



ARACY

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention

Practice Paper

Measuring children and young people's
sense of identity and culture

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The Nest

The Nest is the wellbeing framework that underlies the work of ARACY. It is composed of five domains that cover the areas in which a child or young person needs to be supported in order to be happy, healthy and thriving. The domains were formed through consultations with children and young people. The domain of 'Having a positive sense of identity and culture', however, was a later addition following further stakeholder consultations.

Since its introduction, *the Nest* has been used by government and non-government bodies to coordinate and support policy priorities, service provision, and data analysis. This reflects its functionality as a template for:

- planning cross-sectoral, coordinated and collaborative responses to issues affecting the wellbeing of children and young people;
- ensuring a holistic approach to providing services and support to children and young people that considers the 'whole' child; and/or
- designing research about children and young people that reflects an ecological model of wellbeing.

In response to requests from stakeholders to clarify what having a positive identity and culture means in the context of applying *the Nest*, this paper summarises:

Why measure children and young people's sense of identity and culture?

When to measure children or young people's sense of identity and culture?

How to measure children or young people's sense of identity and culture?

Associated resources can be found in the Practice Paper *Resources for measuring children and young people's sense of identity and culture*. Further information on:

- what having a positive sense of identity and culture means;
- what the potential risk and protective factors for the development of a positive sense of identity and culture are; and
- what developing a positive sense of identity and culture looks like at different ages and stages;

can be found in the complementary Practice Paper *The development of a positive sense of identity and culture by ages and stages – contextual factors and potential risk and protective factors*.

The concepts covered in all three Practice Papers are explored with greater depth in *A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture*, a report prepared by ARACY for the Australian Government Department of Social Services¹.

Conceptual framework

Based on the literature review undertaken on the formation of identity and connection to culture¹, a conceptual framework was developed to outline the areas that affect their formation and how they relate to one another. They also highlight the different areas that can be measured and on which data can be collected.

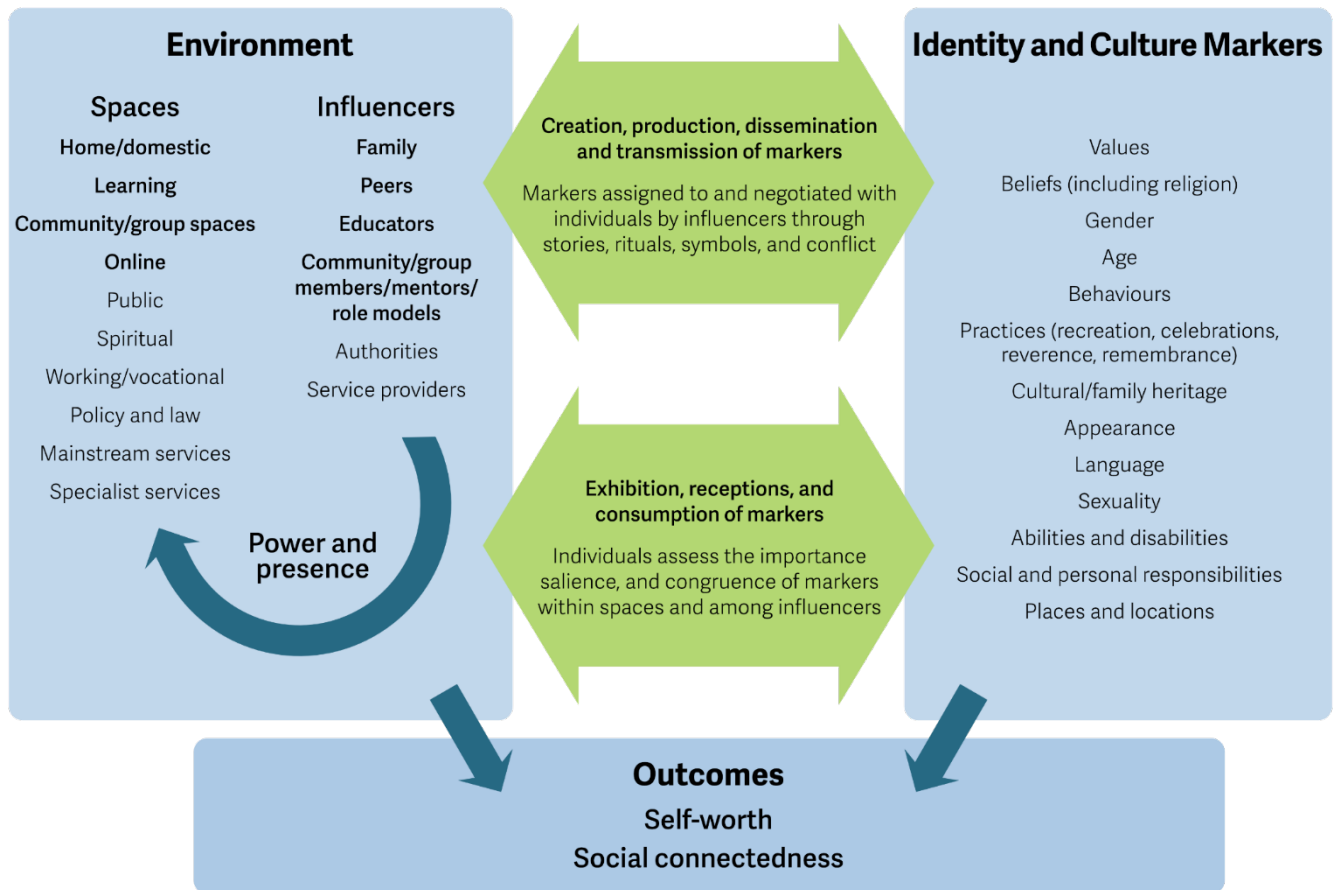


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for having a positive sense of identity and culture.

Note: Spaces and influencers in bold/italic are those considered most relevant to children and young people. Self-worth comprises the perception of the capacity to achieve (self-efficacy); perception of self-value (self-esteem); and hope for the future (aspirations). Social connectedness comprises access and participation with groups, society and communities; perceptions of belonging/connection; perceptions of safety; experiences of discrimination/bullying; and measures of tolerance/openness.

Why measure it...?

Having a positive sense of identity and culture ensures children and young people thrive...

As reflected in the conceptual framework, a child or young person's sense of identity and culture is expressed through their perceptions of self-worth and social connectedness to family and community.

Having a positive perceived self-efficacy and self-concept, and a better rounded or 'achieved' identity status, has been positively associated with academic and psychosocial outcomes among young people². Experiencing high levels of social support/social connectedness; including engagement with and sense of belonging to family, community and culture, and having a positive perception of their neighbourhood; has also been shown to be an important protective factor for increasing resilience to discrimination and positively associated with academic and psychosocial outcomes as well^{3,4,5,6,7,8,9}.

Children and young people from diverse backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, particularly benefit from having positive identifications with their cultural background. In addition to academic and psychosocial outcomes, having a strong cultural identity has also been linked to decreases in anti-social behaviours such as the underage consumption of alcohol⁸.

It falls within the responsibilities of government and child and family services...

A child or young person's sense of identity and culture therefore affects how they:

- use spaces (i.e. public spaces, online spaces);
- engage with their peers, family and community;
- learn; and
- be healthy.

Therefore, a child and young person's sense of identity and culture is relevant to the education and health sectors, state government, local government and other authorities who hold the responsibility in maximising a child and young person's capacity to learn, be safe and be healthy.

It is a human right...

The Convention of the Rights of the Child, which Australia has ratified, also includes several provisions relating to a child and young person's sense of identity and culture, as demonstrated in the Practice Paper *Resources for measuring children and young people's sense of identity and culture*.

When to measure it....

The development and expression of identity and culture among children and young people can be measured to support the processes outlined in Box 1.

Box 1

Establishing **benchmarks** and supporting the ongoing **monitoring** of performance outcomes of a service or policy.

Evaluating the impacts of a service or policy.

Providing a **descriptive snapshot or profile** of a certain population or group during a specific timeframe.

Examining the relationship of a child or young person's sense of identity and culture **to other areas of wellbeing.**

These processes can be used to inform services to children and young people, or policies targeting this group, by:

- locating gaps in support for children and young people to develop their self-worth and social connectedness, more generally or within specific groups;
- establishing how best to support the development of self-worth and social connectedness among children and young people (i.e. levers for change);
- evaluating the intended and unintended impacts of services or policies on the self-worth and social connectedness of children and young people; and
- evaluating the intended and unintended impacts of self-worth and social connectedness of children and young people on other areas of wellbeing.

It is important that the relevance of identity and culture among children and young people to a service or policy is supported within a **program logic or framework**. This helps to establish the specific context in which it should be measured and provides a process for developing indicators.

Framework Example 1: Tasmania Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework

This Framework was developed as part of the state's *Strong Families, Safe Kids Implementation Initiative* which aims to redesign the child protection and services system. It is based on the *Nest* and outlines the following descriptors for the Positive Sense of Identity and Culture domain:

- can find out about family and personal history and are supported to connect positively with their culture;
- feel like they belong;
- have a positive sense of self-identity and self-esteem; and
- are in touch with cultural or spiritual practices and have these practices valued and respected.

Framework Example 2: Early Years Learning Framework

Belonging, being and becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia is a guide for early learning educators and establishes the key learning outcomes for young children engaged in the sector. It is based on the key themes that children should experience and be supported in 'belonging' (knowing where and to whom they belong), 'being' (seeking and making meaning of the world), and 'becoming' (rapidly shaping and developing their identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships). Relevant outcomes include Outcome 1 – 'Children have a strong sense of identity'. This includes:

- children feel safe, secure and supported;
- children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency;
- children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities; and
- children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.

Outcome 2 is that 'Children are connected with and contribute to their world'. This includes:

- children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation;
- children respond to diversity with respect;
- children become aware of fairness; and
- children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment.

How to measure it...

Establishing indicators

Indicators have been described as¹⁰:

...a relevant variable, measured over time and/or space that provides information on a larger phenomenon of interest and allows comparisons to be made.

The following *principles for developing indicators of children and young people's sense of identity and culture* were developed from a review of the literature on identity and culture and informed by best practice in indicator development¹.

- 1) Indicators should be **grounded in theory and supported by a conceptual framework**, reflecting key aspects of identity and culture as determined through the literature. This includes:
 - a) Academic definitions of having a positive sense of identity and culture: a level of positivity and coherent meaning one perceives in relation to their past (and their family's past), their current state, their social relations, their ability to achieve, and their future.
 - b) What having a positive sense of identity and culture means to children and young people: having good relationships with family and friends; undertaking activities they enjoy; undertaking activities that have meaning to themselves personally, their family and their community; having knowledge of and making meaning out of personal, family and social history; using language; sharing food; having shared ideas of what makes a good life (i.e. values, morals and religion); being distinct/special/unique; showing respect; being well regarded by others; and being proud.
 - c) The multi-dimensional and context dependent nature of a person's sense of identity and culture.
 - d) The multiple sites of identity formation – although home is a key site, peer groups and spaces outside the home, including schools and online, also play a key role.
 - e) The gender specific nature of how context affects children and young people's positive sense of identity and culture.
 - f) Middle childhood, late adolescence and early adulthood as the key age ranges for the formation of a positive sense of identity and culture, although formation begins from birth and continues to evolve over the life-course.
 - g) Cultural identity as an important protective factor for children and young people from minority cultural backgrounds.
- 2) Indicators should be **consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child**.

- 3) Indicators should **place the adults in a child and young person’s life with the responsibility for enabling the formation of a positive sense of identity and culture** – including the provision of a safe space to explore their identity and opportunities to engage with family and cultural heritage.
- 4) Indicators should be developed with the **engagement of stakeholders**, primarily representatives of and experts on the groups from which the information will be collected, and representatives and groups of people that will use them.
- 5) Indicators should be focused on the **outcomes of having a positive sense of identity and culture, and the processes involved in their creation and display**, not just the description of prescribed demographic backgrounds (see Figure 6 on identity and culture markers). As highlighted in the conceptual framework, this involves indicators related to:
 - a) the assignation and negotiation of identity and culture markers by and with children and young people (i.e. the process of children and young people taking ownership of or rejecting certain characteristics/marker imposed on them by others, or aligning themselves with new ones);
 - b) the assessment of the importance, congruence and salience of identity and culture markers by young people and children in different contexts (i.e. how children and young people perceive the extent personal characteristics/markers such as gender, race, appearance and sexuality are valued or accepted by others)
 - c) measures of self-worth; and
 - d) measures of social connectedness.
- 6) Indicators should have **specific relevance to stakeholders and act as a lever** for change.

The **feasibility** of collecting the relevant data and information to measure these indicators is another important consideration and can be informed by the questions in Box 2. It is important to establish where **data gaps** exist, however, therefore the reliance on existing data should not be a final consideration for including certain indicators.

Box 2 Important questions to ask about the feasibility and measurability of indicator

Do these indicators measure change?

Does relevant valid, reliable and usable* data already exist?

If not, can it be efficiently and accurately collected?

Do existing collection tools already exist?

*By valid, does research show that the indicator measures the phenomena for which it is intended; by reliable, can it be consistently measured and compared over the time; by usable, is it timely, statistically robust and have the capacity to be disaggregated

Measuring indicators

Indicators are informed by data and information. There are three ways this information can be gained. It can be collected through using newly developed data collection tools, using existing data collection tools, or accessing existing datasets. An efficient method is to **prioritise existing datasets**, drawing upon information and data as they already exist. Using or basing new data collection tools on existing ones that have been validated and proven to be reliable is another option. ARACY's Practice Paper *Resources for measuring a children and young people's sense of identity and culture* outlines existing measures and scales developed to assess aspects of a young person's or child's sense of identity and culture. Additionally, it lists existing datasets that collect data on aspects of identity and culture among young people and children in Australia. These lists were based on a high-level desktop review undertaken on how a young person or child's sense of identity and culture is currently measured and what data is currently collected¹. Although comprehensive, there may be scales, measures and datasets that were missed in this process.

Given the nature of the topic, there is little data collected on or data collection tools developed for very young children. Much of the information and data collected on young children are based on educator or parent reporting. That is not to suggest that young children do not hold valid views or cannot articulate their sense of identity and culture, just that there are limited validated tools developed for this purpose in the Australian context.

Box 3 What is a data collection tool?

A data collection tool is any systemic process that collects and stores information. Commonly used examples include:

- Research surveys, questionnaires and scales
- Observation checklists and templates
- Interviews and focus groups (e.g. interview guide/schedule, activities used to clarify themes and general points, rankings, and opinions)
- Manually completed administrative forms
- Automated administrative data

Existing data collection tool Example: Marsh self-description questionnaire

Tested and developed among Australian school students, the Marsh self-description questionnaire is a 5-point response scale across 7 sub-scales each with 8 items.

1/ Physical abilities/sports – student ratings of their ability in and enjoyment of physical activities, sports and games.

2/ Physical appearance – student ratings of their own attractiveness, how their appearance compares with others, and how others think they look.

3/ Peer relations – student ratings of how easily they make friends, their popularity, and whether others want them as a friend.

4/ Parent relations – student ratings of well they get along with parents and whether they like their parents.

5/ Reading – student ratings of their ability in and their enjoyment/interest in reading.

6/ Mathematics – student ratings of their ability in and their enjoyment/interest in mathematics.

7/ General-school – student ratings of their ability in and their enjoyment/interest in all school subjects.

SDQ-II includes the original seven subscales but with following additions and amendments:

Peer relations divided into two sub-scales, opposite sex and same-sex;

Honesty – student self-perceptions of their honesty and trustworthiness;

Emotional stability: student self-perceptions of themselves as being calm and relaxed, emotionally stable, and how much they worry;

Verbal (replacing 'reading'): student self-perceptions of their skills and ability in English and reading;

General- self (self-esteem) – student ratings of themselves as effective, capable individuals, who are proud and satisfied with the way they are.

SDQ-III includes the same factors as SDQ-II but the following two factors: Problem-solving/creativity; Religion/spirituality

Using existing datasets Example: Child Friendly Alice community profile

Involving a collaboration between Communities for Children, Anglicare NT, Strong Kids Strong Centre, Red Cross, Connected Beginnings and Larapinta Child and Family Centre (NT Department of Education); a community profile of Alice Springs was developed to support the actions of the Child Friendly Alice Initiative.

“This Initiative is a community collective with the shared aspiration of improving the wellbeing of children and their families in Alice Springs.”

A series of community consultations in the form of focus groups, workshops and surveys were undertaken to develop the framework and supporting indicators for wellbeing. Using the *Nest* domains, the following indicators were developed for having a positive sense of identity and culture.

- Acceptance of other cultures
- Aboriginal languages spoken
- Languages other than English spoken at home
- Organisations that support language and culture

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics was used to measure the first three indicators within the Alice Springs region. It was noted, however, that there was a lack of data and information demonstrating the quality and extent of support provided by organisations regarding the use of language and connection to culture.

Indicator themes and their relationship to other *Nest* domains

The Nest Framework was developed with the intention that there would be conceptual and practical crossovers between each domain. The positive sense of identity and culture domain is no exception. There are many aspects of having a positive sense of identity and culture, including measures of self-worth and social connectedness, that are equally related to being ‘Loved and Safe’, ‘Learning’ and ‘Participating’. The following table breaks down some of the major aspects of a child or young person’s sense of identity and culture (as outlined in the conceptual framework) that could be used as themes for potential indicators, and the overlaps between the other domains of the *Nest*.

Relationship to other Nest domains

Potential indicator themes/ Nest domains	Positive Sense of Identity & Culture	Learning	Participating	Loved and Safe	Material Basics	Healthy
How children and young people describe themselves	✓					
Sense of belonging to certain groups e.g. families, schools peers	✓	✓		✓		
Quality, nature, and extent of relationships with peers and families	✓			✓		
Self-esteem, self-worth or perceived self-efficacy (including aspirations) outside of an academic context	✓					
Self-esteem, self-worth or perceived self-efficacy (including aspirations) within an academic context	✓	✓				
Access to and engagement with family and community history, language, traditions and practices	✓		✓			
Sense of 'belonging' or 'safety' in specific spaces e.g. school or at home, online or in public	✓	✓		✓		
Experiences of bullying or discrimination, and actions undertaken to address this	✓			✓		
Engagement with activities in the community, with family or with friends	✓		✓			

Take home points....

1. A child or young person's sense of identity and culture relates to:
 - How children and young people describe themselves, and the groups they feel they belong to.
 - The quality, nature and extent of relationships with peers and families.
 - Self-esteem, self-worth or perceived self-efficacy (including aspirations).
 - Access to and engagement with family and community history, language, traditions and practices.
 - A sense of 'belonging' or 'safety' in specific spaces (e.g. school or at home, online or in public).
 - Experiences of bullying or discrimination, and actions undertaken to address this.
 - Engagement with activities in the community, with family or with friends.
2. This domain has several overlaps with the domains of 'Loved and Safe', 'Participating', and 'Learning', however, the specific characteristics children and young people associate with their individuality (i.e. self-concept), and their self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy and aspirations outside of the school and learning context remain potentially relevant to this domain alone.
3. To date, others who have used the *Nest* have included the following indicators and key descriptors under the 'sense of identity and culture' domain:
 - access to and engagement with culturally relevant practices and activities such as language, and;
 - knowledge of cultural and family heritage.
4. There are several existing measures and datasets that can be drawn upon to develop indicators of having a positive sense of identity and culture to suit individual needs, although not many of these have been developed with the purpose of use among very young children.

¹ Renshaw, L. (2019). A positive sense of identity and culture: Defining and measuring progress for children and young people in Australia – a literature and scoping review on developing better indicators. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

² Waterman, A. S., Schwartz, S. J., Hardy, S. A., Kim, S. Y., Lee, R. M., Armenta, B. E., . . . Agocha, V. B. (2013). Good choices, poor choices: Relationship quality between the quality of identity commitments and psychosocial functioning. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1(3), 163-174.

³ Altschul, I., Oyserman, D., & Bybee, D. (2006). Racial-ethnic identity in mid-adolescence: Content and change as predictors of academic achievement. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1155-1169.

⁴ Dockery, D. M. (2008). Traditional culture and the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An analysis of the 2008 NATSISS. Perth, Australia: Centre for Labour Market Research, Curtin University.

⁵ Benninger, E., & Savahl, S. (2017). A systematic review of children's construction of the self: implications for children's subjective well-being. *Child Indicators Research*, 10, 545-569.

⁶ Bradshaw, D., Jay, S., McNamara, N., Stevenson, C., & Muldoon, O. T. (2016). Perceived discrimination amongst young people in socio-economically disadvantaged communities: Parental support and community

⁷ Brody, C. H., Chen, Y., Murry, V. M., Ge, X., Simons, R. L., Gibbons, F. X., . . . Cutrona, C. E. (2006). Perceived discrimination and the adjustment of African American youths: A five-year longitudinal analysis with contextual moderating effects. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1170-1189.

⁸ Gazis, N., Connor, J. P., & Ho, R. (2010). Cultural identity and peer influence as predictors of substance use among culturally diverse Australian adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 30(3), 345-368.

⁹ Scheepers, D., Spears, R., Manstead, A. S., & Doosje, B. (2009). The influence of discrimination and fairness on collective self-esteem. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(4), 506-515.

¹⁰ PwC. (2017). Signs to look for: Criteria for developing and selecting fit for purpose indicators. Wellington, New Zealand: PwC.: p. 5



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