

# **CHARACTER-CENTERED TEACHING: SIX STEPS TO BECOMING A MODEL PROGRAM**

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## **The Need for Character Education**

Major changes in our society over time have had a significant impact on the family, the world of work, our nation, and ultimately on the expectations for educational achievement placed on our schools. Family structures and roles have changed dramatically. The nature of occupations, the role of the individual worker, the structure of organizations, and the quality of work produced have all been altered and, in turn, have demanded changes in academic curricula and programs.

In recent years, these societal changes have resulted in the breakdown of the family and a significant mistrust of employers, law enforcement officials, the courts, the health care system, and the political process. Poverty, homelessness, violence, and crime are commonplace. The events and situations we learn about from front-page headlines in newspapers, terrifying stories on the nightly news, or shocking statistics in government reports often reflect dysfunctional behavior, which is a powerful emotional reaction to a rapidly changing society and an increasingly complicated and pressure-filled world.

These changes have had a particularly detrimental effect on children, as reflected in the heartbreaking statistic that one of the major causes of childhood death is murder by handguns. Change often creates fear, which may generate confusion, loss of meaning to life, hostility, and at times a desire for revenge. Fear and the consequences of fear often lead to a loss of emotional connectedness between and among people. The loss of connectedness, in turn, may be reflected in research showing that, over the past two decades, adolescents have become more concerned for their own personal well-being and less concerned for the well-being of others.

Problems involving the attitudes and behavior of children must be addressed within individual families, which bear primary responsibility for character development of their offspring. Schools, however, must assume a supporting role in generating and understanding expectations and guiding principles that become part of the overall education of each student. Schools have always had this supporting role, because it is a basic part of their function to prepare graduates for interactions with others as they assume their societal responsibilities in the community and in the workplace.

Even so, attempts by schools to initiate character education programs have often encountered resistance and become a source of friction among societal segments. Experience has shown that disputes typically result from accentuating the negatives, or areas of disagreement, in proposed programs. The approach to character education of the International Center for Leadership in Education overcomes this major problem by setting disagreements aside and concentrating on areas of common ground. Once common ground is established, selection of acceptable topics proves relatively easy, because just about everyone agrees that schools should concentrate on preparing students for eventual entry into the community as productive, self-

sufficient citizens. Thus, the International Center's program focuses on guiding principles that contribute to success at school, within families, in seeking and holding jobs, and in functioning as productive citizens.

### **Definitions of Character Education**

It is noteworthy that the preponderance of funding, time, and facilities within an education program centers on academic instruction and achievement directed toward the acquisition of knowledge. Consider also recent findings which indicate that intelligence, as reflected by IQ scores, contributes only 20 percent to career achievement for the average person. The dominant factors in success involve personal and interpersonal skills not related to the individual's store of knowledge. These success factors are an integral part of what can be considered a person's character.

Therefore, an education system with the professed purpose of producing graduates ready to succeed in a complex, competitive society must help promote positive personal character traits in its students. Within this context, the following definitions apply:

- **Character** is a composite of the attributes, attitudes, and behavioral patterns that combine to constitute a person's identity and distinguish individuals from one another. Each individual develops a unique character, demonstrated by a unique combination of attributes and behavioral patterns.
- **Character education** refers to that area of the education system which is concerned with the development of student attributes and behaviors that will promote higher level personal and academic functioning, positive interpersonal relationships, a school environment conducive to learning and academic achievement, success in adult roles, and a civil society.
- **Character-Centered Teaching®** is an approach through which teachers conduct their academic instruction in a manner that clearly and purposefully reflects their own positive character attributes and 12 guiding principles. Character-Centered Teaching consists of methods and skills that promote the development of guiding principles and becomes the "how" of academic instruction.

### **Sources and Causes of Behavioral Problems — The *d*-Factor**

Many of the problems that cause serious concern on a societal level are really reflections of major emotional shifts within individuals in reaction to situations that produce fear and other negative emotions. Such fundamental emotional shifts develop very powerfully and dramatically in some individuals and to a lesser extent in most members of our society. These fundamental emotional shifts within individuals result from a phenomenon we call the *d*-Factor. The *d*-Factor represents the condition in which the individual feels emotionally disconnected from others. Its existence is often seen through attitudes or behaviors that show:

- a strong desire for self-fulfillment and immediate gratification at the expense of others
- a strong need for emotional self-protection, accompanied by judgmental, blaming attitudes
- a loss of meaning in life or the lack of a positive identity

- the use of power, fear, and intimidation in interpersonal interactions
- little sense of joining with others
- hurtful, aggressive, or violent behavior.

The *d*-Factor may be an underlying cause of many of the alarming and terrifying behaviors we hear about. These behaviors, which result from feeling disconnected from other people, represent a style of conduct that is opposite to what most people would consider to be strong character. As a consequence, many Americans have become extremely aware of the need to re-emphasize and encourage development of the basic guiding principles of strong character, which has been our tradition in America.

Character education programs that develop guiding principles to promote a style of conduct which emphasizes personal responsibility and respect in human relationships are critically important as one step in the solution to the serious problems we face as a nation. Therefore, character is a critical issue. We all need to address character for kids' sake.

As concerned educators, psychologists, family members, parents, and members of our communities and our nation, we must attempt to understand the problems our children are struggling with today, on the individual level as well as on the societal level, if we are to begin to address these very serious issues. Although these issues are extremely complex, character education is one area in which educators can be a force for positive change. Therefore, character education programs may be helpful in restoring a feeling of emotional connectedness at school, in families, and within the community.

### **Introducing a Character Education Program**

As a district or school begins to design a character education program, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. A number of programs already exist which can be adapted to the needs of the local community.

Character-Centered Teaching is the program developed by the International Center. As indicated above, it is based on our commitment to rigor and relevance in education and on several basic but very important beliefs. First, we believe that parents have the primary role for teaching morals, values, and character to their children. Second, we believe that schools can play a supportive and critically important role in the area of character education. Third, we believe that there is common ground on which most people can agree — such as the importance of honesty and responsibility. Fourth, we believe that character education should be focused on the needs of children. In this regard, we believe that children need essential personal and interpersonal skills that promote:

- responsible, thoughtful behavior
- increased self-respect and self-confidence
- respectful, honest relationships with others
- independence and interdependence
- a sense of emotional connectedness with oneself and others.

By developing these skills and abilities through a character education program, students can derive greater satisfaction in their lives as individuals, family members, workers, and citizens.

## **Developing a Program**

In working with a school to develop a Character-Centered Teaching program, the International Center focuses on six important steps that are essential for developing a model program.

**Identifying Leaders.** The first step in the assessment and development of a Character-Centered Teaching program is to identify natural leaders in the school and in the community who need to be involved from the outset in order to ensure the success of the program. Leaders will typically be teachers and staff, school administrators, parents, students, and community leaders, but there may be others. The important task is to bring together key people who can function as leaders and design and implement a program that calls for top-down support for bottom-up change.

**Develop Partnerships.** The next important task is for the key players to develop a partnership with parents and the community. This is accomplished by establishing a Community Advisory Panel. The panel is composed of parents and others who are a representative sample of the local community. The function of the panel is to investigate character education and advise the school on the type of program to implement. The panel answers questions such as, “What are we trying to accomplish?” They also discuss the attributes they want their children to possess when they graduate from high school so that they may be successful in life and productive members of the community.

**Determine Guiding Principles.** After the members of the Community Advisory Panel have learned about character education principles and programs, they focus their attention on guiding principles. The panel determines the guiding principles on which they believe the school should focus. These guiding principles are formally adopted as the community’s Key Guiding Principles.

**Establish Plans.** The process of program implementation begins with the development of a mission statement and a vision for the program. A strategic plan is then written that will define the activities to be conducted and methods for involving students, parents, and staff. This plan is essential to ensure the development of a truly comprehensive program that will result in the integration of guiding principles into the curriculum and schoolwide activities.

**Implement Practices.** Of critical importance is a strong focus on how to help students adopt the guiding principles and transform them into guiding practices. The key to success is to help students develop a feeling of commitment to the guiding principles. Commitment is developed when students have positive experiences in the application of the guiding principles. In planning for the Character-Centered Teaching program, emphasis should be on developing strategies that teachers can implement naturally in interactions with students. The key goal is for students to learn and practice the guiding principles in all aspects of school life, such as in a sports activity, in math class, in a discipline situation, or in any other school-related activity. The school system should be treated as a learning laboratory that can be utilized in all its richness so that students may build the essential skills needed to translate guiding principles into guiding practices.

**Evaluate the Program.** Program evaluation is an essential step in the development of a model program. Behaviors and attitudes that will be evaluated for change should be related to the Key

Guiding Principles of the community and associated guiding principles that are the focus of the program. The behaviors and attitudes that will be evaluated for change need to be selected carefully and related logically to the way in which the guiding principles are being promoted. Concurrently, if data collection is readily available, other behaviors can be evaluated for change to determine if the Character-Centered Teaching program is having any general effects. Following the initial stages of program design, recommendations about behaviors and attitudes to evaluate for change may need to be modified depending on how the program is actually implemented. Significant improvement cannot be expected to occur with all behaviors or attitudes evaluated. It is critical to remember that it is the program which is being evaluated, not the individual student.

### **Essential Elements of a Model Character Education Program**

Review of numerous model programs around the country shows that schools which promote exceptional character typically have the following key elements. They:

- promote a caring community
- help students develop a commitment to guiding principles
- foster partnerships between students and teachers
- demonstrate a clear, sustained commitment to the character education initiative
- integrate guiding principles into the curriculum and the fabric of school life
- show the connection between guiding principles and academic performance
- highlight a creative, distinguishing feature of the program.

### **Guiding Principles of Exceptional Character**

Through the research efforts of the International Center, 12 guiding principles have been identified as key principles upon which to base a model character education program. Collectively, they are referred to as the Twelve Guiding Principles of Exceptional Character. The guiding principles are:

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| • responsibility | • respect         |
| • contemplation  | • compassion      |
| • initiative     | • adaptability    |
| • perseverance   | • honesty         |
| • optimism       | • trustworthiness |
| • courage        | • loyalty         |

These guiding principles are defined in Appendix A; examples of associated guiding practices are given in Appendix B.

### **Window of Exceptional Character**

A conceptual model has been developed to help teachers, students, and parents understand that each of these guiding principles does not necessarily stand alone; rather there are relationships among the guiding principles. This model is called the Window of Exceptional Character (see Figure 1). There are four clusters with three guiding principles in each cluster.

Although each principle can be applied by the individual or in conjunction with other people, it has proved best to identify the principles within two functional domains — intrapersonal and interpersonal.

The conceptual model can be used for instructional purposes, so that students can be helped to understand that the guiding principles in the intrapersonal domain are those used primarily by oneself. For example, a student would take responsibility for his or her homework assignment, give it careful thought (contemplation), and take initiative to complete the assignment. If the assignment is difficult, the student may have to persevere and be optimistic in order to finish it. Finally, the student may need to employ the guiding principle of courage when the time comes to stand up in front of the class and describe the results of the homework project to classmates.

In a similar fashion, students may learn that, in the interpersonal domain, one student would show respect for another student's ideas or perhaps offer help to a student in distress (compassion). When there is a difference of opinion, students may need to show adaptability in attempting to reach a win/win solution to a conflict. Students may learn that it is extremely important to be honest with others. Moreover, they may understand the importance of following through on what they say they are going to do (trustworthiness) and remaining loyal to family, friends, or their school.

Practicing the guiding principles in the intrapersonal domain typically will result in a greater level of independence. Similarly, practicing the guiding principles in the interpersonal domain will typically result in a greater degree of interdependence with others. Further, while practicing the principles in the intrapersonal domain, the student is caring about himself or herself; while practicing the principles in the interpersonal domain, the student is showing concern for others.

**Figure 1. The Window of Exceptional Character<sup>®</sup>**

The Window of Exceptional Character in Figure 1 is divided into four quadrants. Quadrants I and II are action-oriented. In quadrant I, the individual is taking positive actions for him/herself, such as accepting responsibility for a task. In quadrant II, the individual is taking positive action toward another person.

Using quadrants III and IV, a teacher can develop lessons on how one builds confidence within oneself (III) or in the eyes of others (IV). For example, a student may need to persevere, remain optimistic, and be courageous when presenting a minority point of view in a speech to the entire student body. If the student has practiced these guiding principles, the student is likely to have boosted his or her sense of self-confidence when it is time to give the presentation. Examples of behavior in quadrant IV would be found in students who consistently show themselves to be honest, who perhaps volunteer for certain school-related activities and always prove trustworthy in accomplishing those activities, and who, through words or actions, show that they are loyal to their school. By witnessing students practice these guiding principles, other students may feel confident in the character of these individuals and perhaps elect them as class officers.

These are just a few examples of the interrelationships among the guiding principles and the lessons that can be derived from those interrelationships. Using other methods and strategies developed in the Character-Centered Teaching approach, specific lessons can also be applied to the roles that students will assume later in life.

### **The Character-Centered Teaching Approach**

In order to maximize learning for children, schools can organize their buildings, classrooms, staff, and curriculum to facilitate the learning process. Some schools have become models in terms of developing their organizational structures to facilitate academic learning. Similarly, when schools become organized to promote character education, the effort needs to involve more than signs in the hallway or occasional character-related activities or stories about character. When a school makes a commitment to character education and organizes the building, classrooms, staff, and curriculum to integrate guiding principles, it is facilitating the process of learning positive personal attributes and behaviors consistent with solid character.

The Character-Centered Teaching approach takes the process one step further. This approach recognizes the classroom teacher as critically important to any character education program by being a source of positive social influence in a child's life. Therefore, when the teacher develops a style of teaching and relating that fosters the development of guiding principles, student learning is maximized. The style of teaching and relating encouraged by the Character-Centered Teaching approach is defined by a good understanding of the guiding principles and their interrelationships, skillful use of communication and application strategies, and a general approach that makes guiding principles a natural part of ongoing academic instruction and interpersonal relationships. Through these and other means, character education and academic instruction are seamlessly interwoven on a daily basis. The result is a synergistic effect in which character education enhances academic instruction and vice versa. Essentially, rigorous and relevant quality academic instruction is presented by teachers who continuously model, nurture, and integrate guiding principles into their style of teaching and relating. Their characters guide their teaching, and their teaching is always demonstrating principles of good character.

## Appendix A

### Definitions of the Guiding Principles

**Adaptability** – *The ability and willingness to change*

To put oneself in harmony with changed circumstances.

**Compassion** – *Kindness*

The desire to help others in distress.

**Contemplation** – *Giving serious consideration to something*

To think things through with proper care.

**Courage** – *Bravery*

The willingness to put one's beliefs into practice, the capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear.

**Honesty** – *Truthfulness, sincerity*

The act or condition of never deceiving, stealing, or taking advantage of the trust of others.

**Initiative** – *Eagerness to do something*

The capacity for thinking up and acting on one's own ideas without prompting by others.

**Loyalty** – *Faithfulness, dependability*

The quality of being faithful to another person in the performance of duty, adhering to a contract with another person.

**Optimism** – *Positive beliefs*

The inclination to take a hopeful view or think that all will work out for the best.

**Perseverance** – *Hard work*

The quality of continuing to try hard and in spite of obstacles and difficulties.

**Respect** – *Regard, value, admire, appreciate*

Special esteem or consideration in which one holds another person or thing.

**Responsibility** – *Accountability*

To consider oneself answerable for something.

**Trustworthiness** – *Reliability*

Dependable, deserving of trust and confidence.

## Appendix B

### Definitions of Guiding Practices

<b>Adaptability</b>	Be ready and willing to adjust as necessary to the changes in people and circumstances that arise in daily life.
<b>Compassion</b>	Show kindness and concern for others in distress by offering help whenever possible.
<b>Contemplation</b>	Think things through with proper care before taking action.
<b>Courage</b>	Face difficulty or danger and express your beliefs even if you are afraid.
<b>Honesty</b>	Be truthful in all that you do and never deceive, steal, or take advantage of the trust of others.
<b>Initiative</b>	Take responsible action on your own, without prompting from others.
<b>Loyalty</b>	Show others that you are faithful and dependable when you have a commitment to them.
<b>Optimism</b>	Strive to be hopeful and positive in your beliefs about yourself, others, and the future.
<b>Perseverance</b>	Continue to work hard and persist toward the goal even when obstacles and difficulties arise.
<b>Respect</b>	Show consideration and regard for yourself, others, and the world around you.
<b>Responsibility</b>	Demonstrate that you consider yourself to be accountable for your actions and that you follow through on your commitments.
<b>Trustworthiness</b>	Show others by your actions that you are reliable and believable and deserving of their confidence.