EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE PAPER

Identity is a fundamental part of what makes each of us unique. It is a dynamic complex socioecological process that is never fully completely, and yet which shapes our mental, social, cognitive and emotional well-being. There are no easy answers to the questions Who am I? Who do you think I am? Where do I belong? But there are challenges and opportunities for children and young people to explore and discover with the support of their caregivers, frontline workers, peers and community.

In a rapidly changing and volatile world, knowing who you are and where you may belong is perhaps more important than ever to gaining sense of well-being, safety and agency. And while this is equally true for adults, it is perhaps even more true for children and adolescents. As children grow from their earliest years, through middle childhood, into early and then late adolescence and finally into adulthood, they continuously acquire additional forms of identity – including evolving physical characteristics, cognitive progression, and self-chosen identities among others.

It is well known that our experience of childhood and adolescence are heavily influenced by the identities that we are given, acquire, denied or forced on us. But despite the proven importance of identity to the well-being and mental health of children and young people, we know surprisingly little about how identity develops and is shaped by the world of the child, the world around the child, and the world at large.

The interim Leading Minds 2022 Conference Paper seeks to provide insights into child identity, drawn from the available evidence and literature. It is interim in the sense that its final version will be shaped by the expertise, evidence and experiences presented at the conference, and from the comments and review of its participants and others in the remainder of 2022.

This enhanced understanding of the child and adolescent identity will be a vital cog in finding ways not only to challenge and contest the discrimination, exclusion and violence that millions of children face based on their identity, but also to support them in build their own positive identity and self-worth both in childhood and into adulthood.
KEY MESSAGES FROM THE INTERIM CONFERENCE PAPER

1. **Identity issues have emerged as among the foremost challenges for millions of children in the 21st century.** It is not a coincidence that the poorest and most marginalized children in every country are those discriminated against or excluded on the basis of identity factors, including disability, ethnicity, gender, legal status, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion and other identity characteristics.

2. **Despite considerable progress in recent decades, millions of children and young people around the world still suffer from rampant discrimination, exclusion and violence based on their identity.** Globally millions of young people lack a legal identity. Millions of girls and young women are still being denied because of their gender. Still others face discrimination and exclusion based on their ethnicity, color or caste, while millions of disabled children are still denied access to essential services and protection.

3. **The impact of discrimination on children and young people can be devastating.** There are clear and unequivocal links between discrimination and mental health. Exposure to racial discrimination and marginalization can be a chronic source of trauma for children. Identity-based stereotypes have been shown to affect children’s educational performance. Exposure to discrimination and gender based violence has been shown to have strong negative impact on children’s health and behaviors.

4. **The COVID pandemic has underscored the linkages between child identity and mental health,** showing the vital importance of the former to the latter. Studies underscored that that even in times of crises and distress such as during the height of the pandemic, children’s mental health benefited greatly when they have a strong sense of belonging, feel loved and cared for, have a positive sense of themselves and are confident in who they are no matter what that is.

5. **The online world can both positively and negatively impact child identity.** While the freedom and anonymity of the internet can make it safe space for identities to exist and thrive, there is a need to balance this the potential risks of internet use, such as increased bullying online and negative feedback received through social networking sites.

6. **Building a positive identity is increasingly recognized as pivotal to children’s development, growth and future prospects.** Positive child identity is related to better child development outcomes, increased capacity for children to reach their full potential, enhanced mental health and well-being in both childhood and adulthood, and increased resilience to stressors and shocks. A positive identity can also act as buffer against the negative effects of discrimination and exclusion.

7. **To build positive identities, children must be better supported in the three fundamental areas of child identity: legal identity, social identity and personal identity.** Legal identity relates to an individual’s standing in law, and often comes to fore in issues of migration or refugee status, or statelessness. Social identity is related to a child’s group affiliation or how they perceive their diverse roles in relation to others. Personal identity relates to a person subjective sense of their individuality, their uniqueness and their distinctiveness from others.

8. **Supportive and nurturing family and kinship relationships are vital to building positive child identity,** as is feeling safe and belonging within their community and society. Having agency in adolescence is also a fundamental building block of positive identity. Culture and group affiliation
are powerful drivers in promoting positive identity but can equally have negative feedback effects if children face discrimination and exclusion on the basis of these affiliations.

9. The online world can both positively and negatively impact child identity. While the freedom and anonymity of the internet can make it safe space for identities to exist and thrive, there is a need to balance this the potential risks of internet use, such as increased bullying online and negative feedback received through social networking sites.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AT THE LEADING MINDS 2022 CONFERENCE

The preceding sections of the report have presented evidence and arguments related to eliminating discrimination based on identity and creating positive identity. And yet key challenges remain in both domains. The conference will therefore seek to answer a few key questions:

1. Child identity is a nascent concept in many countries and contexts. How can we define it more clearly and begin to form a consensus around measuring its dimensions?

Legal identity

2. Millions of children still lack a legal identity, with many finding themselves cut off from essential services or not recognized in law. How can we ensure that all children have a legal identity?

Social identity

3. Despite decades of international and national equality laws, policies, programmes and budgets, millions of children still face discrimination based on identity by their social group — including caste, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender orientation, religion, sexual orientation and other social factors (s). What will change the game in fighting discrimination based on social identity?

Personal identity

4. Discrimination, exclusion and violence based on identity has been shown to lead to negative child identity formation, with pernicious effects for their mental health and social integration. What tools are required to address and reverse negative personal identity derived from discrimination?

Digital identity

5. In the online world, children often have more freedom to build their own identity — but also can face abuse and harm that is more ubiquitous than in the offline world? How can we give them the opportunity to express themselves online while protecting their well-being from online abuse?

Worlds of Influence for child identity and well being

6. Relationships has a strong influence on positive child identity formation, especially in the early years. How can parents and guardians be supported to help child get a good start in forming a positive child identity?
7. Agency is strongly formed in adolescence and is key to positive identity construction. How can we support adolescents in their quest for a positive identity, and what role in particular do educators have in this endeavour?

8. In a world of crises, it is hard often for children and adolescents to feel safe, which is a cornerstone of positive identity formation. What can we do in the World at Large to help to foster a sense of safeness and optimism for children and young people?

Evidence and partnerships

9. Much of the evidence on child identity in this report is derived from high-income countries, where the concept is relatively well developed. What is needed to understand more about child identity in middle- and low-income settings and how might our conceptualization differ and be refined?

10. Many organizations and individuals are working on identity and anti-discrimination efforts. How can we enhance these actions by coming together to collaborate in support of child identity?