



How to Implement Character Education in the Classroom

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As an old African proverb states, “it takes a village to raise a child”. Whether you’re a teacher, parent, or just another member in your community, it rings poignantly true, because children watch and learn from the behavior and actions of all those around them, and not just their parents.

Believe it or not, everyone in our society is a teacher when it comes to character. After all, kids aren’t raised in a vacuum; everyone has the potential to influence your child. Even so, there has been much debate over the years about whether character education should be included within the scope of the school day. Many feel that it is solely a parent’s job to teach children about principals and morals, while others are very vocal about the fact that many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, sometimes with parents who are unable to provide this guidance. So, what’s the answer? Can providing this seemingly extra facet to the academic curriculum support learning goals already in place?



Let's take a deeper look at the definition of character education and explore its benefits in the classroom. Below, find specific strategies to incorporate character lessons into your lesson plans.

What is Character Education, and Why is it Needed?

Make no mistake: no matter what others have to say when they share their personal opinions on the topic, supporting character growth has always been a central goal and intention of our educational system, dating all the way back to Benjamin Franklin. According to the [US Department of Education](#), character education is "... a learning process that enables students and adults in a school community to understand, care about and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others." This means that as school communities, and as individual parents or teachers, we have the responsibility to teach students the respect, responsibility, and civic values necessary for kids to grow up into caring members of our society.

While the focus mentioned above outlines the notion that the purpose of character education is to raise ethical adults, it's not enough to merely give instruction at home. Kids must be able to be respectful long before they reach adulthood. Indeed, teaching students prosocial character traits also benefits the learning and activities at school, too. Children must be able to follow the rules in the classroom, show respect for others, and complete classwork honestly.

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In schools today, character instruction is often centered around the six pillars of character education: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Many districts use these pillars to set a school-wide initiative to highlight each trait throughout the school year, especially at elementary schools. In fact, many districts use the pillars to support a wider school discipline management system, such as the popular Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system.

So now that we know the what and why, let's dig deeper to discover specific benefits, as well as a few questionable aspects of incorporating character education into the curriculum.

Pros and Cons of Character Education

As with any initiative, there are some potential downsides when it comes to incorporating more character education lessons into the school year. Some of these could include aspects such as:

- Taking time away from academic lessons
- Some believe that character education is ineffective
- Programs are difficult for teachers to begin in the absence of a whole school initiative
- Lessons vary from district to district, making character education inconsistent



By in large, the biggest source of debate against character education is the theory that it just doesn't work, taking critical instruction time away from teachers and students. However, multiple studies, such as [this one](#), shows that it could improve school culture in many ways. Some of the potential pros include:

- Reduced disciplinary reports
- Reduction in disciplinary action, such as detention or suspension
- Less violent behavior

- Reduction of student bullying
- A more positive school and classroom culture

As a country, we are well aware of the violence that has been happening on our campuses each academic year. All in all, considering both the pros and cons, one only needs to weigh the seriousness of the items on each list to conclude that character education, even if inconsistent or somewhat ineffective, has the enormous potential to do good, and with studies to back it up.

Ideas to Support Character Education in Schools

If you're a teacher, you may be wondering what steps you can take to incorporate lessons about character into your plans. Try the following strategies to get started:

Be the adult you want your students to be

For better or worse, kids learn from everyone's behavior and actions. That's why it's crucial to model ethical and respectful behavior for your own students. While ethical behavior is non-negotiable for a teacher, there are the "little things" that your little learners watch for as they interact with you. For instance, making sure to use words like "please" and "thank you" and expecting kids to do the same can go a long way towards showing them how to act. Admitting mistakes and apologizing likewise sends a powerful lesson. And reinforcing respect for all, including both adults and children, send clear messages about expectations and decorum. All that said, be sure to model the behaviors you want to see from your kids.

Set fair and consistent rules, routines, and consequences in the classroom

Most educators already know that they must set consistent rules and routines when the school year starts. But have you ever known a teacher who didn't stick to their guns when it came down to enforcing their own behavioral standards? Consistency is key to showing children that rules and routines are meant to be followed, and certain behavior is valued and expected.

Use mentor texts that relate to a specific trait

The reason why ELA teachers love books is because they can do almost anything! For elementary teachers, dedicate a small chunk of your day, or so many story time sessions a week to reading children's books that emphasize character traits. Before choosing a title, come up with an idea for how you would like your class to study character. For instance, use the six pillars mentioned above and study one per week or month. Choose a book that emphasizes that trait to read and discuss. For older children, even in high school, many classic titles teach powerful lessons, such as Harper Lee's quintessential primer on good character, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Play role-play games

Role play games offer meaningful learning while serving up a ton of fun! Create realistic scenarios and roles and print out cards or [printable worksheets](#) for kids to reference. Be sure to include the scenario for each group of students, and character traits to display for each participant. Have them act out the parts, creating the dialogue for each scene while exhibiting those attributes. At the middle or high school level, have kids create public service announcement videos for the trait they are studying.

Community service projects can fulfill academic objectives

Every so often a news story goes viral that describes a teacher or coach's class receiving physical education credit for completing service projects for the elderly or disadvantaged. This goes to show that these service projects can also fulfill academic objectives and teach students about civic responsibility and duties. Depending on grade level and local resources or opportunities, research the possibilities in your area, and determine what your students can do as a project serve their community. Even with limited options, even something as small as creating posters or mailing holiday cards to deployed military personnel overseas can model respect and gratitude for those who put their lives on the line for all of us.

Use a classroom award/reward system

Most K-3 teachers have a reward system in place as a part of their discipline management system. But what if awards were given for showing positive traits, such as kindness, or helping others? One idea is to have a "treasure box" where students are able to choose a small reward after displaying predetermined positive attributes. For example, if kids collect so many points for performing good deeds as outlined by the teacher, they can pick a reward from the box. Stock it with small items that need not be expensive! Rewards serve as powerful incentives to live out the character traits that have been taught. In time, students will move on from these extrinsic rewards, learning to value the targeted attributes.

Considering character education as a valuable part of the curriculum has been one of the more hotly debated topics of the past decade. Some believe that morality and values should be taught exclusively at home, while others believe that a whole community is responsible for raising a child. No matter the stance, it's an undeniable fact that teaching ethical values is one of the goals set for us at the national level.

It's up to districts, schools, and individual teachers to decide how much and what to include in their own pursuit to teach to the whole child. Review the ideas listed above and use whatever it is you think will lead to enhanced character growth in your students, paving the way for responsible, caring little learners.

