

# Developing Personal Identity

Everybody says  
I look just like my mother.  
Everybody says  
I'm the image of Aunt Bee.  
Everybody says  
My nose is like my father's.  
But I want to look like me.

—Dorothy Aldis, *All Together*



All of us want to be special. We all need to feel that we are unique and that we occupy a special place in the world. Most of all, we need to be noticed and respected by other people. Only in this way can we become secure and independent adults.

Many people think the search for identity begins in the teenage years. Actually, this process starts long before adolescence. It is as babies and young children that we first start to grope for "me."

During these early years, you help shape your children's identity. Your words and actions are a mirror in which children see themselves. The image you reflect helps determine what they will become.

## The source of self

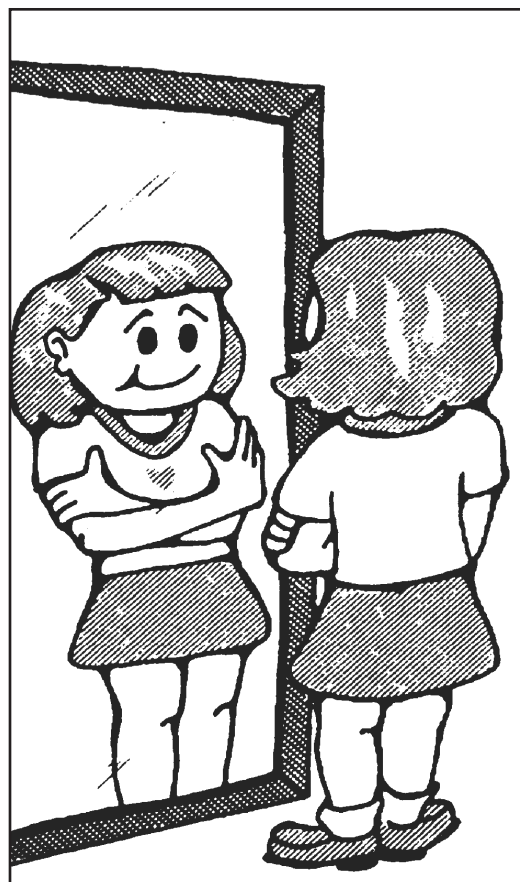
Children are not born with a sense of identity. In fact, newborn babies don't even know they are separate from the rest of the world. They can't tell the difference between their hands and yours and the paws of their teddy bear. To them, the world is all one thing.

Gradually, babies discover their bodies belong to them. By touching, tasting, looking, listening, smelling, and moving around, babies learn where their bodies end and the rest of the world begins.

Children acquire another tool for building a picture of themselves when they learn to talk. They can use words such as "big" and "good" to describe themselves. As they grow and start to move around, they learn they can make things happen.

EC 1293-E

Reprinted February 2006



## Testing a new identity



With the growth of their self-awareness, children start to test their identity. All parents will recognize these first attempts to express "me":

"I wanna do it myself!"  
"No!"  
"That's mine!"  
"Look at me!"  
"Me first!"

Through such behavior, children work toward self-reliance and begin to assert themselves as individuals.

Since every member of the family is working on identity, tensions sometimes develop. Many of these conflicts are just a part of growing up and can't be avoided. Sometimes, though, family tensions are a sign children need more recognition. To help children in their search for "me," you can:

- Tell your children how they are special.
- Give them opportunities to be useful around the house.
- Try to experience the world as your children do.

# HELPING • CHILDREN • GROW

The growth of identity is a lifelong process. Many people and experiences will affect your children's identity. No other experience, however, will be as enduring as your responses during the first years of life. Nothing can replace the "reflections" of parents who know their children and care for them, and use this knowledge and affection to help their children become themselves.

Forming a healthy sense of their selves requires that children have pride in themselves and an awareness of their place in the world. Here are some activities that can help them develop a clear image of themselves.

## Their physical identity

**Introduce babies to themselves in a mirror.** Ask "Who's that? Why, that's Tracy O'Rourke! Hi, Tracy!" As children get older, have them watch as they put their hands on their heads, touch their noses and elbows, and count the parts of their bodies. Have them stand next to you, their brothers or sisters, or friends, and see how they are the same and how they are different.

**Help your children make a self-portrait.** Have them lie down on a large piece of wrapping paper or several paper bags slit open and taped together. Trace the outline of their bodies. Have them fill in the outline with their features: hair, eyes, nose, mouth, and nails. They can either draw their clothes or tape some of their old clothes to the picture. Hang up the completed self-portrait where everyone can admire it.

## Their life

**Start an identity book for children.** In a large scrapbook, paste pictures, cards, and other mementos of important times in your children's lives. As they get older, children can collect their own treasures. They can dictate comments for you to write in and even add their own illustrations.

**Make a time line to help them recall past events in their lives.** String a piece of clothesline along a wall where they can reach it. Give them clothespins to hang up pictures, cards, clothing, and other souvenirs of important events: the day they were born, the day a brother or sister was born, or the day they learned to ride a bike. Put events in the order that they happened.

## Their roots

**Help children make a picture map of their neighborhood.** First take a walk to find the important places they'll want on their map: the park, school, grocery store, and friend's house. Then, with a large piece of paper and some crayons, help them mark where these things are. Start with your own house and street and gradually add other streets and places. Label everything. Use the map to see where you're going when you leave the house.

**Make a family tree.** Use old photographs and a large piece of paper. Make your children the focus of the tree. Talk about how they are related to other people on the tree, and point out how they are similar to and different from their relatives: "You have red hair like Aunt Sarah," or "You're the only person with blue eyes in our family."

## Their future

**Encourage pretending.** As children play, they start to think about what they might become. Save old clothes and materials for them to use. For example, some old clothes and empty cans, boxes, and jars help children pretend they are grocery shopping. Buttons, spools, and an old mirror glued to a piece of cardboard make an instrument panel for an airplane or car.

**Take children to see what other people do and provide them with books that show people doing a variety of jobs.**

Reprinted from a University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service publication and adapted for use in Oregon by Cindee M. Bailey, former Extension child development specialist, Oregon State University.

This publication may be photocopied or reprinted in its entirety for noncommercial purposes.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published January 1988; Reprinted February 2006