

What is the History of Character Education?

1. Character education is as old as education itself. Down through history, all over the world, education has had two great goals: to help people become smart and to help them become good.
2. The American Founders believed that democracy has a special need for character education, because democracy is government by the people themselves. The people must therefore be good, must develop "democratic virtues": Respect for the rights of individuals, regard for law, voluntary participation in public life, and concern for the common good.
3. In the early days of the republic, the Bible was the source book of both moral and religious instruction. When disputes arose over whose Bible to use, William McGuffey offered his McGuffey Readers as a way to teach schoolchildren the "natural virtues" of honesty, hard work, thriftiness, kindness, patriotism, and courage.
4. Character education — instruction in virtue through edifying stories, the teacher's example, and discipline — remained a central part of the public school's mission until the middle part of the 20th century. It declined for several reasons:
 - The rise of logical positivism ("There is no moral truth, no objective right and wrong") and moral relativism ("All values are relative")
 - Personalism ("Each person should be free to choose his own values; who are we to impose our values?")
 - Increasing pluralism ("Whose values should we teach?")
 - The secularizing of society and the fear that teaching morality in the schools would mean teaching religion.
5. In the 1960s and 70s, values education that emphasized "process" or thinking skills — clarifying your values (values clarification), reasoning about values (moral dilemma discussions), and decision making processes — replaced character education's traditional emphasis on moral content (learning right from wrong and acting rightly).
6. As societal moral problems have worsened, character education has made a comeback. Adults realize that the young need moral direction. Parents and teachers have a responsibility to provide it — to pass on a moral heritage. The school has a responsibility to stand for good values and help students form their character around such values. Character education is directive rather than non-directive; it asserts the rightness of certain values — such as respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, and fairness — and helps students to understand, care about, and act upon these values in their lives.