

Overview of the Development of Ethnic, Gender, Disability, and Class Identity and Attitudes in Children and Youth

- By six months of age, children find skin color and gender differences interesting
- By 18 months, many toddlers can correctly place a photograph of themselves in their racial/ethnic group, and some can select their own picture correctly in response to a group label. However, they cannot do either of these tasks consistently for pictures of other people.
- By two years of age, children are not only noticing, they are also curious about and asking questions about differences. These questions reflect both children's individual life experiences and their cognitive stages of development
- Between 2 1/2 and 3 1/2, children also become aware of and begin absorbing socially prevailing negative stereotypes, feelings, and ideas about people, including themselves. Children may show discomfort or dislike or fear toward a person whose skin color is darker than their own, or who speaks a different language, or who has a physical disability. They may tease or refuse to play with a child because of her skin color, gender, or how he dresses or talks.
- By the time they are 4 years old, children are seeking labels for racial/ethnic identity and they have their own theories about what causes a disability, skin tone, and gender. Adult verbal and non-verbal responses dramatically influence this. Preschoolers have a very limited understanding of social-class differences. However, studies show that preschool-aged children assume that rich people are happier and more likable than poor people. And, when asked, these children insist that it is not fair that some people have more money than others and suggest that the rich should share with the poor.

- By 5 years of age children have developed a core sense of racial/ethnic identity and begin to explore what it means to be from one race compared to another. As they settle into their racial/ethnic identity, societal bias can undermine their self-esteem and ability to build a positive identity within their ethnic group.
- By early elementary school (about 6 years old) children are likely to both describe and explain poverty and wealth in observable concrete terms, such as number of possessions and type of residence.
- By 6, 7, and 8 years of age, children continue to construct and elaborate on their ideas about their own and other's racial/cultural identities and their feelings about human differences. Their development during the primary period goes beyond an individual identity to also include a group identity. They also understand that their identity includes many different aspects (gender, ethnicity, class) and are interested in learning about their ethnic group, especially through oral histories and written biographies. They have also developed cognitive skills necessary to analyze their own ideas and begin to understand the influence of socially prevailing stereotypes on them.
- During childhood and adolescence, children *increasingly* make the connection between having a job and getting money and learn more about the status and financial benefits associated with specific occupations. When they are about 10 years of age, children begin to refer to psychological traits, such as motivation, in their explanations of why people are in different circumstances. At this age, children advocate for equalizing the wealth between rich and poor.
- By age 9 or 10 attitudes have solidified. At this point children's racial/ethnic attitudes tend to stay constant unless the child experiences a life-changing event that consistently challenges them to rethink their beliefs.

- By age 11 or 12, children continue to be interested in and aware of world events.
- They are interested in ancestry, history and geography. They are better at "perspective taking" by this age too. They can also understand racism now and can use skills to take social action.
- By adolescence, children are capable of seeing the role of the social and economic structure in the unequal distribution of wealth. However, these children are more likely to justify Inequalities by claiming that poor people get what they deserve (e.g. "they didn't work hard enough"). That is to say that, by adolescence, children tend to accept unequal distribution of wealth and blame poor people for their poverty. Our task then, is to help children see and critique how our economic system perpetuates economic advantage and disadvantage.
- Throughout the remainder of childhood and *into* and throughout adulthood, individuals continue to get messages that reinforce already formed attitudes and beliefs. They also act on their attitudes and beliefs as they continue their journey through life. Hopefully, they also work on raising their own consciousness and questioning those previously held beliefs. Through experiences such as reading, reflecting, and talking with others, they are able to slowly change negative beliefs and patterns of behaviors and work toward more accepting and just relationships and interactions.

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This information was compiled by Julie Bisson.

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