

Supporting your Child in Developing a Healthy Identity

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Introduction

Developing a positive sense of self and identity is a life-long process which starts in childhood and often begins to be expressed in the teenage years. However, it can be a difficult concept to pin down. Lifespan research suggests that how we view ourselves impacts our most important life experiences (Orth et al, 2012, 2014). Psychological theories present self-esteem as an internal measure of actual and imagined assessments from others that you are close to. At the same time many people gain a sense of positive self-esteem from their identity groups, which furthers a sense of community and belonging. These groups can include shared interests, culture, religion, gender and so on. In this way, 'identity' is based on both having a sense of self (uniqueness and individuality which makes a person distinct from others) and belonging to a collective group.

Identity Development

Therefore, forming a positive identity/self-image and healthy sense of self is an increasing part of child development. It usually begins in the latter primary school years and then, in response to the increasing challenges of growing up, becomes an important aspect during adolescence where it can contribute to growing independence and self-efficacy. It can provide purpose

and motivation in life which can boost self-esteem and support resilience. It can be a way for young people to develop a sense of social belonging to enjoy sharing and developing interests within a group of like-minded peers. A positive and helpful identity is therefore associated with good emotional well-being and lower rates of anxiety and low mood.

Personal Choices

Constructing an individual sense of self is thought to be achieved by making personal choices regarding who and what to associate with. These personal choices rely on the ability for the person to explore their environment and from this to make identity choices - in terms of values, goals and roles - and commit to them. Though there is continuity in this process, there is also development and change. Identity is made evident through the use of markers such as language, dress, behaviour and choice of environment and how these markers are recognised within a social context. Of course, these markers may also be misinterpreted to mean a certain identity whereas they may not be. For identity to be resilient and helpful, these personal choices need to be integrated into a stable society and culture.

Autism and Identity

The diagnosis of autism potentially presents challenges to this process compared to experiences of typically developing young people for a number of reasons. Difficulties with flexible thinking can make it hard to make healthy choices. Feelings of anxiety in managing the social world can make exploration difficult with many young people avoiding social situations as a way to cope. All or nothing thinking styles, often negatively biased, can make it harder for the young person to explore healthier options or to look at the positive aspects of exploring a range of life experiences, or they may be vulnerable to becoming involved in more extreme interests. Difficulties regulating emotions internally mean that difficult feelings may become expressed through behaviour, such that it may look like a formation of identity but is really a way to cope with difficult feelings. Gender Dysphoria is where a person experiences distress because their biological sex differs from their gender identity. There is some evidence that people with autism are more likely than other people to experience gender dysphoria and some professionals in the field consider it important to distinguish between gender dysphoria and issues connected to autism.

Therefore for a young person with a diagnosis of autism this developmental process may benefit from additional support in the following ways:

1. Support your child to develop a range of interests so that they have opportunities to explore and find things they may like. Given this may prove quite a challenge try to find activities which provide healthy opportunities and which offer a socially structured setting, for example, dance lessons, athletics, music, or singing. If your child finds this idea annoying you could use their preferred interests for example computer time, as a reward initially to support attendance and talk to them about the importance of having a range of interests even if they don't want to.

2. If your child is very reluctant to try new things, support them to do this gradually. Offer them a range of choices and allow them to choose so that they feel more in control. Start with their interests and gradually make this a more social event, e.g. inviting other children over for a 'computer club' with a social meal. When they start a new activity outside home they could just go to watch at first, then stay for half of it, then go to all of it. When doing this sort of graded work, tell them they need to stay for at least 5-10 minutes each time in order for their worries to get better over time.

3. Help your child to develop balanced thinking. When talking to them about the news, life events and choices, ensure you talk about them looking across the range of up and down sides, with a greater emphasis on the positives than the negatives.

4. Many young people with autism regulate their emotions through acting out life challenges rather than talking to someone or reflecting on things. Think about whether your child's preferences, dress or behaviour are actually an informed choice as a result of exploring their environment (identity) or actually a way to process challenges in a way that makes sense to them or helps them regulate their emotions. Try to work out what the challenge is that they are trying to process, for example, a girl dressing up in boys clothes in order to make friends. Support your child to regulate by talking to you about it and offer them wider opportunities to support exploration and make choices. For example, invite both genders over to play on playdates or support access to activities with mixed genders.

5. The diagnosis of autism itself can be an important part of a young person's identity. Help your child to foster pride in their diagnosis – looking at the unique skills that autism can bring.

References

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