

Children's Growing Identity: Cultivating Self-Awareness to Inspire Confidence

In those last sweet days of summer, Mom Margaret wanted to do something enjoyable with both kids in addition to the typical flurry of school supply shopping. But, she hesitated to propose an outing when she noticed that ten-year-old Olivia was sulking around the house seeming down. When Margaret asked her about it, she snapped, "Mom! I'm fine."

After giving Olivia a little time and space, Margaret approached her gently, "Seems like you've been worried or upset lately. Are you okay?" Despite her delicate prodding, Olivia shrugged her shoulders and innocently looked at her mom.

"I don't know," she said genuinely perplexed.

"Are you upset about your friends?" Olivia had been hanging out with neighbors all summer long, and maybe they had an argument Mom guessed. But, no, that wasn't it. "Could it be," asked Mom, "anticipating the school year starting and all that goes along with it?"

Olivia was no longer quiet and launched into her many worries. Ah, jackpot. Would she like her new teacher? Would she fit into her old group of friends or could she make new ones? What if she failed the new advanced placement math class to which they had moved her?

Frequently as parents, we feel like we must poke, prod, and pry — but not too hard and not too obviously — in order to discover the true feelings our children are evidencing through their words and actions. We know something is wrong. But what? Many times, children are not aware themselves, as was the case with Olivia. Her Mom allowed her the safe space to reflect on what she was really feeling, and she was able to figure it out with her support.

At each age and stage, children are growing their self-awareness. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning defines self-awareness as "the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior...the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence." This includes approaching challenges with the intent to learn from them and the optimism that with hard work, one can meet any challenge. Children are not born with the ability to identify, understand, and articulate their emotions. That skill is built over time through

interactions with you. The more intentional parents become about teaching children how they are experiencing emotions, how they interpret situations, and realizing they have choices in how they interpret situations, the greater the child's self-awareness becomes.

Self-awareness is equally important to grow in ourselves as parents yet is, perhaps, one of the most under-appreciated skills. In fact, a recent statewide poll of Montana parents revealed parents were split on the issue; half said they had a strong sense of self-awareness and half said they had low-to-moderate self-awareness. Consider that no one person has total self-awareness. In other words, we all have blind spots to our feelings, thoughts, and how they impact our actions. But, helping your child grow their self-knowledge will impact every other critical social and emotional skill as they grow in their competence, confidence, and ability to develop healthy relationships with others.

Because children learn social and emotional skills first by watching the caring adults in their lives, parents can become more intentional about growing their own self-awareness as modeling an important step. Post feeling words or photos of facial expressions on the refrigerator as a reminder to articulate them. Also, write down and reflect on your most challenging parenting moments when you get angry or upset. What triggered the feeling? Why did you feel so strongly? Did you react in a constructive way, and, if not, how can you choose a better reaction the next time? These reflections can strengthen your own self-awareness, modeling the skill you want to promote in your child.

Because back-to-school time is a major transition for all students, it can be an emotionally-charged time. Your understanding of your child's mental and emotional exhaustion at the end of a new school day or their anxiety about all that's new can go a long way toward supporting this time of change.

Check out the following tips for parents on how to build this critical competence at each age.



For 3-5-Year-Olds:

Develop a Feelings Vocabulary and Cultivate Body Awareness.

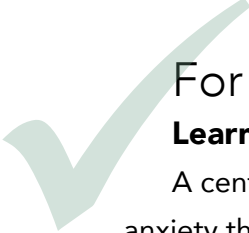
While our young children are becoming competent with language use, they are only at the beginning stages of developing their feelings vocabulary. In fact, that body takeover that occurs when they are upset can further fuel their upset as they feel out of control. Though we've heard the phrase "use your words" uttered to young ones, this expectation goes beyond their developmental capacity. Consider the fact that mature adults can struggle to name what they are feeling when highly upset, so don't expect that of your child. Instead, support their learning. When you see a furrowed brow, ask: "It looks like you're worried, is that right?" Make a point of using feeling words in family life to give your young child practice. And, also, call out physical symptoms when you see them. "Your ears are red. Are you feeling tired?" Or, "Your tummy seems to hurt when you are worried. Are you feeling worried?" These simple reflections can help a young child cultivate self-awareness as they become better able to understand, express, and seek support for what they are experiencing.



For 6-8-Year-Olds:

Reflect on Self-Talk.

Did you know that the emergence of self-talk happens between kindergarten and first grade? Children are attempting to figure out the rules in all aspects of their lives — in the classroom, in family life, and with their friends. Self-talk aids this self-regulating process. Whereas you once had to say, "Don't climb on that wall. It's dangerous," now your child will utter to himself, "Mom said this is dangerous. Don't do it." But, as we know, self-talk can also become self-defeating. If a child approaches an academic challenge with an "I can't do it" refrain playing in their head, the chances are slim that they'll meet that challenge. So, how can you call out self-talk and reflect on it? If you see a child repeatedly struggling, you might ask, "What are you telling yourself?" Let your child know that self-talk is normal, important even. But, when those inner voices turn destructive, that's the time to turn them around. You might ask, "What can you say to yourself to help you figure out that problem or meet your challenge?"



For 9-12-Year-Olds:

Learn the Conversation Two-Step. One: Empathy, Two: Reframe.

A central theme of this age group is their growing social awareness and the anxiety that comes with attempting to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Change is upon these preteens as they deep dive into puberty and the many physical, emotional, and mental changes that accompany it. They feel a heightened vulnerability that can lead them to confusing conclusions about how others perceive them and what they think of themselves. So, when your child comes to you with a concern about a friend, listen and reflect with empathy. "Sounds like you are feeling rejected by your friend's cold shoulder in the hallway." You'll support their big feelings. But then, help them reframe their thinking by asking open-ended questions. "What do you think your friend was feeling? Is there anything going on in their life that could be making them upset? Are you sure this has to do with you, or could it be more about their own stress?" Offer those questions without expectations of an answer. You'll not only offer your child the opportunity to strengthen their empathy skills, they'll also grow in their social and self-awareness as they realize that particularly their negative interpretations are not always accurate. They may be more liked and accepted than they thought!



For 13-15-Year-Olds:

Help Teens Discover Their Anchor.

Teens spend much of their time comparing themselves to others to figure out how they will define themselves and what their role might be in their friend group. As they pull away, asserting their independence, they are experimenting with the many variations of who they could become attempting to envision their future adult self. This is the time when they need an anchor. What will help offer direction and serve as a steady internal guide as they grow their identity into emerging adulthood? Reflect on their sense of meaning and purpose. What's most important to them? How can they see themselves contributing to the world? What specific gifts can they give to others and to the larger world? If they looked back on their life at the end, what about who they became would give them great pride? Asking these questions provokes their thinking to help them grow their sense of purpose. They begin to see their potential as a significant contributor. This sense of purpose can guide their big and small decisions as they face increasingly complex risks and challenges.

All of these ways of supporting and reflecting on your child's feelings and interpretation of others' feelings can assist in growing their identity. Your children can begin to define themselves as ones who can face challenges head on with a positive outlook, who understand the messages they are receiving from their feelings and can communicate them in ways that support their needs, and figure out who they are independently becoming and how they might actively contribute their best to the world. Self-awareness builds confidence. With your support, your child is eager and ready to uncover the many gifts and powers that lie waiting within them!

About The Author:

Jennifer Miller, M.Ed., author of the popular site, Confident Parents, Confident Kids, has twenty years of experience helping adults become more effective with the children they love through social and emotional learning. Among other roles, she serves as lead writer for ParentingMontana.org, a project that provides easy to use parenting tools to support a child's success from kindergarten through the teen years.



This product was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.959 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of SAMHSA or Health and Human Services.