



How Young Children Build Images of Themselves

by Francis Wardle

Self-image, the view each of us has of ourselves, is complex, multidimensional, and ever changing. It affects everything we do, and is affected by everything we do. The creation of self-image begins at birth and continues throughout a person's life. It is neither all positive nor all negative.

What is of deep interest to early childhood educators is our wish to assist in the development of a strong, independent, secure self-image in each of our children. This need of ours has resulted in some very negative ideas and practices — to name a few, showering praise and rewards on children at every turn; believing a single program, book, poster, phrase, pamphlet, or activity can *inoculate* a child with a positive self-image; engaging in activities with our children that form an excessive preoccupation with oneself; and believing that a minority child's self-image is totally tied to his sense of belonging to a minority group.

Self-image is based on a simple, interactive, conceptual model: the individual, the individual's interaction with the environment, the response of that environment to the individual, and the individual's interpretation of that response. But the application of this model poses some complex questions:

- Why do children interpret the response to the same environment differently?
- How does self-image build on itself?
- Which adults in the environment have the most impact on self-image (for example, bonding)?
- What does developmental age have to do with creation of self-image?

- What is the impact on self-image of minority status in this society?

Critical to a child's self-image is how the child interprets the response of the environment to her actions and involvement. When she looks in the mirror, does she say "I like myself" or is she critical? When she fails a task, does she say to herself "Here we go again" or does she say "That was an interesting experiment with unexpected results"? Meta communication — talking to ourselves — has a lot to do with the development of our self-image.

Each child has a profound impact on the creation of his own self-image: the way he behaves and responds to the environment (Is he appropriate? fun to be around? obnoxious?) and the way he evaluates information from the environment. He is an active agent in the development of his own self-image.

Clearly much of a child's self-image is based on the way society views the child. A child who feels she belongs to a family, community, and culture will develop a healthy self-image. This is why it is so critical that schools and early childhood programs support a child's home environment — culture, race, language, lifestyle, and values.

But we cannot do this at the expense of the most important ingredient of self-image: the quality of human interactions. The way important people in a child's life respond to the child's personality and behaviors is a mirror for the child's image. William Cross (1987) has carefully looked at these two factors: the important human interactions in a child's life and the various groups the child belongs to. He has developed what he calls a two factor theory of self-image — a combination of personal identity and reference group orientation.



Personal identity is a concept everyone has, regardless of culture, language, nationality, or race. It includes self-esteem, self-worth, self-evaluation, interpersonal competence, personality traits, and physical characteristics. Reference group orientation includes the various groups a person belongs to: church, school, race, community, family, gender, and racial identity and gender image. It also includes the symbols and values of those groups.

While Cross believes self-image is based on an interaction between personal identity and reference group orientation, he does not believe one is predictive of the other: a person who has a strong sense of group belonging does not necessarily have a strong personal identity.

But it is also clear much of a child's personal identity is determined by the way the environment responds to the characteristics the child has, based on his group belonging (gender, race, family lifestyle, religion). For example, if a program does not support a child's home language, that will impact self-image. If a child does not see pictures, books, and people in his program that look like him, that too will affect his self-image. And if a child is prevented from participating in a celebration because of his family's religious choice, this will have a negative impact.

What is important about the two factor model is to realize these impacts are important because they affect the individual child. A child's positive self-image is based on how the child sees herself; it is not based on how the child sees herself in reference to racial, ethnic, gender, economic, or other groups. This is particularly true of young children, who have not yet formed a clear concept of racial consistency and group membership. What is critical is positive, meaningful responses to the individual child, not to the group the child belongs to. A girl who builds a fantastic structure in the block area is competent as an individual, not as a girl; a biracial child who is complimented for his rich brown skin, blond hair, and green eyes is receiving positive feedback about his unique physical features.

Self-image is based on the continual resolution of two often conflicting parts: the way the world views the child (physical features, behavior, likability, temperament) and the way the child views himself. Because young children go through various cognitive and social stages in which they view the world and themselves through particular prisms, this resolution is a continuous growth process. One of our biggest roles as parents and teachers is to continually help our children resolve this apparent conflict.

While our total interactions with our children impact this resolution, it is helpful to break what we do into four general themes: love and acceptance, power and control, moral virtue, and competence (Curry and Johnson, 1990). Early childhood educators are particularly interested in positively impacting self-image while children are with them; yet we do a disservice to our children if we divorce that experience from the child's total life. These concepts are applicable at home, at the program, and in the community.

Love and Acceptance

Is the child accepted as a unique, worthy individual? Does the child feel she belongs? Does she feel people care about her and her experiences?

We can build feelings of love and acceptance by:

- Providing high levels of support and nurturing at all times.
- Providing appropriate and consistent limits.
- Providing praise and acknowledgment for completing specific tasks.
- Letting children know you love them based on their unique personality. "It's fun being with you." "I'm glad you came shopping with me." "I like having someone to talk to."
- Engaging in projects with your child that show her you enjoy her company.
- Giving each child your undivided, personal attention as much as you can.

Power and Control

Does a child feel he has some control of his life, and of his destiny? Does he feel his destiny is under his control or someone else's?

We can develop feelings of power and control by:

- Providing lots of opportunities for choice.
- Providing meaningful projects and activities a child can participate in: building a fort, growing a garden, doing a cooking project, completing a painting.
- Providing many opportunities for children to explore, investigate, hypothesize, wonder, and develop alterna-



...tive solutions to practical and intellectual problems.

- Helping children develop their own ability to decide if they are satisfied with their effort and its result. Help them self-evaluate.
- Teaching problem-solving techniques.
- Providing high expectations and challenges.
- Letting children know you believe they can succeed.
- Encouraging children to develop their own rules, based on their abilities, to control certain activities.

Moral Value

Does the child basically feel good? Does she believe she is being treated fairly? Does she believe that, fundamentally, she is a good person? Does she believe she belongs?

We can develop feelings of moral value by:

- Making sure that all interactions with adults (teachers, parents, coaches) are characterized by mutual respect, cooperation, empathy, and fairness.
- Limiting extrinsic rewards, like money, stickers.
- Helping children constructively handle failure and disappointment.
- Providing opportunities for children to persist and expend effort in projects meaningful to the child.
- Providing many opportunities for children to work together cooperatively and in groups.
- Providing opportunities for children to do things for other people, the school, or the community (visiting seniors, cleaning up the playground for the whole school).
- Criticizing the child's behavior, not the child, when you need to limit or criticize a child.
- Never comparing the child with other participants (family, team, class) in any group of which she is a part. Helping her feel like an important part of the group.

Competence

Does the child feel he can do a variety of things other children his age can accomplish? Does he believe it is worth attempting a task, even if it cannot be fully completed?

We can support feelings of competence by:

- Basing expectations on the individual child's age and abilities.
- Doing as many instructive things with your child as possible.
- Understanding that overcoming problems and developing solutions are important competencies that build self-image.
- Supporting interpersonal competence — solving problems with other children.
- Providing acknowledgment and appropriate praise for completing specific tasks.
- Rewarding effort and risk-taking.
- Helping children learn new skills and concepts and building on existing skills, but not expecting them to be able to do tasks as well as adults.

Conclusion

Developing a healthy, secure self-image is a life-long, complex, elusive phenomena. It is not a linear process. It is fluid and dynamic. It is constantly changing and shifting. And it ultimately involves how a person feels about herself, both as an individual and as a responsible member of overlapping social groups: family, church, profession, race, culture, and nation. Child care professionals have a vital role to play in the early development of our children's strong and positive self-images.

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