

HOW TO HELP A YOUNG PERSON EXPLORE THEIR IDENTITY AND CULTURE



For young people clarity and confidence in who they are, where they come from and where they belong gives them the self-assurance they need to make good decisions about the people they choose to surround themselves with and the choices that will shape their future.

In trying to discover their identity young people will often “try on” different roles at home and school and in social settings, which can take the form of testing boundaries or acting out. For mentors supporting young people to explore their identity and culture, it is important to remember that adolescence can be an extremely confusing time for them – a time when they are unsure of who they are / where they belong but they have an increased need to “fit in”/ be accepted by others.

WHAT MAKES AN IDENTITY?

At some point, usually during their adolescence, young people will start to explore their own values, ethics, spirituality, racial and ethnic identity, sexuality and gender.

Exploring the different elements of their identity is part of a very normal desire to understand who they are and where they fit in the world.

As young people explore their identity they learn what makes them unique but it comes at a time in their life when they are very keen to “fit in”. Longing to fit in with everybody else means that for a young person who feels different from others because of their cultural, ethnic, gender or sexual identity, forming their identity will be especially challenging and it may leave them feeling angry or depressed.

TIP

Take the time to remind your mentee that no single part of their identity defines them – their values, ethics, religion, racial and ethnic identity, sexuality and gender are a part of a much larger whole person. None of the different elements dictate who they have to be.

EXPLORING ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

In today’s world there are very few people who grow up in a community surrounded only by people of their own ethnicity and culture, so we all have some sense of what it is to be different. For some people though this feeling of being different can be very alienating.

For young people who come to New Zealand from another country and find themselves surrounded by people who look and/or sound different, who speak a different language or who hold very different values to their own, it can lead to feelings of isolation and sadness.

Let your mentee know that what they are going through is normal – that the process of adjusting to a new culture (acculturation) is a difficult one because it involves adjusting their behaviour and perhaps even their way of life to meet the expectations of their new environment.

Although your mentee is likely to want to “fit in” with their new environment by blending into New Zealand society, let them know this does not mean that they have to reject their home culture and values.

Lots of people in today’s world are bicultural. Being bicultural means a person has the ability to function in more than one culture – usually the dominant culture of the country they live in now and the culture of their heritage. Being bicultural has been described “as the ability to switch between two worlds”.

This same sense of dislocation and isolation can occur in people who shift from a small town to a city inside New Zealand or who begin to explore a side of their culture that is new to them. Mentors can assure young people in this situation that they don’t need to discard who they were, or where they have come from, to explore this new part of themselves.

If your mentee is exploring a part of their culture that is new to them, encourage them to connect with interested relatives or friends who can teach them about their heritage.

If your mentee has moved to a new town and left behind their old support networks encourage them to keep in touch with those networks via phone and email but also to join social clubs, sports teams or pick up a new hobby which will help them make friends and connect with people.

TIP

Young people can become conflicted over their ethnic or cultural background when the associated values or norms conflict with the values and norms of their friends and peers. Get your mentee to reflect on the positive aspects of their culture and suggest they talk to other young people who are experiencing the same frustrations.

FINDING WHERE THEY FIT

Let your mentee know that everybody will have more than one place that they fit in life and that they have the power to choose the places and the people where they feel most secure.

Ask them to talk to you about their existing connections with:

- You; their family; their friends; their church; their sports team; and their marae.

Tell them why you value your connection with them – explain that though you are a different age and/or come from a different background that you enjoy their company and tell them why.

If they are having trouble fitting in or finding connections, ask them what makes them feel different to the people and places around them. If they can't describe what it is, discuss the different elements of identity – values, ethics, spirituality, racial and ethnic identity, sexuality and gender.

If you identify parts of their identity where they don't feel supported or they feel they don't fit in with the people around them, help them to make a list of places they could go to connect with likeminded people:

- a local cultural performance group – kapa haka
- a new church
- a LGBTQI meeting
- the internet (this won't replace the need for real connections but it is a great place to research local support networks, social clubs or cultural groups).

TIP

Young people make unsafe decisions when they are anxious to "fit in" somewhere – as a mentor you need to help your mentee see who they are connected to and help them to identify and seek out new, healthy connections if they are feeling isolated.

WHEN REJECTION OF IDENTITY LEADS TO DEPRESSION

If during their period of exploring their identity your mentee finds things they are uncomfortable with or that they believe they will be rejected for, it can lead to feelings of depression. Parental and peer rejection of a young person's identity – for instance their sexual orientation – has been shown to cause extraordinary stress, which has also been linked to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts.

Talk to your mentee about strategies for preventing depression which include:

- staying fit and healthy
- getting enough sleep
- spending time with people they like and trust
- aiming to have balance in their life
- focusing on skills like problem-solving and communication.



WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

However if you feel your mentee is suffering from depression and needs help there are places to turn for support:

- SPARX
<https://www.sparx.org.nz/>
- Mental Health foundation
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/>
- Depression Help Line
<https://depression.org.nz/>
- Youthline
<https://www.youthline.co.nz/>