

4. Children need environments that foster positive/healthy identity development.

What We Believe

We believe that children need environments that affirm who they are and support the development of a strong, positive self-concept. This includes spaces where they feel seen, valued, and respected for their race, culture, language, family structure, abilities, and individuality. Healthy identity development is rooted in relationships, representation, conscious awareness, and experiences that foster confidence, a sense of belonging, and self-worth.

Why This is Important

Recognizing children’s need for healthy identity development in the early years is essential because it lays the foundation for self-worth, confidence, and belonging. When children feel seen, valued, and accepted, they are more engaged, resilient, and ready to learn. Healthy identity development also supports strong social-emotional skills and helps children navigate differences with empathy. Early experiences shape how children view themselves and others, making it vital to create inclusive, affirming environments from the start.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Classroom materials—books, dolls, artwork—reflect a wide range of cultures, languages, family structures, and abilities. Children regularly see themselves and others positively represented. Children feel seen, proud, and included.	Materials often reflect a single dominant culture or stereotype. There’s little acknowledgment of children’s diverse backgrounds or experiences. Children may feel invisible, excluded, or “less than.” They begin to question their value or internalize negative messages.
Educators greet children in their home languages, include cultural traditions in the curriculum, and invite families to share their stories and customs. Children take pride in who they are and where they come from.	Children are discouraged from speaking their home language, and cultural practices are ignored or tokenized. Children may feel pressure to hide parts of themselves, leading to shame, confusion, or loss of connection with their roots.
Children are free to explore their interests and roles without gendered limitations—such as boys playing with dolls or girls building with blocks—and adults respond with encouragement.	Adults enforce narrow gender roles or discourage nonconforming behaviors (“That’s not for boys!”). Children may feel shame or fear around self-expression, which can harm confidence and emotional well-being.