

Development of Racial Identity by Age

Guiding Assumptions:

- The development of a positive sense of racial/ethnic identity, not based on assumed superiority or inferiority, is an important task for everyone.
- Racial / ethnic identity formation is a developmental process which unfolds in rather predictable ways.
- For young people of color, the process often begins to unfold in adolescence.
- For whites living in predominantly white areas, the process may not begin until much later.
- Many white adults have given little consideration to the meaning of their own racial group membership.
- The fact that adolescents of color and white youth, as well as white educators, are on very different developmental timelines in terms of racial identity development is a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict.
- Those who feel affirmed in their own identity are more likely to be respectful of others' self-definition.

Prevailing Majority Culture Ideology:

The prevailing majority culture ideology promotes the idea that children are color-blind, i.e., they are unaware of race and racism. This ideology further assumes that if adults don't talk with children about "it," children will grow up to be non-prejudiced adults. Denial and avoidance, then, appear to be the main techniques for dealing with one of the most pervasive and crucial problems of U.S. society.

Children will "naturally" grow up to be non-racist adults only when they live in a non-racist society. Until then, adults must guide children's anti-racist development. This will include the fostering of: 1) accurate knowledge and pride about one's racial/cultural identity; 2) accurate knowledge and appreciation of other racial groups; and 3) an understanding of how racism works and how to combat it.

For Children from oppressed racial/cultural groups, the order of concern seems to be: 1) questions about one's own identity; questions about racism and about whites; and 2) questions about other groups. For white children, the order seems to be: 1) questions about people of color; 2) comments which reflect stereotypic or negative attitudes; 3) questions about their own racial/cultural identity.

Ages 2-3

Children are becoming more curious and aware of how they look and how they differ from other people. Differences between girls and boys, hair color and eye color become topics of conversation. Children will begin to talk about their own physical appearance and abilities. This age may also see children beginning to notice that children who look different may also be eating different foods or speaking a different language.

Children at this age may also begin to show signs of pre-prejudices (the ideas and feelings in very young children that may later develop into real prejudices when reinforced by biases that exist in society). Examples of this may be seen in children who will only play with dolls who look like themselves or show fear around people who look different than them.

Things you may hear at this stage:

“I have brown hair.”

“I have blue eyes.”

Ages 3-6

Children in this age range will think of race in strictly in terms of physical appearance. Children are aware of both their own and other’s physical attributes and have questions about why they look the way they do and why other people look differently. It is common for this age to have questions about “social colors” and “general colors.” You may also see children in this stage question the permanency of skin color or eye color. You may also see children in this age group begin to identify with their own ethnic group as they become more aware of family traditions and history.

Things you may hear at this stage:

“Will my skin color change when I grow up?”

“Will you always be white?”

“I’m not black. I’m brown.”

“I’m about as brown as this crayon.”

“Your nose is different because it goes up.”

“Why am I white?”

Ages 6-10

Children at this stage have a literal understanding of ethnicity; that ancestry influences not only how people look but also the food they eat, the language they speak and the activities they enjoy. For example, being Mexican-American means speaking Spanish and eating Mexican food.

This age will also show a greater interest in cultural characteristics and tend to be working on the conflict between belonging to different groups. For example, they will grapple with being both “American” and “black.” These children are also increasingly peer oriented and are developing a sense of “fairness” through their games and play.

Awareness of racism against their group is often heightened during this age and personal prejudice can become apparent in behavior and attitude. It is so important that children during this stage are made aware that racism is not a natural part of human nature and that it is not inevitable.

Things you might hear at this stage:

White children expressing gratitude that they are not Latino.

A white child expressing the belief that slaves were bad because they fought and a black child countering that they were fighting to be free.

“He can’t be Mexican, he speaks English.”

Ages 10 – 14

At this stage children begin to understand the social implications related to race. Studies show that sixth-graders can grasp how political resources are allocated in neighborhoods and how affirmative action affects minorities. Also, inter-racial friendships that were formed in elementary school tend to fall apart as children begin to socially segregate.

The historical and geographic aspects of racial identity are more deeply understood, as is the concept of “ancestry.” Feelings and knowledge about cultural values and personal struggles against racism become more complex.

Things you might hear at this stage:

“That’s the rich part of town. Only whites can live there.”

“My Grandmother came her from Africa. She tells me a lot of stories about what life was like there.”

Adolescence:

The main goal of identity formation in adolescence is to develop a clear sense of self.

This is done by “trying on” different roles in various settings, such as home, school, and other social settings. In this process young people explore their own values, ethics, spirituality, racial and ethnic identity, sexuality, and gender. While teens are learning what makes them unique, they also have an increased need to “fit in.” Therefore, identity formation can be especially challenging for teens who feel different from others because of their cultural, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity.

Self-Identity: refers to how we define ourselves. Self-identity forms the basis of our self-esteem. In adolescence, the way we see ourselves changes in response to peers, family and school, among other social environments. Our self-identities shape our perceptions of belonging. Many teen-agers express pride in their heritage and a sense of belonging to a group as their view of ethnicity and race matures.

Social-Identity: Is constructed by others, and may differ from self-identity. Typically, people categorize individuals according to broad, socially-defined labels. For example, if you have dark skin, you may be labeled “black” by others even though you may not have adopted that identity for yourself.

Identity is dynamic and complex, and changes over time.

The Teen Brain

- From ages 13 to about age 25, a **pruning and strengthening process** is happening in their brains.
- Because of the huge changes happening in the teen brain, it's possible that a decision a teen makes now may affect him for life.
- From early adolescence through their mid-20s, a teen's brain develops somewhat unevenly, from back to front. This may help explain their endearingly quirky behavior but also makes them prone to risk-taking.
- The parts of the adolescent brain which develop first are those which control physical coordination, emotion and motivation.

- However, the part of the brain which controls reasoning and impulses - known as the Prefrontal Cortex - is near the front of the brain and, therefore, develops last. This part of the brain does not fully mature until the age of 25.
 - difficulty holding back or controlling emotions,
 - a preference for physical activity,
 - a preference for high excitement and low effort activities (video games, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll),
 - poor planning and judgment (rarely thinking of negative consequences),
 - more risky, impulsive behaviors, including experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

Adolescence: Translating the Race, Digital & Pop Culture World

- Know your own beliefs regarding race and pop culture so you can talk about setting guidelines for the teen.
- Get educated. Find out what music, Web sites and other media interest the teen and how it is connected to race. These will change, so ask often.
- Learn how to analyze media messages around race and racism, so you can help the teen translate them.
- Engage in media use with the teen and get comfortable with new technologies, especially if the teen is using them. Use these opportunities to talk about what is credible and why.
- Encourage teens to think critically about what they hear, see and read.

Note: It's not easy being an adolescent

- They have to try to figure out and manage volatile and powerful emotions.
- They have to fit into a complex social network.
- They have to deal with immense peer pressure.
- They have to deal with wildly changing moods.
- They have to handle sexually maturing bodies that give rise to strong urges.
- They have to figure out what their values are going to be.
- They have to renegotiate relationships with their parents.
- They experience a loss of talent development.
- They have to get through school.
- They have to figure out how to get enough sleep.
- They have to begin to plan their future.
- They have to decide how they are going to respond to the temptation of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.