

Ages & Stages: How Infants & Toddlers Develop Self-Concept

Being sensitive and responsive to individual needs to support children's growing sense of self

By Carla Poole, Susan A. Miller, EdD, and Ellen Booth Church

0 to 2 "I'M ME!"

Stage by Stage 0 - 2

Babies need loving and consistent relationships to develop a positive sense of self. Tuning in to babies' preferences helps them develop a sense of self that is compatible with their innate characteristics. Gentle but firm limits help toddlers feel secure. Two-year-olds' emerging language propels their sense of self. "Me do" becomes their mantra.

Babies create a sense of self within loving relationships. Each baby is a unique blend of innate characteristics. Some babies are easily soothed, while others are more particular about what soothes them. Each teacher is also unique, responding to babies with their own characteristics and experiences. Caring for a baby is a joining together of two individuals who are searching to make a deep emotional connection.

Tuning in to Babies

Slow down and tune in to babies. Look for the baby's responses to different sounds, sights, and textures. This will help you understand the baby and his way of adapting to his environment. It helps him feel secure and begins his lifelong process of the development of self.

Learning About One Another

Just as you get to know a baby, the baby gets to know you. They are very good at reading facial expressions. At around 2 months, babies offer a "social smile," the first social response to others. Their budding self is affirmed when you smile back. This makes babies feel good—When I smile, you smile with me!

Blossoming Personalities

During his first year of consistent, loving relationships, a baby's behavior becomes more organized, and he communicates more clearly. A 9-month-old might vocalize as he reaches toward you to be picked up, or he might initiate a game of peekaboo. Responding to these requests helps a baby's sense of self blossom.

Exploring Their World

During the second year of life, toddlers form a sense of "I'm me! I can do it!" Their secure sense of self, of being loved in a special way by special people, fuels their self-directed explorations. Young toddlers need lots of opportunities to initiate and direct their own activities.

Becoming Self-Conscious

Another important shift occurs at around 18 months, when the toddler becomes self-conscious for the first time. Twenty-month-old Kayla, for example, manages to unlatch the cupboard door to the diapering supplies. As she reaches into this forbidden territory, she glances over her shoulder, looking for her teacher. She is conscious of her teacher's reactions to her behavior. Toddlers are especially sensitive during this period and can feel shamed if they receive harsh criticism. Encourage toddlers' independence, curiosity, and exploration, while setting reasonable boundaries for their behavior. You can tell Kayla that she can't have the extra diapers, but she can open up another door that holds some stuffed animals or toys.

Emerging Language Skills

Two-year-olds' emerging language skills help them express themselves. Their mantra becomes "Me do! Not you!" Their feelings are strong, and their sense of self is still fragile, so they need to assert themselves and protest limits. Your role is to remain calm and to help them adapt to the demands of daily life. Consistency in limit setting is helpful, but it is also important to remain flexible. Try to build a partnership with each toddler. This way, the limits you set are reassuring, but don't squelch the toddler's sense of self.

Responding to Preferences

Helping babies create a positive sense of self requires a delicate balance between aiding them in developing in ways that are compatible with their innate qualities and helping them function in their social world. Respect for their individuality, their sense of self, helps build the self-confidence they need for the lifelong process of learning.

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3 to 4 "I CAN PUMP HIGH!"

Stage by Stage 3 - 4

Threes and fours have the ability to see themselves as separate and unique individuals.

The self-images of young children tend to be descriptive, rather than judgmental. Increasingly independent, preschoolers are intrigued by the new things they can do.

With a broad smile on his face, 4-year-old Aaron directs his teacher, Mrs. Gehringen "Watch how I pump the swing!" Proudly demonstrating his exciting new skill, he joyfully chants, "I'll fly so high, I'll reach the sky. I won't come back until the Fourth of July!" Mrs. Gehringer gives him two thumbs up and responds, "Great swinging, Aaron!" Aaron pumps the swing higher, his self-esteem soaring.

A Growing Self-image

In the dramatic-play center, Becca asks a new classmate, "Who are you?" The new girl eagerly responds, "I am Ella. I am 3. I have a baby sister. And look, I have a baby doll, too." Feeling autonomous, preschoolers like Aaron and Ella see themselves as separate and unique individuals. They define themselves in concrete terms. Included in this internal picture of the image that preschoolers have of themselves are such things as their physical attributes, names, ages, genders, social affiliations, possessions, and abilities. A young child's self-image tends to be descriptive, rather than judgmental.

The Image-Esteem Connection

How preschoolers feel about these characteristics relates to their self-esteem. For example, Aaron acquires a feeling of self-worth as a result of his interactions with others who are important to him, such as his teacher, who gave him immediate positive verbal and visual reinforcement about his swinging skills.

Although forming one's self-concept is a lifelong process, how the child feels about himself in the early years (positive or negative) can set a pattern for the rest of his life.

A Critical Time for Success

Because threes and fours are growing so fast and developing in every way as they learn new skills and sharpen old ones, the preschool years are a critical time for successful experiences. Children need to be able to absorb information about how others respond to them in order to confirm how they feel about themselves. Becoming more independent, preschoolers are intrigued by what they can do. For instance, exhibiting greatly increased fine-muscle control, preschoolers confidently execute tasks they will need to perform throughout their lives. Four-year-old Kennedy enthusiastically holds his pencil just like his teacher does while they draw and "write" a story together about bugs. With great self-satisfaction, 3-year-old Esther sparkles when she is complimented by her mom for copying a pattern of colored circles with her crayons. Three-year-old Luis feels good about himself when he shows off his intellectual abilities, counting out juice cups, "one, two, three," and passing one to each child at his snack table. And with an astounding vocabulary of more than 4,000 words, 4-year-old Julie feels pleased when her buddy Kit acknowledges her well-told, funny story about her cat named Tutu.

5 to 6 WILL THEY LIKE ME?"

As the children come through the kindergarten door, some bound in, while others hang back. All are experiencing their first taste of going to the "big school," with all the accompanying thoughts and feelings related to defining themselves in this new setting.

Facing New Challenges

Traditionally, the beginning of the year is a time to focus on children's developing self-concept. Some 5- and 6-year-olds have participated in groups of other children before, but the world of kindergarten is a much bigger pond to swim in! One of the greatest challenges new kindergarten students face is the development of a strong and positive sense of self in a "big school" setting. It is not unusual for a normally confident child to experience some insecurity. The child may

Stage by Stage 5 - 6

Fives and sixes are transitioning from the "me" stage to the "us" stage, becoming aware of the needs and interests of the group. Partners are now able to use words to communicate their needs and feelings. Five- and six-year-olds use the power of the word no to help define themselves within the group setting.

have difficulty separating. He may watch rather than participate, or he may be demanding of attention. The unspoken questions in his behavior might be saying, Who am I in this big group of kids? How do I fit in? How will I get my needs met?

Transitioning from "Me" to "Us"

It is helpful to understand the developmental viewpoint of a 5- or 6-year-old in order to assist him in developing a good sense of self within the new group at school and in the family. They are transitioning out of the egocentric "me" stage, to a stage in which they have a greater understanding of the "me" within the "us." It is not always an easy transition. Children can vacillate between having patience and understanding the needs of the group, to wanting their own needs met-now! Adults must help children see how their needs will be met within an appropriate time frame. One way to do this is to play turn-taking and transition games. These show children that waiting can be a fun activity.

Becoming Communicators

One of the greatest developing skills a kindergartner has is his ability to communicate.

Language in kindergartners has grown beyond basic verbal skills, to include the ability to communicate feelings and needs. This is an important part of self-concept. And this is exactly the time to encourage language. Five- and six-year-olds often need to "talk out" their feelings and problems. Be sure to allow the time and space for these discussions, both in small and large groups.

Defining Themselves Within the Group

Children at this stage want to let you know what they need-even if this includes saying no to something that doesn't suit them. At this time of year, don't be surprised if children say no to participating in some group activities. They are using the power of no to help them define themselves within the group, and to take the time to see where they fit in.

Developing Self-Respect

At the core of all these behaviors is the development of self-respect. While self-concept is about "who I am," self-respect is more about "how I take care of myself." A strong sense of self allows children to be able to speak up if they think something is not fair, if they are being ignored, or even if they don't feel well. The key word is respect. As their self-concepts grow to include self-respect, children learn that what is fair for them also has to be fair for those around them. This is when and how a child learns that he is not a lonely fish in the big pool. He sees that he is actually one of many different fish that work together to create a harmoniously flowing sea of friends.