



# Three Irreducible Needs That All Kids Need to Thrive

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

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Raffi Cavoukian, a children's singer, songwriter, and child advocate, wrote a song titled – All I really need – which beautifully captures from a child's perspective their most essential needs. Raffi sings, "All I really need is a song in my heart, food in my belly, and love in my family." Every time I listen to this song I hear an unspoken message directed at adults as to what our children really need in order to thrive.

Developmental science is also clear on the three irreducible needs of kids – the need for play, tears, and relationship. These three things are critical ingredients in helping kids grow to become socially and emotionally responsible individuals capable of setting their own goals, adapting to their environment and being resilient in the face of adversity, and feeling empathy for others. This is what maturity should look like but without the right conditions, this growth cannot be assured.

We all know people who look like grown ups but behave like preschoolers. There is a difference between being young at heart and being immature – such as blaming others for one's problems, having a hard time not getting their way, demanding and commanding others as to how to take care of them, and behaving impulsively. How do we explain this lack of maturity? When there are deficits in a child's environment in providing for their irreducible needs, then development can be impacted and maturity hampered.

## **The Irreducible Need for True Play**

Play is the birthplace of personhood. It is where a child gets their hands on the steering wheel of their own life and experiments under the direction of their body, heart, and mind. Kids need a place that is free of consequences in order to practice and explore.

Humans come with an innate desire to make sense of things, to pursue goals, and to discover who they are. We cannot force a child to play or do it for them, it is an instinct that drives them to emerge as their own person that can only be unlocked in play. As any three year old will declare while in the process of figuring things out – "I do it myself!"

We don't have to teach our kids how to play – it is innate. Our job is to create the space for them to play that is contained, safe from emotional wounding, and allows for the freedom of movement and expression. In other words, playgrounds often have gates and fences around them leaving kids free to explore the space that is within.

Some kids are drawn to movement and to use their bodies to jump, climb, dance, or run. Others like to explore and examine, while some like to take items in their world and design something new. Each child has a particular bent for expressing their internal world, it is our job to facilitate the expression of it by creating spaces where this can be unleashed.

What gets in the way of children's play? One of the main challenges to play is the push towards academics, particularly in the early years. The trend towards early instruction and schooling is alarming and unfounded based on decades of research in developmental science. For example, in my community there are children showing up in kindergarten unable to play, that is, they look at their teacher and say they don't know how when told it is time to. Upon closer examination, their preschool years have been full of instruction, schooling, and structured activities. Instead of hearing parents sound alarm bells about the loss of play (the teacher did!), there was a sense of pride that a child could read or do math at an early age. Earlier is not better – not according to science. We can train and make kids work and perform at early ages but at what cost to their development? What happens when kids are made to work instead of play?

Play affords a child a safe space for emotional expression and this is critical to well-being and maturity. Kids go through many types of emotions in play, acting out their feelings in the safety of pretend and make believe. When play isn't 'for real,' then the consequences of emotional expression are minimized and offer them the freedom to release whatever is stirring them up. The loss of play has been correlated in research with increasing rates of attention, anxiety, depression, and aggression in kids. Play preserves children emotionally.

The problem is we don't value play the same way we do work and outcomes. Play is viewed as something kids do in their spare time and even this has become endangered. Children's time is increasingly filled with screens, structured activities, and instruction. While screens have become easy targets in bemoaning the loss of play, research suggests that one of the biggest losses in kid's time is due to the increased amount of time they spend shopping – a 168% rise over a 15 year period.

Without play our children cannot grow. There are no shortcuts here, no substitutes, and no pill that can serve as a substitute for what play provides. Parents need to be a gatekeeper to the things that erode time and space for play. Children need to have a song in their heart as Raffi says, because this is the sound of play inside of a child that is seeking expression in the world around them.

### **The Irreducible Need for Tears**

Humans are born with the inherent capacity to be adaptable and resilient. We should be able to thrive despite adversity, to handle not getting our way, survive lack and loss, and be transformed in the process. This is the potential that exists in each of us and it will only be realized when we have a relationship with tears and sadness.

The capacity to feel sad is one of the best indicators of emotional health in a child. When vulnerable feelings can be expressed it indicates that a child's environment is helping to preserve or protect a child's heart. Emotions are what drive a child to mature when they care about others and themselves, care about learning, care about their behaviour and how they act, and care enough to face their fears.

Tears signify loss and separation from something we desire or when we are up against the things we cannot change. When it registers in the brain that something is futile – it cannot be or cannot change – then there is an emotional download and sadness is the end result. It is here, in this place where we have to let go of our agenda and feel the upset around it, that we are changed by the emotional shift. When it vulnerably registers that we can't always get what we want, it will also resonate that we can also handle adversity. Tears are not something to be feared but something to be embraced in the process of learning.

What gets in the way of supporting kids from expressing sadness or in crying? Sometimes adults are too impatient, busy, or frustrated which leaves little patience and room for a child's emotional needs. Sometimes the messages we send kids is that we value happiness and 'positive feelings' more and suggest that sadness or upset is not welcome or warranted. Phrases such as, "turn that frown upsidedown," or "you are not filling someone's bucket today," can put the focus on people pleasing instead of emotional integrity. We cannot tell our children to be honest, speak their mind, and tell us their secrets, while at the same time tell them to change or deny what they are feeling because it doesn't serve them or us.

Many parents tell me that when they were a child they were not raised being able to cry or express sadness when things didn't work out. They often feel that because they were not supported this way, they are therefore unable to support their own kids too. But the capacity to help someone when they feel sad or upset is not something you need to learn, rather, it is something we already know how to answer with comfort, contact, and closeness. We just need to show up and be present when our kids need to feel vulnerably and express what they are going through.

You don't have to agree with a child's thoughts or actions in order to help them find their tears either. We can come alongside their emotions and make room for their expression without condoning that immature behaviour is okay. We can acknowledge that something is frustrating for them and welcome the tears that need to drain the frustration that is built up. Saying no is part of an adult's role in a child's life – and so is helping them find their tears when they can't change the no's that are there.

If a child can no longer say they are sad, upset, or lose the capacity to cry, it will be the adults in their life that will need to consider how to lead a child back to a place where they can feel vulnerably. When caring feelings go missing, it can be for many reasons including inhibition by the brain in order to preserve emotional well-being. If caring about something hurts too much, the brain simply responds by inhibiting the experience of caring feelings. Sometimes hearts can harden but there is much adults can do to help them thaw.

### **The Irreducible Need for Relationship**

Children cannot thrive without relationships. They need relationships with adults who generously invite them to be in their presence, who display an unwavering capacity to hold onto them despite conduct and performance – while at the same time, lead the child to behave in ways that are civil, mature, and emotionally responsible towards others.

While I was at a hockey game the other night, I watched a father and his 7-year old son interact as they sat in front of me. It was clear his son was excited to be at the hockey game as well as impatient in only being able to move within the narrow confines of his chair. I watched the boy move around in his seat and buzz with energy as he watched the game, engaged with his Dad, and playfully interacted with his friend. I watched as his father gave him some space to express his energy until it crossed a line where it became too much and annoying to others around him – like when he started to kick the chair in front of him. The father leaned down, brought his head to his son's ear and gave him direction, "I need you to stop kicking the chair and to sit in your seat for 10 more minutes." The effect was immediate but what was remarkable was the warm yet firm way the father dealt with his son. It was clear to me his son was moved to obey his father not out of fear but respect – this is relationship at it's finest.

What healthy relationships deliver to children is the ability to rest and trust in the care of an adult to lead them. A child's immaturity means they will behave poorly at times and express themselves inappropriately. What kids need is to lean on adults who can lead them through these impasses while preserving their relationship. It is a child's dependency on an adult that facilitates their growth towards independence. In other words, unless you are rooted relationally, you cannot stretch and grow towards your own human potential.

There are many ways we can facilitate healthy relationships with our kids including:

- Engage them in conversation and listen with full attention
- Do things together that bring out your enjoyment in being with them
- Remember what is important to them and surprise them with your knowledge
- Get there first when it comes to meeting their needs, that is, come before they call you for another kiss goodnight or be ready to feed them before they get 'hangry'
- When they are not behaving well, convey what isn't okay while also conveying that your relationship still is
- Don't be afraid to lead them and call the shots when appropriate, inviting tears when needed

What Raffi seems to get so clearly in his song, All I really need, is how adults are partners in playing midwife to a child's maturity. Kids have songs in their hearts because they should be instinctively moved to play. They need food in their bellies and love in their families which is about their hunger for attachment and to be cared for. Add in some tears and the capacity to feel sad and you have the three irreducible needs that all children require based on decades of cultural wisdom and developmental science. Simple? Yes – but these three things require a great deal of time, energy, commitment, and patience on the part of adults.

If you take the long view on human development you quickly realize there is no pill that can substitute for maturity. Nature has a plan to grow our kids up and if we do our job then we can trust in nature to do the rest. We need to play midwife to the potential for maturity that lies within each of our children.

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