



CHILD AND YOUTH

Young People and Identity

Identity describes a person's sense of who they are and is a building block of personality. Adolescence is an especially important period of identity development. Healthy identity development requires support as young people progress through challenges and are confronted with questions of who they are, their values, and their place in the world.

Identity is shaped through relationships. Young people develop an understanding of themselves through the feedback and reactions of those around them. When their internal feelings and experiences are mirrored and validated by others, they feel understood and accepted. This helps them build confidence, trust, and a coherent sense of self. When there is a mismatch between their inner experience and others' responses, they may feel invalidated or confused about who they are.

Identity and mental health

A strong sense of identity is important for young people to effectively deal with challenges, adapt to change, express and regulate their emotions, feel good about themselves, and build healthy relationships with others.

Healthy identity develops when there is a good fit between internal and external feedback: when a young person's sense of self aligns with how they are seen, valued, and accepted by others. Feeling secure, loved, and understood provides the foundation for confidence and trust in themselves and in others.

Without a stable sense of identity, young people may find it harder to manage stress and cope with life's challenges. This uncertainty about who they are and where they fit in can make them more vulnerable to mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, and risky behaviours. They may also lack direction in life and struggle to make decisions.

Identity development and formation

A sense of identity is different for everyone and can help us answer questions like:

- How am I similar and different to others?
- Where do I come from - my culture and family?
- What is my place in the world?

Identity formation begins in preadolescence and continues to develop as young people explore who they are. It is shaped by social, cultural, and environmental influences. Trying new activities, spending time with different friends, and changing

appearance are normal parts of this process.

Understanding identity can take time. It might be more confusing and distressing if young people get conflicting messages about how others see them. Healthy identity development involves exploration and gradually committing to what feels authentic for the individual.

Identity development can involve several stages:

- Identity diffusion: the young person has neither explored identity options nor made a commitment to an identity.
- Identity foreclosure: the young person commits to an identity without having explored other options.
- Identity moratorium: the young person is actively exploring identity options but has not yet made a commitment to one.
- Identity achievement: after a period of exploration, the young person commits to an identity.

How can we support healthy identity development?

Everyone involved in a young person's life, clinicians, carers, teachers, and family, plays a role in supporting identity development. This support happens through both actions and relationships. When adults provide consistent, validating feedback, they help young people make sense of who they are and build confidence in their own perceptions.

You can help supporting this by:

- Supporting the young person to try new activities, roles, or interests
- Giving the young person appropriate opportunities to make choices for themselves
- Reflect their feelings and experiences to help them feel understood
- Exploring the young person's values
- Offer predictable feedback and emotional responses to build trust
- Being supportive when a young person expresses uncertainty or curiosity about their developing goals or beliefs

When young people experience relationships that consistently *match and mirror* their inner experiences, they develop stronger confidence, trust in others, and a secure sense of who they are.

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