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CHAPTER 3

A Look in the Mirror: Self-Concept in Preschool Children

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A QUESTION THAT CHALLENGES and compels us from our earliest years throughout our lifetime is “Who am I?” We are universally drawn by surfaces that reflect us back to ourselves: We search mirrors and the faces of others and catch our images in storefront windows and still waters, hoping these reflections will offer critical clues into the nature of our individual experience and identity. While the formation of self-concept is a process that spans a lifetime, the years encompassing infancy, toddlerhood, and early childhood are a critical time during which the foundations of self are put into place. Developmentally sensitive early childhood programs recognize this fact and strive to foster greater self-awareness, self-expression, and self-esteem on the part of the child. Such programs offer the child ample opportunities to represent and see himself represented in play, art, literature, and songs. They also provide developmentally appropriate challenges that allow children to actively explore the boundaries of their newfound autonomy and build upon their competencies. Understanding and addressing the nature of self-development is especially important in working with emotionally fragile and at-risk preschoolers, for whom the process can be complicated.

This chapter will analyze the growth of healthy self-concepts in young children and explore ways that early childhood professionals can support the development of self in the preschool classroom.

DEFINITIONS AND THEMES

What do we speak of when we use the term *self-concept*? The "self" as a psychological and developmental construct has been described in a variety of ways. Kohut (1977) has defined the self simply as "the center of one's psychological universe." For Stern (1985/2000), the self is a "unique subjective organization." Many have wondered about the viability of "the self" as a unified entity and have focused instead on the various facets of the self, such as self-concept (e.g., Harter, 1983, 1999).

Among the various theories of the development of the self, there are several points of convergence. One theme that runs like a thread throughout the literature is the distinction between two fundamental aspects of the self: the self as subject ("I"), which is the active, knowing, experiential self; and the self as the object ("Me") of one's awareness and evaluation, which is what we often refer to when we use the term *self-concept* (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Another major theme is that the self develops in the context of relationships with others (Beebe, Rustin, Sorter, & Knoblauch, 2003). There is wide agreement that the quality and characteristics of the child's early relationship with his caregiver shape the child's emerging self in fundamental ways and that social feedback continually influences the child's developing image of himself.

THE BEGINNINGS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPING SELF

How and when does the infant begin to develop a sense of self? There has been much agreement on the point that it is not until toward the end of the second year, with the onset of language and symbol development, that the child develops an objective awareness of self, what is known as "self-concept" (Kagan, 1981; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975/2000; Roth-Hanania, Busch-Rossnagel, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2000; Stern, 1985/2000). However, the questions of how this happens and what leads up to this development have been approached in a variety of ways.

Visual Self-Recognition

Much of the empirical work on the development of self-concept has focused on visual self-recognition (Beebe & Lachmann, 1998). Lewis and Brooks-Gunn (1979) studied infants' responses to their images in mirrors, on videotapes, and in photographs. They observed that during the first year, infants demonstrate a growing awareness of the fact that they exist as subjects distinct from others and are capable of exerting an effect on their environment. Drawing on the work of Piaget, these authors maintain that contingency cues presented by kinesthetic feedback, interaction with objects and mirrors, and especially social responsiveness provide

information about the relationship between one's actions and outcomes in the external world. These cues create the store of knowledge out of which grows an awareness of the "existential" self, or the self as an active subject.

It is not until toward the end of the second year, note Lewis and Brooks-Gunn, that infants demonstrate what is frequently known as "self-concept": a consolidated awareness of self as the object of one's knowledge, or the "categorical" self. Beginning around 15–18 months and consistently by 21–24 months, children differentiate between self and others and display self-recognition in noncontingent situations (Roth-Hanania et al., 2000). For example, when confronting mirror images of their rouge-marked faces, they tend to direct behavior toward the mark, which indicates that they have developed a schema of themselves as objects with invariant, identifiable features and recognize that the mark violates this schema. Around this same time, children begin to recognize and label themselves in pictures as well as systematically use verbal self-referrants, including names and personal pronouns. A child might point to herself in a picture and say, "Dat Katie. Katie blue dress." Kagan (1981) also found that toward the end of the second year, children show increasing signs of self-awareness, including self-descriptive utterances.

According to Lewis and Brooks-Gunn (1979), self-knowledge depends on knowledge of others; the child must have a schema of the other in order to develop a schema for himself. "What can be demonstrated to be known about the self can be said to be known about the other and what is known about the other can be said to be known about the self" (p. 231). Knowledge about others informs the child's definition of himself vis-à-vis the external world. Children from this age forward increasingly use social categories such as age, gender, and familiarity, according to which they define themselves vis-à-vis the external world. At first, these criteria are fairly concrete (Harter, 1983, 1999), but they become more abstract as the child gets older.

Not only is visual self-recognition a reflection of the acquisition of self-concept, but vision is also an important source of feedback contributing to the development of self-image (Beebe, 2004). Fraiberg (1987) studied blind children's self-representations in language and play and found that they were consistently delayed in the acquisition of "I" as a stable pronoun. The role of parent-to-child visual and auditory affective mirroring as a foundation for integrating information about self and other has been recently acknowledged (Beebe, 2004; Friedman, 2005). Daniel Siegel (1999) highlights the role of parent-child co-construction of narratives as an organizer of self and an integrator of self-other experience.

Psychoanalytic Accounts

Psychoanalytic accounts of the self have had a more socioemotional thrust. They tend to emphasize the dynamic and affective aspects of the infant-caregiver relationship and the separation and individuation process that was previously outlined in Chapter 1.

Freud (1915/1950) first described the processes by which the rudimentary ego develops out of the realization that the mother does not automatically fulfill the infant's every need. However, Mahler and her colleagues (1975/2000) have been the most influential in terms of delineating the process by which the child separates and individuates during the early years.

According to Mahler, in the first few months of life there is no differentiation between self and other. The infant-parent bonding process takes them into a "symbiotic" state, during which the intimacy of the parent-child relationship is all-encompassing for the baby and for the parent. This period is followed by several phases characterized by increasing differentiation, separation, and individuation. Locomotion is seen to spur on the child's movement away from his caregiver, while increasingly stable mental representations of the caregiver support his ability to tolerate periods of separateness. A turning point for Mahler comes in the latter half of the second year and the crisis of "rapprochement." At this point the child is able to differentiate between self and object, internal and external, and becomes acutely and painfully aware of his separateness.

Mahler's turning point coincides with the finding by Lewis and Brooks-Gunn that children exhibit a consolidated awareness of themselves as distinct entities in the latter half of the second year. However, Mahler's emphasis is different and has more to do with the importance of the mother as an emotional object in the infant's life, the affective components of the child's struggles to separate and individuate, and the formation of intrapsychic representations of self and other (Harter, 1983, 1999). In Mahler's view, the end of the second year is a stormy time, marked by the child's distress and anger about his separateness and the helplessness it entails, his conflicting wishes to be both connected and autonomous at the same time, and his conflicting image of mother as good (need-gratifying) and bad (frustrating). If the mother continues to be available and responsive to her child's needs, however, by the third year this conflict is largely resolved and the child is able to integrate the good and bad (gratifying and frustrating) aspects of his caregiver into one unified image. Aided by his increased cognitive capacities for symbol formation and object permanence, the child establishes a more secure and integrated intrapsychic representation of his caregiver, or "emotional object constancy." This enables the child to consolidate a stable image of self as a separate entity with an enduring individuality ("self-constancy"), one important aspect of which is a rudimentary consolidation of gender identity.

Around the same time, says Mahler, there is a far-reaching structuralization of the ego and establishment of many basic ego functions. Greenspan (1981, 1997; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006) has pointed out that many basic ego functions, such as reality testing, regulation of impulses, and regulation of thought and affect rest on the stable differentiation of self and nonself, inner and outer reality, and establishment of sense of self as a separate causal agent.

Object relations theorists such as Winnicott also emphasize the role the parent plays in laying the intrapsychic foundation of self. Winnicott (1965) theorized

that when a "good enough" mother is able to provide empathic response to the infant's needs,

each infant is able to have a personal existence and so begins to build up what might be called a continuity of being. On the basis of this continuity of being, the inherited potential gradually develops into an individual infant. If maternal care is not good enough then the infant does not really come into existence, since there is no continuity of being; instead the personality becomes built on the basis of reactions to environmental impingement. (p. 54)

Empathic response entails meeting the baby's needs, not only physical but also psychological, through holding, so that the baby is allowed a brief experience of omnipotence and is protected from such "unthinkable anxieties" as the feeling of "going to pieces" and "falling forever" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 58). The mother must then remain emotionally responsive as she *gradually* presents the infant with masterable levels of frustration, or external reality, whereby the infant comes to successfully separate out the self from other. The infant slowly internalizes the ego-supportive environment (the object), which becomes the basis for the child's self and the child's capacity to be alone.

More recently, Stern (1985/2000) brought observations from the field of developmental psychology to bear on psychoanalytic theories of self-development. Stern challenges earlier psychoanalytic notions of a symbiotic phase of development, maintaining that there is evidence that some senses of self as distinct from other exist from birth and long prior to self-awareness and language. These preverbal, experiential senses of self serve as the subjective organizers of experience, particularly social experience. They are "the preverbal existential counterpart of the objectifiable, self-reflective, verbalizable self" (Stern, 1985/2000, p. 7) and continue to grow and coexist with later senses of self. Each newly acquired sense of self creates new and greater capacities for interpersonal relatedness. Separation and union experiences, like other clinical issues, are not phase-specific; rather, they proceed simultaneously and are issues for the life span. Stern's later work introduced the concept of "the motherhood constellation" as a way of understanding maternal experience and its impact on the mother's sense of self. In this way of conceptualizing maternal experience, the new mother's sense of self includes not only the baby, as Mahler had implied in her definition of symbiosis, but also the mother's own mother (Stern, 1995).

Stern (1985/2000) postulates four different senses of self in the developing infant, each describing different domains of self-experience and interpersonal relatedness. With the sense of an "emergent" self (birth-2 months), there is rudimentary organization of experience and orientation toward interaction with the external world. With the development of the sense of a "core" self (2-6 months), infants become aware of themselves as distinct physical entities with their own agency, affectivity, and continuity in time and a sense of others as distinct and separate interactants. With the development of the sense of a "subjective" self

(7–15 months) comes infants' discovery that both they and others have distinct mental states and that these inner subjective experiences, which include attention, intention, and affective state, can be shared. The sharing of affects paves the way, in Stern's view, for symbol formation and language development during the second year and the development of a "verbal" self (15–18 months and on). With language and symbols come the toddler's awareness of himself as an objective entity rather than just as a subjective experiencer. Language and symbols also provide the vehicle through which the child can create and share meanings with another.

Emde (1983) has also proposed a process view of the self:

We must avoid getting caught up in the idea of a sharply focused age period in which the self emerges. Such a way of thinking tends to reify the self as a developmental acquisition and implies that it is something like walking, learning to ride a bicycle, or beginning speech. Nothing could be further from the truth. I believe we must remind ourselves that the self is a process, and refers to a vital set of synthetic functions which increase in complexity and depth as development proceeds throughout the lifespan. (p. 168)

While self-recognition *per se* begins in the latter half of the second year and successively evolves to higher levels of organization, prior to the second year and the development of representational capacity, an "affective core" of the self exists (Beebe & Lachmann, 1998). This affective core monitors experience according to what is pleasurable and unpleasurable and helps to guide both self-regulation and social interaction. It gives continuity to our experience even as we change the course of development and ensures that we can understand others. We all possess in common an innate, universally shared set of affects. Long before language develops, the affective core of self makes possible both communication and the sharing of affective states. For example, through what is termed "social referencing," infants can communicate about affects with adults and use adults' affects to help guide behavior in ambiguous situations.

THE SHARING OF INNER STATE: VALIDATING THE SELF

Parents play a crucial role in fostering their child's sense of self through their willingness and ability to share in their child's inner state. This not only offers the child knowledge about himself but also gives validity to what the child is feeling and thus helps bring the child's true self into existence. Winnicott (1965) introduced the notion of the "true self," which he said can only arise if the mother is able to meet and make sense of the infant's gesture rather than imposing one of her own. Moreover, the mother's reflecting back to the child what she sees there, or "giving back to the baby the baby's own self," allows the baby to exist psychologically and to feel real (Winnicott, 1971/2005). When caregivers excessively

impose their own external agenda on the child instead of responding to the infant's needs, the child constructs a "false self" that is characterized by an attitude of compliance and hides the child's true inner reality. Stern (1985/2000) refers to a similar phenomenon when he discusses "affect attunement," which involves the parent's matching of her child's inner, affective state. "Affect attunements" allow for intersubjective relatedness and strengthen the child's subjective sense of self (Beebe, 2004). Failures in affect attunement on the part of the parent exclude certain portions of the child's subjective experience from the realm of intersubjective sharing (Beebe et al., 2003). In order to maintain a connection with his parent, the child creates a false self that utilizes only those portions of inner experience that can be shared. This effort to meet the needs and wishes of another comes at the expense of remaining, very real portions of inner experience and can result in the disavowal or splitting off of portions of self-experience.

Internal Working Models of Self and Other

Bowlby (1969, 1973) first introduced the idea that the child develops internal working models of self and other based on early attachment experiences. If a caregiver is emotionally responsive and available, a secure attachment relationship develops. In turn, this fosters positive internal working models of both self and others. As Bowlby (1973) stated:

The model of the attachment figure and the model of the self are likely to develop so as to be complementary and mutually confirming. Thus an unwanted child is likely not only to feel unwanted by his parents but to believe that he is essentially unwanted. (p. 204)

Followers of attachment theory have elaborated on this notion. Sroufe (1990, 1996) defines the self as an "inner organization of attitudes, feelings, expectations, and meanings which arises itself from an organized caregiving matrix" (Sroufe, 1990, p. 281). The core of self has to do with expectations regarding the maintenance of basic regulation and positive affect. A responsive caregiving relationship, which promotes smooth regulation of affect and maintenance of behavioral organization in the face of stress, will foster the development of a well-defined and functional self-core (Sroufe, 1990, p. 293). This will influence later adaptation of the child, particularly with regard to social interaction and relationships (Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997).

The interrelationship between self-organization and history of care has been explored in a number of empirical studies (Kochanska, 2001). Sroufe (1989, 1990, 1996) reviews these findings. In summary, children who have histories of sensitive care and are securely attached have been observed to have complementary models of themselves as potent and worthy. They are more ego resilient, independent, resourceful, and confident in their approach to the environment. They

are able to utilize adult resources effectively and tend to interact positively with peers, displaying empathy and the capacity for emotional closeness. Children with histories of insensitive care who have anxious-avoidant attachments, on the other hand, seem to have complementary models of themselves as unworthy and impotent. They are less self-confident and resourceful in their approach to the environment and, despite a seeming precocious independence, are generally less self-reliant. While they are deemed to be highly dependent, they are not able to utilize adult resources effectively. Avoidant children exhibit feelings of low self-worth and tend to interact negatively with peers, displaying hostility, aggression, and lack of empathy. Expecting rejection, these children tend to elicit rejection from others.

Who Am I? The Struggle for Self-Concept in the Preschool Child

While the different theories thus far presented have different points of emphasis and even contradict each other at times, they all contribute to a picture of the developing self during the toddler years. In working with emotionally fragile preschoolers, theory can be used selectively, according to what is relevant, to guide our understanding of individual children's experiences. The overall picture of self-development describes an infant who, in the context of a supportive caregiving relationship, is beginning to organize and monitor experience. Affect is an important organizer of experience and lies at the core of self. Patterns of experience become the basis for the child's developing sense of self. In the first year and a half, the child has a growing experiential sense of himself as an active subject ("I") who exists as both apart from and related to others, who is capable of having thoughts and feelings and exerting an effect on his environment. Toward the end of the second year, there is a major developmental turning point when the child crystallizes a reflexive awareness of self; this is referred to by many as a "self-concept." This awareness continues to grow and undergo modification throughout one's lifetime. There is wide agreement about the importance of the early caregiving relationship as initially helping the infant regulate and organize experience, laying the emotional foundation for self-development, and providing the infant with ongoing feedback about self and others.

Given nurturing and supportive provision of his needs, by the time a child enters preschool, he should have established a strong and secure relationship with his caregiver and upon this foundation begun to construct a sense of himself as a separate and autonomous person. He is able to internally maintain his connection with his caregiver even when he is not in her presence and, bolstered by this connection, confidently set off to explore independently in his nursery classroom, knowing that he will later return to the comfort and security of his caregiver. Knowledge he has gained through his interactions with others enables him to define himself as an individual with his own unique set of attributes, such as gender, age, competencies, and familiarity. He knows he is a boy, that he is 3 years old, that he has curly hair, that he lives with his mommy and his sister, and that he can ride a

tricycle. The well-functioning child deems himself to be a potent agent who is capable of exerting an effect on his environment. He feels that he is valuable in the eyes of others, worthy of both care and friendship, and able to maintain his self-esteem even in the face of stress.

Unfortunately, however, this is not every child's reality. For example, what of the child whose caregiver has not been a reliable and available attachment figure? Or the child who has been separated from parents and placed in foster care? Or the child whose parents are so preoccupied with their own pressing intrapsychic needs or the realities of survival that, instead of attending to their children's needs, they demand that their children adapt to theirs? Or the child of parents who themselves are depressed, have low self-worth, and send messages of failure to their children? Or the child whose parents are prone to extreme mood swings and outbursts of violent behavior? These situations will have important consequences for the young child's self-concept.

Self-Esteem

An often discussed aspect of self-development, which can be problematic for young children, is self-esteem. Harter (1983, 1999) says that self-esteem has to do with one's cognitive evaluations of oneself as well as the affective reactions to these judgments. She distinguishes between self-esteem, the evaluation of one's worthiness and acceptability in the eyes of others, and self-confidence, one's sense of oneself as a competent, effective agent. While many factors affect self-esteem, early relationship experiences as well as reflective feedback from significant others are fundamental influences in its development. Attachment studies have demonstrated that children who have histories of insensitive care develop complementary models of themselves as unworthy and ineffectual in eliciting care (Osofsky & Roberson-Jackson, 1994). Children carry these feelings into the nursery classroom. Thus, teachers might observe a little girl who frequently engages her peers in negative ways: She teases her classmates until they respond aggressively, at which point she seems oddly smug, somehow satisfied that the outcome confirms her expectations of rejection. The teacher might have to struggle herself to overcome her frustration and find positive ways to engage with the child who constantly seeks her attention in negative, confrontational ways. We might observe children who scribble over photos or pictures of themselves, spit at or hit their mirror images, and display a lack of attention to body care—allowing, for example, their noses to go unwiped and their shoes untied. Self-representations in artwork can offer clues to the teacher and clinician about the child's self-concept. A child's confusion or ambivalence about who he is might be manifested in representing himself in distorted ways. He might appear to be extremely small and fragile in his drawings of himself; lack arms, legs, or other significant features; or have features belonging to the opposite gender, perhaps even an animal. Teachers have in some cases reported having seen children climb into the garbage can, expressing through

a very poignant metaphor the feeling that they are disposable. One little girl, who had by the age of 4 lived in three separate foster homes, put it pointedly: "I should be in the garbage can. That's where I belong."

Diminished Sense of Agency

Another aspect of self that can suffer is the young child's sense of agency. We have seen that the child's sense of self as an effective agent or actor in the world grows out of experiences of being able to have an impact on others and on his environment. The infant's opening and closing of his fist, his cries to bring his caregiver to his side, the toddler's incessant turning on and off of the light switch and demands to do things "myself" have all been ways of developing and practicing this sense of agency, of learning that there is an "I" that can "do" many things. From this perspective, it follows that children would have a sense of themselves as being ineffectual if they are growing up in an environment that is unresponsive to their needs and actions, where they have little opportunity to exert autonomy in developmentally appropriate ways, and that emphasizes their inadequacies. Children who have been excessively challenged by experiences that are beyond the scope of their comprehension and mastery, such as trauma, or who are presented with unrealistic demands, such as babysitting their younger siblings, might have a diminished sense of their own agency and instead feel powerless and overwhelmed.

Pseudo-Autonomy

With some children, we observe a developmental paradox. The child is precociously independent, disconnected, and competent. At the same time, he has a diminished sense of agency and is emotionally immature. Often, these children come from deprived or multistressed families. Parents who are themselves needy often are unable to meet their children's needs; at the same time, they place unrealistic demands on their children, such as cleaning and other household chores or comforting the parent when he or she is upset. Children who experience this are often unable to strike the important developmental balance between dependence and independence. These children give the distinct and unsettling impression of being at once very old and very young. On the one hand, they are precociously competent and independent and can accomplish tasks beyond their years. A preschool teacher might marvel at how competently her 4-year-old pupil goes about readying the table for lunch and diapering her baby sister. However, this same child backs away from age-appropriate challenges such as making a block building with disclaimers such as "I can't do it." In many ways she is highly dependent on her teacher; she is terrified, for example, when the teacher goes out of the room for a few brief moments. The shallowness of the child's independent stance be-

comes quite clear in ordinary situations of stress. For example, when her friend refuses to share the toy stove with her, she becomes extremely upset and regresses to rather infantile behaviors, screaming, crying, and pounding the floor with her fists.

Unstable Self-Concept

Mahler has shown us that the emotional constancy of the mother is the cornerstone of the child's development of self-constancy. A child whose mother is inconsistently available will not develop trust in her constancy and will continually fear her loss. In a parallel fashion, this child might fear losing himself. We observe children in the classroom who do not have a sense of body integrity and fear getting paint on their hands, lest it entail a change or loss of self. We observe children who insist on using the potty, fearful that when the toilet is flushed they will be sucked down into the hole along with everything else.

A child whose parent has extreme fluctuations in behavior—for instance, violent mood swings, maltreatment alternating with caretaking—will have difficulty integrating the good and bad aspects of the parent into one unified image (Osofsky, 2005). This child will consequently have trouble establishing a unified self-image and might vacillate between having an inflated, idealized self-image and one that is utterly diminished. He might identify exclusively with one aspect of his caregiver and have little tolerance for the suggestion that he or his caregiver is anything other than all good. Cicchetti, Beeghly, Carlson, and Toth (1990) observe that maltreated children may be prone to idealize qualities of themselves and their attachment relationship, perhaps as a defense against the rejecting behavior on the part of their primary attachment figure.

False Self

Although affect is at the core of our self-experience, many emotionally fragile young children are confused about or disconnected from their inner experience and manifest what has been described above as a false self. We might notice the child who falls down and lets out a strange laugh, one that resounds with a false and hollow ring. We might notice the child who giggles when his friend cries because he is too cut off from his own feelings to be able to empathize. Too often, children are required to meet the emotional demands of adults while their own inner affective experiences remain unvalidated. Consumed by their own pressing needs, some parents are unable to respond empathically to their children and have little tolerance for displays of negative emotion (Osofsky & Roberson-Jackson, 1994). When a parent tells a child to "stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about," he encourages the child to suppress his true, feeling self and present instead a "false self."

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND CLINICIANS

Early childhood educators and clinicians can exert a powerful influence on a child's self-concept. Unfortunately, many attempt to promote a positive self-concept through blanket statements of praise, such as "good boys and girls," which have little connection to the child's real attributes, affects, and competencies. Praise is often doled out in the form of smiley-face stickers, which encourage children to put up a sunny front in spite of what they might really be feeling inside. When a child is exhibiting an undesirable behavior and negative affects, he might be warned not to be a "bad" boy. Statements such as these attach global estimations of self-worth to particular behaviors and affects and reflect more the adult's agenda than who the child is. Such statements might effectively modify behavior and encourage an attitude of compliance. However, in conveying the message that worth is contingent upon a certain adherence to adult standards of behavior and affects, they also have the potential to undermine a child's self-esteem and encourage her to put on a false front and push the true self underground.

Self-worth rests on the experience of being loved, accepted, and cared for unconditionally. Adults can help improve children's self-esteem by giving them the message that they are fundamentally valuable in the eyes of others and worthy of care regardless of their behaviors or affects. In order to be meaningful and not rote, positive feedback must be offered in the context of a caring relationship and should be connected to the child's real successes, affects, and attributes rather than the adult's agenda. In this way, the adult can help the child make positive, successful experiences her own. A therapeutic reflection might be, "Alexis, you have gotten really good at riding that tricycle. I remember when you used to say, 'I can't do it.' You worked really hard at it, and now you ride so well!"

It is more helpful to respond to a child's acting out by conveying the message that the behavior, not the child or his affects, is unacceptable. A therapeutic teacher might tell a child, "Natasha, it is not okay for you to hit Theo. You can feel angry, but hitting is not okay. Hitting hurts, and we need to keep everyone safe." By offering meaningful explanations of limits, we can actually help build children's sense of self-worth, the message being that we set limits because we value children and want to protect them.

In addition to providing meaningful feedback, the therapeutic teacher can help improve a child's self-concept and self-confidence by creating opportunities for the child to have successful experiences in the school setting, in the context of both interpersonal interactions and interactions with materials. Adults can help the child whose poor self-concept impels him to seek attention in negative ways by creating opportunities for the child to have positive interactions with both adults and peers, interactions that have the potential to improve the child's working models of self and other. At first, the adult might need to initiate these interactions, for example, by joining the child on the floor to engage in a mutually pleasurable game of ball play. She might also encourage the child to develop positive

strategies with peers. Observing a child who would like to join in another child's play but goes about it in a maladaptive way, a teacher might say, for instance, "Tanya, Paul didn't like it when you knocked down his building. Maybe you could ask him if you can build with him instead. You have a lot of good ideas about building, too." Similarly, for a child who has a diminished sense of agency, the therapeutic teacher might present the child with learning challenges that he is able to master and help him to overcome his fears by encouraging him, reminding him of past successes, and assisting him in a way that adds to rather than takes away from his experience of mastery in the activity. A teacher might position the puzzle pieces to make it easier for a child and then gently encourage the child to place them himself: "I'll bet you can figure out where that one goes. I remember yesterday, you did the whole butterfly puzzle all by yourself. (*Child hesitates.*) I'll give you a hint. It's part of the ice cream cone. (*Child places piece successfully and smiles.*) See? You did it!"

Teachers and clinicians can help children who have simultaneously too much and too little agency establish a balance. The preschool years are an important time for children to consolidate their concept of age and belonging to the social category of little girl or boy, not baby or grown-up, a time to strike a balance between big and little. The well-functioning preschooler can approach new challenges confidently and at the same time draw upon adults for help and support when needed. The therapeutic teacher can help children establish this important balance by providing children with many appropriate opportunities for mastery and at the same time reassuring them that they are children and that grown-ups are there to take care of them. Children should be able to feel "big" as they run around the playground pretending to be superheroes, or as they practice a new trick on the monkey bars, and then curl up into a little ball with a teddy bear at naptime as their teacher reads them a soothing story. Teachers might also heighten children's awareness of age categories through a curriculum such as "big and little," which compares babies, children, and adults and connects these observations to the children's own experiences: "When you were a baby, you drank from a bottle. Mommy and Daddy gave you your bottle. Now you are a 3-year-old girl. You know how to eat with a fork. But you still need grown-ups to help cook your food."

Teachers and clinicians can help children develop a more stable and integrated self-concept. The adult's consistent availability and responsiveness to the child is a powerful intervention in and of itself, enabling the child to build trust in the constancy of the adult and correspondingly stable and integrated images of self and other. Teachers can also help children develop a unified image of self and other by offering realistic feedback about a child's ambivalence: "Yesterday you were really mad at me when I said it was cleanup time. Now you are happy with me again and we are playing together. You are still you and I am still me."

Ironically, many preschool programs perpetuate the problem of the false self by failing to validate a child's full range of emotion, reflecting images of a bright and happy but unreal world. Instead, adults can help children develop greater

connection to their true selves by reflecting and accepting their full range of inner experiences. At times, the adult might need to reassure the child that she can survive the child's negative emotions and still remain available: "I see that you are angry. Even if you are angry at me, I will still be your teacher." Adults can help children develop their inner sense of who they are, how they feel, and what makes them feel that way. This can only be done in the context of a real relationship. It is the teacher or therapist's ability to recognize and share in the child's feelings—even difficult feelings—that can help the child to accept those feelings as his own and integrate them into a sense of self that reflects his own true inner experience.

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