Social Identity

ability

ethnicity

biological sex

race

social class

family structure

age

gender expression

beliefs

sexual orientation
Myself as my body - I am my physical self.

Babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers gather information about themselves and people who are separate from themselves, constantly making comparisons between their own bodies and images, to understand distinctions between self and others.

- Babies experience the world through the five senses and physical abilities.
- Before their first birthday, babies distinguish themselves from others in a mirror.
- By 2 years old, children have enough information about their physical selves to identify themselves in videos and photographs.
Abilities make up a large portion of a young child’s perception of themselves.

- As children gain new physical and cognitive abilities, they get satisfaction from practicing for pure enjoyment.
- In a group setting, children also pick up on the enthusiasm and pleasure adults express about the child achieving early milestones, contributing to sense of self.
- 2s/3s/4s, when asked to talk about themselves, focus almost exclusively on what they look like, what they like to play with, and what they physically can do.
Children are learning about their internal selves, the mental and emotional aspects of their personality. Every time adults use descriptive words about a child, whether positive, negative, or neutral, it adds to their mental structure of who they are.

- Sense of self includes abstract labels and descriptions applied to by other people.
- One of the first abstract labels children attach to their identity is their name - after many, many repetitions, in many different situations, the label becomes attached. The next distinguishing identifier is often the gender binary (boy/girl).
- If repeated enough, adults’ descriptions/labels of children’s traits (who they are) become a part of their self-image ingrained over time as something that can’t be changed.

Myself as my personality - I am what you say.
Children develop a sense of themselves reflected in how they are relating to people who matter to them.

- You see who you are by how others perceive you.
- This begins from how parents and caregivers applaud accomplishments, criticize behavior or enact discipline, contributing to positive/negative feelings (ie: pride, self-worth, guilt, shame, etc.)
Myself as a memory - I am what I remember.

The internal picture children construct over time is based on the personal stories and memories of events that adults choose to recall.

- Toddlers and preschoolers love seeing pictures of themselves and hearing stories about themselves to develop a growing understanding of their history; to build a narrative of who they are within the context of their relationships and experiences.
- This is where we see the intersection between sense of individual self and sense of belonging to a group.
How and when do children develop identity?

- Identity formation begins at birth, as babies are observers of similarities and differences. By 6-8 months, children distinguish people who are familiar and unfamiliar. By age 1, infants have received messages about who they are by observing others’ reactions; and developed a sense of being valued and being cared for.

- Between ages 1-4, children express curiosity about similarities and differences, both visible and invisible. As language develops, toddlers and pre-schoolers begin to verbalize their observations with words, learning how to talk about various aspects of identity.

- Beyond age 4, children become more aware of how they are viewed by others, and how others view people like themselves, from messages received from family, television, books, magazines, photographs, artwork, etc. Children compare visible and invisible identities, and life circumstances, and express concerns about being perceived as different.
What is the role of diversity in identity development?

- Young children develop a sense of self in relation to opportunities and limitations in their social world.
- By age three, children notice their own gender, skin color, family structure, physical abilities, language, home life. If presented with the opportunity, they will notice and mention how they are different from others.
- Children who spend early years in homogenous families and communities come to associate the human face, voice and touch with a particular skin color or tone. In diverse families and communities, children expect a degree of variation in how people look, feel and sound, viewing variation as normal; and understand the world is comprised of both high and deep voices, dark skins and light ones, varying family structures, differences in social class and access, etc.
- Children who regularly see diversity reflected in their daily life will see a range of possibilities in ways one can identify as ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ or ‘expected’
How do diverse communities become inclusive?

- When diverse members of a community can show up as themselves and feel seen, valued and heard, without changing or hiding aspects of their identity in fear of being perceived as different or treated as such.

- The way children learn to be inclusive is by acknowledging and accepting differences, without placing value or social significance to differences of identity.

- When children observe others having uncomfortable or negative reactions to an aspect of identity (skin color, hair texture, clothing choices, eyeglasses, demeanor, etc.) they learn which aspects of identity are significant and hold social value; this shapes their ability to be inclusive:
  - Do people around me react as if differences are normal?
  - Do people around me react to differences by switching their behavior?
  - Is it okay to be different?
  - Which parts of myself are accepted by my community?
  - Which parts of myself do I change, hide or leave at home, to fit in here?
Social Identity

- ability
- social class
- age
- ethnicity
- biological sex
- family structure
- race
- gender expression
- beliefs
- sexual orientation

Sexual Identity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What he's observing (hearing, seeing, etc.)</th>
<th>What he's asking/saying:</th>
<th>How we respond:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Whose baby is that? She doesn't look like any of you.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Why doesn't Adira look like us?&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;People in a family can look different. We have different skin colors, eye colors, nose shapes. Let’s look at some more pictures of families and see what we notice.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You look Indian, just like your mom.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I'm not Indian, I'm just Kamari.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Kamari is your name. Being Indian is part of your ethnicity. You’re also African-American. There are lots of words that describe who you are.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;If we mix red, blue and yellow, it makes brown.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Eww! Brown is a yucky color!&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Your skin is brown, and it’s beautiful! Isn’t it interesting that a color can be yucky to you and beautiful to me, at the same time? Kind of like foods - yucky to some, and for others yum!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What he's observing (hearing, seeing, etc.)</td>
<td>What he's asking/saying:</td>
<td>How we respond:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During bath time, noticing his body parts are different from his sister’s.</td>
<td>“Why does Adira have two butts?”</td>
<td>“Adira was born with a vagina. You were born with a penis. You have different body parts.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee at the build-a-bear workshop says: “Do you want to choose some pants for your stuffed animal to wear?”</td>
<td>“My horse only likes sparkly things. I’m going to get him the rainbow tutu.”</td>
<td>“There are so many choices! You can choose to dress your horse however you like. Just like you choose the clothes you want to wear each day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We are having a baby!”</td>
<td>“Where does a baby come from?”</td>
<td>“The baby is growing inside me right now, just like you did. When it’s grows too big to fit inside me anymore, it will come out and do the rest of it’s growing here with you!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Family Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What he's observing (hearing, seeing, etc.)</th>
<th>What he's asking/saying:</th>
<th>How we respond:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families with two parents and a child.</td>
<td>“I'm going to make a horse family. This is the mommy horse, daddy horse, and the baby horse.”</td>
<td>“In my horse family, there are two mommies and two babies. And this horse family there are two daddies and a brother and sister. And this horse family there are two mommies and a daddy and one baby. And in this horse family....”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our caregiver comes in the morning and leaves in the evening.</td>
<td>“Boom-Boom isn't in our family because she doesn't sleep here.”</td>
<td>“People in a family can sleep in different homes. Just like Gram and Pop sleep at their house; and your cousin Nirvan sleeps at his house. Boom-Boom is a part of our family. She sleeps in her room, at her house, and then comes over to play, just like Gram.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend who has a single-parent.</td>
<td>“How come ___ doesn’t have a daddy?”</td>
<td>“Families are made up of different people. Some children have one parent, some have two or more. Some children have grandparents or aunts, uncles and babysitters. Children can have different grownups who love them and take care of them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What he's observing (hearing, seeing, etc.)</td>
<td>What he's asking/saying:</td>
<td>How we respond:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person sleeping in the subway station.</td>
<td>“Why is he sleeping on the floor?”</td>
<td>“Some people don’t have a bed or a home to sleep in. Different people have different things. How does it make you feel to see someone sleeping on the floor like that?....What can we do with that feeling?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person collecting money on the subway train.</td>
<td>“What is she collecting?”</td>
<td>“She is collecting coins to help her get the things she needs, like food and water. Would you like to add to her collection?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A playdate/birthday party at someone’s house.</td>
<td>“I love ___’s house. They have ____ at their house.”</td>
<td>“It sounds like you had fun with ____. Every family has a different home. What do you love about our home?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What he's observing (hearing, seeing, etc.)</th>
<th>What he's asking/saying:</th>
<th>How we respond:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A person using a wheelchair.</td>
<td>“Why does that grownup need a stroller?”</td>
<td>“That is called a wheelchair. It's a tool people can use to get around when their legs are not able to help them walk. There are lots of different ways people get around! Do you want to see more?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His cousin’s prescription glasses.</td>
<td>“How do you see with these?”</td>
<td>“These glasses help her eyes see clearly, the way sunglasses help your eyes see when it is sunny. Everyone's body can do different things, and glasses are just one tool some people can use to help their eyes see clearly.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A classmate writing their own name.</td>
<td>“I can't write my name.”</td>
<td>“You aren’t writing your name yet, but your hand is learning how to. Everyone’s body learns to do things at different times. One day soon, you will also write your name! Is that something you want to practice together?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can we do to support our children?

- Self-reflect.
  - How do I respond to differences in identity?
  - How do I respond to my child’s observations and curiosities?
  - What do I consider “normal”?
  - How do we expose ourselves to diverse groups of people (race, family structure, class)?

- Expose children to a diverse range of identities and possibilities.

- Increase your own comfort level in discussing aspects of identity. PRACTICE!

- LISTEN. Address stereotypes directly. Explain differences, don’t ignore them.

- Introduce language so your child has the words discuss what they’re observing.

- Be a gentle guide and good role model - what they see, hear and say matters.

- Explore questions with your child and with other grownups - you don’t have to have all the answers!

- ABCs = Affirm, Be Honest, Continue the Conversation!