Why Good Books Are Better When You Talk About Them

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What do you do when you finish reading with children, say, at bedtime? Perhaps what many of us do—just close the book, kiss them good night, ruffle their hair, and turn out the light.

To be sure, that time of reading together is a precious experience—the pleasure of a good story shared and the deepening of the bond that comes from a “connective ritual.” But as valuable as these read-aloud together times are, we think they very often contain a missed opportunity. If you just close the book, you and your children—or your students, if you’re a teacher—will have missed a chance to share your thoughts about the challenges the characters have faced, the choices they’ve made, the consequences of those choices, the virtues and vices displayed—and how all of that might apply to your own character and lives.

The Perils of Turkish Delight

Imagine you’re reading The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the most famous of C.S. Lewis’ timeless Chronicles of Narnia. Edmund stumbles into Narnia, realizes his sister Lucy has been telling the truth about Narnia all along, and finds himself confronted by the terrifying Queen of Narnia looking down at him from her great sled.

The Queen interrogates him. To get Edmund to divulge what she wants to know about his siblings, she magically produces for him a box of enchanted Turkish Delight candy. The more he eats of it, the more he wants, and he mindlessly tells the Queen everything she wants to know.

When he begs the Queen for more, she demands he first bring his three siblings to her—which he promises to try to do. Even after Edmund later learns from Lucy that the Queen is really the wicked White Witch who turns innocent people into stone, he continues to think only about how he can get more Turkish Delight—even by now he’s feeling quite sick.

The Character Conversation

Consider what you could talk about if you stopped to reflect on this episode.

Is Edmund to blame for what happens here—or is he simply a victim of the Witch’s tricking him into eating the Turkish Delight?

What is it about Edmund’s character that makes him so easy for the Witch to deceive and manipulate? What makes him so ready to betray his siblings to get more Turkish Delight?

Why doesn’t he suspect the Queen of being bad in the first place?

If somebody gave us something to eat or drink that made us crave more and more and made us feel sick, what would we be likely to suspect about that person and the powerful substance they had given us? Who could we go to for help?

Narnian Virtues

In our Narnian Virtues Character Education English Curriculum, we’ve posed conversation starters like these about key passages in Lewis’ novels to more than 2,000 children in 57 schools in eight countries, including the US, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Cambodia, Turkey, and Mexico. We’ve done this
as part of a four-year research project supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. We’re investigating how to use the Narnia novels to help children understand and value the virtues, apply them in their own lives, and curb bad habits that undermine the virtues.

Our classroom curriculum has children study three Narnia novels, one a year during the fall term. Eleven-year-olds read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; 12-year-olds, Prince Caspian; and 13-year-olds, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.

Classroom lessons are designed to teach English skills and character at the same time. We focus on six “Narnian” virtues (see box) and their opposing vices that are dramatically brought to life in the stories.

**Why Narnia?**

Why did we choose the Narnia stories to use in our international character education program? They continue to be hugely popular with children and families. To date, they have sold more than 100 million copies in 47 languages. Netflix and Entertainment One recently announced that they would be “translating the Narnian universe into feature-length and episodic programming for years to come.”

Moreover, Narnia is a universe where moral choices matter. Good choices have good consequences; bad choices, bad ones. Some characters, like Edmund, who are selfish or obnoxious at the outset are transformed in their character as they learn hard lessons and realize their flaws and failings.

**Partnering with Parents**

At the heart of this project has been a partnership with parents—asking them to talk about the virtues with their children in the flow of family life and to promote their practice in everyday interactions. The Virtue Improvement Plan (V.I.P.) has students rate themselves on each of the 6 Narnian virtues, and then choose, in consultation with their parents, a virtue they’d most like to improve in. They work on their “personal target virtue” for the whole fall term and talk with their parent(s) about how they’re doing.

For each novel, students and parents have a Passport workbook with six Home Activities (see p. 7). After doing these, parents say their relationships with their children become less top-down and generally more positive (see p. 8).

Mark Pike is Professor of Education at England’s University of Leeds, author of Mere Education: C.S. Lewis as Teacher for Our Time, and director of the Narnian Virtues project.

Thomas Lickona is Co-Investigator for Narnian Virtues and directs the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs. His most recent book is How to Raise Kind Kids (2018).

**Narnian Virtues Defined**

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<th>Virtue</th>
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<td><strong>Wisdom</strong></td>
<td>The habit of exercising good judgment; being able to see what is true and good and choose the best course of action. Wisdom includes curiosity, the desire to learn or explore something (but avoiding what is bad, such as illegal drugs and pornography).</td>
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<td><strong>Love</strong></td>
<td>The habit of acting selflessly for the good of another without seeking recognition or reward; the willingness to sacrifice for others. Love includes the virtues of gratitude (feeling and expressing thanks) and forgiveness (letting go of anger or resentment toward those who have hurt us while still holding them accountable).</td>
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<td><strong>Integrity</strong></td>
<td>The habit of being true to ourselves and honest with others; standing up for what’s right and following our conscience; not engaging in self-deception. Integrity includes the virtue of humility—being aware of our strengths and shortcomings, striving to correct our flaws, and being free from pride and arrogance.</td>
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<td><strong>Fortitude</strong></td>
<td>The mental and emotional strength to do what is right and necessary in the face of difficulty; the ability to endure suffering and overcome adversity; the confidence, perseverance, and resilience to meet challenges. Fortitude includes hard work (pursuing a good goal with energy and commitment) and courage (overcoming fear when facing danger or social pressure to do what’s wrong).</td>
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<td><strong>Self-Control</strong></td>
<td>The habit of self-restraint; controlling our desires, emotions, impulses, and appetites; resisting temptation; delaying gratification in order to achieve a greater good.</td>
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<td><strong>Justice</strong></td>
<td>The habit of treating everyone with equal respect and fairness; recognizing that no one is “above the law”; fulfilling our responsibilities; admitting our mistakes and making amends.</td>
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