Supporting Healthy Identity Development
Excerpt from *A Place to Begin: Working With Parents on Issues of Diversity*

By Dora Pulido-Tobiassen and Janet Gonzalez-Mena – California Tomorrow (1999)

Why is a Positive Sense of Identity Important?

As people working with parents from many backgrounds, it is essential that we understand why all children need to develop a healthy sense of their group identities---and the particular challenges and difficulties of achieving this when facing families whose structures, languages, national origins and skin colors are targets of prejudice. A positive sense of identity is crucial to the development of self-esteem and confidence. Children who feel worthy and capable are more likely to be optimistic and to do well in school. A healthy sense of identity also helps children to be more open to people from other backgrounds because they are less likely to fear differences or put other children down to feel better about themselves. A strong and positive feeling about their parents and grandparents helps children feel safe and confident about themselves and their roots.

Having a sense of group identity as well as personal identity also helps a child feel a sense of belonging. Group identity is constructed in many different ways. Identity can come from belonging to a community based on religion, political or social values, shared language, ethnicity or national origin. It can even be a community based in part on the shared experience of being targets of racism. A group identity can come from whatever the child's family considers important in defining who is "like us." When children are of a group that others value less, creating a strong and positive group identity is particularly important for providing them with resiliency and moral support for challenging the biases they may face in that larger context that devalues them.

How and When Do Children Develop an Identity? The Power of Racism

"Children learn to know themselves in relation to opportunities and limitations in their social world.

Race and color, in particular, remain unavoidable issues in identity formation." (Frazier, 1941)

Parents and those who work with them may not always realize how early children begin developing a sense of differences based on race, culture and language. The process of forming an identity begins at birth, as children absorb who they are from those around them. In the first few hours they can tell one smell from another, one voice from another---and they prefer their mother's. Attachment is part of the process of identity formation. As infants grow emotionally close to certain people, they associate them with how those people smell, touch, sound, and are able to recognize their "special people" early on.

After several months, children come to distinguish "strangers." In the process, babies become astute observers of differences and similarities. When infants engage with others, they receive messages about who they are from others' reactions. They develop their sense of being valued and being cared for from those interactions. They begin to imitate and later identify with others in their lives.

In diverse families and communities, children come to expect a degree of variation in how people look, feel and sound, viewing such variation as normal. They understand their world is comprised of both high and deep voices, dark skins and light ones. Children spending their early years in more homogeneous families and communities come to associate the human face, voice and touch with a particular skin color or tone.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of very young children reacting to racial differences when they first encounter them. For example, Robin arrived from Hong Kong at 23 months of age. She showed no anxiety around Asian or white people, in the airport or at home. But when she first met her African American doctor, her eyes opened wide with shock. It seemed that this was the first Black person Robin had seen in her life.

By age three, children can put their reactions to skin color into words (Goodman, 1964). They not only notice their own, but they mention how theirs is different from that of other family members or friends. As children enter their preschool years, they express curiosity about all kinds of differences.

Just as they learn about differences between colors and shapes, they also are starting to categorize people. Three – and four – year – olds talk about physical differences between themselves and others, between boys and girls and among skin colors, hair textures, and eye shapes. They also soon become aware of differences in language, in family make-up, and in what happens in each others' homes. By the time they are in the early grades, children have begun comprehending racial differences consciously (Goodman, 1964)/

The development of children's identity is tied to all of this observation. As soon as they begin to talk, the questions may start to flow, revealing the very concrete terms in which they think:

- ✍ *Grandma, how come our skin is darker than the neighbors?*
- ✍ *If I don't speak Spanish, can I still be a Mexican?*
- ✍ *What part of me is Black and what part is white?*
- ✍ *Why am I "Black" if my skin is brown?*
- ✍ *I want to have eyes like Miyoko's. If I learn Japanese, will my eyes change?*

How children learn to appreciate differences depends on the social meaning attached to them. Do other people react as if those differences are important? Do other people react to differences by switching their behavior? Differences in eye or skin color, for example, can simply become a category of human variation. When children feel an uncomfortable reaction, they become alerted to the negative significance some people put on their differences. Thus they learn to see that "I'm Black" is significant. This shapes identity.

As they grow, children become more and more aware of how they are viewed by others. Even early on, they begin to learn about how others view people like themselves form the messages they receive from television, books, magazines, photographs, and artwork. In their day-to-day lives, children who regularly see people who look like themselves in important, powerful positions gain confidence and a sense of possibilities. But children constantly bombarded with images portraying people from the same background in a negative light or as inferior, start to dislike who they are (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force).

Children may start to reject what they have been taught by their parents if they find that what they do at home is never mentioned, or worse, is considered strange by other children and adults. They may refuse to speak their home language, eat certain foods, wear certain clothes, or follow certain religious practices. They begin to compare their appearance or life with that of others. They start to express concerns about being different.

- ✍ *Miki comes home saying, "Mom, I don't want to eat with chopsticks any more. The kids laugh at me."*
- ✍ *Alex has been in a pre-kindergarten program for two weeks. One evening he refuses to speak in Russian with his parents (the only language they understand). "I don't speak that way anymore", he*

insists. "The teacher says it's not okay for me to speak Russian at school."

These moments inevitably occur with children whose language, skin color or cultural behaviors are reflective of groups that are devalued in this society. It is essential that families be able to provide a sense of positiveness about their race, language, nationality and skin color. Children need to be reassured that differences are fine. Parents, and those who work with them, need to find ways of bridging the norms, attitudes and ways of doing things in children's multiple worlds---and counteracting the demeaning and harmful messages.

Is the process of forming a racial or cultural identity the same for all children?

Not really! In our society, racial and cultural identity formation is almost always tainted by deep racial divides and active racism. Children learn early on that their skin color makes a difference in how they are treated, that they are "like" others with their same skin color. Overall, white children and children of color actually learn who they are racially quite differently. This is partly because white people traditionally hold a place of power in our society. White children learn to take for granted that they "belong" in this society. Meanwhile, children of color are targets of discrimination and oppression that ensnare them in an onslaught of messages abut their lesser worth. Whatever your background, as someone who works with parents, you need to be aware of how children sense of self can be shaped by experiences in the world based on their race. The goal is to help ALL children develop a strong, positive sense of themselves.

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