

**Why are research findings on emergent self-concept important for understanding  
young children's development?**

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## 1. Introduction

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Self concept is one of the most widely researched theories in psychological literature. In layman terms, it refers to one's understanding of self. It is a fundamentally remarkable concept which seeks to understand the individual's self perception and is often referred to as a cognitive element of self perception. Self concept helps the children in understanding their own perception about themselves and differentiates their behavior accordingly. For instance a young boy is likely to display fondness for action based toys while young girls are more likely to be attracted towards the color pink, dolls and other supposedly "girly" things<sup>1</sup>. It is a continuous process and is dynamic in nature as we continue to develop new images of ourselves as we evolve in terms of knowledge and experience.

## 2. Definitions

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The term self – concept has been defined by various researchers in varied ways. Some of the definitions are mentioned as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Rodd, J. (1997). Understanding Young Children's Behavior: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals, Pp. 38

According to Purkey (1988) the term self concept is defined as “*the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence*”<sup>2</sup>. He perceives self - concept as expressions of self worth which describes the degree of gratification of own oneself. According to Huitt (1998) self – concept is the general perception an individual has about him/her self while self – esteem on the other hand refers to the manner in which an individual ascertains certain components of self – concept<sup>3</sup>.

According to Rodd (1997), “It is a cognitive construct that a person builds around themselves and which gradually develops over time. It is a view of or understanding about oneself that grows as a result of experience with the world and people in it”<sup>4</sup>.

According to Boersma and Chapman (1992) academic self concept is defined as “*a relatively stable set of attitudes and feelings reflecting self – evaluation of one’s ability to successfully perform basic school – related tasks such as reading, writing, spelling, and math. Academic self concept is seen as a factor related to, yet distinct from, general self – concept or self esteem*”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Purkey, W. (1988). An Overview of Self – Concept theory for counsellors

<sup>3</sup> Huitt, W. (1998). Self Concept and Self – Esteem. Educational Psychology Interactive

<sup>4</sup> Rodd, J. (1997). Understanding Young Children’s Behavior: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals, Pp. 38

<sup>5</sup> Boersma, F. J., Chapman, J. W. (1992). Perception of Ability Scale for Children, Pp.1

### 3. Research & Analysis

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Various research conducted in the field of understanding the significance of self concept in the development of young children suggest that there is a positive relationship between self – concept and academic achievement of children. Such a relationship was confirmed by researchers such as Byrne, (1986), Marsh & Yeung, (1997) as well as Mujis, (1997)<sup>6</sup>. The most persistent observation in all the above mentioned research is that all the researchers co – relate academic achievement with the academic self – concept rather than non – academic self concept.

Several researchers have also developed theories that seek to understand the manner in which young children perceive themselves. According to Howe and Courage (1993) the development of understanding of self, in young children, which begins at the age of two, is one of the most crucial aspect of the commencement of their autobiographical memory. Research indicate that the verbal skill of a child is influenced by factors such as maternal

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<sup>6</sup> Byrne, B. M. (1986). Self – concept / academic achievement relations: An investigation of dimensionality, stability and causality.

Marsh, H. W., Yeung, A. S. (1997). Casual effects of academic self concept on academic achievement: structural equation model of longitudinal data

Mujis, R. D. (1997). Predictors of Academic Achievement and Academic Self Concept: A Longitudinal Perspective

style of reminiscing and a child's awareness of self and are important predictors of a child's event memory <sup>7</sup>.

According to Harter (1999), young students often tend to display a marked deviance in their attitudes and behavior especially during their transition from elementary to middle school. Such a drastic reduction in their self – concept is a result of an adaptive reaction to the otherwise overly positive perception their own self which is a trademark characteristic observed in all individuals during their childhood. He further suggests that such over estimation of their competence by young children is attributable to their lack of maturity to diligently assess their aptitude and to assimilate required information from various sources. With their development in terms of age and knowledge, their understanding about their self worth increases and hence they become more capable to evaluate their self – concept by appropriately distinguishing between their endeavor and capabilities<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Gauvain, M. (2000). The Social Context of Cognitive Development, Pp. 126

<sup>8</sup> Harter, S. (1999). The Construction of Self: A Developmental Perspective

#### 4. Concepts and Theories:

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The theories and concepts of self – concept accentuate the manner in which identity is developed through the process of interaction with other individuals or groups. Certain rational theories highlight the social process of interaction within a particular group or community while the dramatic theories seek to describe the role performances depicted by individuals while establishing their self worth or identity. The postmodern theories of self – concept on the other hand, aims at analyzing the manner in which a relational perspective of self is conceived during an individual's participation in groups / communities. The pragmatic view describes the term self – concept as a complicated process of achieving awareness about oneself. This theory states that individuals tend to develop the concept of their own self through the process of interaction and communication with other individual or groups. This concept is described and analyzed in the works of George Mead<sup>9</sup> and William James.

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<sup>9</sup> William James, (1890). The Principles of Psychology

George Mead, (1934). Mind, Self & Society

## 5. Significance of Research Findings

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The various researches carried out in the field of understanding self – concept and the resultant findings of such research offer crucial guidance in understanding the behavior of young children and the manner in which it affects, prevents or encourages their growth and development. For instance, it is observed that children with positive self – concept are more likely to display positive behavioral attitudes than those with negative or poor self – concept. Such a result further help us in determining ways to take preventive action or devise corrective measures to prevent such negative or unwanted behavior. According to Marshall (1989) the various strategies available at the disposal of professionals to encourage the development of positive self – concept in young children include: providing adequate time and support to the children in understanding their grievances, engaging them in meaningful conversations by frequently asking them for inputs or suggestions, assisting or encouraging them to identify their own positive behavior, helping them learn interpersonal skills etc<sup>10</sup>.

The study on self – concept and the resultant outcomes which indicate the perception of young children about themselves help the professionals in devising proper programs and models to inculcate required values in them. For instance, in the above section the

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<sup>10</sup> Rodd, J. (1997). Understanding Young Children’s Behavior: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals, Pp. 38

research by Harter suggested that the young children often tend to misinterpret the concept of self – esteem and the stages during which such misinterpretation is likely to occur. This finding could be utilized in taking preventive action and developing positive self concept among the young children who are more likely to misjudge themselves.

According to the research findings of Byrne, Marsh & Yeung and Mujis, there is a strong and positive relationship between self – concept and academic achievement of children. This study could prove to be of significant help in inculcating positive attitudes in young children in order to help them overcome their limitations and help them achieve academic success. Children who tend to display low self – concept might fall prey to low academic achievement, according to Harter (1999), such obstacles can be overcome by timely interventions which should be aimed at developing the student’s abilities in fields where they lack adequate knowledge. For instance, students who tend to display low academic self concept, and experience reading disabilities may be offered assistance in terms of programs specially designed to develop their reading / literacy skills. However it is important to note that the researcher acknowledges the fact that developing all the aspects of a student’s personality is unachievable although those aspects which the child values may be developed adequately to their full potential.

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