PARENT ARTICLE

Identity in a world of likes

A parent-to-parent article about children, approval and identity in a scored world.



THE IDEA TO REMEMBER

A child needs to know they are loved for who they are, not for how they perform.

They too go through needing to work out who they are. It is the long, fumbling project of childhood and adolescence, and it has always been carried out by trying things, getting them wrong, and slowly discovering what feels true. What has changed, and changed profoundly, is that a whole generation is now attempting this in full view of an audience that scores them in real time.

The situation we were once familiar with has changed in a way I am not sure we have fully reckoned with.

How a sense of self used to form

Typically, a sense of self formed when a child tried something like painting, football, telling jokes, being kind, being bold, and noticed how it felt from the inside. Did it bring a quiet satisfaction? Did it feel like something they personally could identify with? The feedback was slower, internal and largely their own. Identity was built from the inside out, discovered in private and tested gently against a small circle of people who knew them.

The modern version

The modern version presents something quite different. A child tries something and within minutes a number tells them what the world thinks of it. Likes, hearts, views, comments - an instant and very public verdict delivered by an audience far larger than most previous generations have ever faced at that age. The feedback happens quickly because the brain is built to chase exactly this kind of approval. Some versions of yourself are rewarded. Others are met with silence, which to a young person can feel worse than criticism. So a child quietly learns to do more of what the numbers applaud and less of what the numbers ignore or criticise.

When identity starts forming from the outside in

This is the heart of it. When the screen tells a child who to be, identity stops forming from the inside out and begins forming from the outside in. Instead of asking the slow, private question "who am I, and what feels true to me?", the child learns to ask a faster and far more anxious one: "What version of me gets approved of?" They begin, often without noticing, to perform a self rather than to discover an authentic one.

The quieter cost

The cost is rarely loud, which is part of why it is so easily missed. It appears as a child curating and choosing the photo that will do well rather than the one they actually liked. It appears as a strange new anxiety attached to ordinary moments. There could be a lovely day spent half of the time worrying about how it will look to others. It appears, most painfully, in the gap that can open between the polished self a child presents and the unsure self they privately experience. This gap is exhausting to maintain and lonely to live inside. A child can gather a great deal of approval and still feel, underneath, that nobody knows the real them, because the real them was never the part on display. In many cases the real them has not yet been fully discovered even by themselves.

What this asks of us

This is not said to suggest your child is lost, or that a generation is doomed to live as performers. Children are more resilient than that, and the inward self is not erased but only crowded. It does, however, require of us as parents something quieter and more deliberate than monitoring an app. Instead, we need to be the steady mirror that the algorithm can never be. The feed reflects a child back to themselves as a set of numbers, valued for what performs. We can rather reflect them back as a person, valued for what the system does not.

A small, steady thing to try

Make a habit of noticing and naming the parts of your child that no one will ever like or share: the kindness shown when no camera was near and the effort that failed but was brave. Value the odd, specific, unmarketable things that make them who they actually are. "I loved how patient you were with your brother just then." "You worked so hard at that, even though it did not come off." These are not throwaway compliments, but quiet acts of resistance, telling a child that their worth was never up for a public vote.

A child who knows they are loved for who they are, not for how they perform, has somewhere solid to stand when the numbers turn cold. Your steady, unscored attention is how they come to know it.

FROM THE BOOK

How children build a self in a world that constantly scores them is one of the deeper stakes covered quite seriously in the book. You will see more closely how a screen-shaped identity takes root, and how to help your child grow a sense of self resilient enough to stand outside of the scoring of the crowd.

NEXT STEP

Notice and name one unscored quality in your child this week: kindness, effort, patience or courage.