



The Basics of Character Education and Social–Emotional Learning

There are several other highly-structured, fairly well-organized Character Education programs available to teachers and counselors. They have some variation, but for the most part, they focus on the same set of core values:

1. Respect/Manners
2. Honesty/Trustworthiness
3. Fairness/Justice
4. Responsibility/Accountability
5. Caring/Tolerance of Others
6. Good Citizenship

We will examine each one of these key values of good character.

1. **Respect/Manners.** This aspect of good character includes saying “please,” “excuse me,” and “thank you,” holding doors for others, avoiding foul language, and not interrupting conversations. It also includes observing the time-honored adage of “do unto others as you would have done unto you.” Respect also means never using words to hurt, never resorting to physical aggression, and using positive conflict resolution skills. Above all, it means that when you do have a conflict with someone else, you endeavor to remember that they are a fellow human being, a person worthy of your respect.
2. **Honesty/Trustworthiness.** This good character trait is exemplified by telling the truth, not cheating on tests, not taking things that don’t belong to you, showing loyalty to family/friends/school, exhibiting reliability, and recognizing that your reputation is priceless and difficult to repair once it is damaged.
3. **Fairness/Justice.** This quality means being a good sport, not cheating in competitions, playing fair and by the rules, sharing what you have with others, not judging others rashly, encouraging others to be fair, fighting for what is right, and advocating justice.
4. **Responsibility/Accountability.** This means keeping your promises, doing your homework, studying, not blaming others for your actions, owning up to mistakes, thinking ahead to the consequences of your actions, having a sense of duty, and being a role model for your peers.
5. **Caring/Tolerance of Others.** You can exemplify this trait by being accepting of others, not being a bully, trying to see things from someone else’s point of view, practicing charity, serving others, being empathetic, and being thankful.
6. **Good Citizenship.** This means understanding how our governments (national, state, local, school) work, obeying the law and the rules at school, respecting law enforcement officers, giving back to the community, being patriotic, and encouraging your family to vote and being involved in the democratic process.

In regards to the other professionally designed character education curriculums I mentioned above, a few are empirically based and some can be effective. However, nearly all of them are expen-

sive. Teachers, counselors, and administrators have told me that they have paid upwards of \$5,000 for character education programs! Some of the programs with a \$1,000 price tag might be considered ‘reasonably priced’ if you are a large school district with a healthy budget. However, if you are a teacher or counselor from a small, underfunded district that has precious little discretionary funds, or if you wanted to buy a program like that on your own to avoid all the red tape, it’s certainly not pocket change.

That is why this invaluable program is needed: to provide teachers, counselors, and school psychologists with an inexpensive way to incorporate the concepts of character education into their classroom in a way that is fun for students and faculty alike. Our hope is that our program is not only engaging, but dialogue-provoking as well.

Now that we know what topics character education covers, let’s examine a fundamental principle behind character education: social emotional learning. For some people, it seems that being social comes naturally, and, indeed, some aspects of it are innate. However, social psychologists, especially in the 1960s, discovered that many social behaviors (either prosocial or antisocial) are learned. This social learning is accomplished either through conditioning (behavior that is rewarded or punished) or through modeling.

Albert Bandura is one of the most celebrated of these social psychologists. He designed field experiments to determine whether humans can learn behaviors by watching others, especially social behavior. In one very famous experiment, the ‘Bobo the Clown’ study, he showed how children between the ages of three and five could learn aggression simply by watching adults and peers model the behavior—in this case, punching a blow-up clown doll (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

If you accept the finding of Bandura’s research, then you understand that some people may have problems exhibiting prosocial behaviors because they either did not have good role models for the proper behavior or they lacked the opportunity at home or in their communities to practice the right kinds of social behaviors. If that is the case, I estimate that there could be potentially thousands of students that need to learn social interactions such as reading a person’s body language or facial expressions, communi-

cating effectively, and even feeling empathy for another because their home environments did not provide them with this.

If we consider social–emotional learning in addition to the six main topics of character education that I mentioned above, there are additional aspects of high character that are just as important to impress upon our children to make them socially healthy and emotionally resilient. The ones that I believe need stressing are:

- Self-control
- Confronting and overcoming fear
- Cooperation and teamwork
- The ability to forgive and the ability to seek forgiveness
- Personal integrity (a code of honor)
- Leadership

Self-control is important for our students because without it, learning becomes difficult, if not downright impossible. Delaying gratification, stretching your limits of attention and controlling your anger all fall under this category. I also like to point out to my students that besides facilitating learning, self-control (resisting the impulse to hit or blurt out whatever comes to mind) helps you make and keep friends.

I firmly believe that to achieve or accomplish anything worthwhile in life, you have to stare down the unknown. It may sound daunting, but you must have the courage to face it. We have to teach our children to not be paralyzed by fear. If we define courage as the ability to deal with fears, it is a priceless quality to teach our students so that they will not be afraid to ask questions, to be wrong, or to try something new. How else can learning take place?

The old saying goes, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” It wasn’t built with one set of hands either. It took people assuming different roles and working together. As much as we may have dreaded group projects in graduate school, it trained us in how to get along with others to get the job done. Big tasks require teamwork and cooperation, and for our society to continue humming along for generations to come, our students must learn that lesson, too.

We all mess up. Sometimes we mess up so colossally that we hurt others around us. If we don’t summon the humility to ask for forgiveness, we will one day find ourselves alone. The same holds

true for granting forgiveness to those that have hurt us. While it's important to teach our kids not to be emotional punching bags, it is equally important to send the message that everyone deserves a second chance. It's also vital that we, as adults, send the message that we recognize that when our students mess up, they deserve a second chance as well.

I believe that the concept of integrity is something that has been adulterated by popular culture and that has led to confusion for our children. They talk about “street cred” and “reputation” as being important to them. We need to help them clarify what's really valuable in that area. Their most prized possession should not be their “rep,” per se, as much as it should be a more formalized, overall sense of personal integrity. Many definitions of integrity simply mention honesty, but I feel that it should refer more to a complete set of ethics. In earlier days, this concept was called a code of honor. We should be showing our students why it is important to have an honor code in schools. Furthermore, we should help them to develop their own code of honor for their lives outside of school. If they can follow a reliable moral compass that they have internalized, society will be the beneficiary.

Finally, we always implore our students to be leaders, but some of us don't know exactly what good leadership looks like. We say, “lead by example,” but leadership is much more than that and we need to break down those qualities so that we can all agree on them and encourage them in our students.

In writing the fictional story about the Essentialz and creating this curriculum program, I have endeavored to not only include the six topics (as either a primary or secondary quality) that other programs do, but also the additional traits of social competence mentioned above because they are just as important and deserve equal consideration.