



# Understanding, exploring and supporting children's identity development

*Ask me about my life, what is important to me and about my hobbies and interests. These things make up who I am. Consider these when making decisions about my life.*

(Family Justice Young People's Board, 2017a).

This practice tool aims to support practitioners to explore and write about identity with children. In developing this material, Knowledge Exchanges were held with frontline practitioners and with a group of young people from the **Family Justice Young People's Board**. We are grateful for their time, wisdom and insight.

Identity is a broad, complex and contested topic. The aim of this briefing is to provide a short introduction to some useful concepts for social care practitioners, some suggestions to support children's identity development, and practice tools to use to explore identity with children and young people. It is split into the following sections:

- > **Introduction**
- > **Ways of understanding identity**
- > **Supporting children's identity development**
- > **Tools for exploring children's identities**

## Introduction

In this briefing identity is defined as a person's sense of self - made up of their experiences, values, characteristics and social roles. Our sense of identity informs answers to questions such as:

- > Who am I?
- > What is important to me?
- > What is my place in the world?

(Jackson et al., 2020)

Our sense of self forms and changes, beginning in early childhood and developing and changing throughout our lives, shaped by the contexts in which we live and the narratives and stories we hear and tell about ourselves and the world (Branje et al., 2021). Identity formation takes place in changing, and sometimes highly contested, social and cultural contexts - we might reflect on our own experiences of the ways in which aspects of identity such as race, class, gender and sexuality have or have not changed over our own lifetimes.

A sense of identity has different meanings in relation to children's developmental ages and experiences. Adolescence is a particularly significant time for identity development (Erikson, 1968), as young people may begin to question and re-examine who they are and who they want to be, beyond their place in their family or carer environment (Branje et al., 2021). Developing a defined and valued sense of self supports mental wellbeing and self-esteem (Mental Health Foundation, 2019).

Children involved with social care professionals should not feel obliged, and may not be willing, to share all aspects of their developing identity. Nevertheless, the importance of understanding a child's identity when making decisions about their life is recognised in legislation and statutory guidance.

Identity is included as an element of a child's developmental needs in the assessment framework in *Working together to safeguard children* - [www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children) - (Department for Education, 2018, p. 30), and local authorities must consider children's 'religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background' when making decisions about a child in care (*Children Act 1989*, section 22).

For children who have experienced disruption, harm or trauma, support from professionals who seek to understand, respect and represent their unique identity, including in case records, is crucial. Support for children and young people is likely to have more impact if their identities are taken account of and respected; while children are less likely to benefit from, or engage with, support if decisions are made that take no account of how they see themselves and their future (Hazel et al., 2019).

Young people in care have said that they want their workers to have a better understanding of different aspects of identity - including cultural awareness, gender and sexual identity, beliefs and religion (Coram Voice, 2021). Research on the representation of identity in social work assessments is limited, but identifies that:

- > The identity sections of assessments are often limited. Children are often described briefly and generically, with reference to culture, ethnicity and family relationships only. Children's hobbies, talents, interests and friendships are rarely included.
- > Children's own views about what different aspects of their identity mean to them are often absent from records.
- > Written records become part of the narratives that are shared about who individual children are. Although children's strengths are often described, assessments may often be deficit-laden, problem-focused and framed around risks

(Casey & Hackett, 2021; Thomas & Holland, 2010).

**Reflexivity** is the ability to consider how one's own presence and perspective influences what we see and do (Brown & Turney, 2014). When supporting children's developing identities, it is important to consider how our own assumptions shape our understanding of, and approach towards, those we work with (Partridge, 2019).

#### **Think about your own identity:**

- > How would you describe your own identity? In what ways has that changed over time?
- > Which aspects of your identity are visible to everyone? Which are visible only to close friends and family? Which aspects of your identity do you keep invisible to most people?
- > If a professional was making decisions about support and care for you, what information would be important for them to know about your identity? What might you not want to share about your identity?

The GRRRAACCEEESSS and the LUUUTT model are practical tools to support reflection about different aspects of identity, how these factors inform the stories we tell about ourselves, and the way in which others construct stories about who we are.



The GRRRAACCEEESSS and the LUUUTT models - Video:

<https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/assets/using-the-grrraaacceeeesss-and-the-luuutt-models-in-supervision>



Practice Tool:

<https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/assets/social-grrraaacceeeesss-and-the-luuutt-model>

Sometimes, fear of making mistakes, upsetting someone or causing offence can make it hard to talk about identity.



### Questions for discussion or reflection

- > Which aspects of identity do you feel most, or least, able to talk about with children and families?
- > For aspects you feel uncomfortable to talk about, would you want to discuss these? If so, what support would you need in order to do so?
- > How do you actively support a safe space in your team in which colleagues understand each other's experiences of power and powerlessness, and discriminatory beliefs or attitudes do not go unchallenged?

This practice tool aims to build confidence in understanding, exploring and supporting children's identities. The first section introduces some concepts that are useful in understanding identity, the second section focuses on supporting children's identity development, and the third section provides some ideas and tools for exploring identity with children.



## Ways of understanding identity

A short introduction to some theories and concepts that may be useful for social care practitioners in reflecting on identity in practice.

### Narrative identity

*Narrative identity is a special kind of story – a story about how I came to be and the person I am becoming.*  
(McAdams, 2018, p. 6)

This psychological theory describes how our identities are formed by creating internal stories or narratives to make sense and meaning of the past, present and potential futures. These internal narratives change over time. In childhood we need space to ask questions, hear others' stories and be listened to in order to shape and form our own early narratives.

Family narratives about a child influence how identity develops, as children learn how to make meaning out of events during conversations with their parents or carers (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Roles and images that become accepted as representing a child in family narratives may be positive, but can also label a child negatively, influencing the way they see themselves and the world around them (Hazel et al., 2019). For care-experienced people, accessing their social care files can play a role in identity development, in 'making sense of the past' (Hoyle et al., 2019, p. 1865).

Children involved with social care - whose lives may involve displacement, disruption and confusing experiences - may have had limited opportunities to make sense of their lives in this way and need support to understand their experiences and the ways in which these may affect their identity (Michelson, 2022). As such, listening to a child's story about themselves is a core element in relationship-based practice. Life story work is one way to support children to understand and make sense of their stories.



*Life story work: Practice Tool* (Baynes, 2022)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/december/life-story-work-practice-tool-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/december/life-story-work-practice-tool-2022)



### Questions for discussion or reflection

- > How do you build in time to listen to, and help piece together, children and young people's stories about themselves and their identity?
- > What aspects of your own personal narrative might you share with children and young people you work with in order to build trust between you?

## Social and personal identities

Our identity narratives are not formed in a vacuum. Identity forms and develops in the context of the 'meta-narratives' or dominant cultural stories that shape the social and cultural contexts in which we grow up and live (McLean & Syed, 2016). Meta or grand narrative is a term developed by Jean François Lyotard (1979); it describes dominant theories that are based upon an appeal to universal truth or universal values and function to legitimise power, authority, and social customs. Grand narratives about race or class, for instance, have reinforced and sustained social and political inequality. Such narratives are:

- > Widely used and socially dominant versions of history, goals and values.
- > Pervasive - even if people do not accept them, they are widely known and seen.
- > Hard to see - these ideas, over time, can be so powerful that people do not question them and may assume they represent everyone's lived reality.
- > Influential - identities, aspirations and interactions are influenced by what people think is possible.
- > Rigid - it is hard to change and challenge master narratives.

(Adapted from McAdams, 2019).

Hard though it may be, master narratives are adapted, resisted or challenged (McLean & Syed, 2016) when counter narratives challenge and reshape cultural norms. Over the course of the twentieth century narratives of race, gender and sexual identity have been reshaped in the UK by counter narratives developed by civil rights, women's rights and gay rights movements. In 2023, narratives of gender identity are the focus of intense debate. Through listening to children's stories, practitioners can deepen their understanding of how an individual child relates to, and negotiates, wider cultural ideas (Michelson, 2022).

We can consider identity in terms of **social identity** - how someone feels in relation to others, for example through feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society (Raburu, 2015; Branje et al., 2021). **Personal identity** is our own view about what makes us unique, including our own self-image and self-esteem. For example, a young person's social gender identity includes how they see themselves as belonging to a group gender identity (such as 'men', 'women', 'non-binary'), while their personal gender identity reflects the way they see themselves as a unique part of that group (for example, what it means to that young person to be a man) (Branje et al., 2021).

## Visibility of identities

Some aspects of identity may appear obvious - age, ethnicity or gender, for example, may be interpreted according to social or cultural norms. However, these interpretations may be simplistic, at odds with someone's own sense of identity, or simply incorrect. It is easy to make assumptions about identity based on what is visible; it is important to explore children's identities with them. For example:

- > A child's gender may be visible, but not what they think about their gender identity or how they understand their gender.
- > A child may have a disability which is not immediately visible, but could be a significant aspect of their identity.
- > A child's religion may be visible (for example, through the clothes they wear) but not how they live out their religion in day-to-day life, or what it means to them.

Identities may be voiced (spoken about and acknowledged), unvoiced (unspoken about or unacknowledged) and/or silenced. In different settings and with different people, different identities may be more or less visible and spoken about. For example, the importance of a young person's identity as part of their peer group compared to their identity as part of their family may vary depending on who they are with (Hazel et al., 2019).

## Intersectionality

'Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking' (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 3). For example, in response to a survey by Stonewall (2018), half of Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised LGBTQ+ people reported discrimination in their local LGBTQ+ community because of their ethnicity. Intersectionality helps us reflect on how different aspects of identity – race, sex, sexuality, gender, for example – intersect to generate different experiences of discrimination and oppression or privilege.

### To explore intersectionality further you can watch the following films:



An introduction to cultural competence in social care | Film four – An introduction to intersectionality and how we can apply it to our work (18 minutes)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/content-pages/learning-and-development/learning-library/an-introduction-to-cultural-competence-in-social-care](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/content-pages/learning-and-development/learning-library/an-introduction-to-cultural-competence-in-social-care)



Kimberle Crenshaw on Intersectionality | The Big Idea (5 minutes)

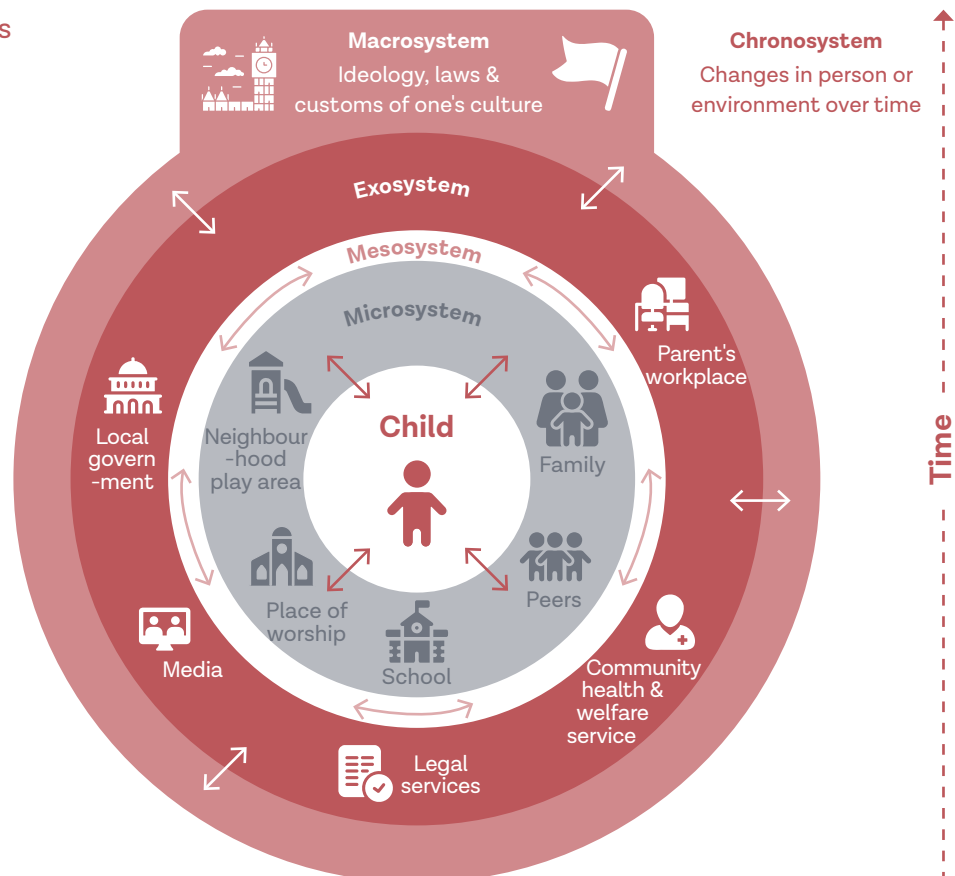
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BnAW4NyOak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BnAW4NyOak)



## Identity development in context

Our sense of self is partly shaped by the changing contexts in which we live. The following model illustrates five different systems that influence a child's developing identity.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecology systems (1977)



The five structures  
(adapted from  
Hart & Aumann, 2017)

### Microsystem

People and places a child interacts with directly - including family, carers, friends, school and neighbourhood.

### Mesosystem

How different parts of the microsystem interact with each other, for example the relationship between a child's teacher and their parents.

### Exosystem

People and places a child doesn't interact regularly with, but have a significant impact on them, for example a parent's place of work.

### Macrosystem

Government policies, cultural values and the economic and political systems within which a child and their family live.

### Chronosystem

Changes over time, including life transitions and historical events that change how a person interacts with the systems.

## Supporting children's identity development

### Identity development can be affected by experiences of adversity.

Supporting children who experience adversity to find ways to make sense of their experiences, identity and agency are core tasks for social care practitioners. For some children, the impact of adversity may result in feelings of shame, guilt, responsibility, fear of stigma and powerlessness, impacting their sense of self-worth (Michelson, 2022).

#### **Example: Identity challenges faced by children with a parent in prison for sexual offences.**

Families and professionals in this study (Hextall, 2022) talked about the impact on children's identity:

- > Knowing a parent's sexual offending informed children's identity development, including the ways that young people were able to explore their own sexuality and prepare for adulthood.
- > For some children, the nature of their parent's offence limited their ability to maintain a positive self-image. When children were old enough to understand what had happened, feelings of shame, confusion and anger were common.
- > Identity formation was disrupted when children had to move home, school and even change their names.
- > Families wanted emotional support or counselling for their children to make sense of what had happened, and were disappointed that social services intervention focused only on safeguarding concerns and evaluating family time.



#### **Read the full report here:**

*Invisible harms and hierarchies of shame* | Children Heard + Seen

<https://childrenheardandseen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Invisible-Harms-and-Hierarchies-of-Shame.pdf>

#### **Example: Identity challenges faced by children seeking asylum**

*I really don't know, I've lost myself. I know I have.*  
(Groark et al., 2011, p. 427)

The traumatic events that lead to children fleeing their homeland, and their journeys to arrive in the UK, are likely to profoundly impact their sense of self and their understanding of the world around them. Children seeking asylum will be affected by the significant loss of home, way of life, cultural identity, community, and often family members. Children given the label of 'asylum seeker' develop in the context of heavily contested and sometimes violent political debates around this issue (Groark et al., 2011; Douglas, 2010).



### Implications for practice:

Mumford and Sanders (2014) identify three themes central to identity development for young people who have experienced significant adversity:

#### > **Safe, secure connections**

Where workers can build authentic relationships with children and young people, taking time to build trust and provide containment, this allows young people to find and try opportunities for positive identity development (Mumford & Sanders, 2014, p. 9). These connections might also be with a trusted carer (Marshall et al., 2020; NICE & SCIE, 2022) a peer or sibling (Brady et al., 2022) or other kin.

#### > **Opportunities to test out identities**

Children and young people need opportunities to test out different identities. This might include access to education, sports and social groups in the context of trusting relationships. Some studies have linked forming friendships and opportunities to take part in groups, sport and other activities with lessened vulnerability to exploitation and adversity (Beech et al., 2018; Thomas & Speyer, 2016).

One example is the Gap Youth Club for young people who identify as LGBTQ+. They produced a video - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgl\\_-5Qg2fl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgl_-5Qg2fl) - which captures young people's views about the importance of having access to different opportunities for identity formation. It highlights the importance of connections and relationships, agency and choice, and opportunities to have new experiences.

#### > **Building a sense of agency**

Developing a strong sense of personal agency is important and may give young people who have experienced adversity greater confidence and an opportunity to redefine narratives that define them as 'at-risk'. This may be particularly important when preparing for transitions (Mumford & Sanders, 2014).



### Questions for discussion or reflection

- > Having safe and secure connections with trusted people is important for developing a positive sense of self. How do you support this as part of your role?
- > How do you keep up-to-date about opportunities (groups, clubs, activities) for young people in your local area where they might test out different identities and figure out who they are?
- > Review your organisation's policies and procedures. How are young people supported to participate and have agency in their lives, and in decisions about their support and care?

## Considering identity, oppression and discrimination.

Children respond differently to discrimination. The context in which discrimination occurs, and the attitudes and responses of trusted adults and peers, influences the way discrimination impacts on young people (Dansey et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Mannay, 2017; Mental Health Foundation, 2019; Rogers, 2017; Raghavan & Griffin, 2017). However, experiences of discrimination may contribute to children's developing sense of identity (Mental Health Foundation, 2019; Michelson, 2022) as they interact with the world around them. For example:

- > Negative cultural narratives about care experience may impact on children and young people's sense of belonging at school, with peers and into adult life (Dansey et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Mannay et al., 2017). Informed by the campaigning of care-experienced people, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care has recommended that care experience be made a tenth protected characteristic under the *2010 Equality Act* (MacAlister, 2022).
- > Children and young adults with learning disabilities who experience discrimination at school and in the community can struggle to maintain a positive identity and develop social connections (Mental Health Foundation, 2019).
- > Racism and discrimination impact upon children's physical and mental development (Benner et al., 2018; Center on the Developing Child, 2020). For example, interviews with Romany Gypsy, Roma, and Irish or Scottish Traveller young people describe how discrimination in education can significantly impact their self-esteem and self-worth (Traveller Movement, 2022).



### Implications for practice:

Principles of human rights and social justice underpin social work practice and professional standards – see [www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards](http://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards) - and practitioners have responsibilities in regards to challenging oppression and discrimination. Reflect upon how you:

- > Advocate for young people and challenge discrimination when it is encountered.
- > Listen to and learn about lived experiences of discrimination and oppression.
- > Ask young people how they would like to be described - for example, what pronouns they would like to be used, how they would like their ethnicity and culture to be described, and how they would explain their spirituality or religion.
- > Ensure you see young people as the expert in their own lives and identities, while recognising any safeguarding responsibilities.
- > Review your organisation's website and workforce. How representative is it of the communities you work with? Representation is important; seeing oneself in words, pictures and positions of authority supports positive identity formation.

(Adapted from Marsh, 2022)



## Further reading

*Supporting young people who identify as LGBTQ+: Frontline Briefing* (2022)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/february/supporting-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus-frontline-briefing-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/february/supporting-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus-frontline-briefing-2022)

*Promoting anti-racism in children and family services: Practice Briefing* (2022)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/july/promoting-anti-racism-in-in-childrens-social-care](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/july/promoting-anti-racism-in-in-childrens-social-care)

*More than faith - Muslim-heritage children in care: Strategic Briefing* (2022)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/may/more-than-faith-muslim-heritage-children-in-care-strategic-briefing-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/may/more-than-faith-muslim-heritage-children-in-care-strategic-briefing-2022)

*A toolkit for working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people: The Traveller Movement* (2022)

[https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TTM-BESTIE-TOOLKIT-2022\\_web-1.pdf](https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TTM-BESTIE-TOOLKIT-2022_web-1.pdf)



## Supporting identity development for children in care.

Children in care may be placed with foster carers or become part of an adoptive family. These families' lives will be different from their previous home in all sorts of ways – and aspects of family identity such as class, ethnicity, religion or culture may be very different from prior experiences. In these circumstances, careful consideration of a child's identity and specific needs are particularly important, and professionals have a responsibility to ensure that foster carers or adopters have a good understanding of the identity of the children they care for (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Halford, 2022) and how to make them feel welcomed and included.

To take one example, Zoe Thomas' research (2020) - <https://theconversation.com/hair-and-skin-are-important-to-a-black-childs-identity-but-many-social-workers-dont-understand-this-143146> - highlights how significant hair texture and skin colour are to Black children, and how this is often overlooked by social workers:

*...young people raised the significance of hair and skin colour to their life experiences, their relationships with themselves and others and their relationships with society and its institutions* (Thomas, 2020, para. 4).

Thomas advocates that practitioners engage with privilege, marginalisation, and racism, and talk to young people about the relationship between ethnicity, hair, and skin. Anyone caring for Black children needs to develop practical knowledge and skills about caring for their skin and hair.



### Implications for practice:

Practitioners and carers should:

- > Develop their confidence to reflect upon and talk about ethnicity, religion and culture, acknowledging children's multiple identities and making everyday connections with the different parts of their identity. This might include finding opportunities for children to explore their identity in different ways - through relationships with role models, clubs and activities, attendance at places of worship or entertainment, celebrating special or significant days, and providing children with books, toys, art and food representing diversity.
- > Call out discrimination and advocate for children when this occurs. Prepare children with strategies to respond to various forms of discrimination.
- > Where possible, involve the child's birth family and the child themselves to explore and understand their unique identity needs.

(Bristol City Council, 2014; Fosterline, 2019)



### Further reading

*Muslim-heritage children in care: Strategic Briefing* (2022) - [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/may/more-than-faith-muslim-heritage-children-in-care-strategic-briefing-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/may/more-than-faith-muslim-heritage-children-in-care-strategic-briefing-2022) - which considers in detail how professionals can support Muslim-heritage children in care, and their carers.

## Recording children's identities

*Embodying both positive and negative childhood experiences that resonate into adulthood, records can act as a building block in the construction of meaningful life stories and a stable sense of self.*

(Hoyle et al., 2019, p. 1871)

It is important that case records provide a clear account of relevant information about children's identities, to inform decision-making and as part of the 'story' told in the records that explains the rationale for decisions made. Well written and thoughtful records can give young people who access their records important insight into their history and identity (Hoyle et al., 2019; 2020).

### MIRRA Project

MIRRA is an acronym of **Memory–Identity–Rights in Records–Access**. The aim of this participatory study was to explore the rights of care experienced adults to information about their childhoods. The study found that:

- > For care-experienced people, accessing their social care files can play a role in identity development, in 'making sense of the past' (p. 1865).
- > Care experienced adults wanted to see photos, personal opinions and memorable items, which were often missing from records about them.
- > The 'paper self' created by the case file had considerable power. It could impact how people were treated and understood by themselves and others, and result in further marginalisation.
- > Records were written in a manner that meant identities could become fixed and lacked context.

(Hoyle et al., 2019)



### Example: Me and My World, Brighton & Hove

This is an approach to writing directly to children in care. Social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers write their reports directly to the child, and foster carers write a letter to children in their care every six months. This approach enables the child to be held in mind, appreciating their humanity. Reports using this approach often include more about children's strengths and achievements, and are written in way that everyone can understand, supporting the child to understand important questions like 'why am I in care?' (Watts, 2021).



### Further reading

*Good practice in recording and access to records: Strategic Briefing* (2022)  
[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/january/good-practice-in-recording-and-access-to-records-strategic-briefing-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/january/good-practice-in-recording-and-access-to-records-strategic-briefing-2022)

Reflections on accessing care records and supporting good recording: Podcast (2021)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording)



### Questions for discussion or reflection

- > What approaches do you currently use to promote child-centred recording about identity?
- > How do you include children's own views about their identity in your written records?
- > How would you describe a child's identity if you were writing a letter directly to them?

## Tools for exploring children's identities

The following section puts together some ideas that might be helpful in exploring identity. Every interaction between a child and a practitioner will be different (Dillon et al., 2022) and approaches should be adapted based on a child's individual needs, age and ability, and modified to suit purpose and time constraints. More ideas can be found in *Supporting effective participation with children and young people* - [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2023/may/supporting-effective-participation-with-children-and-young-people](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2023/may/supporting-effective-participation-with-children-and-young-people) - a selection of resources including a podcast, videos and practice tools.

The following practice tools provide different ways to explore children's identity:

- 1) **Exploring a child's name**
- 2) **Playing a game of identity 'Jenga'**
- 3) **Creating an identity cupboard or backpack**
- 4) **Photographs, videos and music**
- 5) **Drawing a genogram**
- 6) **Engaging in play**

# Tool 1 - Exploring a child's name

## Aim

The name or nickname a child is given can give practitioners the opportunity to start conversations about identity. A conversation about someone's name can start other conversations about culture, ethnicity, family roles and responsibilities, and family stories. A child could be named after a relative, someone revered or admired in the public sphere, or the name could be indicative of a particular moment in a family's life. For example, in Ghanaian culture names are given depending on the day a child is born. The start of a child's identity can begin from the very moment they are named at birth.

## Warning

For some children this exercise may be painful or difficult, for example:

- > Some children may not readily have the answers to these questions, not knowing who named them as a child or why. A useful exercise could be for the social worker and the child to work together to find out the meaning of their name and use some of the questions below to assist with this. Children may also have nicknames that can also be explored, adapting the questions.
- > Some children's names might be connected to painful or traumatic family history and bring up discrimination, racism and historic abuse - for example, children whose names have been changed to suit white pronunciation or surnames associated with the slave trade.

## You'll need

This activity can be a conversation. You can also engage creatively with it, inviting children to draw out their responses or act them out with toys.

## Example questions

- > Do you know who named you as a child?
- > Is there any significant meaning to your name?
- > What do you like about your name?
- > Are there any stories in your family about your name?
- > Have these stories influenced you as you have grown up?
- > What stories would you like people to tell about you?

*This tool was drawn from Nana Bonsu's practice experience.*



## Tool 2 – Playing a game of identity 'Jenga'

(Adapted from Dillon et al., 2022)

### Aim

Playing a game while talking about identity can be a creative way of supporting connection while exploring issues that may be hard to talk about for both practitioner and family. A game of 'blocks' or 'Jenga' can be adapted in order to talk about different parts of identity with children and families.

### What you'll need

'Jenga' style building blocks. These could be bought and shared as a team.

### Creating the game

On a piece of paper, write a series of numbered of questions about identity (you can also print out or photocopy the example questions on the next page). Number each of your blocks. You can use the same blocks for lots of different activities, by changing the questions you write down.

### Playing the game

Whenever a person removes a block, they (1) look at the number written on the block, then (2) ask the question on the piece of paper with that number. Time can be taken with follow-up questions. You can play this game with multiple people, including families together.

Practitioners also answer the questions, allowing for conversations about similarities and differences.

Figure 4: A game of identity 'Jenga'



## Example questions

1. What things do you like about yourself?	2. What can you do really well?	3. What makes you laugh?
4. Are there people in your life who remind you of yourself?	5. Are there things you would like to change about yourself?	6. What languages are spoken in your family? Are there favourite words or phrases that are used?
7. Who is the best person/people to help you with any challenges you face?	8. What is your favourite game?	9. What celebrations do you take part in as a family?
10. What is your hope for the future?	11. What are the things that people have noticed about you? Do you think this is true about you?	12. What parts of you do other people not notice?
13. What hobbies do you have?	14. What meals do you cook in your family?	15. Do you have a faith, religion, or belief?

## Tool 3 – Creating an identity cupboard or backpack

(Adapted from the Faith and Belief Forum: -

<https://faithbeliefforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Secondary-Resource-Pack-1.pdf>)

### Aim

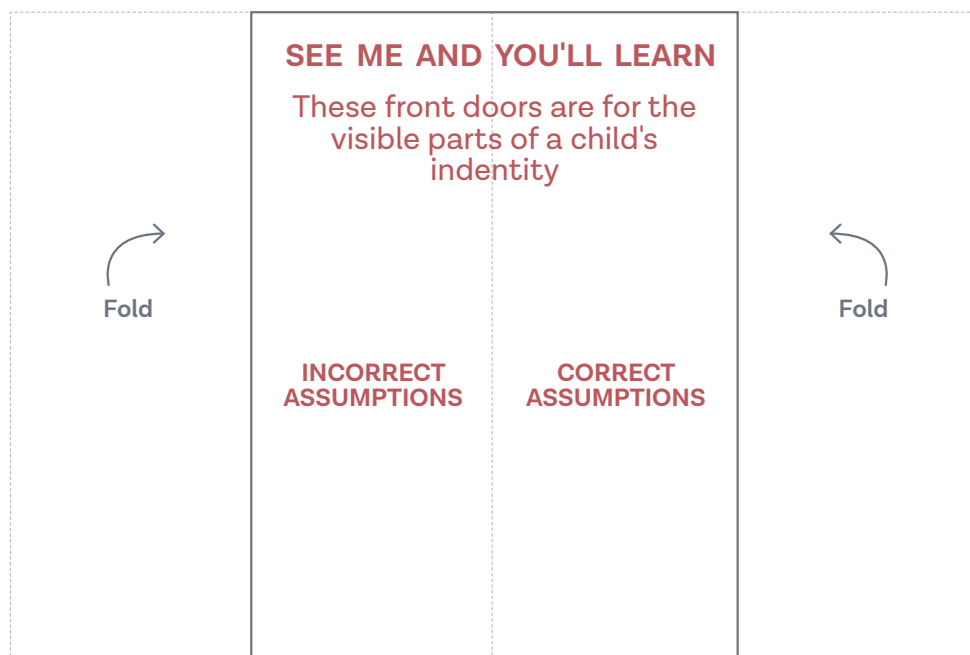
These exercises can be used to explore the ways in which children can inhabit multiple identities. It can help practitioners explore what is visible and invisible about a person's identity, and discuss the complexity of identity with children and their families. Before starting, it would be useful to ask a child what identity means to them. It's important to consider language that is appropriate, considering age and additional needs - there is a complementary 'backpack' version that may be more suitable for younger children.

**Identity cupboard: May be more suitable for older children**

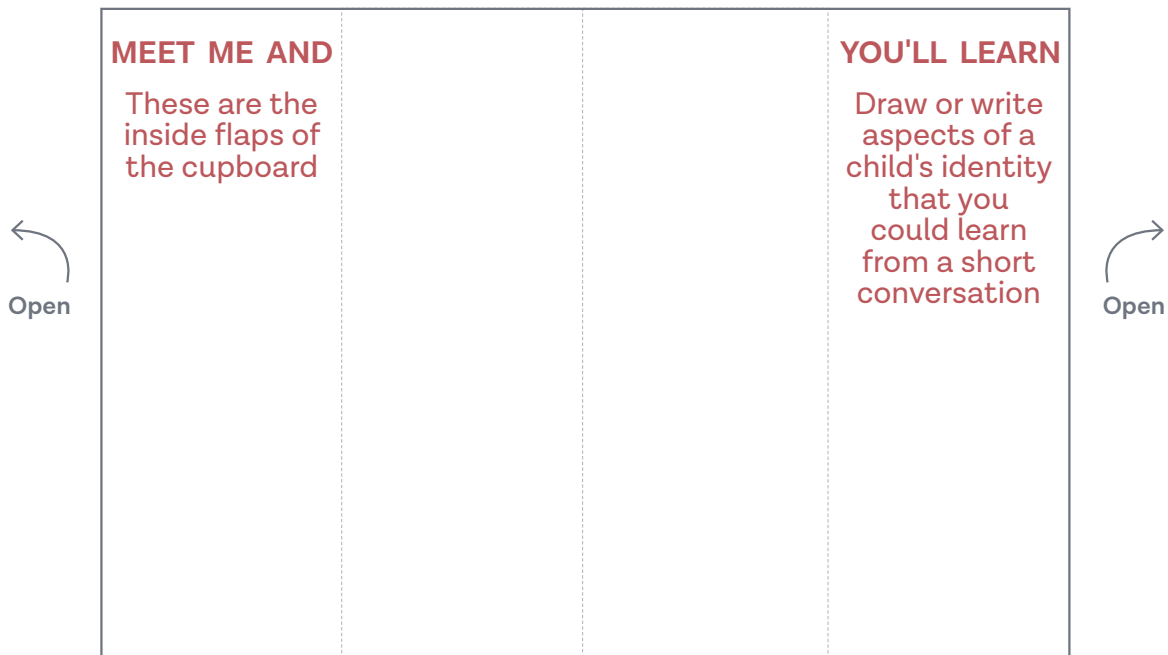
### You'll need

A piece of A4 paper or card, and something to write with. Depending on the child, you may also want to bring coloured pens, stickers and collage materials.

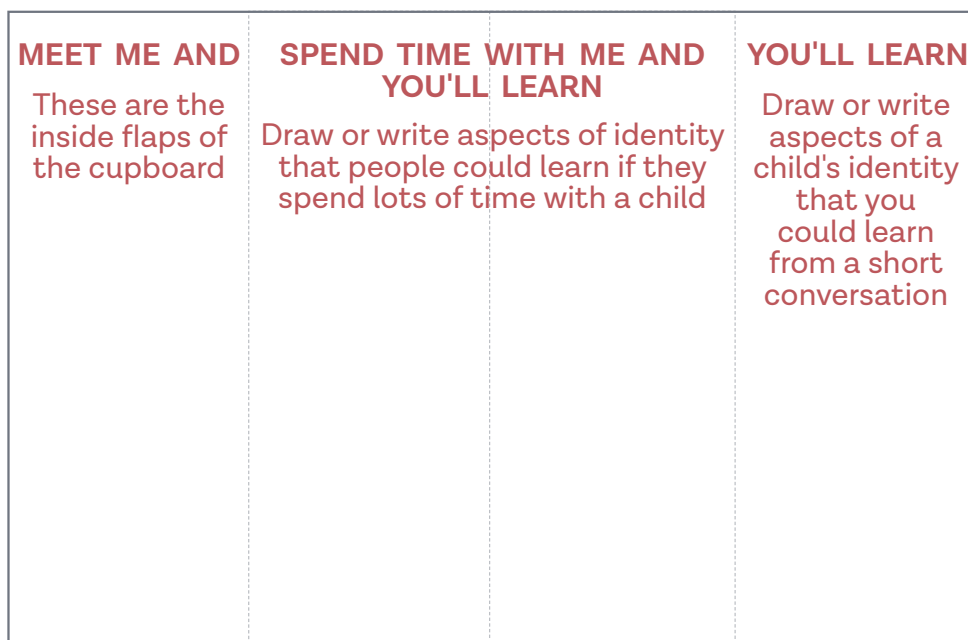
1. Fold in two sides to make a 'cupboard' with two doors.



2. On the outside, write across both doors: 'See me and you'll learn'. On the right door write 'Correct assumptions', on the left door write 'Incorrect assumptions'. Here, support the child to write about the visible parts of themselves, and what people learn/assume from the outside.



3. On the inside of the flaps, write, 'Meet me and you'll learn'. Here, children can write/draw aspects of their identity people could learn if they had a brief conversation together.



4. On the inside of shelves, write 'Spend time with me and you'll learn'. Here, children can write/draw aspects of their identity people could learn if they spend lots of time with them, like best friends or close family.

## Identity backpack: May be more suitable for younger children

### You'll need

Paper and colouring pens.

1. Draw an outline of a backpack. On the front of the backpack, draw all the visible aspects of a child's identity with them. On the back, draw or write all the invisible aspects of their identity. The child can add words, images or symbols, and decorate it to make it unique.
2. You could also use a paper bag, envelope or rucksack for this activity. Decorate the bag with the visible aspects of a child's identity, and write the invisible aspects on pieces of paper (which can then be put inside the bag).

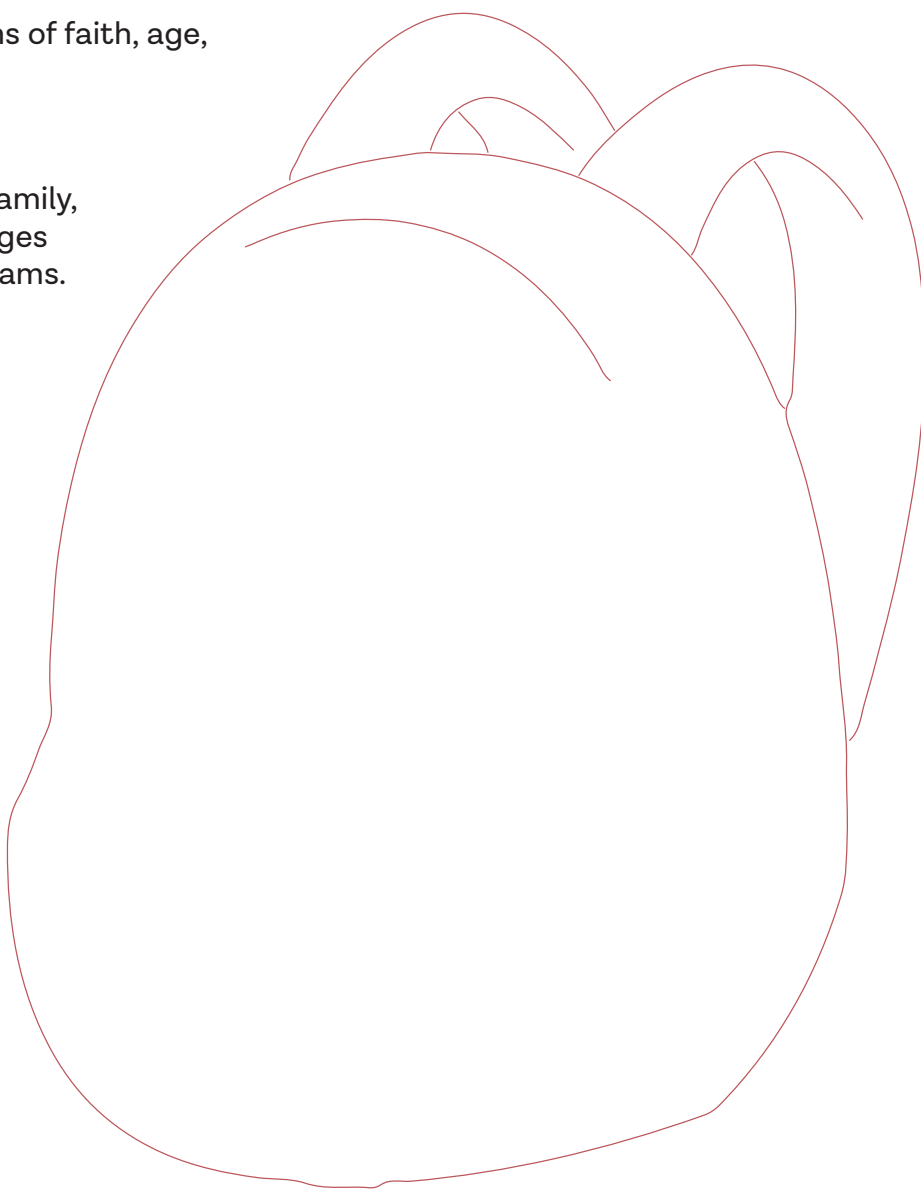
It might help to talk about examples of visible and invisible identities, for example:

#### > Visible

Skin colour, visible signs of faith, age, gender.

#### > Invisible

Hobbies and talents, family, faith or beliefs, languages spoken, hopes and dreams.





## Tool 4 – Photographs, videos and music

### Aim

Photographs and short films can provide creative ways in which children can describe their identity with those around them, giving them the opportunity and agency to choose how they would like to share their identity.

### You'll need

A device that can take photographs.

1. Give the child or young person a device for taking photographs and allow them to control it for an agreed period of time. Invite the young person to take photographs that show 'Who I am' and that are 'All about me'. Questions could also be more specific. For example, 'Your favourite places' or 'Three things that are really important to you.'
2. Look at the photographs together and invite the young person to talk about their meaning. The discussion time gives opportunities to 'engage in different aspects of their lives reflected in their pictures' (Cooper, 2014, p. 11).

(Cooper, 2014; Thomas, 2013; Wilson & Milne, 2013)

A similar activity could use sound recordings, inviting a young person to make a short sound recording of something that is important to them. This could, for example, be a music track that is representative of part of their identity. Wilson and Milne (2013) found that music could help young people explore and explain their identities, with young people in their study using it to remember their birth family, create a comfortable safe place and work through difficult emotions.

## Tool 5 – Drawing a genogram

### Aim

A genogram is a visual representation of family relationships and characteristics which can help explore a child's perception of their relationships with others, and their identity and role as part of their family. Cultural genograms help to capture different characteristics that are important to people's identities (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Family members' ethnicity, faith or sexuality can be added to a genogram using different symbols.



### Further reading

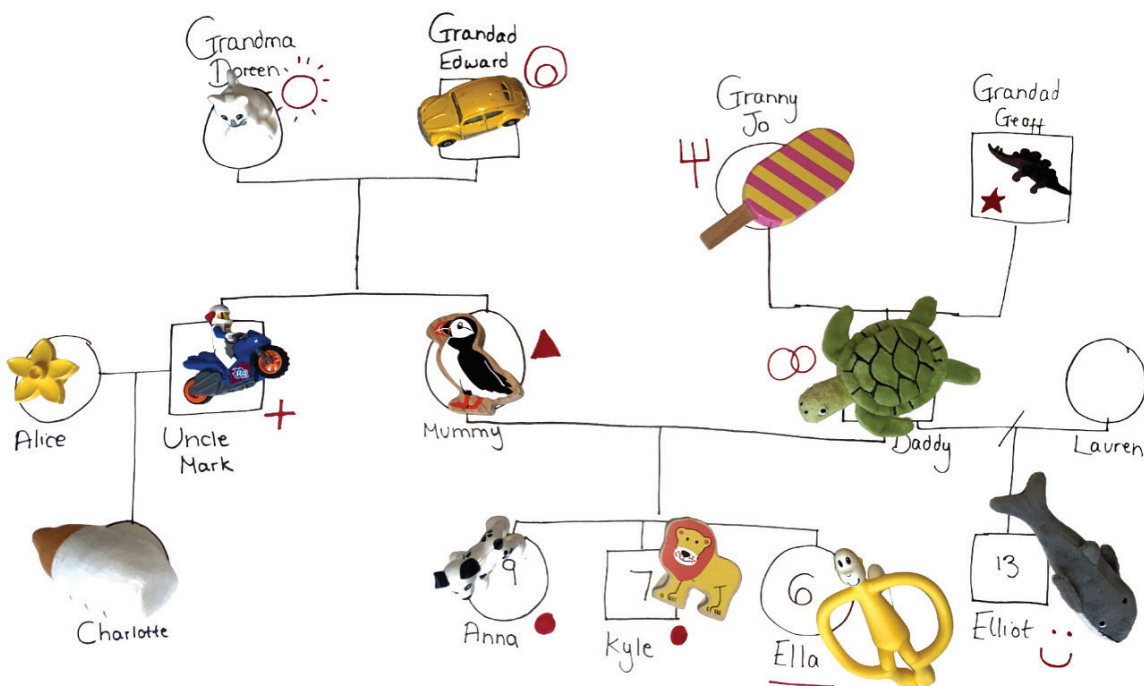
*Using genograms in practice: Practice Tool* (2021)

[www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2021/february/using-genograms-in-practice-practice-tool-2021](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2021/february/using-genograms-in-practice-practice-tool-2021)

### You'll need

Pens and paper. This exercise can also be done with a collection of small toys and objects.

Figure 5: An example of a genogram (adapted from Scott, 2021, with symbols from Taylor et al., 2013)



A genogram can be created with a child using toys or other objects to represent each person (Scott, 2021). Start by drawing out a simple family tree. Ask the child to choose a miniature or object that represents each family member. These miniatures often carry symbolic meaning for children and can be used to talk about family functioning and relationships.

Symbols can be used to explore relationships between the child and different family members. It may help to limit the number of symbols, depending on the age and ability of the child. This can be less structured than a formal genogram - for example, names of everyone important to the child could be added to a picture of a tree, along with symbols to represent them (Taylor et al., 2013).

Figure 6: Example genogram symbols (Scott, 2021, with symbols from Taylor et al., 2013)



## Tool 6 – Engaging in play

Play can be used to explore aspects of identity during social work visits. It can be easier for children to express feelings and emotions through play than through words. Through play, children explore how they see the world and their role in it. Play allows a child to enter the world of make believe, to transform into an object, a superhero, or an admired role model. In doing so, different identities can be explored.

Play can be used to explore how a child sees the world around them and their role in it, as shown in the short film *Life story work: Using play in life story work* (2022) – [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/december/life-story-work-practice-tool-2022](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/december/life-story-work-practice-tool-2022)

In the film, a practitioner and child make a simple cardboard house. This could be an activity in itself, to help settle and engage them. The practitioner invites the child to choose dolls or objects that represent people and populate the house. Once this theme has been introduced, it's important that the practitioner sits back and allows child to take control.

The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) project – [talkingandlisteningtochildren.co.uk](http://talkingandlisteningtochildren.co.uk) – found that many social workers communicated with children by talking and asking sequences of questions, and that they were often not provided with the resources or the support necessary to engage with cooperative and creative communication (Ruch, 2020).

Based partly on these findings, a physical kitbag was developed and trialled in local authorities. Despite challenges with adapting its use for children of different ages and limited time in social work teams to undertake direct work, practitioners who did use the kitbag found that it encouraged creativity and supported communication with children (Flaherty et al., 2022). Each kitbag contained eight multi-sensory resources:

- > **Aromatic oil**  
To support soothing, calming and balancing exercises.
- > **Timers**  
To support mindfulness and allow turn-taking in conversations.
- > **Feelings cards**  
Describing different feelings.
- > **Animal cards**  
Pictures of animals alongside an associated quality (for example love or communication), to encourage affirmation and empathy.
- > **Presence cards**  
To support mindfulness.
- > **A 'wonder journey'**  
A visualisation and relaxation exercise told through a story.
- > **Finger puppets**  
To support play and role-play.

## Conclusion

*Get to know me. I am me – I am unique.*

(Family Justice Young People's Board, 2017b, number 14)

Social care practitioners play a significant role in the lives of children and their families, making decisions that have wide-ranging and long-lasting impacts. For children and young people, being supported by professionals who recognise their unique and evolving identities is important. This practice tool is a starting point in understanding, exploring and supporting children's identity development.

Exploring and understanding children's identities is challenging. Practitioners need to be well-supported, to have the time to build trusting relationships with children and their families, and work in partnership with them to understand their identity and lived experience.



### Questions for reflection

- > Which area within this practice tool has been particularly interesting to you? How can you use this within your work with children?
- > Is there any part of your practice you would like to develop further in relation to identity development? Are there further resources you would like to explore?
- > What support do you need to explore and support children's identities? How can your team manager, or your organisation, help you address further learning opportunities?

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