his mother and father, older siblings, and baby twin sisters remained behind. Modric was exceptional—polite, witty, affectionate, hardworking, wide-eyed, and adorable. Every adult loved him. And we loved him even more when we learned that he behaved so exceptionally even though he endured abuse and neglect in his new home. On several occasions, he came to school with open wounds that required numerous stitches. His teeth were rotting to the point of causing severe discomfort that interfered with his eating. His clothes were unwashed. But the staff never hesitated to act. We worked with social workers from his open case through child welfare services and collaborated on support. We did regular home visits. We arranged dental services. We bought him new clothes. By the time he left us, he was safe, healthy, and off to a sought-after high school. It made us feel great to help Modric, and he made it so easy with his resilient, bubbly personality and his darling big brown eyes.

New York Times Magazine's "Ethicist" columnist Randy Cohen has said, "In ethics, cuteness doesn't count" (2009). Yet, for so many of us, the children like Modric, who exhibit cuteness and other desirable qualities, are the ones who get our help, rather than the ones we dislike. But concepts like cuteness and desirable qualities are complex. Cuteness by whose standards? Desirable qualities according to whose cultural norms?

Our relationships with children are often shaped by preconceptions about culture, race, and gender but also sometimes just by what we have been socialized in our own upbringings to expect from them. In my second year of teaching I taught a group of thirty-six fifth and sixth graders chock-full of challenging academic and social needs. In hindsight it was both good and bad to be in this situation so early in my career. I had enough idealism, energy, and creativity to make it positive for most of the students but was green enough to let some students not only slip through the cracks but get kicked out the door, which I either didn't notice or didn't think twice about. Finn was one such student, one of five siblings who had been placed in a foster home. He was in his fifth school in four years because of his many foster home placements, and as I soon found out, his mom took back all of the other siblings except Finn because he was too "difficult." And was he ever. Labeled as "persistently disruptive," he's the only student who ever threatened to kill me (repeatedly), and he got into fights with other students on a daily basis. I empathized with his mom, not him. Of course he was too difficult for her. He was too difficult for any of us. Within weeks, we had started the procedures to have him moved to a self-contained special education classroom at another school.

I now imagine what it must have been like for Finn. Ten years old, just a small child, cast off yet again. Separated from his family, knowing his mother did not want him, bouncing through a series of strange new homes where he might not always have been treated well. Going from school to school where the children were strangers, the teachers unfamiliar, and he found out yet again that he didn't belong. I imagine how alone, terrified, and angry he must have felt.

But, at the time, I didn't think of any of that. The only thing I thought about, as he well knew, was getting rid of him. Within three months of his arrival, he was gone, and I could get to the work that I had defined as my job. At that time, students like Finn were obstacles to be removed, not individuals to whom I was accountable.

It is possible that even with my greatest efforts, my relationship with Finn might never have become truly close, like it was with Modric, and that would be OK. While we might not develop lifelong relationships with every child, we can nurture genuine and consistent relationships that make each student feel safe, supported, and cared for and make ourselves feel competent, knowing that our work has meaning.

Rethinking the Word *Normal*

"It's not *normal* for a teacher to have to deal with this. Our job is to teach the content areas, not to deal with society's problems." How often have you said or heard something like that?

I keep returning to the word *normal* because I hear it all the time. The concept of normal came to us courtesy of a nineteenth-century scientist studying astronomy, Adolphe Quetelet. Quetelet wanted to uncover objective principles of astronomy through identifying averages in measurements (Rose 2016), which he did. He then wondered if he could use the same mathematical concept of averages to identify the ideal in humans and establish expectations for human behavior.

A very appealing concept. Tidy. Predictive. And wrong, especially in regard to human behavior. First, what's average or normal changes. Once women and people of color couldn't vote, gay couples couldn't marry or adopt, and literacy was a privilege of the rich. We're pretty comfortable accepting *normal* as a historical construct, something that changes over long spans of time, but the closer the context comes to our own, the more we sometimes find ourselves using *normal* and *abnormal* to create boundaries between ourselves and those who make us uncomfortable. Of course, identifying behaviors that aren't typical is useful, but not when we're using that information only to judge and dismiss.

When we say the word *normal*, we're categorizing, and when we say, "This isn't *normal*," to describe one of our students, what we're really saying is that we don't feel up to the challenges presented by that child. Teachers often feel beleaguered because the expectations of their job don't feel *normal*. And they're not wrong: teacher training doesn't usually live up to the demands of actually being a teacher. Those of us working with kids right now need help getting the tools and understandings we need to be successful today. Let's start by understanding how the makeup of our brains can influence how we view and interact with children.

Examining Our Biases

In classrooms, intentionally or not, we sometimes use students as scapegoats, to allow us to cast off discomfort with ourselves and our practice and to avoid confronting our own weaknesses and insecurities. In Western thought, Hegel described this as the creation of the Other (Kain 1943), or someone who is different from us in some fundamental, lesser, and inferior way, such as values, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, species, or sexuality. The Other is our scapegoat, which in common psychology is the person or people held to blame for a multitude of problems for which they are not responsible. It has roots in ancient religions, in which goats were killed, symbolically carrying away the sins of the community.

Casting children as scapegoats allows us to steal power, to be supreme by saying to some children, "You can't participate; you can't have the rights that some people in

this community have; your purpose is to be less than other, more valued members of this community.” When we allow for the creation of the Other in our classrooms, we reinforce a pattern of otherness in our society. This pattern of otherness doesn’t come from nowhere; it repeats itself because our brains’ conceptual networks lean into categorizing. Knowing this can help us correct it.

Changing Entrenched Negative Behaviors

Research has helped us understand that tension exists between two different locations of the brain. Most of us know that our primal brain, the amygdala, generates the immediate response to fear stimuli through fight, flight, or freeze. The amygdala has also emerged as a key region in unconscious-bias research. There are other parts of our brain involved as well, like the prefrontal cortex, which forms impressions and holds memories that cause us to say, “You are either part of my group or part of another.”

But we also know that other higher brain functions such as moral reasoning, logic, and critical thinking can override the fear responses and bias and help us to regulate our thoughts and our actions. The brain is the last organ in the human body to fully mature, and as it matures, repeated experiences create new circuitry, or neural pathways, in the brain. Those neural pathways can make our responses harsher or more harmonious—more prone to moral reasoning, logic, and critical thinking.

It is important to know that the pathways, however deeply developed, can be changed again with new repeated experiences. This is called neuroplasticity. We can disrupt and change ingrained behavior patterns—actually physically change the landscape of our brains—by making different choices over a period of time. So the choices we make today and tomorrow and the next day are critical to the choices we make later on. Imagine what we could do for children if we could teach them—not just tell them, but teach them—how to use this information. The body of research on neuroplasticity can help us, and them, expand the choices we make about our own human behavior beyond what it is today (Goleman 1995).

It is important to know that the pathways, however deeply developed, can be changed again with new repeated experiences.

Social and emotional learning is based in part on neuroscience and the belief that through repeated experiences we can help students develop grooves for positive,

euphonious ways of interacting in and with the world. The automatic or unconscious responses in our brains can remain thoughts; they do not need to control our actions. If we pause and identify how we feel, we can choose the most constructive action and seek out new information if needed. Too often, we are resistant to new information, to new schema, to a new way of looking at a familiar issue. But it's the act of being in a dialogue about that new stuff that develops our brains, making us more understanding, wiser, and ideally more connected and compassionate people.

There's no such thing as stasis in human development. We are always changing, but we truly learn only when we are willing to examine, discuss, and reflect on these changes. If we're going to take on the responsibility of teaching children, of helping them to see that they are works in progress—and if you are reading this book, you already have—then we have to recognize that we, too, are works in progress and need to live in the stance of learner. When we do that, we begin to open ourselves up to more joyful and fulfilling personal and professional lives.

Children learn behaviors through our intentional and direct teaching as well as through the behaviors we unintentionally model. Because of this, our responsibility for our own behavior is great. We want children to learn to be tolerant, empathetic, and inquisitive and to evolve as learners, thinkers, and people. But all too often, that's not what we teach.

A recent study entitled *Ready to Lead: A National Principal Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and Transform Schools* (DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland 2017) showed that while many believe that teaching children social and emotional competencies is indeed important, there isn't time. Unfortunately, schools rarely take on the work of teaching a child to learn and to grow as a person. In fact, since the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, even fewer educators feel they have time for social and emotional learning (SEL).

Growing into Compassion

Most of us, I think, not only want to develop compassion in our children but would like to believe we embody it ourselves. Daniel Goleman has written about the importance of compassion in being able to connect with others, for personal relationships, for workplace success, and to expand our worldview to include those who may be less fortunate than we are so that we can help. In an interview with Harvard Business Review (May, 2015), Goleman explains, "When you feel compassion, you feel distress when you witness someone else in distress—and because of that you want to help that person."

Compassion comes from the Latin word *compati*, meaning “to suffer with.” If you can extend yourself to suffer with someone, it is more likely that you will act on his behalf.

Melanie Joy has written, “The most effective way to distort reality is to deny it; if we tell ourselves there isn’t a problem, then we never have to worry about what to do about it. And the most effective way to deny a reality is to make it invisible” (2008, 139).

We are a country that extols diversity, but like that surface-level connection we get through social media, our passion for diversity sits at the surface too. Underneath the surface, we fear difference. If someone’s not in our group, it signals danger. Most of our fear is completely irrational and largely unexamined, but it is real nonetheless. We fear difference—ethnic or racial difference, economic difference, sexual-orientation difference, gender difference, religious difference, political difference, and the list goes on. Fear often manifests itself as anger; remember fight, flight, or freeze. Self-awareness is a competency many of us struggle with, so oftentimes, we don’t even recognize that a fear response is impacting our behavior, manifesting as anger, and ending up very much in the driver’s seat.

With that gap in social and emotional competence (if we aren’t self-aware, we can’t self-manage very well), we allow fear to block the possibility of connection or compassion and often find ourselves in us-versus-them situations. Whomever we end up against, we put great effort into minimizing their problems and perspectives, and eventually they become invisible to us. They just aren’t real enough to deal with. This is a cycle we can stop with a commitment to meeting the fundamental needs of our students and making the time for social and emotional learning.

Recognizing Schools’ Institutional Bias

I’d be doing a real injustice to children if I led you to believe that the creation of the Other existed only in the brain. Because of bias, we’ve created institutions that reflect and enact it on people. This kind of institutionalized othering is called institutional bias. Even if we can’t escape it, we can certainly take responsibility for recognizing it and our role in upholding it.

Institutional bias has detrimental effects on a very specific portion of the student population. Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2012 reveal that students of color made up more than 45 percent of the K–12 student population (Aud et al. 2012). Roughly 80 percent of teachers are white. Whether we have all come to realize it or not, we each bring deep and often unconscious biases, preferences, and cultural norms and expectations with us to the classroom and it plays out for students in very notable ways.

In our country, black children are three times as likely to be suspended as white children. Each of us who works with children bears responsibility for confronting that disparity of treatment between the children who look like most of us and the children who do not. Look at the statistics in the box. What do they say about the bias we carry within ourselves as teachers?

The Oxford Reference website defines *institutional bias* as a “tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favored and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms.” For example, in a 2015 *New York Times* article analyzing statistical evidence, Sendhil Mullainathan, a professor of economics at Harvard, identified the institutional bias in the disproportionate rate of police killings of black men in America. Here is his take, in brief: Individual police bias might impact the number of killings, but if you somehow removed the individual bias, institutional bias would remain. There would still be suspect descriptions, which overwhelmingly finger black males; police officers are most frequently placed in a neighborhood with more black people; an overwhelming majority of blacks in the United States live in poverty, and there is more violent crime in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, leading to more police interactions; policy often dictates that police officers pursue drug dealers rather than users, and dealers are more often black and users more often not. Individuals are responsible for individual bias. But these structural realities are no more the responsibility of individual police officers than of all of us living in the United States who are either uninformed or informed and choose to look the other way.

If you are asking, “What does this have to do with my work as a teacher?” here is the simple answer: If we don’t see the institutional conditions that impede the Other, then we can’t understand their experiences or create equitable learning environments for them. If we don’t see the institutional conditions that impede

- Black children represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but 48 percent of black preschool children receive more than one out-of-school suspension.
 - Black students are nearly four times more likely to be suspended and nearly twice as likely to be expelled as white students.
- Black boys are about three times more likely (20 percent) to receive an out-of-school suspension than white boys (6 percent).
- Black girls are six times more likely (12 percent) to receive an out-of-school suspension than white girls (2 percent).

Source: Civil Rights Data Collection (U.S. Department of Education 2016)

children, we are led into misunderstandings that we need to fix students instead of fixing the conditions that marginalize students—and the fixing-children mind-set and teaching-children mind-set oppose each other. As participants in educational institutions, who bring our own biases into the classroom, we need to examine and own our role in maintaining its racist practices.

Cultivating Our Willingness to Help

The reality is, not all children are Modric, and there are plenty of Finns in the classroom mix. There are some students whom, from the moment we meet them, we don't like. There's just something about them that puts us off that we can't quite put our fingers on. Other times, our dislike grows as a particular student challenges us.

The lie “I care about all my students” is similar to the lie “I don’t see color.” Both statements seek to bury uncomfortable or difficult feelings and make us perpetually ineffective at meeting students’ needs. The lie isn’t always intentional, as it is one we are socialized to tell. We have grown to believe it as truth, but our behavior often says otherwise.

Every now and then in a planning session, I’ll meet a teacher who’s bold enough to ask a question that makes everyone else stare into their computer screens as if they haven’t heard. “What about the kid who just refuses to get with the program? You know, the one who tells the other kids their mothers suck, who does no work, and whom nothing works for?”

At this point I have a sincere but canned response to such questions: “I don’t believe there is a single child whom nothing works for; it’s a matter of finding the right approach. And I’d be more than happy to help you think through your future work with that child after this particular meeting ends. If you are willing to try out a few different strategies, I know we will eventually land on the right one.”

But no one ever has taken me up on my offer. When we get to the point when we are willing to ask that kind of question out loud, we are without compassion for the child. And that can only mean we have an unhappy teacher and an unhappy student spiraling to a bad place. That can only mean failure on both ends. I’ve seen that happen enough times to know it well. I’ve been there myself. But this is the work I am committed to doing, and that I am inviting you to do too, so that none of us remains stuck in such a destructive place.

Planning for students to become people who know they are meaningful members of the school community, who are competent, and who are autonomous requires

that we have compassion for each and every student—but especially for the student who is most unlikeable to us. We have all met them, have all taught them, and at times it seems like those children are demanding that we have heroic levels of patience and persistence. We really start to lose it when we realize that patience and persistence are not enough. We can't tolerate it when being who we are in this moment is not enough.

I'm suggesting that we shift our paradigm about how children can and should fit into the structure of a classroom community. Many of us expect children to conform to the model we envision. This often seems like expecting a square peg to fit in a round hole. Just because many children can do it, it doesn't mean everyone should be expected to. Instead we should be thinking about how to make our instruction, both social and academic, conform to student needs.

As we better understand our own social and emotional needs, we can analyze more deeply why we react as we do to challenging students.

Our book lays out multiple pathways for you to show students that you care, through revisions to current practice. The path you take depends on what your students need and what you feel ready to take on. To start, we have to become aware of how we're feeling about these students and wrestle with those feelings, however uncomfortable they are. Without that step, we won't have the motivation to go further. That's why we've created space for you to explore why denying your negative feelings works against your students and

the work you do with them, and we offer specific strategies for reflecting on how you really feel about students.

We also have to develop more knowledge and understanding of these children and ourselves. As we better understand our own social and emotional needs, we can analyze more deeply why we react as we do to challenging students. Further, understanding how these needs influence students and their behavior helps us better understand them and make a plan for helping them.

We can use all this to analyze specifically what is going on between us and our students. We explore some of the reasons some children are so much harder for us to like than others. Again, confronting some of these truths, like the fact that we bring a host of biases with us into our classrooms, can be challenging, but it is necessary if we are going to make a change.

Finally, we have to figure out what to do with all these newfound feelings and knowledge! We'll help you learn how to actively develop compassion for these

students. We'll also set out strategies for how to see them as more lovable by meeting their basic needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Taking on the challenges this book addresses takes courage and hard work. As with most aspects of teaching, there is no one right answer, no magic bullet. But we are confident that the discomfort you might feel as you read this book and examine your feelings and the struggles you encounter as you try to understand these students and how to help them will be worth it. Gradually, you will begin to see changes in yourself and your students that will allow you to be a compassionate and effective teacher for all students. As we say later in the book about children, we say to you now: We have high expectations of you. We believe you have the capacity to make others feel better than they feel right now. Figure 0.1 shows some ways to accomplish that. Now go to it.



Track Disciplinary Practices

Keep track:

Choose a two-week period of time where you will record all of your “disciplinary actions” and the children involved. These include classroom removals, phone calls home, loss of privileges, reprimands, or whatever you do in your classroom to give consequences.

Notes:

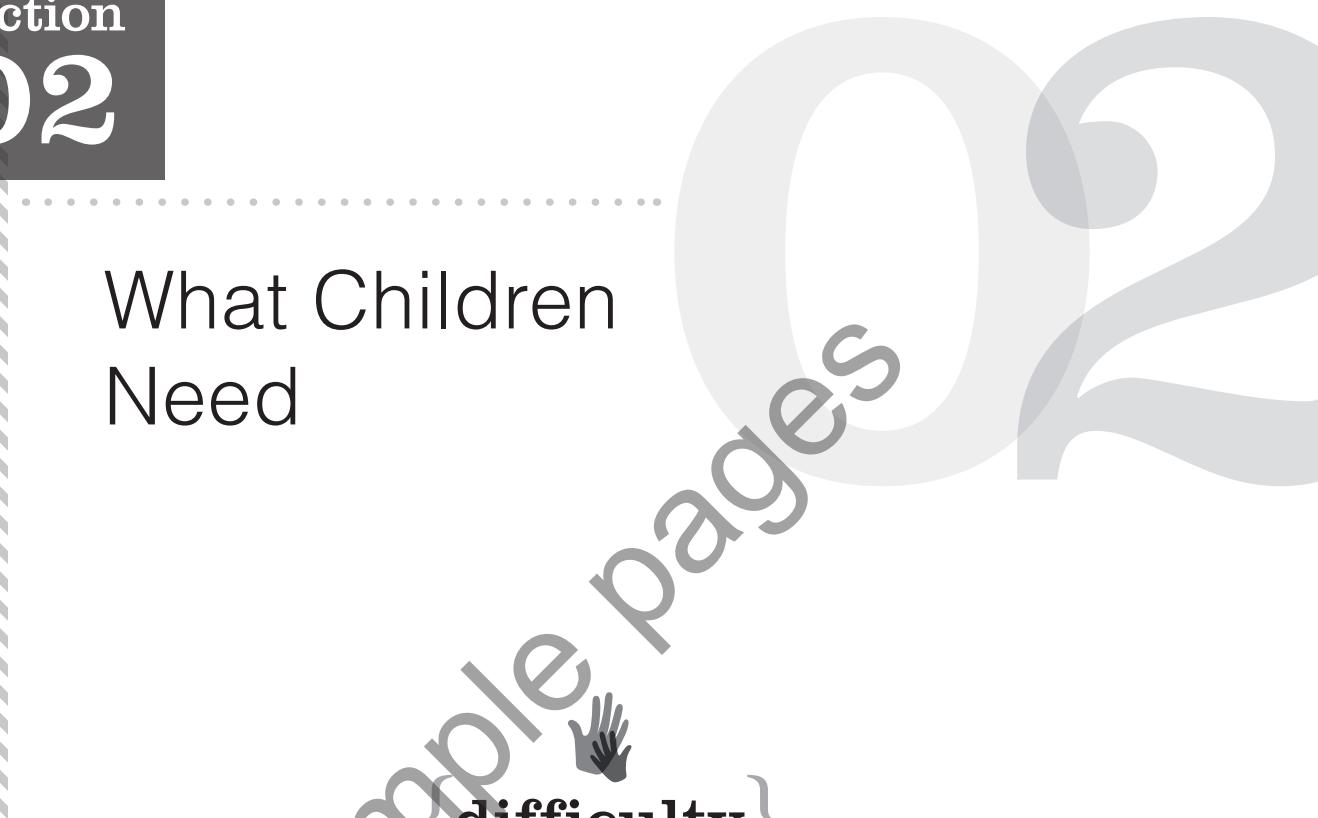
Reflect:

What do you notice about the children involved? Are there any patterns along race, gender, income, or other identity lines?

Synthesize:

What have you realized from this exercise that you didn’t realize before? Are there any implications for what you might do differently?

section 02



What Children Need

{difficulty}

Willy Was Marked by Trauma

Willy, a fifth grader, faced many challenges at home. These included lacking a safe environment and the necessary support and resources to succeed. He bore the scar of having been burned with a hot iron on his arm. Teachers at the school were aware of his situation but not sensitive to his needs. Because he came to school in unwashed clothes every day and carried an odor of not having bathed, children would routinely try to sit as far away from him as they could. Teachers would say, "You have Willy this year? Good luck with that." Eleven-year-old Willy spent most of his school day in a corner, rocking and mumbling under his breath. Behind academically, Willy seemed to put most of his attention on stealing and hoarding food. When children complained that their lunches and snacks were missing, the food could usually be found in Willy's bulging jacket.

As Willy's teacher, I wasn't really sure what to do for him. I'd made the necessary mandated reports, made some phone calls home, and even tried a few home visits, but despite my efforts, he remained the only child whose parents I never met. So I started with what I believed I could control, the one immediate thing I could do to help. I made sure the rest of the class didn't ostracize him. No students would be allowed to treat any other student like a pariah. By the time I taught Willy, I had learned that every child had to feel like he or she belonged there. While I wasn't perfect at it, I had a set of strategies that I used consistently, such as

- ➔ having daily morning meetings where students shared in numerous ways about their interests, families, and culture;
- ➔ allowing students to choose the topics they would write about;
- ➔ inviting families in for monthly celebrations;
- ➔ reading books and studying topics that would reflect student identities and interests;
- ➔ taking lots of field trips, both work- and play-related, to spend out-of-classroom time together so we would get to know each other as people; and
- ➔ allowing—as my former principal had recently reminded me, much to the custodian's dismay—all children to hand-paint the chairs and parts of the walls so the classroom really felt like it was theirs.

In addition to these steps I took for all children, I took specific steps to support Willy as well. I made sure that Willy was secure in having extra snacks to take home but did it discreetly so that the rest of the class wouldn't be resentful. I decided to have a conversation with my class without Willy there, so I could be very clear with them about my expectations for how we would treat him and take care of each other. It felt necessary at the time to do this in order to protect him, since he had a reputation that followed him from previous years in the school, and they'd witnessed him being treated as an outcast and had perhaps even participated in that behavior. In hindsight and with knowledge I've gained over the years, I realize now that he might have felt like a more important part of the community if I had had this conversation with him present and allowed him to witness the genuine willingness of his peers to be there for him. His inclusion in the conversation could have built upon the safe learning environment I was trying to create, where students would respect the multiple identities that existed in the classroom.

While I couldn't be sure of their previous participation, I could be sure that nine-, ten-, and eleven-year-olds could understand that Willy's behavior was a sign that things weren't happy or comfortable for him. We had to prove to him that we weren't going to make things worse and that maybe we could make things better. You might think this worked because that particular group of children was kind, but I've never taught children—ever—who when asked and expected to didn't rise to such an occasion with kindness and grace. Every student can always be taught and expected to

- ➔ greet classmates in the morning and say goodbye at the end of the day;
- ➔ smile and make eye contact;
- ➔ ask an alone student to sit with him or her at lunch, play at recess, join a work group, or partner up; and
- ➔ take the initiative and go sit next to an alone student during instruction, lunch, or work time.

Although at the time I was acting on instinct, I now understand why that went so well. When children are asked to be thoughtful of others and we give them the tools and expectation to meet that request, we also give them a sense of social and emotional competence. In the asking, we are saying to students, "I have high expectations of you. I believe you have the capacity to make others feel better than they feel right now. Here are some ways to accomplish that. Now go to it." The opportunity to try out being their best selves gives power to children. So, by instinct and accident, the students in my classroom learned to be capable of including Willy. And the actions of his classmates helped Willy begin to recognize that he could be someone that others wanted to be around. For anyone, but especially an outsider like Willy, being included builds not only relatedness but also competence. Willy came to feel not only that he was part of the group but that he belonged because he was capable of making connection.

As a teacher, I was learning to articulate and teach what children need and what we and our classroom and school community are responsible to give them:

- 1. Students should feel like they belong in their classroom communities.** They should know that their teachers and peers want them there and that they are important members of the community.

- 2. Students should feel socially, emotionally, and academically competent.** They should know and feel like they are good at multiple things. For example, I'm good at greeting people in the morning and making them smile; I'm a good editor; I'm a good mathematician; I'm good at getting to work right away and being productive; or I'm good at including others on the playground.
- 3. Students should feel autonomous.** They should understand and manage the multiple ways and times that they get to make decisions for themselves. These decisions might include what to make or study as a writer, what book to read, where to sit to read, and whether or not work alone or with peers.

And yet overlooking these basic needs—for all children, not just extreme cases like Willy—is too common.

All of us, no matter how good we are as teachers, sometimes have to work against a deficit model when we meet a particularly challenging student and sometimes even when we don't. Implicit bias based on race, class, gender, and perceptions of disability are so deeply embedded in our cultural fabric that we don't even realize we are seeing human variations as deficits that result in low expectations for students. These low expectations characterize a deficit model, which at its core means we define children based on perceived weaknesses rather than strengths.

There is a very clear and well-researched danger in this for children, especially for children of color and low-income children. Teacher expectations for such students are lower than for their affluent white counterparts (Aud et al. 2012). To compound the issue, findings also show that low teacher expectations are more of a predictor of student success than student motivation (DeMonte and Hanna 2014).



Focus on Assets, Not Deficits

An asset model focuses on what unique cultural capital, skills, or interests children bring with them. Figure 2.1 shows some language choices that reflect how we see a child. Note that the examples here describe Willy. Notice the power of shifting our language from a deficit model to an asset model.

SHIFTING FROM A DEFICIT MODEL TO AN ASSET MODEL FOR WILLY			
COMPETENCIES	Willy	Deficit Model	Asset Model
	Relationships with peers	Ignores and avoids contact with peers, but at times can be verbally explosive.	Shy and hesitant initially but willing to engage with peers with genuine invitations and wait time. Responds to sincerity and space. Sometimes giggles when being asked for or receiving advice during conferences. Appears to be delighted at genuine peer attention.
	Decision making	Incapable of making decisions. Always chooses opposition or inaction.	Is supported by a consistent offering of small, manageable decisions. Takes on more decision making with each success.

continues

**SHIFTING FROM A DEFICIT MODEL
TO AN ASSET MODEL FOR WILLY** *continued*

Willy	Deficit Model	Asset Model
COMPETENCIES	Relationships with teacher	Tunes out teacher directions. Avoids eye contact and one-on-one interactions. Mumbles and rocks during instruction.
	Academic competence	Extremely low productivity. Appears to struggle with or avoid all academic work. Avoids all group work.

Figure 2.1

While it's essential to do this kind of reflection, it's just as important to think about creating and maintaining the conditions where school becomes a place where all students are seen and appreciated for their assets—one where that experience is so positive that they become motivated participants. Relatedness, competence, and autonomy are the critical factors in both motivation and engagement to become self-determined individuals, and the absence of these factors can lead to a detrimental effect on individuals (Deci and Ryan 1985). Helping students realize these traits should be our goal every day and in every lesson throughout every school year. When we have authentic high expectations for students, and we create the conditions in which they can become motivated and engaged, we are creating an optimal environment for their success.

Recently, I was coaching a group of teachers to plan their first units of study for the school year in reading and writing. There was lots of talk about reading and writing standards, and the teachers were eager to jump to lessons and activities that met the standards, but I asked that they put those details on hold for a minute. I needed their unit planning to be informed by a more foundational question: *How is what is happening in my classroom each day supporting children's sense of belonging, social and academic competence, and autonomy?*

Relatedness, competence, and autonomy: these are the three fundamental psychological needs all humans share. Without feelings of relatedness, competence, or autonomy, we don't—we can't—live fulfilling lives. And yet so many children who pass through the doors of schools never have these needs met. In the largest student survey prior to 2009, researchers found that only 48 percent of grades 6–12 students felt teachers cared about them as individuals (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations 2008). Only 45 percent felt teachers cared if they were absent from school. Meeting these needs for children has to become central to our work, and we have to model for children what it looks like to be someone who values meeting those needs.

It is a challenge to ensure that each child feels relatedness, competence, and autonomy. And that makes sense. Each child is different and has unique needs. In Figure 2.2, I've listed some key qualities or behaviors that a teacher who values meeting the fundamental needs of students might have. These are the same qualities or behaviors we might need to demonstrate to other adults (parents, colleagues, loved ones) or experience ourselves in order to meet each other's needs.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

Need	Ways to Meet the Needs of Children	What This Might Sound Like
RELATEDNESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make consistent efforts to connect with all students.• View differences as assets rather than deficits.• Know students personally and academically.• Put yourself in the shoes of others in order to understand their experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Get ready for morning meeting. Patrick is going to lead the greeting today.”• “For tomorrow’s share, it will be Fanta’s, Olivia’s, and Charis’ turns. We are going to tell about something we love to do with someone from our lives we care about. They will take three questions or comments at each turn.”• “Today I’ll eat lunch at John’s table, and you can decide what the lunch talk will be about.”• “You seem really upset. Can you tell me about what happened and what you are feeling? I might ask questions, not because I think you are wrong, but just because I want to understand better.”

continues

MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN *continued*

Need	Ways to Meet the Needs of Children	What This Might Sound Like
COMPETENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen closely to what children do or say and name it positively.• Reinforce significant strengths in even small accomplishments. • Help children develop systems for staying organized. • Recognize what children know and can do and help them build a scaffold to new learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “So what you are saying is . . . It sounds like you are . . .” • “I see that you got your book out right away. Good job getting started. In a few minutes, once everyone is reading, I’d love to hear how you like it so far.” • “Remember, the blue folder is where your math papers go; the green folder is for writing drafts.” • “I see that you have started to add into your draft ‘he grumbled,’ and ‘he whispered.’ It seems like you are thinking about the words <i>he grumbled</i> and <i>whispered</i>, but you don’t have it here yet. How about we work on adding in that dialogue in one or two places? I’ll show you how.”

continues

MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN *continued*

Need	Ways to Meet the Needs of Children	What This Might Sound Like
AUTONOMY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Give children opportunities to choose work, materials, assignments, or peers to work with.Ask children to self-reflect and assess experiences.Allow space for behavioral mistakes and revision.Create ongoing opportunities to critique social and social justice issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">“I see you are almost done with your book. What are you thinking of reading next? Will that be on your own or with a partner?”“What strategies did you use to complete that? What was most or least helpful?”“You have your presentation criteria and all your research done. I’m trusting you two to be ready to present on Thursday.”“Do you agree with the character’s decision to . . . ? How would you have handled it? Where do you see things like this happening in real life? How do you feel about it?”

Figure 2.2



Assess Children's Self-Perceived Agency

However much we do to meet students' needs, it is not enough to stop there. It is always important to understand how children perceive their experience in school. What follows in Figure 2.3 is a tool you can use for all students or for those you are most concerned about, formally or conversationally. If some students in your class feel their needs aren't being met, then they probably aren't. These kinds of data can help you shift your practice in ways that will be most meaningful to children.

ASSESS STUDENTS' AGENCY		
Relatedness	Competence	Autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> At school I feel like I am part of a group.<input type="checkbox"/> I can talk with others in school about things that really matter to me.<input type="checkbox"/> Some of my closest relationships are with people at school.<input type="checkbox"/> I am close to children and adults at school.<input type="checkbox"/> People care about me at school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> I am good at many of the things I do at school.<input type="checkbox"/> I can manage most of my tasks at school.<input type="checkbox"/> I feel like I can complete difficult jobs at school.<input type="checkbox"/> There are things I can help others with at school.<input type="checkbox"/> Adults and children know the things I am good at.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> I can act like myself at school.<input type="checkbox"/> The work at school is the work I want to be doing.<input type="checkbox"/> At school I can choose to do my work in the way I think I can do it best.<input type="checkbox"/> I can make plans about what work I want to do, how long it will take, whom I do it with, and how to do it.<input type="checkbox"/> Adults and children trust me to get things done.

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Figure 2.3

Peter Senge, who wrote *The 5th Discipline* (1990), describes what he calls a “shift-the-burden archetype” as a way to illustrate that treating symptoms, rather than identifying and fixing fundamental problems, can lead to a further dependence on symptomatic solutions. We see the symptoms of a problem, and instead of digging deeply to identify the root cause and address that, we attack the symptom. A medical example might be that an athlete has lower back pain, so she relies on anti-inflammatory medications to mask the pain and returns to normal activity. Then there’s the unintended side effect. The athlete doesn’t know that a small tear in a muscle has been causing the pain, and the return to normal activity will cause such disruption that surgery will be required, and the same level of activity might never be possible again.

We see this in schools all the time.

I remember working with middle school students who suffered from personal trauma—living in poverty, having a parent in prison, and having the burden of caring for themselves and younger siblings. They were so carefully managed (and controlled) by adults, both behaviorally and academically, that they received full scholarships to private boarding schools. The adults were shifting the burden, not dealing with the trauma. With a change in settings and the absence of careful management, the students were soon engaged in behavior that led to expulsion (an unintended side effect).

We see this too with schools. Imagine the teacher who is in danger of losing his job because of poor standardized test scores, which are a result of his lack of both support and personal development as an educator as well as how the school itself fails to support high-poverty, high-trauma students behaviorally or academically throughout their entire school experience. The teacher both teaches solely to the test and fudges some answers on the score sheet (shifting the burden). The unintended side effects are many.

The underlying belief that creates these problems? That expectations must be applied and adhered to without exception. But *reasons* for student behavior or achievement are not excuses. Educators must become experts at finding out the *reasons* not only for misbehavior but for lack of growth, for lack of progress, or for a child or an adult who is struggling within a school. Otherwise, we focus on symptomatic solutions, which causes other problems. Instead, we need to look at the root cause. Like doctors, who would not routinely treat all fevers without an understanding of why the fevers existed as a symptom, we can’t continue to blindly accept blanket responses to school-based problems.



Value Approximation

What if we looked at problems as signals to us that we were not creating the appropriate conditions for children to approximate something before they got it right? In our earliest development, we learn to talk, to read, and to write through approximations. Brian Cambourne has often reminded us of early language development as a classic example of celebrated approximations. A young child's first sounds often are so far removed from a word—a single letter sound perhaps—but we react with glee, eye contact, and applause, saying back a word *we think but aren't certain* she was attempting to say. Positive feedback and correct and frequent examples of language use around a toddler lead to language acquisition. Giving negative feedback, telling children they are wrong, and making corrections do not lead children to be language users, and yet those are moves we rely on once children reach school age. We must remember that no matter how old we are, having repeated opportunities to approximate new skills, strategies, and behaviors is critical to our learning and development and will continue to be throughout our lives. Through approximation, we can become better teachers, and we can help children meet the important needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Cambourne 2002).

Even for those who are incredibly sophisticated in their practice, approximations are critical to learning. Scientists and mathematicians use approximations to experiment, theorize, and create new laws or understandings. At its simplest, it might mean using a rounded number for a calculation before deciding on the exact formula or an exact answer. Or it might be approximating the shape of a planet as a sphere as a starting point before determining its precise or accurate shape.

As teachers we're always approximating toward the ideal. In some moments, we hit the mark, while we miss it in others, never perfectly consistent because we're human beings. Reflection on our own attempts, successes, and struggles is essential to our learning so that our professional lives can always be reaching toward a closer approximation of our ideal of teaching, our ideal relationships with children. We have to live this model ourselves to honor it in children's growth and learning.

In classrooms, we often neglect the value of approximation. Approximation creates the necessary space between the introduction of an idea and the expectation that it will be realized with perfection. Remember the deficit and asset table (pages 36–37)?

Willy did best when given space—both physical and mental—to accept invitations to learning and to relationships. He needed repetition and the experience of giving something many celebrated tries.

The class' behavior toward Willy might have softened his edge a bit, but he was still a recluse. Much of the day he remained in the farthest corner of the classroom, rocking and mumbling. From time to time, he'd venture in closer during our meeting times on the carpet, and that was progress. He was always listening though. One day, several months into the school year, a near miracle happened. The class was studying poetry in reading and writing, and on this day, we were discussing William Carlos Williams' poem "This Is Just to Say," an intimate, twenty-eight word poem, said to be written as a note to his wife, in which the writer confesses to having eaten the plums that were sitting in the icebox.

I could see it was piquing Willy's interest, but it wasn't until students went off to write that I saw him acting completely differently. He was *writing*! For days, Willy worked through dozens of variations on this poem, and he willingly shared them with the class. "I have eaten the potato chips which were on the counter, which you were probably saving for lunch. Forgive me, they were delicious, so crisp and so salty. . . ." Willy's food-stealing experiences made him connect with this poem, and he saw that William Carlos Williams made it a safe subject for him to write about. To this day, the experience feels serendipitous, as if I'd actually stumbled upon something that worked. And while to some extent I did, I didn't know this poem would be the lever, but the groundwork the class and I had laid with Willy awakened something in him that made it possible for there to even be a lever. We awakened the possibility of his competence.

All of us, the students and I, were so proud of his new participation and passion, and we sure let him know it. "Willy," a child would say, "I really like the way you described potato chips. The crispness and the saltiness are the most important things about them." And, "Willy, did the person forgive you for taking them?" We treated his newfound identity as a writer and as a poet with the utmost seriousness and utmost celebration, in the same spirit as a parent would treat a child's new language accomplishment as he learned to speak in sentences. Willy was having the experience of feeling competent, not because of directives but because the conditions were right for him.

Part of giving Willy the experience of autonomy meant giving him space. I'd seen other staff get into battles with him that they couldn't win, where they had tried to impose their will on a child that clearly had a stronger will than any of us.

Over years, he'd developed behaviors to create space for himself. Forcing him to sit closer, to stop rocking, to stop mumbling, to write more, to do what everyone else was doing might have on the surface made it appear as if we were doing our jobs as teachers. In reality, I could see that when others tried that approach, it only created more distance between them and him.

Sometimes we think there are two options with children: forcing or ignoring. Imposing our will or throwing our hands up in despair. But autonomy exists in the choices in between, and so with Willy, I lingered there. I gave him consistent invitations to move in closer, to try things out, to make decisions for himself. Sometimes to approximate and sometimes to not quite hit the mark on approximation. I made sure to let him know that I saw him, I recognized his choices, and I would remember to follow up with new invitations should he decline the current ones. Ultimately, the decisions had to be his own. And ultimately, he did start making more of them.

Life isn't a fairy tale, so I won't pretend everything was perfect for Willy after that, but he made so much progress socially and academically. He was a reader and a writer with a unique identity. He became someone important and valued in the community. And I learned I could be the kind of teacher who could continue to evolve in order to support a child like Willy and make him feel safe and successful in my classroom. See Figure 2.4 for some suggestions to examine your own practices of labeling students.



{commitment}

Examine Asset and Deficit Labeling

Remember:

If we want to catch ourselves when we have low expectations, it's worth taking multiple looks at students who feel challenging to us. Select a child, perhaps the same one you thought about in Section 1, and remember what that child behaved like and what you expected of that child. Describe the child based on the four categories below. Be as precise as possible in your written descriptions. Then think about how you felt during those times and even how you feel now while remembering.

	What have you observed?	Is this asset- or deficit-based? When you think about this observation, what feelings are associated with it?
Think about the student's relationships with peers.		
Think about the student's decision making.		

continues

Examine Asset and Deficit Labeling, continued

	What have you observed?	Is this asset- or deficit-based? When you think about this observation, what feelings are associated with it?
Think about the student's relationship with you.		
Think about the student's academic competence.		
Reflect: What do you notice about how you described the child? Were the descriptors positive or negative? Deficit- or asset-based? Did you see any patterns in your feelings?		Notes:
Synthesize: What do you realize now that you didn't before about your expectations for the child? Are there ways you will look at the student differently moving forward?		

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Figure 2.4