How do identities form? How can parents help with the development of identity? What does it mean to parent with identity in mind? Below are a few key messages for parents that Rosetta shared with us.

- Understand that identity development is a life-long process. The answer to “Who am I?” will be different at ages 5, 20, 50, 88. There are no two people with exactly the same identity sets. In the United States, there is a tendency to only look at race, but identity is much bigger than skin color. What someone looks like is only the tip of the iceberg; it’s 10% of a person’s identity. The really important things (our values, belief systems, how we experience conflict, etc.) are beneath the water line. There are many dimensions of identity.
  - Internal: Race, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, ability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
  - External: Language, appearance, educational attainment, geographic location.
  - Institutional: Status, teams, clubs, affiliations, school location, seniority, division/department/staff.

- Tell your kids to be proud of their identity. This is not the same as identity chauvinism: “This is who I am and I am better than everyone else.” Protective socialization means letting your children know that there are negative messages in the world. It is important to guide children on how to mitigate negative messages and labels. You want your children to be prepared. Studies have shown that parenting without protective socialization can result in self-hatred and depression, but too much can lead to children seeing the world as a hostile place.
  - “There are crazy people out there and this is how they might see you. I want you to understand where these messages come from and that they are out there, but you need to know that this is not about you.“
  - “People don’t know how to react to difference. You are beautiful.”
  - “Cultural labels are not a part of you.”

- Understand that identity development is a process that happens differently depending on whether you are a part of a marginalized or privileged identity group.
  - Those from marginalized identity groups are told at home that they are beautiful, but when they engage in the larger community they encounter negative messages and experience self-doubt (“maybe I’m not beautiful”). They may try to assimilate to the majority to become part of the dominant group. For example, girls might become more masculine or children of color may lighten their hair or skin. “I need to unshake who I am so I can become a member of this group.” This can then manifest itself as anger, frustration and rejection of the dominant group. Finally, comes integration. “I know who I am and I am proud of who I am.”
Those from privileged identity groups believe that everyone has a fair shot. “They just are not working hard enough.” At some point those from privileged identity groups might realize that people from marginalized identity groups are not receiving the same opportunities. The world is stacked against certain groups. “How do I recognize that I have benefited from a system that has tilted the scales in my favor?” Guilt leads to action. “How do I leverage my privilege to help others?” In gender equity work, boys often voice that they feel like they are being attacked. It is important to teach boys that it is not their fault that they sit in a position of privilege, but it is their responsibility to try to balance it out. Privilege is a reflection of a dominant culture.

Your identity may be part of both marginalized and privileged groups depending on time and space. For example, Rosetta Lee is a founder of the Seattle Girls School and an experienced educator so she is part of a privileged group at school. However, as an Asian bisexual female, she is also a member of marginalized groups in the larger world.

- Keep your messages to your children strong since the world may not repeat your messages. Ethnicity, gender and sexual identification have strong cultural messages that need to be navigated. What your daughter hears will become a part of who she is. If the messages are negative, how does she push against the very things that she was taught? We internalize so many different messages. Identity may be imposed on you too. “Because I am a member of this group, I must have conflict with members of this other group or I need to perceive things a certain way.”

- Tell your children: “This identity journey is your journey.” Sometimes in an effort to protect, parents get too involved. Children experience many identities on their journey from preK to seniors in high school and beyond. Much of identity development happens at school.

- Be open about your own struggles with identity. Tell your children your stories. Have 100 one-minute conversations rather than the 1 hundred-minute conversation.

- Teach your children to encounter difference with curiosity and delight. Every interaction shapes who we are and how we perceive the world. View every encounter as a chance to re-write who you are.

- Show children different role models, types of families, people of different ethnicities, and religions. Identity is all about exposure.

- Answer the uncomfortable questions that your young children may ask. Do not shut them down. These are innocent questions. Younger children notice differences and are trying to figure out meanings. Engage in conversations so you can shape their early messages. Be honest and straightforward. “That was such a good question!” will give you a few seconds to come up with an answer to an uncomfortable question. Questions are good!

- Coach children to respond, “that’s unfamiliar!” instead of “that’s weird!” when encountering something new. Ask them to tell you more.

- Coach teens (especially those in middle school) on forming friendship groups. In elementary school, friends tend to come across differences. In middle school,
teens experience “friendship extinction” events. The middle school years are about group belonging. Groups become more homogeneous as identities evolve around “my team”. Cliques are developmentally appropriate as teens gather around people who look and act like them in order to build that safe cocoon that allows them the safety to test their independence. Healthy cliques can help teens gain confidence. Coach teens that groups can be formed around core values and beliefs that cross all differences and not only on gender or socioeconomic factors.

- Address gender stereotypes because they can be tied to a child’s sense of self-worth.
  - Girls/women: Be thin, quiet, modest, and spend all of your resources toward looking better. Be smart (but not too smart = nerdy), powerful (but not too powerful = bitchy), sexy (but not too sexy = slutty). Messages to girls/women: be everything and perfect, but do not look like you are trying.
  - Men/boys: Be stoic and emotionally disconnected, show an outward disdain for homosexuals, do not be weak under any circumstances. Messages to boys/men: be one thing.

- Teach teens your family values behind your rules. Teens are much more likely to break rules than values. For example, if you want a curfew, then don’t say, “be home by 1 am.” Instead, communicate the family value (safety). “Because the bars close at 1 am, there may be drunk drivers on the road. I want you home by 1 am because your safety is important to me.” Teens are more likely to meet the values.

- If you hear your child repeating a negative message about a group, then interrupt with...“I believe in you and I know you are a good person. You are better than this. This is what I am hearing and this is not who I think you are. Tell me more. You are wonderful and I want you to become the wonderful person that you are.” This is called relationship-based interruption.

- Watch media with your children. Media teaches messages at a really young age. Children’s media is reinforcing relational bullying behavior. In today’s world, children are engaged in online activities and texting with friends without any parent supervision. The mainstream culture of media is the current sweeping the children downstream and parents need to give them oars.

- Start parent dialogue circles to get conversations going. “How do we build a community? How do we get our kids to stand up for one another in solidarity?” Parents need to be willing to be vulnerable, authentic, and engaged with one another. This is a sign of a healthy community.