



## Positive Self-Esteem and Healthy Cultural Identity

As parents and care providers, we recognize that positive self-esteem is essential to young children's healthy development. Positive self-esteem develops when children have a strong sense of self as well as a healthy cultural identity. Experiences in the early years are critical for establishing both the sense of self and cultural identity. Whether children are part of a majority culture, are bicultural (have parents from different cultures, religion or language), or are from a minority group (due to race, family grouping, ability, culture, appearance), parents and care providers play a key role in helping them develop a sense of cultural identity and feel comfortable within Canada's cultural mosaic.

### Talking to Children about Human Diversity

It is important for adults to talk to children about human diversity. Acceptance of human diversity leads to increased social understanding which enables children to become more skilled in their relationships with others.

The spectrum of diversity includes:

- Ability
- Age
- Appearance
- Class
- Culture
- First Nations
- Gender
- Language
- Newcomers
- Race
- Sexual Orientation
- Spirituality/Religion

Storybooks that depict the wide range of human reality provide one of the easiest ways to begin to talk about diversity. The stories may prompt children to ask questions about differences or comment on similarities with their own experiences. If not, adults can raise the topic by talking with the child about what's in the story.

Adults can promote acceptance of diversity when they use statements like these:

- "Some people have light skin, some people have dark skin, and some have freckles! We all get our colour from our (birth) moms and dads."
- "Some people wear glasses so that they can see better."
- "This child needs help to walk so he/she uses a walker."
- "Each person's colour is just right for that person."
- "You call me 'mom'. A child whose family speaks Hebrew calls his/her mom 'Ima'."
- "You can choose any colour you like when you draw people."

## Helping Children to Develop a Strong Self-Identity

A strong sense of self helps children become more confident and eager to try new activities. Children are often aware of their physical appearance, and they enjoy looking at themselves in a mirror and drawing pictures of themselves. This is one way for children to learn about and feel good about themselves. "Multiracial" crayons, felt pens, and paints help children portray their own skin, eye and hair colours. Children enjoy finding tones that are most like themselves as well as those that are like their friends. When they draw themselves, other family members and friends, children have an opportunity to see and understand that:

- People have many similarities and each of us is also unique.
- Each individual is different and these differences are a natural part of belonging to the human family.

## Helping Children Develop a Healthy Cultural Identity

Every family has its own culture. For young children, culture is understood as 'the way we do things at home'. This includes every day activities and routines such as mealtimes and how family members relate to one another as well as particular beliefs and customs and the ways that special occasions are celebrated.

All children need to be aware of their own cultural practices in order to feel good about themselves. Every child and his or her family need and deserve to have their heritage and cultural identity recognized and celebrated. They are then more likely to begin to understand and appreciate the cultures of their friends. Children from minority backgrounds may experience a greater gap between home and the child care setting or school than do children of the majority culture.

It is essential that child care providers and others ensure that every child feels welcome in the group and knows that his or her family is respected. Understanding cultural diversity is equally important for children of the cultural majority who, because they see their culture reflected on TV, in movies and in many books and magazines, may think that the way their family does things is the only (or right) way.

### What Parents Can Do

Parents and other family members are key in helping children recognize and appreciate their home culture(s) and traditions. Family stories from the past and explanations of how and why things are done in a particular way make the home culture real for children. Parents and other family members enhance children's cultural identity when they:

- Help children 'know their roots'.
- Use the first language to speak with them at home.
- Read stories and sing to children in the home language.
- Take children to celebrations and other events in their cultural community.

### What Care Providers Can Do

It is essential that child care settings are welcoming and inclusive environments that are reflective of the variety of cultures represented by families using the program and by the

surrounding neighbourhood. It is important that care providers show that they value each child's home culture. Here are some ways to do this:

- Provide children's books, posters and play materials that reflect a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- Talk to the children's family members to find out what they think is important for their child's care and learning, and plan activities and use materials based on information families give you.
- Learn and teach words for greetings and goodbyes in various languages. This shows respect for various cultures and their respective home languages.
- Provide familiar foods for snacks and mealtimes.
- Make routines such as nap time and toileting comfortable for each child.
- Celebrate the occasions that are special for each family.

## The Link Between Healthy Cultural Identity and Positive Self-Esteem

In a multicultural society such as Canada, many children draw from their home environments as well as the surrounding community to develop their sense of self and their cultural identity. The way adults talk about culture helps children understand and enjoy cultural similarities and differences. In every day conversations, adults can promote awareness of self and demonstrate acceptance of cultural diversity by saying things like this:

- "In my family when I was a child, we lit candles on Christmas Eve. That's my culture."
- "In Marta's family they do (make, eat, celebrate) things this way. In David's family they do it another way. It's part of their culture."
- "Every family has their own culture, their way of doing things. I really like sharing our culture with others."

By supporting cultural diversity, adults help young children develop a realistic and confident self-identity, recognize similarities between themselves and others, feel comfortable in more than one cultural setting, and understand, accept and respect human diversity. The resulting strong sense of self and healthy cultural identity lead to positive self-esteem, an essential element for young children's healthy growth and development.

### More Information:

Early childhood education for a multicultural society  
Gyda Chud, Ruth Fahlman  
Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press, 1985

Hand in Hand (kit): home and family unit plan and children's book  
Jocelyn Graeme, Ruth Fahlman, May Henderson  
Don Mills, Ont.: Addison Wesley, 1990

Welcoming newcomer families in child care programs: resource package  
Vancouver, BC: Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre, 1998

A guide to creating partnerships with parents  
Mary B. Lane, Sheila Singer  
Sacramento, CA: Department of Education, 1990

These and other resources are available through the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library. Call toll free 1-877-262-0022 or visit our website at [www.wstcoast.org](http://www.wstcoast.org).

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