

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Sense of Self



What You Need to Know

Preschoolers are developing their own perceptions of themselves as individuals. They define and describe themselves in terms of their physical attributes, skills, interests, behaviors, or associations that *they* consider most important about themselves. Additionally, they are developing an understanding of their own interests, beliefs, culture, and how they are different or similar to other people. Children’s development of their sense of self is also heavily influenced by how the adults they value respond to them. Teachers can help children develop a *positive sense of self* by noticing and acknowledging children’s unique attributes, preferences, thoughts, and talents and by providing a nurturing environment filled with acceptance and respect.

Things to Consider

- ◆ While adults may define themselves in terms of personality traits (e.g., trustworthy), preschoolers tend to define themselves by more concrete features such as age, gender, ability, or possessions (e.g., “My name is John, I’m 4 years old, I love superheroes, and I can run really fast.”). Support children by acknowledging and affirming their observations about themselves without judgement (e.g., “You have so much to share. There are many things to know about you.”).
- ◆ Build upon preschoolers’ natural curiosity about similarities and differences and use this as an opportunity to acknowledge and encourage appreciation of diversity. Draw attention to and embrace differences or similarities in ethnic background, sociocultural background, and family structure.
- ◆ Be careful not to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. For example, we tend to praise girls for being kind and caring and boys for being daring or confident. And/or we (and they) make assumptions about the toys or activities they may like (e.g., boys will like trucks more than dolls). Share stories of characters who defy traditional gender roles and be accepting and open to children’s interests or behaviors that cross stereotypical gender lines.
- ◆ Each child has their individual personality and characteristics which should be celebrated. It is important to notice and celebrate children’s more “behind the scenes” characteristics such as being careful and patient as much as it is to identify and acknowledge more visible personality traits like being daring and energetic.

Development of Sense of Self/Identity Skills

Between 36 and 48 months, children <i>may</i> :	Between 48 and 60 months, children <i>may</i> :
Show awareness about self and how to connect with others and pay attention when others notice what they are able to do.	Describes a larger range of individual characteristics and interests and communicates how these are similar or different from those of other people.
Understand some characteristics of self and others.	Describes self using several different characteristics.
Describes own physical characteristics and behaviors and indicates desires and preferences and likes and dislikes (when asked).	Demonstrates knowledge of uniqueness of self, such as talents, interests, preferences, or culture.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of sense of self:

- ◆ Child-directed activities that include or follow children’s interests and ideas.
- ◆ Art activities that promote free expression. Incorporate a variety of colors and art materials for children to use to represent diverse physical characteristics (e.g., skin, hair, and eye color).
- ◆ Photos or materials from home to compare and discuss similarities, differences, and “who we are.”
- ◆ Introduce books, pictures, music, toys, and materials that incorporate diversity.
- ◆ Activities where children get to indicate their likes/dislikes or ideas (e.g., create a graph or chart while tasting different foods and the teacher records if they like or dislike, or K-W-L charts where they indicate what they wonder or predict).
- ◆ Games or songs that involve individualization for each child (e.g., each child has a chance to dance or sing in the middle of the circle).



Intentional Teaching Practices for Helping Children to Develop a Positive Sense of Self

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe to see if the environment in your classroom is nurturing, accepting, and full of respect for each individual's unique identity, preferences, talents, and thoughts. Do you acknowledge and affirm who they are and reinforce a positive self-image? Do children express their preferences? How do teachers and peers respond to them? Are children comfortable describing who they are, their family, and where they come from? Are there things you can do to promote acceptance and respect for others who are different from them?
FOCUS	Acknowledge and Affirm Physical Attributes, Interests, and Characteristics Let children know you've noticed and value them and help them define themselves by commenting on their physical attributes, interests, choices, and personal characteristics. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Physical Attributes: "You have curly black hair and brown eyes," or, "Yes, your skin color is similar to that peach crayon."◆ Choices/Interests: "You chose to play that fishing game again today. I think you really like that game," or, "You chose pretzels instead of crackers for a snack."◆ Characteristics: "Thank you for picking those up. You are so <i>helpful</i>," or, "You keep trying when things are tough. You are very <i>determined</i> and <i>persistent</i>."
SCAFFOLD I	Promote Child Autonomy (value their identity, interests, ideas, opinions) Consider the totality of children's identities, interests, and abilities as you choose topics, activities, and materials. Let them have a say in what happens in the classroom to let them know that you value their individual ideas and interests. Provide opportunities for children to share their ideas to promote equity in social situations. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Offer choices: "Where would you like to play in the room?", "What should we sing/read?", "Let's look at the picture cards and point to or say what you would like to play, sing or read?" Offer visuals or choices of two to help children with limited speech to communicate their ideas and opinions.◆ Imitate their play: "Oh, you like racing the cars – can I race with you? You can tell me or give me a thumbs up for yes or thumbs down for no," or, "I see you lined up those toys perfectly in a row. Can I line my toys up next to yours?"◆ Be flexible: "You really do not like these blocks. You would rather play with those. Okay, I'll come with you to get them."◆ Empower children: "In this part of the story, someone said she could not be in the class play because she didn't look exactly like the character. That doesn't seem fair. Let's share ideas for ways to include everyone."
SCAFFOLD II	Embrace Similarities and Differences Balance activities and materials that reflect children's lives and others that expand their worldview. Make comments that accept and embrace children's similarities and differences. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "Let's listen to two versions of this song: one performed by an American musician and another performed by a Jamaican musician. After, we can talk about ways they sound similar and different."◆ "Your art projects are all so different! Some used glitter and paint, while others used markers. They are all wonderful creations. Can you imagine how boring our room would look if all of our projects looked exactly the same? I love the variety!"◆ "Yes, your hair is straight and blonde. Mine is curly and brown. Our hair is different. We both have hair to our shoulders. What is your favorite way to wear your hair? Can you show me?"
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities from Setting the Stage into your regular routines.