

Foundations of Identity

Identity is crucial to how children and young people (children) understand themselves and their world. The development of a strong identity can support children to grow and develop into resilient adults. This is particularly important when they have had adverse childhood experiences. A positive identity helps create a sense of belonging, feelings of hope for the future, and a sense of control over their lives. Everyday casework and case planning should focus on promoting ways children can develop strong, positive identities.

This factsheet will provide you with a foundational knowledge of identity, to help inform your everyday casework and permanency case planning. This factsheet should be read in conjunction with [Foundations of Culture](#).

What does our Legislation say about Supporting Identity?

Your casework should be guided by the Sections 9 (b) and (d) of the [Children and Young Persons \(Care and Protection\) Act 1998](#), which require that:

- all actions and decisions that significantly affect a child must consider the culture, disability, language, religion, and sexuality of the child
- where a child is unable to remain living with family, their name, identity, language, and cultural/religious ties should, as far as possible, be preserved.

It should also be guided by the [NSW Child Standards for Permanent Care](#). Standard 4 of the standards require that children and young people are supported to have a positive sense of identity.

Understanding the Components of Identity

A child's identity is multi-dimensional, distinctly personal, and develops over their whole life. Forming an identity is a fundamental part of childhood development.

A child's identity helps them understand what they value and characteristics that define them. It is influenced by where the child has come from. This includes their family background, culture, religion and beliefs, friends, sexuality, gender, age, disability, and socio-economic status.

Identity involves:

- self-concept - how they describe themselves personally and as a group member
- self-esteem - their evaluation of themselves
- narrative identity - the internal voice that gives meaning to their past and current experiences and actions
- ego identity - experimenting with new information and experiences before deciding how it relates to them
- self-efficacy - the level of confidence they have in achieving set goals
- social identity - cultivating relationships and role in family or culture, such as a daughter or son or sibling in a family or a dancer in a cultural group
- situational identity – changes in identity depending on a situation or who they interact with
- place and cultural identity - individual and group identity that includes physical location or a sense of belonging to a nation, culture, or community, such as language, cultural events, activities, traditions, or celebrations (ARACY, 2020).

Supporting Children in Care to Develop Strong Identities

A child's identity is shaped by their past experiences and evolves with new experiences. Removal, entry, and experiences in care can have a major impact on the way a child's identity develops. Connections to family, home, friends, school, culture, and other important anchors will be disrupted. These are the anchors that help children develop a strong and positive identity.

Your role is to help support a child to feel re-anchored and empowered to keep exploring their identity. You can do this by helping a child:

- Understand their life story – You can help a child remember, explore, and understand:
 - their life before coming into care – family and cultural background, pets, neighbourhood, and school experiences
 - the reasons they came into care
 - their out-of-home care experiences
 - the reasons they were placed with their current carers, guardians, etc
 - anything else important to the child.

- Have regular, quality family time - working with the child, carers, and families to develop family connections and networks. Supporting positive experiences of family time (contact) for the child and family.

See [Foundations of Family Time \(Contact\)](#) and [Family Time \(Contact\) – Practice Tips](#) for more information.

- Feel culturally connected - supporting the child to connect with culture through family, kin, or other members of their communities i.e., ethnic or religious communities. Make sure your work to support a child's identity, fits with the norms and practices of the cultures that the child respects and values.

See the PSP Practice Areas [Working with Aboriginal Children, Young People and Families](#) and [Multicultural Care and Identity](#) for more information.

- Participate
 - giving the child control over aspects of their lives i.e., allowing them to make personal choices about their appearance, their living areas and their preference to identify with names and places
 - encouraging the child to meaningfully participate, at an appropriate level for their age, culture, and development, in decisions that affect them
 - helping the child to develop skills to speak out and give their views and taking their views seriously to show they are important.

See [Conversations with Children, Families and Carers – Tips and Guidance](#), [Working with Young People](#) and [Tips for Talking with Children And Young People](#).

- Feel respected –
 - acting on what a child tells you in a timely way, and if decisions are made that they don't agree with, explaining why
 - recognising and celebrating significant events for the child or young person.

You should actively partner with carers and family to help them understand ways they can support a child to build a strong identity.

Tip: It's important you include these tasks in the child's case plan. Monitor them to see if they are helping the child to develop a positive sense identity. You may need to change what you do along the way.

References

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2020). The development of a positive sense of identity and culture by ages and stages: contextual factors and potential risk and protective factors, Practice Paper 1, 1-18. Available:

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