

## **Early psychological developmental phases and the development of the real self:**

(adapted from the work of James Masterson, MD — *The Real Self* — pp. 24-29)

The first three years of life are critical in the development of the sense of self. Trauma in these early years can disrupt the development of a secure sense of self and ability to be in secure and healthy relationships.

Here are some of the key early developmental phases:

**First 3 months of life** — the infant is in an undifferentiated merger with the mother/primary parent; the parent's consistency in physical and emotional care and empathic attunement to the child are very important to the child's sense of safety and trust

**3 - 18 months** — this is the symbiotic phase and beginning differentiation of the sense of self:

3-5 months - the infant is focused on the mother and father and sees the primary parent as the source of his/her wellbeing

5-6 months - the infant begins to pay attention to her/his fingers, hands and self as reflected in a mirror and begins to have a separate sense of physical self

10-15 months: practicing phase in which the child begins to experience a sense of physical and emotional moments of autonomy with physical movements and beginning assertion of will

12-18 months - the child begins to see a physical mirror image as reflecting her/himself

During this phase (3-18 months), the parents' responses and behaviors are important in how the child begins to perceive her/himself. Ongoing mirroring and empathic attunement (particularly before the child's development of language) are key as well as consistency in behavior, ability to set appropriate limits and the capacity to support the child in age appropriate physical and emotional self-development, differentiation and expression.

**18-36 months:** increasing separation and individuation; with increased capacity to walk and physically separate, the child is also exploring an increasing individuated sense of self; the child is also increasingly able to see the mother and father as separate selves and to understand them as both loving and at times frustrating (eg. limit-setting, disciplining, etc.)

Critical to the child's development of a healthy sense of self is the experience of the parents' ability to mirror the child emotions (empathic attunement) as well as the capacity to see the child in her/his uniqueness and reflect back the child's gifts, strengths and unique personality traits. It is vital for the parents to support the child's efforts to express and assert his/herself as well as setting age appropriate limits to

support the child in managing experiences of frustration that build patience, tolerance and a capacity to regulate her/his own emotions.

**The development of the real or true self:** If these first three years of life are supportive of the child's developing sense of self and self-esteem, the following characteristics of the real self emerge:

- \* spontaneity and aliveness of emotional expression
- \* a healthy sense of self-entitlement and healthy self-esteem
- \* capacity for self-activation, assertion and support - healthy assertion of the self and ability to support or protect the self if under attack
- \* resiliency in times of stress and capacity to self-soothe when distressed (ability to handle and recover from stressful situations and to regulate one's own emotional states, ie. comfort one's self)
- \* continuity of the sense of self - ability to see one's self clearly and see another in a clear way
- \* capacity for commitment - to one's own goals and to a relationship (and the ability to trust in relationships as a positive and supportive experience)
- \* creativity - to express one's unique gifts and to adapt to new situations