



Developing a positive sense of self

👤 [Donna Gaywood](#) ⌚ [4 January 2022](#) 📄 [Updates](#)

In this conversational blog, Shaddai Tembo, Dr Sharon Colilles, Vicky Hutchin and Aaron Bradbury discuss with Donna Gaywood practical ways to support children to develop a positive sense of self and feel that they belong in their early years setting. They tackle how to talk about race and racism openly, how practitioners can give space to children from mixed ethnic backgrounds to develop a positive sense of self, ways to support children to feel that they belong and how to provide positive spaces for children to develop their own gender identity.

DG: *Birth to 5 Matters encourages practitioners to talk about race openly. Shaddai, what advice would you give to a staff team that feels worried about saying the wrong thing, or don't feel confident to talk to children and their parents about race.*

ST: I do sympathise with this position. Many people feel like this, and they may have the false impression that such an issue is taboo or inappropriate to talk about in the early years. It can feel overwhelming when practitioners start to think about how to have these conversations about race with their colleagues, children, or parents and carers.

My advice to these practitioners is that they first remember that all staff have a legal duty under [the Equality Act 2010](#) to eliminate discrimination against people, including children, on the basis of race. So as uncomfortable as these things may be, you are legally required to meet this equality duty.

If you are not sure where to start – the best place is with yourself. Self-reflection about our own histories is an important first step and provides a springboard to then consider these issues with others and in your practice.

As uncomfortable as issues of race and racism may be to talk about, these feelings pale in comparison to the actual effects of racism for Black and minoritised children. Given what is known about the significant effects of racial discrimination and prejudice on a child's life experiences, educational outcomes, their self-esteem and wellbeing, it should be clear that we cannot afford to shun responsibility for this work just because we are worried about saying the wrong thing.

DG: *You mention about the importance of self-reflection and thinking about our own backgrounds. What would you say to someone who says, "I don't see different colours, I treat everyone the same?"*

ST: For any practitioner, being colour-blind and aiming to treat everyone the same is not an appropriate strategy for a number of reasons. Young children are often already aware of differences in their own and others' skin colour and are beginning to form assumptions informed by wider cultural stereotypes about race. We should not leave them to understand these differences themselves and need to be able to challenge any harmful beliefs that they may have developed. As is clearly written in the Birth to Five Matters guidance, a position of colour-blindness "simply allows the continuation of bias in society which disadvantages people from black and minoritised groups".

DG: *Sharon, your work is concerned with how children from mixed ethnic backgrounds perceive their identity. How can practitioners support children to explore their identity so that they move away from being colour blind?*

SC: It's important for practitioners to think about the racial groupings of the children that they work with because children bring to their play rich funds of knowledge from the home about racial identification. These experiences will be mirrored in their play repertoires with peers. Practitioners can think about the culturally appropriate resources they provide for developing children's positive self-image.

DG: *What sort of activities can practitioners provide for children which will support them to express ideas about their identity?*

SC: The experiences that practitioners provide will be dependent on the ethnic/cultural groupings of children they are working with. Essentially though, it's learning about the children in your setting. This can be achieved by talking to parents and carers initially. Then it will involve careful observation of the children's interests.

Helpful activities/resources could include:

- Skin coloured paints, mirrors, paper for building a positive self-identity amongst diverse groupings of children.
- Children's literature with excellent animation/representation of ethnic difference/similarity.
- Storying and Storytelling.
- Home corners that reflect the diversity of 'communities of practice' that children live in.

It is important that a play-based pedagogic approach is used that provides space and time for the children to have conversations with peers, their friends and practitioners about their identity.

DG: *Sharon spoke about the importance of creating space and time for children to think about their identities. Vicky, I know that you also believe in the importance of creating safe spaces for children to develop a sense of belonging in the early years*

VH: Sharon mentioned storying and storytelling which often happens at circle or group times, these can be a minefield for children who don't feel they belong, having to sit with others in the group, when they feel excluded. So, we need to make this into a safe space where all the children feel at home. Think about the size and make-up of the group as well as watching for the subtle non-verbal clues which suggest the children don't feel safe.

This is where using a Persona Doll to develop Persona Doll stories can be so useful. The doll is not a toy but a special doll for which you create a persona and family background as if it was a real child. Think about the type of doll to use so that it will reflect some of the characteristics of the child or children you feel need most support in belonging – gender, skin tone and hair are important attributes. You then develop stories about the doll's life which you tell with the doll sitting on your lap. The stories should mirror common experiences of your children in the group (eg likes and dislikes, favourite food and activities) but they will also provide windows into other lived experiences.

The doll becomes like another child in the group and the children welcome their 'friend' when she/he comes to visit. It is often just the presence of the doll which has some similar characteristics to themselves which helps children to feel that they belong, raising their self-esteem and respect from the others. Sometimes it may be the issue that you have addressed in the doll's story that helps – an experience the child identifies with. Many of the doll's stories are happy, but some are about difficult or sad events the doll needs help with (e.g. bullying, stereotyping, racism, Islamophobia, name calling). Working together, the children help the doll solve the problems. The positive effect on children's sense of belonging can be quite dramatic, providing an opportunity for children who feel excluded to have their lived experiences visibly valued.

DG: *Feeling that they belong is very important for children, isn't it Vicky.*

VH: Yes, a sense of belonging is inextricably intertwined with a child's wellbeing. Many children struggle because they feel excluded or like outsiders. Certain groups of people are at risk of being excluded due to a host of factors over which they have no control, such as ethnicity, culture, gender,

language, poverty, disability and/or special educational need. The cause may be overt but is often deeply engrained, hidden and unconscious, based on unquestioned, 'traditional' ways of doing things and attitudes.

Birth to 5 Matters explicitly states the importance of listening to the child's voice, right from the very beginning of the preface. Some children are very good at making their needs and desires known to adults and other children, while others can too easily remain unheard, thus receiving less attention from staff and less involvement with other children. These children need to be included. This means watching carefully as well as listening to the many ways they may use to communicate, particularly non-verbally, and then getting involved.

DG: Aaron, as the lead for the Birth to 5 Matters Inclusion and Equalities group what advice can you offer practitioner to help all children feel that sense of belonging in terms of LGBTQI+?

AB: My first point of call would be for the parents to take the lead on this with the practitioners' support, just like any other forms of child development. It is paramount that the setting allows all children to understand difference within their setting, making the case for representation of all within the setting. Trying to remain gender neutral in the approach within your setting, no gendered colours or resources, just colours and resources etc. and allowing gender flexible play as a typical part of many children's development.





We have to be mindful that children are still finding their place within society and at this age it is common for children to act out different scenarios in the early years, both developmentally and socially. However, we also need to listen to the child and see what they are saying, doing and most importantly how the practitioners are dealing with the child's uniqueness.

Kholberg's stages of gender development suggests that a preschool aged child is not yet at the gender permanence stage in relation to development, so it is important to accept that children might be exploring their gender identity, so practitioners need to support parents and carers, remain non-judgemental and keep child at the centre.

In summary:

- When thinking about racism, start with self-reflection
- Be aware of your legal obligation (Equalities Act 2010)
- Racism is damaging to children, so is silence about racism
- Children need space, time, positive resources, and supportive practitioners to talk about their identity
- Persona dolls can also be a supportive resource for children and help them to feel like they belong
- Feeling like they belong is vital for all children
- Practitioners need to be sensitive to the non-verbal communication of children to think about how the children are experiencing the setting
- Parents are important partners when thinking about children's developing gender identities
- Adopting a gender-neutral approach can be helpful
- Remaining non-judgemental in practice and keeping the child at the centre is key to supporting children

About the authors

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|  | <p>Aaron Bradbury is an Early Childhood academic, paying close attention to all aspects of Early Years and Child Centred Practice, Workforce development, Child Development and Early Help. His current role is Principal Lecturer for Early Years and Childhood at Nottingham Trent University. He is also the Chair of the LGBTQ Early Years working group and manages his own website and community called Early Years Reviews.</p> |
|  | <p>Sharon Colilles is Senior Lecturer in early childhood education at UWE – Bristol, a Trustee on Froebel Trust Council, and an associate trainer for the Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education (CREC) and British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE). She recently worked as project assistant for the development of Birth to Five Matters guidance as well as participating in the review of QAA Benchmark Standards. She is an active member of Early Childhood Education Research Association and CREC learning circle. Sharon's research is concerned with play based participatory pedagogies and its part in developing children's mixed ethnic identity learning and development, she also has a deep interest in work that develops anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice.</p> |
|  | <p>Vicky Hutchin worked in inner city playgroups before becoming a teacher, then an early years consultant/adviser in local authorities, in the National Strategies and finally working independently. All her adult life she has been committed to celebrating human diversity, trying to eradicate prejudice and discrimination and in particular implementing anti-racist practice. This was the focus of her Masters and from 2014 she decided to make this the main focus of her work. Vicky worked closely with Babette Brown, the founder of Persona Doll Training, When Babette died in 2019, Vicky became the coordinator to ensure Babette's legacy lives on. The joy of the role is being in touch with the high numbers of committed early years and primary practitioners in the UK and worldwide who want to celebrate human diversity and make a difference to children and families facing prejudice. Vicky is an Associate for Early Education.</p> |
|  | <p>Shaddai Tembo is a lecturer in early education and childhood practice at Perth College UHI, an associate lecturer at the Open University, and a postgraduate research student at the University of the West of Scotland. He is a trustee for Early Education and the Fatherhood Institute. Shaddai also co-convenes the SERA EY Network and is an independent writer and speaker through Critical Early Years</p> |

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