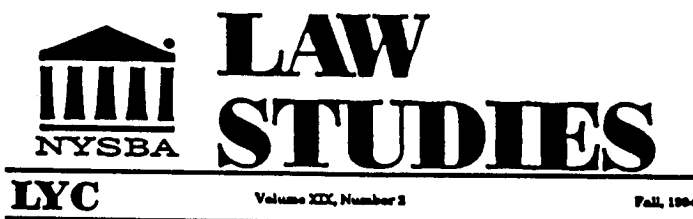


# Combatting Violence with Values: The Character Education Solution

by **Thomas Lickona, Ph.D.**  
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# COMBATting VIOLENCE WITH VALUES: THE CHARACTER EDUCATION SOLUTION

by  
Thomas Lickona

We become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control and courageous by performing acts of courage.

—Aristotle

If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are.

—William Bennett

*Item:* Among leading industrialized nations, the United States has by far the highest murder rate for 15- to 24-year-old males—seven times higher than Canada's and forty times higher than Japan's.

*Item:* From 1965 to 1990, the arrest rate for all juvenile violent crime in the United States rose more than 300 percent. This trend cut across gender: Among girls, for example, arrests for aggravated assault more than tripled.

*Item:* From 1978 to 1988, according to FBI statistics, rape arrests for 13- and 14-year-old males nearly doubled.

Staggering as these statistics are, they pale by comparison to the stories of youth violence that daily fill the news:

A ninth-grader in Massachusetts lured a classmate into the woods and then bludgeoned him to death with a baseball bat. He later told friends he wanted to "see what it felt like to commit a murder."

A 13-year-old boy in a western New York village led a 4-year-old boy into the woods, sodomized him with a stick and strangled and beat him to death.

A 5-year-old boy who watched *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* on television, talked incessantly about the movie characters and their gory exploits, then stabbed a 2 1/2-year-old girl 17 times with a kitchen knife.

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**Why this plague of youth violence, increasingly marked by a near-total lack of conscience or remorse?**

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A group of young teenage boys and girls hung four cats by their tails from a tree branch and then set fire to them. They later told police that they "had nothing else to do."

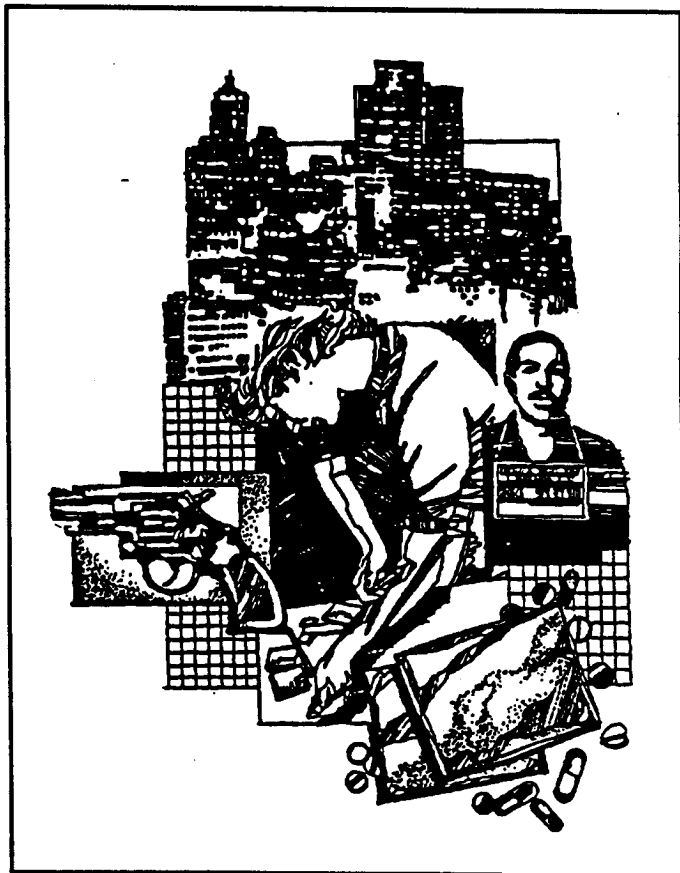
Why this plague of youth violence, increasingly marked by a near-total lack of conscience or remorse? There are clearly many causes. Among them: the decline of the two biological-parent family, especially the dramatic increase in fatherless families (the single strongest predictor of

juvenile crime); poor parenting in general, resulting in millions of children growing up without even the most minimal sense of right and wrong; the physical and sexual abuse of children (accompanied by increasing frequency of older children sexually abusing younger children); the scourge of drugs; the desire for money and material things (cited by teens on a recent PBS special as a major motive for violent crime by youth); the desire for "respect" that leads many young people to carry weapons and use them at the slightest provocation; an across-the-board decline in respect for the value and sanctity of life, born and unborn; the saturation of ever more explicit violence in the media (television, movies, music, video games); and, I would add, the neglect of values and character education in our schools.

## A Crisis of Character

To understand fully the problem of youth violence—and to know where to look for solutions—we have to look at the bigger picture. The surge of youthful violence is the most dramatic manifestation, but only one sign, of a much larger problem: a national crisis of character.

"Even top high school students," ran a recent



Associated Press story, "display a startling lack of responsibility about pregnancy, AIDS, and drunken driving," and "78 percent admit to cheating in school." The article went on to report the details of this sorry ethical profile of academically successful American high school students (those with at least a B average), as revealed by a nationwide survey carried out by Who's Who Among American High School Students.

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Other studies have turned up similarly discouraging results:

- In a survey cited by the *Boston Globe*, more than half of ninth-graders in an affluent suburb said they saw nothing wrong with stealing a compact disc or keeping money found in a lost wallet.
- Almost six of ten high school students say they have used illegal drugs, not counting alcohol.
- 40 percent of ninth-graders, according to a 1992 Centers for Disease Control report, say they have already had sexual intercourse. According to a 1989 United Nations report, U.S. teens have the highest abortion rate in the developed world.
- In a 1990 report titled *The Age of Indifference*, the Times Mirror Center concluded: "Today's young Americans, aged 18 to 30, know less and care less about news and public affairs than any other generation of Americans in the past 50 years."
- Students increasingly appear to be "morally illiterate," unable even to state the Golden Rule.

### **The Return of Character Education**

In response to these cultural indicators of moral regression, a character education movement is beginning to emerge across the country. It is based on the belief that destructive and irresponsible youth behaviors such as violence, dishonesty, drug abuse and sexual promiscuity have a common core: the absence of good character.

Good character can be defined as virtue, habits of moral action such as Plato's cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. In my own work as a psychologist and educator, I have found it useful to define character as having three interrelated parts: moral knowing, moral feeling and moral action—knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good. When we think about the kind of character we want for our children, it's clear that we want them to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right and then do what they believe to be right—even in the face of pressure from without and temptation from within.

People obviously do not automatically develop good character. Conscientious efforts must be made—by schools, families, churches and communities—to help

young persons *understand, internalize and act upon* core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, integrity, compassion, self-control and moral courage.

Universal moral values such as these are not mere subjective preferences (as values clarification had it), like taste in music or clothes; rather, they have objective worth and a claim on our personal and collective conscience. Moral values carry *obligation*; we must abide by them—be fair, honest and respectful, for example, in our dealings with others—even when we'd rather not. The validity of these moral values and their power to hold us accountable derive from the fact that they affirm our human dignity and promote the good of the individual as well as the common good. They meet the classical ethical tests of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?). They are also consistent with what we have historically understood to be the requirements of God, as expressed, for example, in the Ten Commandments.

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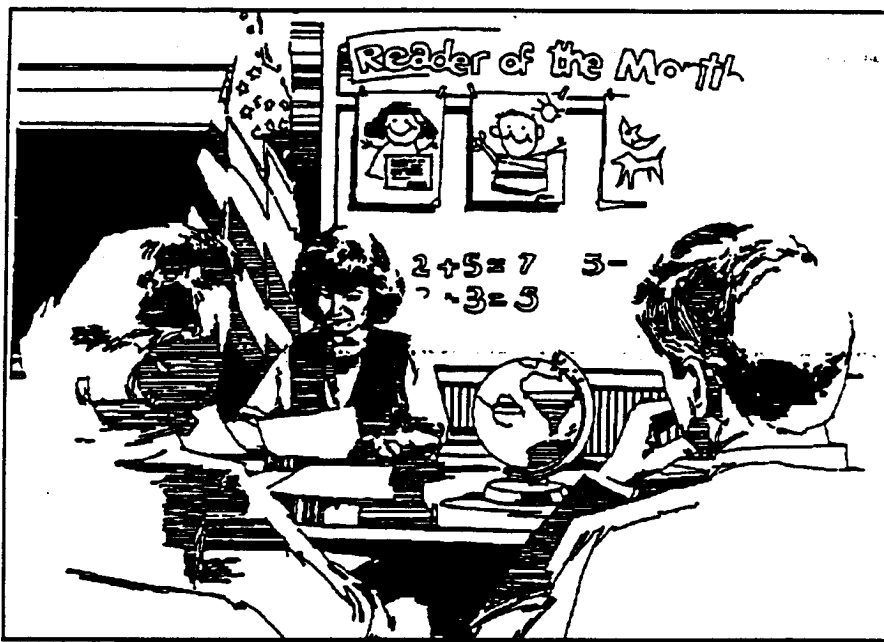
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The past few years have seen a spate of books—such as *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, *Educating for Character*, *Reclaiming Our Schools: A Handbook for Teaching Character, Academics, and Discipline* and the number one best-selling *The Book of Virtues*—offering methods and materials for developing good character in young people. Two national organizations, the Character Education Partnership and the Character Counts Coalition, have recently formed to promote character development nationwide. Congress is now drafting legislation that would fund efforts to develop character education materials and teacher training programs aimed at teaching core ethical values. July 1994 saw more than 200 educators, youth leaders and members of the federal government come together for the first White House Conference on Character-Building for a Democratic, Civil Society.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Character Education**

The family is the most important influence on a child's character, and schools cannot fully compensate for family failure in this area. But schools can do an enormous



calls upon the teacher to set a good example in many ways (by being well-prepared, for example), to directly teach and encourage moral behavior and to correct disrespectful or irresponsible behavior through individual guidance and group discussion.

For example: Teacher Molly Angelini makes courtesy an important value in her fifth-grade classroom. She models courtesy in how she speaks to her students. She requires students to apologize in writing if they call a classmate a name. She teaches them to say, "Pardon me?" instead of "What?" when they wish something repeated. When they go to lunch, she teaches them to greet the cafeteria workers by name and thank them when they put the food on their tray. And she teaches her children that all these behaviors are not mechanical gestures but meaningful ways of respecting other people.

amount, far more than most schools now do or even imagine they might try to do, to develop good character in young people. And in the process, schools can also work with parents to encourage and support them in their role as the primary moral teachers of their children.

If schools wish to maximize their moral clout in the face of the negative societal influences that surround children, they must take a comprehensive approach. This approach views everything in the school day as affecting values and character. The way sports are conducted, grades are allotted, teachers behave and corridors monitored all send moral messages. If a school wants to instill values such as respect and responsibility, the messages have to be consistent.

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In short, the school itself must embody good character. It must be a civil, just and caring community that practices the values it preaches. It must be a community that helps students form caring attachments to adults and to each other. These attachments will nurture a student's desire to learn and to be a good person.

My work with teachers and schools over the past 25 years has led me to develop a model of comprehensive character education that includes 12 classroom and schoolwide strategies. In *Educating for Character*, I describe each of these strategies in detail and provide supporting research.<sup>1</sup> Let me briefly illustrate each of these 12 components here.

**1. The teacher as caregiver, moral model and moral mentor.** This first strategy calls upon the teacher to teach morality by treating students with love and respect. It also

**When students are part of a caring classroom community, they feel valued as persons. When they are challenged to practice respect and care in their everyday peer relations, these values begin to become part of their characters.**

**2. Creating a moral community.** Students need caring relationships with adults, but they also need caring relationships with each other. When students are part of a caring classroom community, they feel valued as persons. When they are challenged to practice respect and care in their everyday peer relations, these values begin to become part of their characters.

For example: Hal Urban, who teaches high school history and psychology, does three simple things at the start of each class that take only five minutes but go a long way toward developing a cohesive classroom community based on mutual respect and support. First, he asks, "Who has good news?" After the sharing of good news, he asks, "Would anyone like to affirm anyone else?" Students become more and more comfortable doing that. Finally, he asks students to take a seat different from the one they had in the previous class and take a minute to get to know their new neighbor. At the end of the semester, on course evaluations, students say that one thing they will remember about the course ten years from now is the way Mr. Urban began each class.

In developing a moral classroom community, teachers also need to promote kindness and prevent cruelty. In Kansas, the STOP Violence Coalition (9307 W. 74th St., Merriam, KS 66204) publishes a book of activities called *Kindness is Contagious...Catch It!* that gives many practical strategies for promoting considerate actions and reducing the verbal peer abuse that causes conflicts, breeds disrespect and quickly undermines positive classroom relations.

**3. Moral discipline.** Moral discipline means using the creation and enforcement of rules as opportunities to foster moral reasoning, self-control, voluntary compliance with rules and a generalized respect for others.

For example: Kim McConnel, on the first day of school, puts her sixth-graders in groups of four. She asks each group to write down, on a large sheet of paper, classroom rules that will help them:

- Get our work done
- Feel safe
- Be glad we're here.

When they are finished, the small groups tape their lists of suggested rules on the blackboard. Drawing from all the lists, the teacher helps the class come up a list that will serve as "our class rules."

Regardless of whether students help to create the rules, the teacher using moral discipline ensures that students understand the moral basis of the classroom rules. A high school mathematics teacher explains his approach:

"I tell my students that I have only two rules: (1) Everybody respects each other; and (2) Come prepared for class every day—which is a form of respect for me, your classmates and yourself. If you violate one of these rules, I will stop and point out the rule. You will need to apologize to the person you were disrespectful toward."

With moral discipline, consequences for rule-breaking seek to teach a moral lesson (for example, why the offense was wrong); require the student, whenever possible, to make reparation; and develop the student's self-control and willingness to follow the rule in the future.

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**The chief means of creating a democratic classroom is the class meeting. This is a meeting of the whole class emphasizing interactive discussion and problem-solving. The class meeting contributes to character development by providing a forum where students' thoughts are heard and valued and by providing a support structure for understanding, internalizing and practicing respect and responsibility.**

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**4. Creating a democratic classroom environment.** This means involving students, on a regular basis, in shared decision-making that increases their responsibility for making the class a good place to be and to learn. The chief means of creating a democratic classroom is the

class meeting. This is a meeting of the whole class emphasizing interactive discussion and problem-solving. The class meeting contributes to character development by providing a forum where students' thoughts are heard and valued and by providing a support structure for understanding, internalizing and practicing respect and responsibility.

For example: Carl Fospero, a 20-year-old graduate student in education, was called to take over an unruly class (Introductory Spanish) of high school students whose regular teacher had suddenly died. In the month that followed the teacher's death, the students—a low-achieving group with a history of behavior problems—had become uncontrollable. They went through four substitute teachers in four weeks.

When Carl Fospero came into the class, the first thing he did was to ask every student to take out a sheet of paper and write him a letter, responding to two questions: "What are your feelings about the class? How can we make it better?"

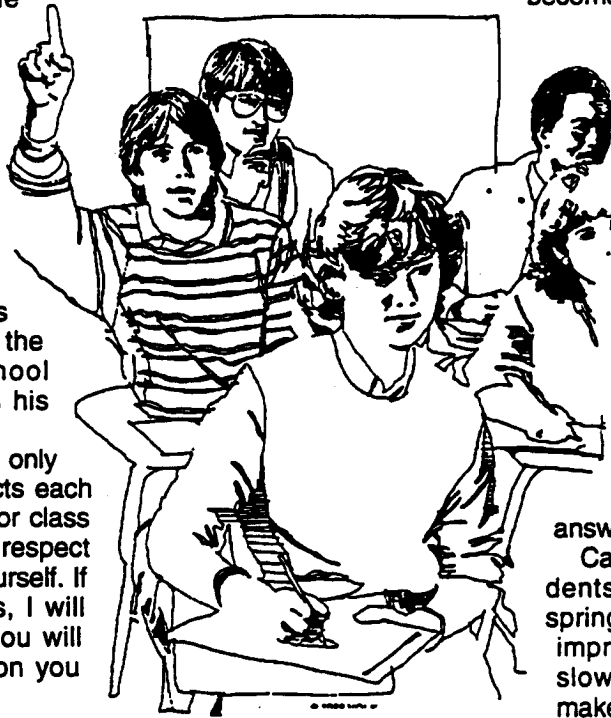
Students complained that other substitute teacher had been "throwing worksheets at them"; they couldn't keep up with the material; they didn't understand Spanish; they often felt embarrassed when they didn't know an answer and so on.

Carl Fospero read portions of the students' letters aloud, using them as a springboard for a discussion of how to improve the course. They decided to slow down the pace of instruction to make sure no one got lost. They decided to make time during each class for cooper-

ative learning—such as conversational Spanish between partners—which students found less threatening. Teacher Fospero said he also wanted to try some new things they hadn't done before, such as writing a play in Spanish and performing and videotaping it. The class also started to write and publish a class newspaper—in Spanish. They used their class meetings to plan these new projects, assign responsibilities and monitor progress and problems.

Students' behavior and learning improved dramatically. Teacher Fospero had achieved this by applying a widely known but much-neglected educational principle: Involve students in making decisions about—and sharing responsibility for—the life of the classroom. The class meeting has been used effectively with students as young as kindergarten.

**5. Teaching values through the curriculum.** There are countless opportunities for teachers to use the ethically rich content of academic subjects—such as literature, history and science—as a vehicle for teaching values and examining moral questions. Here the teacher's question is, what are the natural intersections between the curriculum I wish to cover and the values I wish to teach?





There are outstanding published programs that illustrate how to do this. One is the Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children.<sup>2</sup> This award-winning program uses multicultural children's literature to foster seven character attributes affirmed by cultures around the world: courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty and love. Heartwood makes it clear that multiculturalism doesn't have to mean "multi-morality"; rather it can lead us to discover the universal values that underlie cultural differences and that express our common humanity.

For each of the seven attributes, the Heartwood program provides six children's books (folk tales, hero stories, legends and modern classics from different cultures) along with interdisciplinary activities that develop children's understanding of the particular value and how to apply it.

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**Cooperative learning, which can be done in pair or small groups, contributes to character in many ways. It teaches students the value of cooperation; builds community in the classroom (reducing conflict, the research shows, and fostering friendships across racial and ethnic lines); and teaches basic life skills such as communicating and working together.**

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When the class finishes studying a particular character attribute, all the children, at a moment of their own choosing, look in the classroom mirror and ask themselves if they have shown that attribute (for example, "How have I shown courage?," "How have I been a respectful person?"). Then the child goes to his or her Heartwood Journal and writes a personal answer to that question.

This encourages children to act upon the ethical insights emerging from their reading and discussion of the value-laden literature.

*Facing History and Ourselves*<sup>3</sup> is another much-acclaimed curriculum, initially developed for eighth-graders and later adapted to high school and college levels as well. This 8-week social studies curriculum uses history, films and guest lectures (including talks by death camp survivors) to investigate the Nazi and Armenian Holocausts. Along the way, it has students look within themselves to examine the universal human tendency toward prejudice, scapegoating and even hatred.

An experimental study of this curriculum found that *Facing History* students were significantly superior in their understanding of how individuals' decisions are affected by their society and in the complexity of their reasoning about issues such as leadership, exclusion and conflict resolution.

**6. Cooperative learning.** Whereas curriculum-based values education teaches values and develops character through the subject matter content, cooperative learning does this through the *instructional process*. It says to the teacher: "Take what you would normally teach, teach it through cooperative learning for at least part of every day and you will be teaching values and academics at the same time."

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For example: In a sixth-grade classroom in Montreal, Quebec, a teacher faced the most divisive group she had ever taught. The class was torn apart by racial conflict; blacks and whites exchanged insults and physically assaulted each other during recess and after school.

The school psychologist observed the class and recommended that the teacher set up structured cooperative learning groups. Put together children who have trouble getting along, he said. Give them joint assignments and projects with roles for all members. Monitor them closely. Most important, stick with the groups even if they don't seem to be working in the beginning.

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**But academic work and learning have moral meaning. Work is one of the most basic ways we affect the lives of others and contribute to the human community. Moreover, when students are not working to the best of their ability in school, they are learning bad moral habits—laziness, lack of self-discipline, indifference to standards, evasion of responsibility—that will likely carry over into their adult lives.**

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The teacher started having students work together—usually in threes or fours—in all subjects for part of each

day. They worked on math problems in groups, researched social studies questions in groups, practiced reading to each other in groups and so on.

"It took them two months to really make this work," the teacher said, "but they finally got it together. Moreover, their test scores went up." Mastering the skills of cooperative learning is a gradual, developmental process for both teacher and students, but the academic and character development benefits—documented at all grade levels—justify the effort.

**7. Develop the "conscience of craft."** The literature on moral and character education often treats moral learning and academic learning as separate spheres. But academic work and learning have moral meaning. Work is one of the most basic ways we affect the lives of others and contribute to the human community. Moreover, when students are not working to the best of their ability in school, they are learning bad moral habits—laziness, lack of self-discipline, indifference to standards, evasion of responsibility—that will likely carry over into their adult lives.

Teachers who develop students' capacity for disciplined work typically combine high expectations and high support. For example: Anne Ritter is the kind of teacher who believes that every child can learn. As a new teacher in her school, she taught a class of first-graders, 85 percent of whom came from families below the poverty line. She astonished fellow teachers by getting 90 percent of her class up to grade level in reading and math. Her comment: "It's the job."

When I visited her classroom, a list of classroom rules was writ large and posted in the front. The first rule was: "Always do your best in everything." On the wall was a sign: A PERSON WILL SELF-DESTRUCT WITHOUT A GOAL. The "value of the month," featured on the class bulletin board, was AMBITION, defined as "hard work directed toward a worthwhile goal."<sup>4</sup>

**8. Encouraging moral reflection.** This strategy focuses on developing the several qualities that make up the cognitive side of character: being morally aware; understanding objectively worthwhile moral values; being able to take the perspective of others; being able to reason morally; being able to make thoughtful moral decisions; and having moral self-knowledge, including the capacity for self-criticism.

Bringing this knowing side of character to maturity is one of the most difficult challenges of character education. It requires clear ethical thinking by the teacher as well as a sophisticated set of teaching skills.

Teachers can foster moral reflection through reading, research, essay writing, journal-keeping, discussion and debate. At the secondary level, a promising approach to developing moral reflection through controversial issues is called "structured academic controversy." Developed by cooperative learning experts David and Roger Johnson, this approach defines controversies as "problems to be solved rather than win-lose situations."

The teacher assigns students to groups of four, composed of two, two-person "advocacy teams." Within each group, one team is assigned the responsibility of advocating one position (for example, that there should be more government regulation of hazardous waste disposal), the

other team the task of arguing the opposite position (that there should be less regulation), both teams using background information supplied by the teacher.

In the course of the week, each team must do a position-switch and argue for the position it originally opposed. Finally, the four group members synthesize what they see as the best information and reasoning from both sides into a consensus solution and write and submit a group report. Following that, each student takes an individual test, which holds everyone accountable for learning the information and arguments on both sides of the issue.

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**Teaching students how to resolve conflicts without force or intimidation is a vitally important part of character education for two reasons: (1) conflicts not settled fairly will prevent or erode a moral community in the classroom; and (2) without conflict resolution skills, students will be morally handicapped in their interpersonal relationships now and later in life, and may end up contributing to violence in school and society.**

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Ten years of research on the academic controversy process finds that students gain in their perspective-taking abilities and demonstrate greater mastery of the subject matter than is true with either debate or individualistic learning formats.

**9. Teaching conflict resolution.** Teaching students how to resolve conflicts without force or intimidation is a vitally important part of character education for two reasons: (1) conflicts not settled fairly will prevent or erode a moral community in the classroom; and (2) without conflict resolution skills, students will be morally handicapped in their interpersonal relationships now and later in life, and may end up contributing to violence in school and society.

There are a great many ways to teach conflict resolution skills in the classroom. Susan Skinner, a kindergarten teacher at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, South Carolina, uses two methods she finds effective. When two children have a conflict, she stops the action and uses it as a teachable moment. She invites two other children (not the ones involved in the dispute) to come to the front of the class to role-play a positive solution to the conflict. She then asks the whole class for their suggestions. Finally, the two children who were involved in the conflict are invited to act out a positive solution that draws on what they have just seen and heard.

When one child has hurt another, teacher Skinner teaches a reconciliation ritual. She instructs the offending child to say, "I am very sorry—will you please forgive me?" If the victim judges the apology sincere, that child is instructed to respond, "I do forgive you."

These behavior patterns have the best chance of becoming part of a child's character when they are learned early and practiced often. But effective training is still possible at the adolescent level, where the stakes are even higher because conflicts more easily explode into deadly violence.

Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Smith, a Harvard professor and physician, has developed a 10-week mini-course that teaches teenagers what causes violent conflict and how to avoid it. Says one 18-year-old who took the course at a Boston high school: "I had my share of fights, and I learned how to avoid them by talking things out. Otherwise I could lose my life over something really stupid like stepping on someone's shoe and not wanting to say, 'Excuse me.'"

**Schoolwide Strategies for Character Education.** The preceding examples demonstrate that it is clearly possible for the individual teacher, acting within the classroom, to foster good character. But teachers feel more secure, and their efforts are greatly enhanced, if the whole school—and ideally the community as well—is working to promulgate, model, teach, celebrate and enforce high standards of respect and responsibility.

A comprehensive approach therefore calls upon schools to implement three schoolwide strategies. These are:

**1. Creating a positive moral culture in the school**—developing a total moral environment or schoolwide ethos (through the leadership of the principal, schoolwide discipline, a schoolwide sense of community, meaningful student government, a respectful and cooperative moral community among adults and making time at all levels to discuss moral concerns) that supports the values taught in classrooms;

**2. Fostering caring beyond the classroom**—using positive role models to inspire altruistic behavior and providing opportunities at every grade level to perform acts of school and community service; and

**3. Recruiting parents and the community as partners in character education**—letting parents know that the school considers them their child's first and most

important moral teacher; giving parents specific ways they can support the values the school is trying to teach; and seeking the help of the community (including churches, businesses, local government and the media) in promoting respect and responsibility.

Let me offer four examples of character education success stories that illustrate these schoolwide strategies.

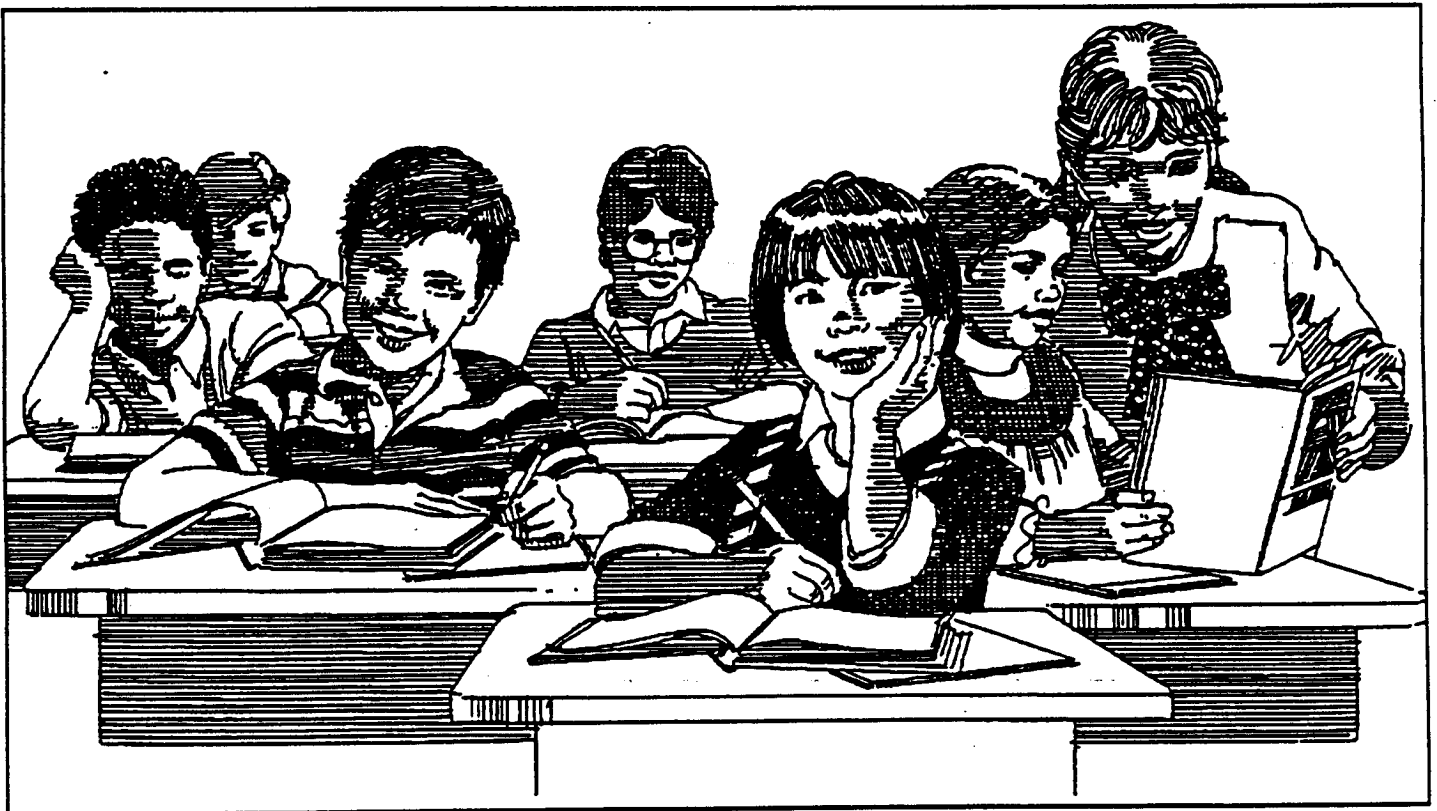
### ***"Let's Be Courteous, Let's Be Caring"***

Several years ago, Winkelman Elementary School, which serves a diverse community north of Chicago (some children are from welfare families, others come to school in limos), found itself increasingly unhappy with student attitudes and behavior. Fights and put-downs among children were common. Students would frequently "smart-off" ("I don't have to listen to you!") to teachers and other adults in the building.

To address this problem effectively, Winkelman's principal and faculty decided they needed a schoolwide approach. They launched a project called "Let's Be Courteous, Let's Be Caring" that emphasized the values of courtesy and caring at every opportunity: through photo displays in the corridors, discussions in classrooms, one-to-one conversations between teachers and children, school assemblies, citizenship awards, parent-teacher conferences that asked for parents' help at home and service projects in the community.

A giant display inside the school entrance defined "courtesy" as: (1) Saying please, thank you, you're welcome and excuse me; (2) Being a good listener; (3) Waiting your turn; (4) Acting politely everywhere; and (5) Discussing problems.

"Caring" was defined as: (1) Sharing; (2) Respecting others' feelings; (3) Following rules; (4) Working cooperatively; and (5) Being a good friend.





The moral environment at Winkelman steadily improved. When I visited the school, parents said fights are now very rare; children said that if you forgot your lunch, you could always count on somebody to give you some of theirs; and a veteran teacher who had taught in several other schools said that Winkelman students showed an unusually high level of respect for adults and each other. Three years after beginning its character education project, Winkelman was recognized in a Chicago-area competition for excellence in both academic achievement and character development.

### ***A Middle-School Success Story***

Vera White is principal of Washington, D.C.'s Jefferson Junior High School. She comments: "Ninety percent of our students come from single-parent homes. When I arrived as principal, parents and the community felt they were losing the children.

"We met — administration, faculty and parents — for a full year to prioritize our goals. We decided we needed a long-range plan. Each year would have a special theme."

Year 1 of the new effort focused on planning the objectives and strategies of the new character education program. Year 2 had the theme "Attitude Counts." Principal White explains: "We wanted students to have the idea that wherever you are—in school, at home, at the mall—your attitude makes a difference."

**"Our overall theme has been 'how to be responsible.' We stress and teach responsibility throughout the day. For example, our students have to have assignment notebooks and to use them in every class. We also set high expectations for our parents. Our parents must come to school for Back to School Night and for teacher-parent conferences during the year."**

Year 3 focused on conflict resolution training. Year 4's theme was community service. "Our kids had been destroying the high-rise projects," Principal White says. "Now every student does community service.

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"We also set high expectations for our parents. Our parents *must* come to school for Back to School Night and for teacher-parent conferences during the year."

Jefferson Junior High School now has a waiting list of 400 to 500 students. It has won two U.S. Department of Education awards. In the city of Washington, D.C., it has

been recognized for having the highest student academic achievement, the greatest academic improvement and the highest attendance rate (its attendance rate used to be one of the worst). There have been no student pregnancies during the past five years.

### ***The No Putdowns Project***

The No Putdowns Project, based in Syracuse, New York, is a response to rising school violence and racial and ethnic intolerance. It has three goals:

1. To create a school and home environment that recognizes the destructive effects of putdowns;
2. To reject the use of putdowns in all interpersonal interactions; and
3. To replace putdowns with healthy communication skills.

A 5-week curriculum, developed by classroom teachers, uses videos, posters, contests, role-playing and other activities to achieve these goals. The curriculum is reinforced throughout the school year.

One participating parent commented: "I see a noticeable difference in how much my child enjoys school." Other parents report that family members now catch each other ("Hey, Mom, that's a putdown!") when they slip.

Twenty-five elementary and middle schools in central New York are now implementing the No Putdowns Project. Several have already reported that discipline referrals and student fights are down for the first time in many years.

### ***Participatory School Democracy***

Another schoolwide character development strategy, greatly under-used, challenges students to help govern the life of their school.

One of my favorite examples of this strategy comes from a school action project carried out by teacher Mary Ann Taylor when she took my graduate course, Teaching Moral Values. With some trepidation, she tackled the problem of her school cafeteria. She described it as "a war zone" where teacher aides yelled at children, students yelled at each other, food fights were common and the place was a mess when students left.

**Another schoolwide character development strategy, greatly under-used, challenges students to help govern the life of their school.**

Teacher Taylor set up a Cafeteria-Council with elected student delegates from each classroom. Being an elected delegate meant you had to *represent* your constituency's ideas, as expressed in class meetings.



At every grade level, classes held discussions: What are the characteristics of an ideal cafeteria? What should be rules for cafeteria manners? Delegates carried their classrooms' views into the Cafeteria Council's weekly meetings, where they discussed these ideas with teacher Taylor and the school's principal and shaped them into action proposals.

The Council also conducted a survey of all students, staff and parents on how to improve the cafeteria. It solicited everyone's ideas through a Suggestion Box. It published a monthly newsletter reporting progress.

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The positive outcomes of all this effort were many: Student cafeteria behavior improved greatly; students were enthusiastic about improvements in the cafeteria; parent feedback was positive; a recycling project was begun; and, most important, the school decided to keep its new delegate system of democratic student government as a way to deal with other problems in the school environment.

Similar student government efforts have been carried out at the high school level to bring students into a larger role of responsibility for solving school problems. In the

process, students are provided with the kind of opportunities for real-life moral action that develop the action side of character.

"The core problem facing our schools is a moral one," writes William Kilpatrick in *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*.<sup>5</sup> "All other problems derive from it. If students don't learn habits of courage and justice, curriculums designed to improve their self-esteem won't stop the epidemic of extortion, bullying, and violence; neither will courses designed to make them more sensitive to diversity."

Good character is what our children need and what our society needs. "Character," the Greek philosopher Heraclitus asserted, "is destiny." If we wish to have any hope of reversing our nation's downward moral slide and building a moral society, we must make character education our highest educational priority.

#### Notes

1. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
2. For information, write: Heartwood Institute, 12300 Perry Highway, Wexford, PA 15090.
3. For information, write: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 25 Kennard Road, Brookline, MA 02146.
4. David W. and Roger T. Johnson, "Critical Thinking Through Structured Controversy," *Educational Leadership* (May, 1988).
5. William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

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