Feeling competent is pretty important to us in the places where we live and work. We feel at ease and sure of ourselves in places where “I know what to do and I can do it”; places where I can succeed, achieve my goals, not botch things up. Where do we feel incompetent? When we don’t understand what to do or how to do it — “Go milk that Holstein cow, okay?” or “Readjust those valves and calibrate the pressure.” Or when the task doesn’t fit us — “The unicycle might be a little big but you’ll manage.” And when the setting doesn’t allow for each of us to make it work for us — “Here’s the tour schedule, the dinner menu, and the rooming list — no exceptions.” Imagine life in a cast, or without sight, or a place where everyone moves or thinks faster or slower than you do.

Competence is important to kids. That sense of “I can do it” fuels the child’s drive to explore and succeed as well. But competence is always a moving target with children, because their cognitive and physical development race along and they continually struggle to integrate their emerging ideas and skills. Sometimes they are at risk of failure because they are able to do things they cannot imagine the consequences of — roll off a couch or climb up to reach a counter, for example. Other times they are unable to do what they can imagine — climb down from a high climber they climbed up, or pour from a big pitcher.

Early care and education environments support competence through:

- appropriate expectations
- appropriate scale
- clear organization the child understands
- a variety of things to do and places to do them
- a profound understanding and acceptance of the diversity of skills and limitations that children possess and a commitment to accommodation.

The best way to evaluate and then design the environment for competence is simply to track a child as she goes about her day.

Or pick a routine, like mealtime, and look at the ways the environment works for or against the child’s emerging skills.

A quick competence check for preschool children

“Without making a mess, can I”:

- get my own drink of water when I am thirsty (because there is a fountain I can make work or Dixie® cups I can use)?
- go to the bathroom and wash my hands with minimal assistance (because the toilets and sinks are accessible, the sinks are at the right height, and the fixtures are designed for my hands)?
- serve myself and put my dishes away (because the furniture, equipment, and room arrangement allow for it)?
- eat neatly by myself (because my feet rest on the floor and the table top is waist high, not up to my chest)?
- choose my activities (because shelves and containers are labeled with pictures and words, and discretely displayed)?
- hang up and get my coat, and carefully store my art and other things (because of well designed cubbies and personal storage)?

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