

## Helping Children Develop a Sense of Identity

*California Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization focusing on issues of diversity and early childhood development, shares these thoughts on the importance of identity in the lives of young children.*

Children who feel worthy and capable are more likely to be optimistic and to do well in school. A healthy sense of identity also helps children be more open to people from other backgrounds because they are less likely to fear differences or put other children down to feel better about themselves.

Having a sense of group identity as well as personal identity also helps a child feel a sense of belonging. Group identity is constructed in many different ways, such as belonging to a community based on religion, political, or social values, shared language, ethnicity or national origin, or the shared experience of being targets of prejudice. A group identity can come from whatever the child's family considers important in defining who is "like us." Creating a strong and positive group identity is particularly important when children are part of a group others value less.

### **How and When Do Children Develop Identity?**

In the first few hours of life, children can tell one smell from another, one voice from another — and they prefer their mother's smell and voice over all others. Attachment is part of the process of identity formation. As infants grow emotionally close to certain people, they associate how those people smell, touch, sound; in this way, they are able to recognize their "special people" early on.

After several months, children become aware of strangers. In the process, they become astute observers of differences and similarities. From their interactions, young children develop a sense of being valued and cared for. They also begin to imitate and later identify with others in their lives.

In diverse families and communities, children come to expect a degree of variation in how people look, feel, and sound, viewing such variation as normal. They understand their world is comprised of both high and deep voices, dark skins and light ones. Children spending their early years in more homogenous families and communities come to associate the human face, voice, and touch with a particular skin color or tone. By age three, many children can put their reactions to skin color into words. They not only notice their own, but also mention how theirs is different from that of other people.

Just as they learn about differences between colors and shapes, children are also beginning to categorize people. Many three- and four-year-olds talk about physical differences between themselves and others, between boys and girls, skin colors, hair textures, and eye shapes. By the time children are in the early grades, they've begun to comprehend racial differences consciously. The development of children's identity is tied to all of this observation.

### **How Do Children of Color Develop a Sense of Racial Identity?**

Children of color have a profoundly difficult task when it comes to developing a positive racial identity because they receive a double message from society: All people are equal, but some people are more equal than others. If children of color are not supported in positive identity formation, they can easily incorporate racist messages unconsciously into their view of themselves and others. This negative internal thinking limits children's potential, putting the brakes on the future, cutting down on options and possibilities.

When children come to understand that they, the people they love, and their ways of doing things are devalued, they can become frightened. It takes extra work for families to help a child feel safe, to learn to avoid oppressive situations, to know when it is and isn't safe to be visible for who they are. Parents face a delicate balance between trying to protect children from prejudice and needing to teach their children enough about the dangers to learn survival skills. We, who work with families, can greatly help by understanding that families are up against these kinds of challenges — and offering support as they work through them.

Children of color often take different paths in identity formation:

- Some try to be like those who are accepted and distance themselves from the speech, dress, and behaviors of their families. Children who take this approach may end up feeling like outsiders in their own group — even within their own family. And being an outsider is a lonely position, especially if the group they're trying to imitate won't allow them in.
- Some children dismiss all thoughts of racism and avoid discussions about these subjects. These children are often in environments in which adults do the same thing — where adults seem to believe that if they don't mention unfair behaviors, children won't notice it. But children do notice, and adult denial just isn't good for healthy identity development.

### **How Do Biracial Children Develop a Sense of Identity?**

Trying to understand race and racial identity takes on another layer of complexity when the child and each parent all look different from one another. Children from parents of different racial backgrounds—biracial or multiracial children—develop their racial self-identity in a unique context. Biracial children have a better chance of growing up in an environment where a range of skin colors and physical characteristics are “normal” at home, where they accept, as a fact of life, the love between two people who look different from one another. But things still aren't always easy for biracial children out in the world.

In a society that often categorizes families by race, some biracial families express fears that their children will be misunderstood or discriminated against because they do not easily fit into one racial group or another. They fear that their child will be alone in a culture that has distinct places for people of different races. Many of these parents hope that their early childhood program will play a strong role in helping their children develop a positive racial identity—to feel their feet planted in both racial identities.

How can children who are adopted into a different racial group than their own — “transracially adopted” — be helped to develop a positive sense of identity? We know that it is important to try to connect children with their particular group — whether it be racial, ethnic, cultural, or community—in ways that promote a positive feeling about the aspects of their identity that are different from their parents. Some adoptive parents are able to find other parents who have adopted across racial lines, creating a social network of families in the same situation so children know that their family isn't the only one where the children don't look like the parents.

It is important for children to know that not only do families come in many forms, but also that children arrive in families in other ways besides being born into them. Discussions of adoption and foster families need to be handled delicately and with respect, but they cannot be avoided if children are to accept and feel comfortable with diversity.

### **How Do White Children Develop a Sense of Identity?**

White parents, and those of us who work with white families, may not always realize that white children also need to develop a positive racial identity — one that does not rely on seeing white as superior to other races. Just as children of color receive negative messages about who they are based on skin color, white children receive messages that could lead them to believe that they are colorless, without a race. That seemingly neutral message can mislead white children into thinking that white is the standard and, therefore, inherently better. But a strong sense of racial identity should not be based on comparison—it grows from feelings of confidence and self-worth rather than from a feeling that you are better than somebody else.

Unless we help white children keep from thinking of themselves as “regular” and everyone else as different, they may develop a sense of distance from those they consider “others.” Deep inside they may have a sense of entitled superiority, even if never taught directly that they are better than others. Unfortunately, despite having parents and teachers who try to teach them that all people are equal, children don't always see this message played out in the world.

Many things contribute to our identity—chiefly, who our parents are, the language we speak, what we language they first learn to speak, or the cultural traditions of their family.

view as our “community,” and what we look like. Children who learn from the world that they are feared or looked down upon because of racism and other biases learn to feel shame about who they are. Some come to internalize negative messages while others struggle to survive the ugliness. As a result, however, not all children get to grow up feeling good about their skin color, the language they first learn to speak, or the cultural traditions of their family. There are ways we can help.