

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Sense of Self



What You Need to Know

Young children do not begin to develop a sense of who they are as separate from others until approximately 18 months of age. Leading up to this developmental milestone, infants' developing sense of self primarily revolves around becoming aware of their bodies, their actions, and their preferences. As caregivers, teachers play a critical role in shaping how infants initially begin to perceive and feel about themselves. When infants feel safe, accepted, and secure in caregivers' presence, they are more likely to explore and discover what they do and do not like. This is especially true when they feel that their efforts are noticed and validated. Acknowledging infants' efforts and preferences are important ways to help infants begin to develop a positive sense of self.

Things to Consider

- ◆ One simple, yet important way to promote a sense of self during infancy is to frequently call infants by their name. As early as 6 months, infants begin to recognize and respond to their name by focusing their eyes and/or pausing to listen. And, a few months later, infants may actually start to turn their head and look when their name is called. Drawing attention to and addressing infants by name helps them learn to associate a specific word (their name) with themselves, which then promotes their understanding of their existence as unique individuals. Provide as many opportunities as possible to help infants recognize their names.
- ◆ Another way to promote sense of self during infancy is to acknowledge infants' preferences. Infants begin to communicate what they do and do not like (e.g., tastes, sounds, or textures) through their facial expressions. By drawing attention to their preferences, you are not only letting them know that you are paying attention to them, but are also helping them recognize that it is okay to have different preferences.
- ◆ Even from an early age, you can acknowledge and encourage appreciation of diversity by pointing out similarities and differences. Draw attention to and embrace differences or similarities in ethnic backgrounds, sociocultural backgrounds, and family structures.

Development of Sense of Self

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Learn about self by exploring hands, feet, body, and movement.	Experiment with the use of hands and body, discovering new capacities and how movement/gestures can be used to relate to others.
Listen and respond by quieting, smiling, or cooing when name is said or used in conversation with familiar adults.	Respond by looking or coming when called by name.
	Pay attention when others notice what they are able to do.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of sense of self:

- ◆ Use child-directed play that follows infants' interests and cues.
- ◆ Incorporate portrait photographs as a way of identifying infants (e.g., have each infants' picture above their cubby).
- ◆ Incorporate songs or rhymes that involve children's names.
- ◆ Call infants by name as often as possible during activities, transitions, and play.
- ◆ Introduce books, pictures, music, toys, and materials that incorporate diversity.
- ◆ Incorporate play with mirrors to help infants learn more about themselves.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Sense of Self

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe how infants handle themselves in different situations. Pay attention to infants' likes, dislikes, and how they approach tasks and activities. Consider information you've learned about them and their families through the Initial Family Meetings and other informal conversations. Do some infants approach new toys or objects with confidence, while others are more hesitant? As you watch each infant, try to determine who could benefit from additional support and encouragement in order to more fully explore their environment?
Tuesday FOCUS	Acknowledge and Affirm Physical Attributes, Interests, and Characteristics Acknowledge and affirm infants' sense of self by commenting on their bodies, what they choose to do, and their affect (e.g., their facial expressions and body language). This lets them know that you notice and value their interests. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "You have ten wiggly fingers and ten wiggly toes" or, "You're reaching your arms above your head! That is a big stretch!"◆ "You are smiling and giggling as you play with those blocks. You must like playing with blocks!"◆ "You were excited when we played with that new doll. You wanted to rock the baby. That was fun for you, wasn't it?"
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Promote Child Autonomy Follow infants in the classroom to let them know that you value their individual ideas and interests. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Offer choices: "Should we play with the blocks (<i>point</i>) or the shape sorter (<i>point</i>)? You are reaching for the blocks; I think you want to play with those today!" while moving the blocks closer and beginning to play.◆ Imitate their play: "Oh, you like banging the spoons together – let me try with you!"◆ Be flexible: "You really do not like these foam shapes. You would rather play with the plastic ones. Okay, let's get those instead!"
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Embrace Similarities and Differences Make comments that embrace infants' similarities and differences. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Point out concrete examples: Smile and make eye contact and say, "Look, you are both playing with blocks!" Smile and point to each infants' eyes/noses and say, "You both have two eyes and one nose!"◆ Interests, lives, or ideas: "We don't all love applesauce. People like different things and that's okay!" Or, "(Child 1) wants to play with the blocks, and (Child 2) wants to play with the cars. You both want to play with different things."
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities from Setting the Stage into your regular routines.