

THE RISING STAR



Volume 1

Issue 3

Feature Article

An Education in Ethics

Written by Steve Johnson, S.M.

Students often know the right thing to do. How can schools help them to do it?

“The numbers are in and they don't look good.” That was the assessment of the Josephson Institute of Ethics last October, when they conducted a survey about the moral standards of more than 20,000 middle and high school students. Almost half the young people reported stealing something from a store in the previous 12 months. In the same period, seven out of 10 cheated on an exam.

Should we be worried? Many observers say that we should. We see evidence of more antisocial behavior than ever among our youth—a sort of divorce between personal ethics and everyday behavior. Even among our most academically talented students, personal interest seems to triumph over the common good.

From across the political spectrum come calls to address the problem, as people from left, right, and center—however differently they may understand morality—recognize that building character is everyone's business. And, of course, in American society, whatever is everyone's business and involves children quickly leads us to the school.

The ideal that schools should produce people who are both smart and good has a venerable tradition in the United States. Most children in 19th century America learned their ABC's from McGuffey Readers, which were replete with stories

of honesty, self-reliance, and courage. The Readers' author, William H. McGuffey, was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Virginia. But by the early 20th century, schools were beginning to lose their comfort with such moral indoctrination. As America became a more pluralistic society, it was harder to come up with a shared notion of good behavior. Given the lack of agreement, moral education, it was argued, was best left to the individual child's family and religious institution. By the late 1970s, character development had all but disappeared as a goal of American public schools.

Several factors have swung the pendulum back in the other direction. First is the growing recognition that families and religious institutions need help. Competing with them for moral authority are peers and the mass media, which all too often lead young people in troubling directions. Schools have become necessary partners with parents in the race for a balancing influence.

Also, as educators, we have come to recognize the essential moral elements already present throughout the curriculum—especially in the literature we read, the history we discuss, the science we implement, the behaviors we model and reinforce, the relationships we develop, and the virtues we promote every day. Ignoring this moral substance in the interest of neutrality simply shirks our responsibility to educate persons whose thought has some well-reasoned content.

The only real question left to us is whether we will approach the moral dimensions of the curriculum poorly or well; we cannot sidestep them.

Affective and Effective Approaches

In the latter half of this century, schools have gone from benign neglect or fearful avoidance of moral education into three somewhat sequential movements: affective approaches such as values clarification and self-esteem building; moral decision making; and most recently, character education.

Values clarification was a popular affective approach that stressed individual self-reflection on values over the promotion of any specific values. While the program had a worthy objective, it did not deliver as intended. We realized there were choices we simply didn't want kids to feel good about, and no increase in clarity would make the unacceptable acceptable. Contemporary educators are often queasy about anything that smacks of indoctrination, but we can become downright imperialistic about academic honesty, respect for self and others, and violence-free schools. American public schools are not and cannot afford to be value-neutral.

Another affective but not so effective approach was self-esteem building. Educators hoped that natural goodness would follow from a stronger sense of self and appreciation for self and others. It didn't. In fact, among the greatest puzzles faced in self-esteem research is that

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Principles of Character

“I feel even more determined to go after my career and achieve success.”

Written by Character Education Partnership in Washington

National Character Counts Week is celebrated every year during the third week of October and focuses on character education. The Character Education Partnership in Washington, DC has outlined key components of character education such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and respect for self and others by creating Character Education Quality Standards based on the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education.™

Principle 1

Promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.

Principle 2

Defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Principle 3

Uses a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach to character development.

Principle 4

Creates a caring school community.

Principle 5

Provides students with opportunities for moral action.

Principle 6

Includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

Principle 7

Strives to foster students’ self motivation.

Principle 8

Engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.

Principle 9

Fosters shared moral leadership and long

range support of the character education initiative.

Principle 10

Engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

Principle 11

Evaluates the character of the school, the school staff’s functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

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Does your organization use these principles? If you don’t, what principles could you implement and how would that improve individual and academic performance.

For additional information: www.character.org

Fifty Ways to Show Kids You Care

According to the Search Institute, only one in four 6th- to 12th-graders say their school offers a caring climate. This is stunning! How can we inspire students to show empathy if they fail to see it in us?

Often we actually care greatly, but in our focus on academic achievement we overlook the small things that demonstrate caring. Interestingly, the shortest path to many students’ academic success is through their hearts. They don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care. Here are some hints.

1. Learn their names.
2. Remember their birthdays.
3. Ask them about themselves
4. Look in their eyes when you talk to them.

5. Laugh together.
6. Say yes a lot.
7. Be yourself.
8. Notice when they’re acting differently.
9. Share their excitement.
10. Send them a letter or postcard.
11. Notice when they’re absent.
12. Call them to say hello.
13. Discuss their dreams and nightmares.
14. Learn what they have to teach.
15. Make yourself available.
16. Show up at their concerts, games, and events.
17. Find a common interest.
18. Apologize when you’ve done something wrong.
19. Listen to their favorite music with them.
20. Wave and smile when you part.
21. Thank them.

22. Point out what you like about them.
23. Clip magazine pictures or articles that interest them.
24. Catch them doing something right and compliment them for it.
25. Give them your undivided attention.
26. Ask for their opinion.
27. Introduce them to your friends and family.
28. Tell them how much you like being with them.
29. Meet their friends and parents.
30. Help them become an expert at something.
31. Be excited when you see them.
32. Tell them about yourself.
33. Praise more; criticize less.
34. Ask them to help you.
35. Believe in them.

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An Education in Ethics (continued)

chronic criminal offenders tend to have high self-esteem (produced from pride in antisocial accomplishments), whereas many of the most altruistic and productive members of society show low self-esteem.

While affective approaches have not contributed a reliable means for schools to develop ethics, they have made valuable contributions, especially in recognizing the importance of the emotions, as well as the intellect, and the importance of school climate in creating an environment where character can develop.

The Limits of Moral Decision Making

The next approach schools tried was moral decision making, which concentrated on the study of ethical principles and their application to dilemmas such as euthanasia or capital punishment. Moral decision making assumed that under the right conditions, children would figure out ethical principles for themselves and generalize what they learned to their everyday moral opportunities. But the problems taught were rarely situated in the children's own real lives. The abstract principles were hard for students to retrieve in situations where, for example, they could save themselves pain by lying and they could not see a connection between their lying and the abstract ideals they had learned.

The result of decision making approaches, some suggest, is students who can discourse articulately on the minutiae of assisted suicide but have far greater trouble bringing this enlightenment to their daily moral opportunities. They may know whom to throw off the life raft, but they cannot relate these ideas to the more common choices they face: Should they dump their date for the school dance because the person they really wanted to go with finally asked them?

Certainly there are particularly difficult situations where we need the assistance that formal ethical decision making offers. But ethics is not just about the hardest choices we will ever have to make; it is also about what we do all day

every day. This brings up a simple observation about the moral life: Most of the time—really, nearly all of the time—we know what we ought to do. We're just having trouble doing it.

Perhaps schools should be more concerned about helping students create the conditions in their lives where they will more consistently do what they know they should. This approach is character education—honing the moral compass from which we operate and developing skills to cope with what gets in the way of being moral.

The Habits of Moral Behavior

Character has more to do with habits and dispositions than decisions. Truth be told, we tend to do in any given situation what we usually do in similar situations and have been doing for some time. Thus, the best way I can improve my moral behavior tomorrow is to improve what I do today. The habits I acquire now not only constitute my current character but also form it for the future. Developing traits such as honesty and self-control will help me respond more automatically as an ethical person would.

Part of character education is encouraging the acquisition of these habits by offering students effective role models, both in real life and through stories and heroes. (See "A Lesson in Perspective") For better or worse, the character we form is very much influenced by the character of the role models we choose. Jerome Stumphauzer notes that kids most prone for delinquency were encouraged in that behavior by antisocial role models and redirected to better behavior by prosocial role models.

In either case, the role models who were most available to kids and real to them had the most effect—a stunning endorsement for time and integrity. Neither parents nor schools can significantly impact the moral development of children without daily, individual connection. One of our major goals in influencing moral behavior is to insure that we are in the

loop, so that as kids consider the moral dimensions of their lives, caring adults have a chance to influence the outcome.

As much as parents and schools need to model what good moral character looks like, they also need to teach students how to deal with the things that get in the way of moral behavior. Students are most likely not to do what they know they ought when they are in angry and intensely emotional situations; when peers pressure them; when personal or academic honesty works against their own self interest; or when they are involved in patterns of self-destructive, drug/alcohol-related, gang, or delinquent behavior.

Students can learn practical ways to overcome these obstacles. They need training in anger control, social skills, conflict resolution, dealing with hostile people, and situational perception (not finding trouble where it isn't intended).

Creating an Ethical Educational Climate

Finally, character education means creating a culture that calls for everyone in the school community to be the best people they can be. Character education programs that work are, in fact, a giant mutual-improvement process involving students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders.

None of this is easy, especially given all the things we are already asking schools to do. When we talk with teachers about character education, they usually are enthusiastic about the idea but daunted by the problem of fitting it into crammed curricula. Their time seems overwhelmed by bureaucratic tasks, and they are hampered by the recent elimination of in-service days during the school year.

But if character education is integrated into the content and processes of instruction, schools can become models of ethical thought and values. When the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics works with a school to set up a character

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education program, the project begins with everyone in the school community considering the question: Who are we when we are at our best? Based on that discussion, we agree on a set of core virtues for the school and a code of conduct to support them. The virtues and the code are then explicitly taught.

Faculty identify elements of the curriculum that support the virtues and add other materials on ethics. Ethical decision making is taught and practiced throughout the school, but it is supplemented by training in reflection, coping skills, and cooperation.

Just as important, faculty work at being available, credible role models of the virtues. In this, they are joined by parents, who can receive help through the school in strategies for raising ethical children. These can include such important skills as maintaining a daily dialogue with a child; connecting with his or her friends; effective, consistent reinforcement of desired behaviors; and skillful reduction of undesired behaviors.

The work of character education in schools and homes always starts with the adults. When we talk about the moral decline of our youth, we are often just

observing our own reflection in the children who learned what we modeled. As teachers and parents, we must demonstrate not only the right behavior but also the kind of thoughtfulness that makes a moral education more than the human version of obedience school. At its best, character education cultivates an appreciation for the power of story, reflection, and the essential tools of habit and reason in dealing with the complexities of daily life.

Steve Johnson, S.M., is the director of School Programs at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, where he works with schools to set up character. ■

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Contact us: ethics@scu.edu
500 El Camino Real Santa Clara, California
95053| (408) 554-5319



[Fifty Ways to Show You Care continued]

36. Delight in their uniqueness.
37. Let them make mistakes.
38. Include them in conversations.
39. Respect them.
40. Be understanding when they have a difficult day.
41. Appreciate their personality, accepting them as they are.
42. Encourage them to help others.
43. Do what they like to do.
44. Encourage them to think big.
45. Celebrate their firsts and lasts, such as the first day of school.
46. Welcome their suggestions.
47. Call them when they're sick.
48. Introduce them to people of excellence.

49. Give them your phone number.
50. Love them, no matter what.

Adapted for teachers from "150 Ways to Show Kids You Care," by Jolene L. Roehlkepartain. Copyright © 1996 by Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota. All rights reserved. 150 Ways to Show Kids You Care is available from Search Institute as a colorful pamphlet that doubles as a poster.



About ARS

America's Rising Stars, a youth leadership process developed by Resource Associates Corporation that helps young people turn potential into performance by developing their most valuable asset – themselves. Self-leadership development is perhaps the most critical component to achieving civic, corporate, and community goals. Today more than ever, we need to be aware of the benefit of investing in the development of our young people. The results are practical and measurable.

- Are our young people prepared to become tomorrow's leaders?
- Are their scholastic results what they should be?
- Do they value life-long learning?
- Do they demonstrate self-directed learning?
- Should we be even more proactive in helping our young people get every positive advantage to ensure their successful future?
- Could we do a better job of preparing our young people to...climb higher? reach farther? set higher goals? aim for the stars?
- If our young people can't lead themselves, how can they lead others?

Participants of the Rising Stars process are assessed throughout the process to ensure graduates apply the concepts to their everyday lives. Follow-up strategies reinforce and perpetuate successful behaviors.

CONTACT INFO

Patrick S. Frazier
Five Star Performance
51818 Bonanza Dr.
Granger, IN 46530
Cell: (574) 286-1123
Patrick.S.Frazier@comcast.net