



## Why is identity such an important topic for teenagers?

**What marked your identity in adolescence? What shaped this identity? What events from the past informed your sense of self? What future did you imagine for yourself? How much coherence was there between how you thought about yourself and how others saw you?**

As teenagers develop abstract thinking and reflect on their lives, questions of identity become increasingly important. Teens construct a useable past that speaks to who they were, imagine an anticipated future that indicates who they will be, and begin to tell a story about their lives that unifies their varying experiences.

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson describes the psychosocial challenge of adolescence as resolving role confusion. This stage of life determines whether a teenager emerges with some level of self confidence or whether the teenager will embody a negative identity (drug dealer, high school dropout) or a confused identity others can manipulate.

Teenagers need to find some symmetry between who they were, who they are, and who they want to be. They also need to balance how they see themselves and how others see them. The values of parents and faith communities are important in this process. They serve to help teens make choices about what is good and right in life and about who they should be and how they act in the world. When they develop identities of integrity, teenagers can make adult commitments—to friendships, to romantic relationships, and to communities of value, such as faith communities, political parties, and social justice networks.

A central challenge of adolescence—and really of all stages of life—is to balance autonomy with belonging, being true to oneself with connecting with others. Traditionally, families, teachers, and coaches encourage boys to “be their own men,” but this striving for independence may mean that boys have difficulty forming strong emotional connections with others. Conversely, families, teachers, and coaches encourage girls to care for others and many lose their sense of self in the process. Both girls and boys need a strong sense of self and strong connections with others. Faith sharing groups promote this, as teens reflect on their own life experiences and develop meaningful relationships with their peers.