



# TAKE-HOME SKILL: UNPACKING IDENTITY FOR TEENS

*"When I discover who I am, I'll be free."*

—Ralph Ellison

## OVERVIEW

A series of questions to help parents/caregivers explore different identities with their teens and how those identities shape their experiences.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help nurture your teen's identity development
- When they experience or witness challenges related to identity such as bias
- To encourage them to expand their circle of friends, promoting positive intergroup relations

### TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Sessions

### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

### MATERIALS

- N/A

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Explore their identities like race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, age, national origin, ability, or political orientation
- Reflect on the identities that are the most important to how they see themselves
- Learn about how their identities might shape their daily experiences in their community
- Reflect on identities that are dominant or marginalized in society
- Explore how bias or privilege relate to their identities.

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Making Practices Culturally Responsive
- Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs
- Making a Practice Trauma-Informed

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Before engaging your teen, take a moment for yourself to identify a news article you read or a movie you watched that tells a story about someone exploring their identity.
- Reflect on an aspect of your identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, age, national origin, ability, or political orientation.
- When did you recognize this identity in yourself? How does this identity shape your beliefs, your actions, your relationships with others, your choices? What are the strengths of this identity? What are the challenges, whether external or internal? Does this identity offer you more or less privilege in society? Where do you most feel at ease with this identity?
- Next, consider why you would want to talk about identity with your teen. When would be a good time? For example, you can have a conversation with your teen during the ride home from school or while you're washing dishes together. What would help you feel more prepared to have this conversation? For example, would you like to select a handful of discussion questions in advance and practice what you might say to your teen?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Having a better sense of your identities helps your teen feel more sure of themselves and fosters a greater sense of competence to be able to navigate being with people of identities that seem different from their own. What's more, when you [carve out time and create a safe space](#) for teens to explore their identities with you, they are more likely to have the opportunity to reflect on these complex questions about who they are. These exploration opportunities reassure teens that they have a source of support from which to learn about the different dimensions of their identities. Having honest conversations about identities also expresses an acknowledgement of their existence as opposed to denying them and how they might affect their interactions with people in the world. By talking with your kids about how you reflect on your identities, you help your teen learn to be brave and comfortable in their own skin.

### ACTIVITY

Begin by sharing with your teen a news article you read or a movie you watched recently that sparked your thinking about who you are. Ask your teen to share whether they've read any stories or watched any movies that did the same thing for them. Begin a conversation with them about how they understand themselves in relation to the world around them. Share why you want to have this conversation with them.

During your conversation, you can invite your teen to share back-and-forth with you about your thoughts on the following prompts. You can take inspiration from and adapt the following prompts using a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you.

- Name some of your own identities like your race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, age, national origin, ability, or political orientation.
  - Which identities do you feel are most important to how you see yourself? What are your earliest memories of recognizing these identities about yourself? What prompted you to become aware of these identities? Which identities do you feel the most positive about? The most unsure about? Why?
  - What do you wish you understood better about your identities? How could you learn more about these parts of your identity?
  - What have you learned about your identities within your family? Are there any traditions or values related to your identities that have been passed down from your family? If so, what are they and how are they expressed in your daily life?
- How do your identities shape your daily experiences in your community?
  - How are these influences similar or different during interactions with more familiar people like your classmates, teachers, coaches, teammates, and less familiar people like those who live outside your neighborhood or work at stores, restaurants, or hospitals?
  - In what spaces do you feel most and least at ease with your identities? Why?
  - Which among your identities are dominant or marginalized in our society? How are your identities represented in popular culture like in movies or other media? How authentic does this representation seem to you?

How do bias or privilege relate to your identities? [Bias](#) is “the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment.” [Privilege](#) is “an advantage that only one person or group of people has, usually because of their position or because they are rich.”

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## CLOSURE

Express encouragement and gratitude to your teen for sharing with you their thoughts around their identity. Make a plan to continue the conversation and invite them to share ideas for other questions to discuss together.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What surprised you about your teen’s thoughts on their identity? How did this conversation relate to your initial reasons for wanting to talk about identity with your teen? What other questions about identity might you want to discuss with your teen next time to build on this initial conversation?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a [study](#), teens who were mostly ninth graders and attended a public high school in the Southwestern region of the United States (race/ethnicity: 24.3% Black or African American, 30.3% Latino, 2.8% Asian American, 6.0% American Indian or Native American, or 36.7% White) were randomly assigned to an 8-session program that either explored cultural identity or post-high school training options. In the identity exploration program, teens learned about key concepts like race, ethnicity, stereotypes, and discrimination, and also engaged in activities that helped them understand their racial and ethnic backgrounds like making a family tree. Teens in the post-high school training program explored various career paths and financial aid opportunities.

Compared to teens in the training options program, teens in the racial-ethnic identity program engaged in greater identity exploration and had a clearer sense of themselves (e.g., “I like myself and am proud of what I stand for”), greater self-esteem, fewer feelings of depression, and better grades.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One of the [most important tasks](#) during adolescence is to engage in personal exploration to develop a clear sense of identity—a [sense of consistency](#) across time and circumstances in the ways they relate to others and their commitments to roles, values, and beliefs. When teens are able to gain a deep understanding of who they are, they are better able to chart a course for their lives with a sense of meaning and [purpose](#). Achieving clarity on their identity can help teens have a sense of “inner unity,” become more self-aware, recognize their assets and efficacy, and have greater self-direction interpersonally and within a broader society.

A sense of identity helps contribute to teens’ well-being beyond adolescence because it sets the stage for nurturing close relationships into adulthood. Learning about and developing positive feelings about the [social groups they belong to](#) is another way that your teen develops a positive self-concept. What’s more, teens who have a good understanding of their identity are better able to bridge across differences and pursue justice. “The more comfortable individuals are in their own skin, the more capacity they will have to engage in a productive manner with others,” [explain](#) psychologists Deborah Rivas-Drake and Adriana Umaña-Taylor in their book *Below*

*the Surface: Talking with Teens about Race, Ethnicity, and Identity.* Teens who have a greater understanding and positive feelings about their [cultural identity](#) are better able to recognize injustices related to their own identity as well as their connection to the struggles of other marginalized identities, and, in turn, are more caring and helpful to others as they act against injustice.