



Community Connections
Solutions Australia Inc



Children's
Services
Central

NSW Professional Support Co-ordinator



Identity

A child's place in
the world

ipsp Inclusion &
Professional
Support Program
AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

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Developing a positive view of oneself is fundamental to every child’s ability to learn and engage effectively with their world. A critical part of developing our identity comes from having an understanding of both ourselves and the people around us. In early years settings educators play a significant role in helping children to form a positive view of themselves as well as contributing to their sense of belonging.

“the fundamental psycho-social ‘glue’ that locates every individual (babies, children and adults) at a particular position in space, time and human society and – most important, connects people to each other.”¹

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises children as capable members of society in their own right and that children can, and should, influence the world around them including the people they share it with. Specifically it refers to identity as a fundamental element of education –

“that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages.”²

What is Identity?

Identity can be considered as both –

- the individual and unique characteristics at birth such as gender, natural physical features, attributes and abilities; and
- personal identity that is shaped by social and cultural context, initially with the family and community and later peers and other adults.

Positive identity and feelings of belonging develop together and are affected by children’s relationships with adults. Arthur (et al) points out that:

“Adults convey strong messages to children – children realise when adults express love, happiness or rejection and disappointment towards them. Children pick up on these reactions (verbal and non-verbal) and incorporate these into their developing view of themselves.”³

Arthur (et al) also outline that a strong identity is underpinned by a sense of belonging – of worth and respect for who we are.³ This is directly affected by the relationships with the adults around them and their view of themselves can change depending on the responses in each situation. Children develop a view and develop multiple and shifting identities having encountered new people and places¹.

Dahlberg (et al) goes further to regard children as co-constructors of their identity when they build relationships with people and evaluate the responsiveness of others towards them.⁴

The concept of co-construction recognises children’s agency – the ability to make choices and decisions and influence their world. It accepts that children can consider the impact they have on others and the places in which they participate. Children with positive identities will be more involved, providing them opportunities for deep and sustained learning. The Learning Frameworks recognise that

“Children are always learning about the impact of their personal beliefs and values. Children’s agency, as well as guidance, care and teaching by families and educators shape children’s experiences of becoming.”⁵

The formation of identify is recognised as dynamic, with ‘evolving experiences and relationships which include change and transitions’ (p20). A child within the family may be

¹ Woodhead, M. (2008) *A sense of belonging*, Early Childhood Matters, Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

² DEEWR, (2009) *Educators Belonging, Being & Becoming – Educators guide to the early years learning framework for Australia*.

³ Arthur, L. Beecher, B. Death, E. Dockett, S. & Farmer, S (2012) *Programming & Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, 5th Edition, Cengage Learning.

⁴ Dahlberg, G. Moss, P. & Pence, (2007) *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*, Falmer Press.

⁵ DEEWR, (2009) *Belonging, Being & Becoming – The early years learning framework for Australia*.



“Children come from diverse backgrounds even within the same society or culture.”

confident and relaxed yet when attending an early year’s service initially may be hesitant and unsure. The same could be said for changing rooms and carers, or starting school. Supported transitions that recognise the challenges, but also view children as capable, will enable children to feel safe and develop a positive identity within the new social environment.

Parents and educators play significant roles in assuring a child’s positive identity in these different social contexts and helping them respond to new and sometimes challenging situations⁶. Positive identities enable children to develop resilience with an ability to adapt to new situations or circumstances. This allows them to continue to learn and function well. They become better at regulating their emotional state in response to changing and sometimes uncomfortable situations⁷.

Children come from diverse backgrounds even within the same society or culture. The idea of difference has a broad scope when considering both individuality and family context. Families and children; whether infants, toddlers, pre-schoolers or school age; are very individual. This individuality forms part of a child’s identity - a part of their lives that is quite clear to them, as is how it is different or similar to others.

The Learning Frameworks outline that:

“Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities. This includes their relationships with people, places and things and the actions and responses of others.”⁵

How they are regarded by others is very important to children. It follows that educators must understand that children’s identity can also be affected negatively as well as positively. If children experience regular negative responses by others about being different, even when not intended, it is likely to leave them insecure and suffer increased levels of stress which will

affect both their view of themselves and whether they belong in these places. Identity is expressed through children’s subjective feelings about themselves and others¹ and as belonging provides a foundation for learning and development, the anxiety will significantly impede their progress.

Acceptance and Recognition

Along with notions of individuality, difference and diversity comes inclusion and exclusion. As each of these can have both negative and positive effects on children, it is important that educators manage their practice to ensure the likelihood of positive outcomes. This relies on employing an approach that is based on acceptance and recognition of a child for who they are.

Brooker and Woodhead outline positive identity as being -

“the result of children feeling that they are liked, recognised and accepted for who they are - both for their unique identity and for their status as a member of a group or category, so that being a girl, being a member of an ethnic group, being disabled, being different, should not result in any child ‘failing to belong’.”⁶

Children benefit from feeling liked, a feeling that stems from being accepted both as an individual but also as a member of a group. It is important however, they are not made to feel that key elements of who they are such as religion, race, gender or their economic circumstances are not portrayed as being wrong or even ‘not quite right’. Further, it has been shown that a critical element of acceptance of children is the demonstrated acceptance and involvement of their parents.

“What sets successful groups apart is the degree to which they respect parents and children, and recognise the importance of the child’s developing sense of identity, both individually and as a member of an extended family.”⁸

¹ Woodhead, M. (2008) *A sense of belonging*, Early Childhood Matters, Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

⁵ DEEWR, (2009) *Belonging, Being & Becoming - The early years learning framework for Australia*.

⁶ Woodhead, M. & Brooker, L. (2008) *Developing Positive Identities: Diversity and Young Children*, in Early Childhood in Focus series, The Open University.

⁷ Shanker, S. (2012), *Calm, Alert and Learning*, Pearson Canada Inc. Toronto, Ontario.

⁸ Swadener, B.B., (2008) cited in *Developing Positive Identities: Diversity and Young Children*, in Early Childhood in Focus series, The Open University.

“Knowing children’s identity and encouraging them and their family to be involved can provide opportunities for the environment to be much richer as children and their families share their knowledge and experiences.”



Being accepted means that children have feelings of being suitable, an idea first outlined by Brostrom in 2002. Feelings of suitability, being the right person in this place,⁹ are much more easily felt in surroundings that are familiar. Obvious differences will occur for children from different cultural backgrounds that may include clothing, food, language, behaviour and styles of play. The transition to an early years’ service will often be a child’s first experience of such differences therefore it is important that educators can support children to understand that difference is accepted and respected through both their actions and words. In this way difference does not mean a child is unsuitable in this place.

An extension of acceptance is recognition – which indicates that not only is a child accepted but their presence is recognised as having an influence on people as well as place. Recognition grows from children being respected and enables feelings of worthiness and competence to be developed.

Knowing children’s identity and encouraging them and their family to be involved can provide opportunities for the environment to be much richer as children and their families share their knowledge and experiences. This is very different from children being expected to adapt to what already exists.

Educator’s Practice

Educators have an important role in ensuring both the acceptance and recognition of young children. Their approach directly affects the ability of children to develop positive identities in the different places they will experience. Positive practices with children help them become confident learners. Participation with thoughtful and understanding educators enables children to first feel comfortable and then to engage and influence others in a way that enriches learning for everyone.

When everyone is included there can be a meaningful sharing of culture and a strengthening of the acceptance

of all children. It is positive when families are involved and contribute to the conversations and experiences for children. The focus of educators then, is clearly on children’s learning and the important place a child’s identity has in supporting their wellbeing. Culture, difference and diversity are then continuously alive in the environment and encouraged as part of everyday conversations and experiences. Difference is recognised through the resources made available each day such as food, books, games, clothing, music, pictures, play materials and equipment. This ensures a familiar environment that supports the development of positive identity through continuous recognition of children rather than being occasional and tokenistic such as only the celebration of significant days in a religious calendar.

It is also important that children who have less opportunity to experience difference in their daily lives are provided this opportunity in early year’s environments. Educators who are culturally competent provide opportunities to broaden children’s experiences to affect positive change just as they would in other areas of development.

“Cultural competence is about our will and actions to build understanding between people, to be respectful and open to cultural perspectives, strengthen cultural security and work towards equality in opportunity.”²

An example is outlined in the Educators’ Guide to the Learning Framework in relation to Indigenous children where it defines competence as -

“the ability of all educators to make appropriate decisions and effective actions in their setting regardless of the absence or presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.”²

Working in this way projects positive feelings for children about difference, supports recognition and contributes to children having a positive view of themselves.

⁹ Brostrom, S. (2002) *Communication and Continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school*, In: Fabian, H. And Dunlop, A-W (eds). *Transitions in the Early Years*, RoutledgeFalmer.

² DEEWR, (2009) *Educators Belonging, Being & Becoming - Educators guide to the early years learning framework for Australia*.



“To help a child belong in an early years service, educators need to know them well as individuals and within their family context; their likes and dislikes, their abilities, dispositions, and attachments.”

Genuinely engaging with families in relation to difference and inclusion, supports children to be trusting and confident about their participation with others and contributes to a positive view of their identity. Hadley and De Gioia identify that:

“Meaningful relationships go beyond exchanging pleasantries and/or discussing events or sharing perceptions about children...Meaningful relationships mean that both parties feel safe in sharing information... including differences of opinion and values”¹⁰

It is important for educators to accept that it is their responsibility to initiate conversations with families as this demonstrates the importance they place on sharing information and recognising culture. Some families such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrants and refugees have not had good life experiences that support them to offer information easily. They will often not see the importance of how sharing this information contributes to the child’s learning and development and often it will only become evident to them through sensitive and informed conversations with educators who understand the importance of culture to identity.

An educator’s modelling of acceptance and responding to the individual identities of children has a significant impact on their acceptance by others. We know that friends matter, even to very young children³ and if a child is seen to be liked by educators, then they are seen to be likeable and worthy of friendship. MacNaughton outlines that interactions with others provides the basis for the formation of identity¹¹ and so the practices of educators are a strong and constant message to the group. As Vandenbroeck outlined -

“identity is also the result of how other people define the young child, how he or she is understood (or not) and shown respect (or not). In these ways social experiences serve as a ‘mirror’ for their identities.”¹²

To help a child belong in an early years service, educators need to know them well as individuals and within their family context; their likes and dislikes, their abilities, dispositions, and attachments. Of particular interest, is how the child sees itself, as this will affect how they develop their social identity in this new place. This will also be shaped by educators’ building trusting relationships which will, in turn, grow from firstly being accepted and then recognised as capable and valued individuals among many with whom they play and learn every day.



¹⁰ Hadley, F. & De Gioia, K. (2008) *Facilitating a sense of belonging for families from diverse backgrounds in early childhood settings*, Early Childhood Matters, Number 111.5.

¹¹ Mac Naughton, G. (2000) cited in Arthur et al, (2012) *Programming & Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, 5th Edition, Cengage Learning.

¹² Vandenbroeck, M. (2008) in *Developing Positive Identities: Diversity and Young Children*, in Early Childhood in Focus series Woodhead, M. & Brooker, L., The Open University.



“Make your service welcoming and familiar to diverse groups through the environment and everyday practice.”

What can educators do?

- Make your service welcoming and familiar to diverse groups through the environment and everyday practice.
- Gather as much information as possible about each child's life and personal identity before they commence so that secure attachments can be developed quickly.
- Allow for continuous opportunities to share information with families about their children's developing identities.
- Be aware of and alert to the benefit that genuine supportive words and actions can have on children's view of themselves and others.
- Spend extended time engaging with infants and toddlers, initiating and responding to their cues and signals, building attachment and trust.
- Help children to develop both a personal and social understanding of themselves and other children by encouraging them to talk about themselves and their families.
- Support conversations about difference and diversity that will help children understand each other.
- Treat each moment with children as an opportunity to contribute to them developing a positive view of themselves.
- Be aware that actions, words and the environment can have a negative effect on children's identity.
- Embed acceptance and recognition in everyday practice, ensuring individuality and children's culture is alive every day for all children.

FURTHER READING

Developing Positive Identities: Diversity and Young Children - Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. eds (2008), *Early Childhood in Focus* (3). Milton Keynes: Open University.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you gather, record and share information with families about children's identity?
- Do you recognise and facilitate opportunities for children to discuss themselves and their families with others?
- Does the environment reflect diversity and difference including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families?
- Do the images on display depict past and current families, staff, and places of significance (natural and built), Elders and the community?
- How do you provide regular social opportunities for babies and toddlers throughout the day?
- Do you actively and sensitively challenge views and actions that do not accept diversity and difference?
- Does your centre plan for children to talk about difference even if that difference is not evident in your group?
- Does your centre incorporate and acknowledge a range of cultural backgrounds and influences into the curriculum and resources, or is culture only visited at times of celebration?