



Understanding the “Self”

When we talk about self-awareness in the context of character development, the first question is: *what do we mean by “the self”?* Modern research suggests that the self is not a fixed essence that lives inside of us, but rather a concept, one of many our brain constructs to make sense of the world.

Your self-concept is shaped by many factors: your personal preferences, the responsibilities you carry, the roles you play in different parts of life, the values and beliefs you hold, your physical appearance, and your cultural background. Taken together, these elements create your personal sense of “who I am.” Importantly, this sense of self develops and shifts across time as your experiences accumulate.

Self-concept does not form in isolation. We learn who we are through interaction with others. The ways people respond to us, the feedback they provide (or withhold), and the social expectations we encounter all feed into how our brain organizes and predicts our experiences. In other words, self-awareness is both a personal and social process, it emerges from the interplay between our inner world and our relationships.

The Role of Feelings and the Body

Another critical element of self-awareness involves what psychologists call *affect*, our general sense of feeling good or bad, calm or agitated. These broad feelings are influenced by our body’s internal signals (such as hunger, energy levels, or physical comfort) and by our current environment.

For example:

- Sitting in the sunshine may create a calm, pleasant feeling.
- Being cut off in traffic may spark agitation and frustration.
- Feeling hungry after skipping a meal may produce irritability.
- Attending a concert may bring on excited energy.



These background feelings provide constant input to our brain, helping it manage what some researchers call the “body budget” - the balance of energy, temperature, rest, and other basic needs. When our body budget is “in the red” (overstretched or depleted), our general feelings tilt negative. When the budget is balanced, we’re more likely to feel steady and positive.

Recognizing this link between body state and emotional experience is an important part of character development. It reminds us that our decisions, interactions, and interpretations of events are influenced not only by what is happening externally but also by how our body is functioning internally.

Why Expanding Emotion Concepts Matters

Self-awareness also depends on the range of *emotion concepts* we have at our disposal. If our vocabulary for emotions is limited, our ability to notice and respond to emotional experiences is also limited. Expanding our “emotion word toolkit” allows us to distinguish between subtle feelings - for example, the difference between being *disappointed* and being *discouraged*.

The richer our emotional vocabulary, the greater our ability to make sense of experiences, predict our reactions, and choose constructive responses. In character development terms, this builds resilience and flexibility.

Cultures across the world illustrate this vividly. Many languages include unique words for emotional states that don’t have exact English equivalents, such as *hygge* (a cozy sense of contentment in Danish) or *schadenfreude* (pleasure in another’s misfortune in German). Learning such terms doesn’t just broaden our language; it broadens our *experience* of emotions.

Even newly invented words can expand our repertoire. For instance, “hangry” (anger fueled by hunger) is now widely recognized, giving people a way to explain a common but previously hard-to-describe state.



Implications for Teaching and Learning

Understanding the self through this lens of character development offers practical insights for educators:

- Self-awareness grows through reflection and language. By giving students words and opportunities to describe their feelings, we strengthen their capacity to notice and name experiences accurately.
- The body matters. Encouraging healthy routines (rest, nutrition, hydration, and movement) supports emotional balance and better decision-making.
- Interactions shape identity. Classrooms that promote respect, inclusion, and positive feedback provide the social conditions for healthy self-concepts to develop.
- Vocabulary builds choice. Helping students learn and use a broad range of emotion words equips them with tools to manage challenges and recognize strengths.

Key Takeaway

Self-awareness in character development is not a fixed trait. It is an ongoing process shaped by our body, our emotions, our language, and our interactions with others. By understanding these connections, educators can guide students in building a stronger sense of self that promotes resilience, empathy, and wise decision-making.