OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

Children are born connected to family, community, culture and place. Belonging is integral to human existence and relationships are integral to belonging. Relationships are the foundations for the construction of personal and social identities – ‘who I am’, ‘how I belong’ and ‘who I can influence’. They are also fundamental to a child’s capacity for learning.

Children construct their personal and social identities within the context of relationships and in response to the actions and responses of others. Identities are not fixed but adapt and change according to children’s experiences. When children have positive experiences in new places and in new relationships, they come to see themselves as people who are recognised and respected as unique individuals. Children’s increasing awareness of gender, ethnicity, nationality and culture, and the contributions they make to the lives of others demonstrates their ongoing construction of identity. Through participation in family, kinship systems and communities, children learn the values, beliefs and practices that connect them to ‘their people’ or family group and enable them to contribute to their communities.

Learning occurs in the context of secure relationships with family, educators and other children. When children feel safe, secure and supported they grow in confidence to explore and learn. Through secure early attachments and their developing sense of agency and group identity, children develop self-confidence, autonomy, persistence and resilience. When relationships are nurturing, responsive and predictable, children learn to manage their emotions and understand the perspectives and needs of others.

Actions, reactions and responses from significant adults and other children contribute to children’s sense of self and their construction of identity. In response to these encounters, children form views, attitudes and dispositions that contribute to their sense of identity.

In their daily experiences children:

- receive messages about what they are good at and what they are not
- learn about the reactions that others have to their personalities and behaviours
- realise the impact that they have on others
- develop ideas about their ability to negotiate situations
- feel a sense of achievement and pride in their accomplishments
- may develop negative feelings about identity or feel excluded.

1a: Children feel safe, secure and supported

Feeling safe, secure and supported contributes to children’s wellbeing and identity. Each child experiences relationships and connections to family, friends and communities which contribute to identity and feelings of security. Children build on those first attachments to
Children have many ways of communicating their needs and desires for comfort and support. They learn through their experiences and earliest relationships the most effective ways to connect emotionally with adults. Within these relationships they learn what to expect of themselves and form expectations about adults’ availability and responsiveness. Discussions with families help educators to understand more fully children’s emotional states and unique ways of seeking comfort and support. When educators make themselves available emotionally to children, they model effective ways for children to express their relationship needs and seek out emotional support.

In the absence of fear and in the presence of trusted adults, children feel sufficiently safe, secure and supported to take reasonable risks and explore their environment and in doing so gain a sense of who they are.

The active role of the educator in supporting children’s feeling of safety and security

When relationships are viewed as fundamental to their pedagogies, educators give significant time and attention to building trusting and secure relationships with each child. They are mindful of the importance of initiating relationships and of ensuring that each child participates in learning in ways that build self-confidence and connections with educators and other children. Educators recognise the value of spending time each day with each child individually as well as within small groups. They recognise and understand children’s growing social competence and use appropriate strategies to enable children to learn together.

To facilitate children’s feelings of safety and security and to support their learning educators can:

For babies and toddlers in particular:

- acknowledge and respond sensitively to each baby’s cues for physical and emotional comfort
- encourage two-way sharing of information with families about their child, particularly at arrival and departure time
- ensure as far as possible that familiar educators are available for each child and family at arrival and departure time and for sleeping, toileting and feeding routines
- make sure they have ready access to their favourite toys and comfort items
• have many one-to-one exchanges and conversations. These could include lap games, sharing songs and rhymes, going outside to look at things of interest, talking about what is happening, look through windows to show a different perspective as well as playing together and interacting during routines.

• comfort and support distressed, anxious or angry children in ways that respond to their physical and emotional cues

• watch and listen carefully for all attempts to communicate, respond and take opportunities to extend and respond to children’s communication attempts

• initiate verbal and non-verbal conversations with babies and support their growing awareness of the patterns of a conversation, the turn-taking involved and the body language that is used. The aim is to let babies take the lead in these conversations, so that they will want to do it again because it is so enjoyable.

• be responsive to the natural rhythms of children by having a flexible but predictable routine that accommodates children’s individual sleep patterns and activity levels and enables them to become familiar with and have some control over their day.

For all children:

In relation to families:

• welcome children and families each day, encouraging them to share stories and events since last meeting. Sharing stories helps children make sense of their own experiences and learn how to tell their own stories.

• take the initiative to build trusting relationships with families and actively share information about each child. This happens when educators take time to talk with families and learn about their values, cultures and aspirations for their children.

In relation to children:

• ensure that children settle in with a familiar educator or other children on arrival

• acknowledge and value the personal relationships children form with trusted adults

• provide personal items and mementoes in the environment that reflect children’s identities and lives – for example, photographs of children and families, comfortable places to sit with family members, familiar toys and comfort objects, cultural artefacts and symbol systems

• show interest in children’s ideas and play through engaging in extended exchanges or conversations to develop ideas and promote sustained shared thinking

• acknowledge and respond to children’s various ways of expressing feelings – for example, sharing in their delight and assisting when necessary to help them find constructive ways of dealing with anger and upset
• make extra efforts in respectful ways with families who do not communicate freely or those who challenge educators’ ideas
• make time to be unhurried and allow children to lead experiences and respond to children rather than organising or leading all of their experiences
• organise staff rosters to ensure as far as possible that familiar educators are available to children
• listen and observe carefully to better understand children’s individual dispositions, cues and ways of communicating their needs
• find opportunities through day-to-day encounters and routines to build confidence and self esteem in children
• respond sensitively to children’s cues for physical and emotional closeness.

1b: Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency

A strong sense of self is the foundation for learning about contributing to broader social groups. Some of the important attitudes and behaviours that are learned during childhood include:

• how to join in a play experience
• when to contribute as a leader and when to stand back and let others take the lead
• judging whether you can do a task yourself and knowing when to get help from others
• responding to disappointment or injustice
• learning how to move on despite a setback
• learning how to be self-directed, motivated and persistent in learning situations
• how to cooperate, demonstrate caring, and resolve conflict with peers.

Autonomy refers to children’s growing understanding of themselves as separate individuals, distinct from those with whom they have attachments. It includes understanding themselves as active and contributing members of groups and appreciating the influence that they have on others around them. Autonomy is understood differently among cultural groups and therefore there is no one or right way to be autonomous.

Interdependence refers to children appreciating their growing knowledge and skills and those of others and being willing to contribute and take responsibility within a broader social group. In other words, interdependence is about children having a growing sense of their place in a community and the contribution they can make to groups to which they belong. It involves learning about the many different roles in friendships and groups, how everyone’s skills and talents can enrich experiences. Early childhood is a time to test out and experiment with
autonomy and interdependence. Educators provide children with opportunities to take control, act alone and work alongside others to accomplish something together.

Different value systems place varying importance on autonomy for young children with many cultures valuing interdependence more highly. Appreciating and respecting cultural and family contexts in relation to autonomy and interdependence and working with families respectfully is crucial.

Resilience is necessary as children encounter difficult situations and challenges to their expectations. Children become increasingly aware of others’ needs and that their needs may not always take priority. For example, at times they will have to wait or watch another child enjoy a toy that they would like to play with. Children who have experienced secure relationships are more likely to be able to see their own needs in the context of others’. Educators can reassure them that their turn will come. Educators help strengthen children’s resilience when they act as advocates for children in the face of unfairness. Isolation and teasing can harm a child’s sense of identity and self-worth. Children need assistance from educators at times to confront unfair situations and resolve conflicts in ways that are fair and respectful. Reassurance that an adult is looking out for children and supporting them to negotiate sometimes difficult social terrain builds their confidence in themselves and those around them. Resilience develops through the ups and downs of ordinary everyday events.

Agency is children’s understanding that they have capacities to influence others and make decisions or choices, particularly in relation to their learning. Even very young children have preferences, make choices and influence others. Children demonstrate the effectiveness of their agency when they insist, persist, resist and challenge. Educators can enhance children’s sense of agency when they are alert to these behaviours as expressions of children learning about themselves and the impact they have on the world. Instead of seeing these actions as problematic or disruptive, educators recognise the potential of these occasions to explore with children how their sense of agency and influence can be used to contribute to the community or group in a positive way.

The role of the educator in supporting children’s emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency

Educators support children’s learning about autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency when they approach their work with a deep knowledge of each child and the cultural context in relation to autonomy and interdependence. They understand each child’s strengths and vulnerabilities and find ways to build their capacities as contributing and capable citizens.

In promoting autonomy, educators negotiate with children responsibilities appropriate for their development, culture, abilities, emotional capacities and contexts. They do this in collaboration with families and communities. These negotiations can be complex; therefore they require educators to be thoughtful and reflective as they balance children’s needs and desires for autonomy against their needs at times for assistance. Giving opportunities to choose and decide, allowing for mistakes, and sharing the learning from mistakes are important for young children as they learn to negotiate these desires and needs.
To facilitate children’s feelings of autonomy, interdependence and resilience and to support their sense of agency educators can:

For babies and toddlers in particular:

- create spaces to explore the environment with a known and trusted adult nearby
- allow unhurried time for children to undertake independent tasks and allow for mistakes and accidents that lead to learning
- scaffold children’s emerging desires for independence and autonomy by providing support where appropriate and at other times stepping back to allow the child to take the lead

For all children:

- talk with families about their aspirations for their children and how they feel about their child’s sense of autonomy and interdependence, and use what is learned to plan for each child
- provide opportunities for children to have some control over the environment -- for example, by making materials for play accessible and teaching them how to use everyday tools such as remote controls, cameras, phones or various forms of cutlery
- support older children to take increasing responsibility for more complex tasks, for example, taking care of their own possessions, dressing, eating
- respect routines that children have decided are important for their wellbeing – for example, saying goodbye to a parent in a particular way, having a story before sleep, using a particular cup
- provide spaces where children can feel a sense of control over routines, for example having a window that allows children to see a parent’s arrival, lounges for quiet moments with families, binoculars to see visitors or approaching parents
- provide opportunities for children to contribute their perspectives to documentation of their learning and choose what aspects of their experiences they would like to share with others
- encourage and scaffold children’s attempts and support their persistence through helping, coaching and revisiting experiences
- support children to choose to say ‘no’ to something that is dangerous, unfair or that may cause harm to others
- offer many opportunities for children to repeat and revisit experiences in order to build skill and mastery
- provide facilities where children can store their personal items and treasures
- provide opportunities for children to make real choices, for example, to choose toys that they most enjoy, choose from a range of foods at snack or lunch, make
decisions about friends they wish to play with (perhaps from another room or group), have a say about educators they would like to settle with when they arrive.

1c: Children develop knowledgeable and confident self identities

Recognition of identity is fundamental to building confidence as a learner. Children bring understandings of themselves that come from current and prior experiences and the cultural and spiritual context of their families and communities. Finding things that are familiar is reassuring for young children. Being able to see one’s identity reflected in photographs, characters in storybooks, home corner props, music and furnishings and having access to personal treasures is affirming and demonstrates that their identity is worthy, acknowledged and honoured. Authentic opportunities to speak a home language and to see it represented within the setting acknowledges language as an important aspect of identity formation.

Early childhood settings provide the potential for children to encounter some of the richness of Australia’s diversity. Children can move beyond their experience of family and immediate community and encounter people who hold different values and beliefs and who look or behave in unfamiliar ways. Within the safety and security of their relationships with educators, children have opportunities to observe, ask questions and learn more about difference. The participation of children with disabilities, varying physical appearances such as skin colour, children from privileged backgrounds, monolingual or multilingual or from various family structures such as gay and lesbian, is to some extent an important experience of unfamiliarity. So this is, an opportunity to see difference as a kind of continuum along which all people are placed (Zimbler and Biffin).

Children begin to understand their own situation as part of this continuum, as well as to form attitudes and views about how to challenge discrimination and bias.

Children bring their individual interests, expertise and questions, sometimes referred to as ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 2005) that can be used as the inspiration for educators when thinking about learning opportunities. These funds of knowledge are integral to children’s identities. They provide opportunities for children to contribute to and guide their own learning and inform the learning of others. Children’s experiences can be the inspiration to encourage them to find out more about each other and explore other identities. Through role play, puppetry, dance and drama children can experiment with taking on an unfamiliar identity and rehearsing other possibilities. They can feel some aspects of another’s life and broaden their experiences beyond that of the familiar.

The role of the educator in promoting children’s knowledgeable and confident self identities

In acknowledging and supporting children to develop confident identities, educators begin with a focus on learning about each child, the family, community context and the funds of knowledge that they bring. They seek opportunities to be inspired by children’s lives and experiences and to use them as a basis for planning for children’s further learning. They are open and honest with children and encourage them to ask questions and learn from each
other about diversity and difference, while always showing respect and affirming the perspectives of all children and the contributions they make.

Educators can support children to investigate their own interests and explore their ‘burning’ questions through sustained shared thinking and communication. They can provide the resources and facilities for children to experience confidence and a sense of control over their learning and see how their knowledge is built on and enhance the learning of others.

To facilitate this learning educators can:

For babies and toddlers in particular:

- make available photos of family, home and pets to affirm children’s lives in the setting
- take time to find out about the routines that are important in their home experience and reflect these where possible in the early childhood setting
- learn songs, rhymes and games that are significant and familiar and share these often throughout the day
- learn key words from children’s first language to use in everyday routines and greetings.

For all children:

- find out about each child, his or her family and community contexts and individual preferences and interests to the extent that the family feels comfortable sharing this information
- reflect children’s identities in the art, stories, materials for play, tools, music and furnishings so that children can feel a sense of ownership
- talk openly with children about diversity and difference, respond sensitively to children’s hard questions and encourage children to challenge bias and discrimination
- promote critical thinking and exploration of many perspectives, confront unfairness and encourage children to share their views
- take an interest in and assist children to investigate aspects of diversity and difference
- take interest in and affirm the cultural backgrounds of all children
- investigate and explore aspects of diversity that are not represented at the setting to further extend children’s knowledge of and familiarity with diversity and difference
- listen carefully to children’s stories and recounting of events and how they see themselves and others in these stories and find opportunities to build on these experiences with children
- undertake research with children and families in order to be better informed about the cultural and community contexts of the children’s lives
- talk with families about ways to support home language at the setting, where possible provide resources that reflect these languages and learn some key words in the child’s home language
• think carefully about how children’s work is displayed and acknowledged and how this might contribute to building children’s confidence and feelings of achievement.

1d: Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

Early childhood settings provide children with opportunities to extend their experience of relationships with others. Children watch the behaviour of others closely; they learn to be caring, empathetic and respectful from experiencing these ways of being.

The active role of the educator in facilitating children’s learning to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

To support children’s learning to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect educators can:

For babies and toddlers in particular:

• provide opportunities to develop close relationships with significant adults and develop confidence in their relationships with other trusted adults, older children and peers
• teach different ways to join other children in play, for example by modeling actions supported with words: ‘You and I can sit near Leo, and we can use some blocks from the box just like Leo is doing.’
• model care, empathy and respect in play, for example by showing nurturing and care with dolls, handing precious things carefully and talking with children about their feelings when excited, hurt, upset

For all children:

• model care, empathy, respect and responsive listening in communicating and interacting with children, families and colleagues, which makes visible to children different ways of being a respectful member of a social group or community
• use culturally based ways of showing, respect, care and empathy which are relevant to your community, for example, by using correct titles for elders or grandparents
• recognise and affirm children’s efforts to show care, empathy and respect by actions such as smiling, verbally expressing your appreciation or writing a message of thanks
• with older children, jointly develop some simple processes for working with others in groups, for example, being clear about each person’s role, listening when someone is speaking and dividing up tasks
• have respectful conversations with individual children or family members which show your interest in and knowledge of children and families, such as knowing when a family member is away from home or when a child has been to visit grandparents
take deliberate action when children show a lack of respect, care or empathy for others. Actions could include:

- asking questions to prompt children’s thinking about their actions and how these might affect others
- identifying alternative perspectives and solutions to conflicts
- using picture story books to raise children’s awareness of actions they can take to resolve conflicts
- using families’ insights and suggestions about helping children to learn to show respect, care and empathy.

Assessment for learning

Educators use a range of methods to document and assess children’s progress and achievement in relation to this outcome in order to capture accurately aspects of children’s lives that can be difficult to measure or show evidence of. Educators rely on key teaching skills of observation and analysis along with good record keeping to document children’s involvement in and progress toward achieving the outcome.

Many of the observations will also rely on professional judgment and a sound knowledge of theoretical perspectives of learning in order to reflect how the child is progressing within the scope of the outcome. Cultural and family variation in interpretations of concepts such as autonomy, interdependence and wellbeing requires educators to take into account expectations of families in analysing children’s progress and achievements.

Evidence of learning in this outcome

Much of the learning within this outcome is subtle and will rely on storytelling, observations of the educator along with discussions with families, children and other staff. Educators might look for children’s learning in the following areas:

- children’s preferences for educators and friends
- how children respond to and manage conflict situations
- how they demonstrate care, empathy and respect in their play and other interactions
- how they self-regulate their emotions and feelings
- persistence and achievement of mastery of skills and knowledge over time
- children’s work when they demonstrate a sense of pride in the finished product
- children’s dramatic play episodes capturing the roles and contributions of each of the children
- children’s levels of confidence and willingness to share aspects of their culture and home life with others
• children’s use of their home language showing their understandings and thinking that may not be evident in an observation of their spoken English.

Talk About

1. Two-year-old Daniel has just enrolled in a family day care setting. During orientation visits with his mother he is confident and happy to play with other children. His mother suspects that he will be become unsettled once he realises she is going to leave him there without her. What steps could the educator take to make this experience a positive one that will build a strong secure attachment relationship between her, Daniel and his family?

2. Kara is four years old and has just started to attend sessional kindergarten. The educator observes her swearing at other children in the playground as she attempts to enter play with a group of peers. The other children at first ignore her but later a few children begin to swear back at her and call her names.

What will the educators need to consider in this situation to build Kara’s confidence and skill in engaging with her peers while being respectful of her family and cultural identity?

1. A group of four- and five-year-old children has been listening to the story of the three little pigs. During the discussion which followed the story reading, Rani, who was born in Africa, says, “My grandma has a house made of sticks, will a wolf blow it down?” Tim replies with, ‘Wolves are always bad like in Little Red Riding Hood.” Carolee added her comment, “People don’t have stick houses!” Mitch agrees by saying, “Yeah, we have brick ones.”

• If you were the educator, how might you respond to the children’s comments?
• What do the children’s comments reveal about their understandings of empathy and respect for other ways of living?
• Which theoretical perspectives provide helpful insights to support further intentional teaching to extend children’s learning from this initial conversation?

2. It is the start of a new preschool year and the new group of four-year-old children seems rowdier than usual. They demonstrate limited care for the resources, environment and each other. Not wanting to be overly authoritarian, you would like the children to look after their environment and take some responsibility for caring for the resources. You can also see opportunities for children to be more respectful and caring toward each other. What might be some of the approaches taken to increase children’s care, empathy and respect while showing equal respect for their backgrounds and prior experiences?

Try out

Examine how your current practice supports children’s strong sense of identity (Outcome1)

1. In thinking about Outcome 1 how do you currently build relationships with families and children? What might you do to strengthen these relationships with each family?
2. How do the routines and timing of daily experiences in your setting contribute to or hinder opportunities for genuine and sustained conversations with individuals and small groups? What small changes might make a difference?

**Hear about**

Example of supporting a child’s growing confidence and autonomy in a new environment: Nikki is 18 months and making the transition from the babies room to the toddler room. Her journey to settling into toddlers has been one of many challenges. In the babies room, she had established a strong rapport with her carers. Moving to toddlers presented her with the challenge of coming to terms with many new faces. As Nikki only attends two days per week, the first few weeks were quite difficult for her and from the time of her arrival in the morning she would experience a lot of distress.

By chance we discovered that when the children went outside Nikki was very settled when sitting in a stroller. Staff would use this time as a way of further building a relationship with Nikki as they pushed her around the yard, talking to her and enjoying one to one time.

Over time Nikki began to settle much quicker in the mornings knowing she could ask for the stroller. Once she was sitting in it she appeared happy to be in any part of the room, observing and sometimes even participating in playful interaction with other children or staff.

**Documentation from Nikki’s portfolio**

*7 February* Nikki is playing at a tree house experience. She was sitting in the stroller, holding her toys, watching intently as a few other children played there first. Once most of the children had left, Nikki said “I want to play that one.” So, I wheeled her over and while still sitting, she began to play.

Eventually she stood up and away from the stroller so she could reach higher. I noticed that one of her toys fell from her grip but Nikki didn’t seem to notice as she was so engaged in her play. This was quite momentous and even when different groups of children played at the tree house, Nikki seemed unfazed.

Gradually she didn’t always ask for the stroller but still preferred the security of staying close to one of her teachers.

*14 February* Though still holding onto her toys, she has taken herself to the sofa, picking up a book on the way. Nikki begins to look through the pages, talking aloud and making up a story based on the pictures. Another child sits in the now vacant stroller. Nikki looks at them but quickly returns her attention to the book, not at all bothered that someone else has occupied ‘her’ stroller.

*21 February* When Nikki arrives she does cry a little when farewelling her mother. It takes very little time for her to settle. Not only that, Nikki happily joins the larger group that has gathered to put on their hats and go outside. While in the yard Nikki walks over to the seesaw and sits on it, smiling and singing out loud. She appears so at ease and carefree.
References and resources


http://www.bernardvanleer.org/publication_store/publication_store_publications/developing_positive_identities_diversity_and_young_children/file


(For further references and resources, see Document 17 in ‘Linked resources - CSU 2009’ folder.)