

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

Often as parents or those in a parenting role, we feel we must poke, prod, and pry to figure out the true feelings of our children. We may have a hunch that something is wrong, and our inclination is to point that out and name it for our children. However, we best serve our children by helping them uncover their feelings for themselves, by taking a step back, and allowing our children the safe space to reflect on what they are really feeling. They may need our support to figure out what they are feeling, and with gentle, intentional guidance we can help them do just that.

At each age and stage, children are growing their self-awareness. 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 are about teaching children how they experience 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. Realize that no one person has total self-awareness. We all have blind spots to our thoughts and feelings and how they impact our actions. But, helping our children grow in their self-knowledge impacts every other critical social and emotional skill they develop (competence, confidence, healthy relationships, etc.) and makes us more aware of our own.

Children learn social and emotional skills by watching the caring adults in their lives; parents can become intentional about growing their own self-awareness and modeling this important skill. Post feeling words or photos of facial expressions on the refrigerator as a reminder to articulate them. Write down and reflect on your most challenging parenting moments when you are angry or upset. These reflections can strengthen your own self-awareness and model the skill you are promoting in your child.

0-5-Year-Olds: **Develop a “feelings vocabulary” and cultivate body awareness.**

Young children are developing their language competency and with language comes their feelings vocabulary. The full-body takeover that occurs when they are upset is literally their body feeling out of control. Parents regularly demand “Use your words,” but this expectation is often beyond their developmental capacity. These are opportunities to support children’s learning by offering and practicing feeling words. “Your brows are furrowed. Are you feeling worried?” Simple reflections help a young child cultivate self-awareness as they become better able to understand, express, and seek support for what they are experiencing.

6-8-Year-Olds: **Reflect on self-talk.**

Between kindergarten and first grade a child’s self-talk emerges. As your child attempts to sort out the rules at school, at home, and with their friends, self-talk aids this regulatory process. But, be aware that self-talk can become self-defeating. How we guide our children through their acquisition of self-talk is critical -- let them know it is normal and essential, but if their inner voice becomes destructive it’s important to turn it around.

9-12-Year-Olds: **Learn the conversation two-step. 1) Empathy 2) Reframe.**

This age group is growing in their self-awareness as well as the anxiety that can accompany trying to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. Physical, emotional, and mental changes can leave them feeling vulnerable and drawing confusing conclusions about how others perceive them. When your child has a concern, listen carefully, reflect with empathy, and support their big feelings. Then help them reframe their thinking by asking open-ended questions.

13-15-Year-Olds: **Help teens discover their anchor.**

Teens spend a lot of time comparing themselves to others and trying to figure out how they define themselves and their role in friend groups. As they assert their independence, they experiment with who they could become and envision their future adult self. This is when they need an anchor -- they need direction and a steady internal guide as they grow their identity. Reflect with them on their sense of meaning and purpose. What is most important to them? What are their gifts? How do they see themselves contributing to the world? Their sense of purpose can guide their decisions as they face increasingly complex risks and challenges.

Supporting and reflecting on your child's feelings and interpretations of others' feelings can assist in growing their identity. Your child begins to define themselves as one who can face challenges head on with a positive outlook, understand the messages they receive from their feelings, and communicate in ways that support their needs. They will be able to figure out who they are becoming and how they can contribute their best self to the world. Self-awareness builds confidence. With your support, your child can uncover the many gifts and powers that are within them!

Find more at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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