



From the library of The Identity Circle — Insights and ideas about leading, managing and living through the lens of identity.

Parenting through Identity – Honoring the Individual Inside Your Child

Synopsis:

As parents, we aren't naturally conditioned to think about raising children through the lens of identity; that is, deliberately helping them understand themselves and love themselves for who they truly are. Yet, helping a child understand his or her uniqueness and the potential it implies goes a long way towards ensuring that they are well-grounded human beings, that they find the right careers and companions, and are secure in who they are over the course of their lives, despite the challenges they will face.

Here, in brief, are 10 things a parent can do to honor the individual inside their child.

1. **Recognize that your kids aren't you** and let go of the often, unspoken hope that they'll follow in your footsteps. It doesn't matter, one way or the other.
2. **Make a point of observing patterns of success** that begin early in childhood, and which are based on the child's achievements, both small and large. Play them back to the child in various ways.
3. **Play "what's possible" games** based on these patterns (If a child draws intricate mazes by hand, is good at graphics, often points out beautiful scenery or light, ask them to imagine how they might build a career around this 'gift' for design.)
4. Starting in high school and into college, **make the connection between success patterns and coursework.** Let education reinforce the child's natural strengths.
5. **Give children things to read that highlight the importance of knowing oneself**, as a prerequisite to making good decisions in life. (random articles from newspapers and magazines, children's books on self-esteem, books about identity, such as *The Alchemist* and my own, *The Identity Code*.)
6. **Help your kids look for the deeper capacities** that underlie their activities and interests (e.g., a love of travel may suggest a passion for history; an interest in research may reflect a capacity for discovery; success at certain video games may signal a natural understanding of strategy).
7. **Talk 'purpose' with your kids, early on.** Ask them provocative questions, the answers to which will mature with time: What matters most to you? What do you love most about life? In this vein, ask 'why' back. Young children, in particular, often ask why over and over again. When a child makes a statement or offers an opinion, ask them why they say that? Get them to explain their thoughts and feelings out loud.
8. **Use language that reflects an identity-based life.** Talk about having the courage to be yourself, the need to be authentic, the value of insight, the power of integrity.
9. **With teenagers, challenge the pull of popularity,** don't endorse it. Help them remember that following their gut is often better than following the leader, even when it doesn't feel good. Encourage them to trust themselves first.
10. **Set the example.** Get to know yourself. Articulate your own identity and communicate that to your children, so the dialogue between you can be two-way. Talk to them about who you are versus what you do. Get them to see that the labels we take for granted – father, mother, football player, dancer, Christian, Jew, etc. – hide rather than reveal what makes each of us the unique human being we are.