

Module #11 Race and Ethnicity in Adoption

Handout #11.5 How a Child Develops A Positive Racial Identity [Source: Dr. Joe Crumbley]

Theories of social learning, object relations, and identification are useful in explaining how a child's identities (racial, religious, ethnic, class, and gender) develop. These theories are also useful in understanding the similarities and differences in how identities develop in children from dominant groups and children from minority groups that experience discrimination.

Social learning theory, originated by Albert Bandura, posits that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling. People learn through observing others' behavior, attitudes, and outcomes of those behaviors. Bandura says:

“Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.”

Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. According to social learning theory, a social identity is constructed as an evolutionary process dependent in large measure upon the socializing environment in which the individual is positioned.

According to **object relations theory**, a child's identity is influenced by significant role models and relationships to which the child is consistently exposed in his or her environment – family, school, society, and the media. The child from the dominant group – the group that has power over the distribution of goods, services, rights, privileges, entitlements, and status – begins his or her identity formation by:

- ▶ Observing what group is in power,
- ▶ Observing that members of the group in power are like him or her (i.e. in race, gender, or religion), and
- ▶ Assuming that because he or she is like members of the group in power, he or she has the same rights and will achieve similar accomplishments and power as members of that group.

The ultimate result of the child's identity is a sense of positive self-esteem, confidence, worth, entitlement and goals.

In contrast, the child from the minority group – the group subject to the power, control, discretion, and distribution of goods and privileges by another group – begins his or her identity formation by:

- ▶ Observing what group is in power;
- ▶ Observing that group members who are like him or her are not in positions of power and control;
- ▶ Observing or experiencing prejudice, discrimination, and exposure to stereotypes; and

Module #11 Race and Ethnicity in Adoption

- ▶ Assuming that because he or she is like members in the minority group, he or she has the same limited rights, can only achieve the same accomplishments, position, and status as similar group members, and that members of the minority group are not as good as those in power.

The minority child's identity affects his or her self-esteem, confidence, goals, worth, self-respect, sense of entitlement, and expectations by making him or her feel inferior. This inferiority is not the result of identifying with or being a member of a minority group, but from exposure to discrimination, prejudice, and negative stereotypes about the group. A child from a minority group that is celebrated, held in esteem, or that shares power and control with the dominant group can have an identity that is just as positive as a child's from the dominant group.

To counteract a minority child's formation of negative identities, the child must see and be told:

- ▶ Members of the child's minority group can also make positive achievements if given equal opportunities.
- ▶ The child and his or her minority group should also have the same rights and entitlements as members in the dominant group.
- ▶ The child and his or her group are equal to and as good as any other group.
- ▶ Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are wrong.
- ▶ There is proof that prejudices and stereotypes are untrue. The child must be able to see it to believe it.

This last task may be the most difficult and challenging to accomplish if the minority child's group is not in a position of power, control, and success in the child's environment. Alternatives may need to include:

- ▶ Exposing the child to historical figures and information about his or her group's accomplishments, capacities, values, and culture.
- ▶ Redefining and reframing the child's definitions of success, strengths, and accomplishments by not using standards and definitions based on those of the dominant group (e.g. highlight individual accomplishments, family commitment, group survival, spiritual and moral integrity, and civil rights activities against discrimination).
- ▶ Exposing the child outside of his or her environment to members of the minority group in positions of power and control (e.g. geographically, in other countries, through films and other media).