

# The Fourth and Fifth Rs

## Respect and Responsibility

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### Building Character at Hilltop Elementary

Linda Babin, School Psychologist and Counselor

*In 1999, Hilltop Elementary School in Lynnwood, Washington, was one of seven elementary schools named a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership ([www.character.org](http://www.character.org)).*

In the early 90s, Hilltop Elementary School faced a trend that schools across the country were seeing: growing student disrespect for both adults and peers.

Our initial attempt to address this concern was to “get tough” about discipline. This approach made no substantial difference. Then, in the fall of 1993, we decided to begin the work of character development with our students with a focus on teaching respect and responsibility. Here are 12 components we view as central to our work:

**1. Strong parent involvement.** Parents were involved in our initial decision to strive to become a “school of character.” We invite each family to volunteer in classrooms for two hours per week; about 75 percent of our families accept this invitation. Parents also receive weekly letters from the principal and classroom teachers, including suggestions as to how they might foster a particular virtue with their children at home.

*I was opposed to doing character education at first. I said, “We have too much to teach already.” But then I saw the change in the kids. I saw the change in how staff related to each other. We’re a different school now. I look forward to coming to work.*

—A Hilltop Teacher

**2. Building a caring school community.** Hilltop’s motto is: “We are here to learn, to love, to care, to share, and to grow—together.” We work on building commu-

nity in every classroom. We nurture cross-age relationships through “buddy” classes, which pair an older class with a younger one. During the year, buddies do projects together, share lunch, and perform service. We begin each academic year with what we call our “New Year’s Day Assembly.” We introduce new staff and new students. We celebrate being back together as a family. We review schoolwide rules regarding respect and responsibility and safety. We ask students to think about and write down the goals they will work on during the coming school year.

**3. Class meetings.** The class meeting is the backbone of our program. We use class meetings for paying compliments and discovering our similarities and differences. If there’s a problem with cliques on the playground, or if people are leaving a mess in the classroom after projects, those are issues for class meetings.

**4. Reflection time.** Our teachers typically do “reflection time” for the last few minutes of the school day and/or at other times through the school day. Most often, they use Hilltop’s *Levels of Responsibility* chart to engage students in assessing their own behavior during that day or work period (see box, p. 2). Kids are usually very honest. Often they help each other think of ways they can do better. Reflection has been transformational for both students and staff. It helps students internalize the virtues. It helps us, as staff, keep our work alive. We are continually asking, “What’s working? Where are the problem spots?”

(Cont. on p. 5)





# Making Sense of Tolerance and Diversity

Thomas Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

Tolerance has often been a controversial issue for schools. Why is this so? On the one hand, tolerance seems like a core human virtue, essential for democracy and civilized life. The absence of tolerance is at the root of much evil: peer cruelty, unjust discrimination, hate crimes, religious and political persecution, and terrorism.

But if tolerance is defined, as it often is, as “the ability to accept the values and beliefs of others,” it poses a dilemma: How can you ask people to “accept” all people’s values when they may believe that some of those values are wrong? How, for example, can you ask people on opposite sides of the abortion and homosexuality debates to “accept” the validity of each other’s views? Contradictory views cannot both be right.

*Tolerance does not require us to accept other people's beliefs or behaviors. It does require us to respect every person's freedom of conscience.*

All schools can embrace tolerance as an essential civilizing virtue—if they define it correctly. Tolerance as an ethical virtue does not require us to accept other people’s beliefs or behaviors. Tolerance *does* require us to respect every person’s human dignity and human rights, including freedom of conscience.

Freedom of conscience, however, is not absolute. It is the liberty to make personal moral choices as long as those choices do not infringe on the rights of others. As an old saying puts it, “Your freedom to swing your fist ends where my chin begins.” Our own freedom of conscience may lead us to object to some of the moral choices that other people make. We might even try to persuade them that they are mistaken in their beliefs or behavior. However, the virtue of tolerance would keep us from coercively and unjustly interfering with others’ freedom to make decisions about their own lives.

Tolerance enables us to disagree, even profoundly, about controversial issues such as abortion, stem cell research, homosexuality, condoms in schools, capital punishment, and the like. Tolerance enables us to

debate our deepest differences in a civil and non-violent manner—a debate that is necessary for the development of enlightened and just public policies and for progress in resolving contested moral issues.

## Tolerance and Diversity

Some schools have replaced “tolerance” with what seems like a more positive virtue: “appreciation of diversity.” Students should in fact learn to value and when possible directly experience the richness of human diversity found within other races, religions, countries, and cultures. Appreciating diversity means trying to find the best in all people, just as we want them to find the best in us. The *Children’s Diversity Pledge* (box, p. 3), cooperative learning, and good multicultural literature are all ways of helping students learn about and affirm diversity in this ethical sense.

However, a problem with “diversity” as an ethical category is that it is all-inclusive, encompassing all differences. Suicide bombers are part of diversity. So are Ku Klux Klanners, internet hate sites, and cultures that oppress women. Some forms of diverse sexual behavior would meet with approval from some persons and disapproval from others. So if we’re educating students to “appreciate diversity,” we need to ask: What kind of diversity are we talking about?

Intellectual honesty requires us to acknowledge at least three kinds of diversity: (1) “*positive diversity*” (such as the different races, ethnic groups, and cultural strengths that make up our classrooms and communities); (2) “*negative diversity*” that we morally reject (such as belief systems that sanction hatred or abuse of human rights); and (3) “*controversial diversity*,” concerning matters about which people often do not agree (such as abortion and the proper relationship for sexual intimacy). “*Appreciating diversity*,” then, is an appropriate educational goal only with regard to category #1—diversity that we generally agree is positive or at least morally neutral. We obviously can’t ask people to “appreciate” values and behaviors that violate their conscience.

*There are three kinds of diversity: positive, negative, and controversial.*

In short, “appreciating diversity” can complement but

## Children's Diversity Pledge

I believe that all kids are different and special in their own way.

I believe that all kids deserve to be loved and respected for who they are.

I will work on being a good friend, so that all children feel welcomed around me.

I will not judge people because of where they live, the color of their skin, how they dress, their abilities, their spiritual beliefs, or whether they are a girl or a boy.

I can and will find the good in all people.

I will not tell or listen to jokes that make fun of other people.

I will be a peacemaker in my family and school.

I will show pride in my family and heritage.

I will learn as much as I can about the family traditions of other kids in my school.

—Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corp.

should not replace “tolerance” on the list of character education virtues because some diversity is morally controversial. We need tolerance in order to address, with honesty and civility, that which divides us.

### *Tolerance and Sexual Orientation*

Many of the most divisive issues in our culture fall into the sexual domain. Consider one that schools often struggle with: the issue of sexual orientation. One recent magazine article urged schools to “promote positive attitudes toward gay families, celebrate Gay Pride Week just as you do Black, Hispanic, and Women's History Months, and infuse famous gay people into your curriculum”—arguing that such steps are necessary in order to create “a welcoming school atmosphere for gay students and gay parents” and “an environment free of harassment, homophobia, and discrimination.” Is such advice educationally and ethically sound?

### *Matters of Truth and Fairness*

Here are nine points—matters of truth and fairness, I believe—that can guide schools in their approach to the complex, controversial issue of sexual orientation.

**1. Schools must teach students to respect all people and should not tolerate violence or harassment toward any student or staff member for any reason.** All persons, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve to be treated with justice and respect. Slurs such as “fag” should not be permitted in the school environment any

more than we permit ethnic or racial slurs.

**2. “Homophobia” is not a useful term in reasoned and respectful discussion of homosexuality.** If this term were used only to mean “fear or hatred of homosexuals,” all persons of character would agree we should reject such irrational attitudes. But “homophobia” is often either not defined or used in a broad-brush way to refer to any disapproving judgment of homosexuality. It is clearly insulting to call other people “phobic” because their conscience leads them to make a particular moral judgment. Ethical discourse requires a language of respect.

**3. The school can create a caring and welcoming community for all students and parents without affirming all the lifestyle choices that may be represented in its student and parent community.** We can affirm all members of the school community by treating everyone with warmth and respect, nurturing the gifts of all students, and inviting all students and parents to contribute actively to the life of the school. The school cannot, however, legitimately treat a controversial sexual behavior as a “cultural category” comparable to race, ethnicity, or religion and then affirm that sexual category in the name of having an “anti-bias curriculum.” For the school to affirm a homosexual lifestyle is to abuse its moral authority by giving official school approval to a behavior that many people (59% in a 1997 Gallup Poll), as a matter of conscience, believe to be morally wrong.

**4. The origins of sexual orientation are uncertain.** Many students think there is a “gene” that “causes” a person to have a particular sexual orientation. Research, in fact, reveals no consensus on the factors influencing sexual orientation. In “Human Sexual Orientation: The Biological Theories Reappraised” (*Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50:3, March 1993), Columbia University researchers William Byne and Bruce Parsons review 135 studies and conclude: “There is no evidence at present to substantiate a biological theory, just as there is no evidence to support any single psychological explanation.”

**5. Sexual orientation does not determine sexual behavior.** A person’s sexual behavior is always a choice. For example, a great many persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, choose to abstain from sexual intimacy for moral, religious, or health reasons.

**6. Health education classes should promote abstinence regardless of sexual orientation.** Sexual intimacy outside a monogamous commitment is high-risk behavior regardless of who your partner is. Condoms provide no significant protection against the three leading STDs (herpes, chlamydia, and human papilloma virus) infect-

ing sexually active teens, inadequate protection against AIDS (in approximately 100 studies, the failure rate has ranged between 10 and 30%), and no protection against the mental, emotional, and character-damaging consequences of premature sexual involvement.

**7. *The long-range welfare of students who are confused about their sexual identity may be best served by helping them delay self-labeling.*** In a study by Gary Remafedi, M.D. (*Pediatrics*, 89:4, 1992) of 34,707 Minnesota teens, 25.9% of 12-year-olds said they were uncertain if they were heterosexual or homosexual. (By adulthood, only about 2% will self-identify as homosexual.) Another study by Remafedi (*Pediatrics*, 87:6, 1991) found a significantly higher risk of attempted suicide among teenagers who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. However, *"for each year's delay in bisexual or homosexual self-labeling, the odds of a suicide attempt diminished by 80%."* These data suggest that schools should avoid doing anything that would lead a young person to prematurely (and perhaps erroneously) self-label as homosexual or bisexual.

In their 1995 *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems*, psychiatrists M. Lundy and G. Rekers point to a second danger: Once an adolescent male identifies himself as gay, he is likely to initiate sexual activity that involves life-threatening health risks. Epidemiologists estimate that 30% of all 20-year-old sexually active homosexual males will be HIV-positive or dead of AIDS by the time they are 30.

**8. *If a school treats the issue of sexual orientation in the curriculum, it should, while teaching tolerance as respect for persons, acknowledge that people differ in their conscience judgments in this area.*** As a matter of intellectual honesty, the school must acknowledge the controversy regarding homosexual and bisexual behavior. Some people consider such behaviors morally acceptable, but others do not. Objections are often religiously grounded. For example, orthodox Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, and orthodox Jews believe (though individual members of these faith traditions sometimes dissent from their religion's historical teaching) that sexual intimacy is reserved by God for a husband and wife in marriage. In this view, the two purposes of sex—the expression of faithful, committed love in a complementary union and the procreation of new life issuing from that union—can be fulfilled only in heterosexual marriage. By this standard, *all* forms of sex outside heterosexual marriage are considered wrong.

This is not a "prejudice" or "phobia" but a deep belief about the purposes of sex. Again, it is neither respectful nor just to denigrate this conscience-based conviction by labeling it "homophobic" or "heterosexist" and then treating it as if it were the moral equivalent of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Conscience-based judgments about homosexual and bisexual sex are judgments about the rightness of certain sexual behaviors, not judgments about the worth or dignity of persons.

**9. *The school should teach that while rational people agree on the inalienable human rights belonging to all persons, they debate what civil rights should be extended to particular groups.*** *Human rights*—such as the right to life and freedom of expression—belong to every person by virtue of being human; the government does not "create" these rights and may not take them away. By contrast, *civil rights*—such as the right to marry or adopt children—are granted at society's discretion on the basis of what the Constitution requires and judgments of what serves the common good.

ot surprisingly, because of differing conscience convictions about sexual behavior, civil rights in this area have been a matter of public policy debate and varying judicial decisions. In some cases, the courts have found in favor of gays' and lesbians' claims to civil rights such as equal employment opportunity, entitlement to equal job benefits for couples living together, the right to adopt children, and the like. In other cases, the courts have ruled differently, deciding, for example, that a landlord, on grounds of religious conscience, does not have to rent to unmarried couples, and that the Boy Scouts, on grounds of its moral code, does

***Tolerance must include respect for moral and religious conscience.***

not have to admit leaders or members who publicly oppose that code. The courts ruled that New York City could not compel the Catholic archdiocese of New York to hire child-care workers who professed a sexual lifestyle that violated Church teachings. And so on. Tolerance must include respect for moral and religious conscience, or it is not tolerance at all. ■

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(Cont. from p. 1.)

**5. A social skills approach to discipline.** Most of our work around discipline is now the proactive teaching of social skills. We emphasize manners—saying “please” and “thank you,” holding the door for someone coming behind you, etc. Visitors always comment on the good manners of our students. Problem-solving skills (*stop, think, and plan*) are taught throughout our school by all staff. We do a lot of mediation in all areas of our school—helping students listen to each other and work things out.

**6. The Window Room.** A unique part of Hilltop’s approach to discipline is its multi-purpose Window Room. This bright, sunny room (which in fact has an abundance of windows) is a counseling center, staffed by two educational assistants with involvement and supervision by the school counselor. Between 85-90% of the visits are for a positive reason (see box).

**7. A monthly focus.** For the first three years of our program we focused only on respect and responsibility. Later, to deepen our work, we decided to focus on one virtue a month. Our monthly virtues are: *perseverance/hard work, cooperation/sportsmanship, service/citizenship, kindness/caring, tolerance, fairness/justice, courage, trustworthiness/honesty, and self-discipline.*

## Levels of Responsibility

### Level 4: Respectful, Responsible, Helps Others

**Characteristics:** All the characteristics of Level 3, plus doing what is assigned and more, giving help when the opportunity arises.

### Level 3: Respectful, Responsible

**Characteristics:** Hard work, doing what is expected, respecting the rights and work of others, cleaning up work carefully, using time well, using materials carefully and responsibly, productive conversation, persistence.

### Level 2: Works When Reminded

**Characteristics:** Work accomplished with reminders or after questioning by adult present, not much work seen, conversation unproductive—may be silly, works sometimes but at other times not working.

### Level 1: Not Working

**Characteristics:** No work or very little work accomplished at end of time, wandering, unfocused.

### Level 0: Bothering Others

**Characteristics:** Loud talking, often silly or goofy, work accomplished is minimum or carelessly finished, actions interfere with another’s ability to concentrate, abuse of materials.

## The Window Room

**Quiet work space.** Some students come to the Window Room to find a quiet place to work, away from all distractions. Some do academic work in pairs or small groups.

**Alternative to recess.** Rather than outdoor recess, many students choose to come to the Window Room to play games, read, do art work, or just talk to each other.

**Positive reinforcement.** Staff sometimes send students to the Window Room in appreciation of especially positive behavior or commendable performance in the classroom.

**Cool-down time.** When a staff member is upset with a student’s behavior, or when a student is upset about something, the Window Room can be a place for cooling off and getting back to appropriate choices and behavior. Depending on the circumstances, the supervising adult may ask the student to write about what occurred, sometimes offering an apology.

**Interpersonal problem-solving.** Students may come alone or with another person. Sometimes an adult guides the student(s) in working out a solution; at other times they work it out on their own.

**Emotional support.** Some students come to seek support from an adult regarding a problem they might be having at school or home. Some of our students are scheduled for weekly one-on-one time with an adult in the Window Room.

**In-school suspension.** Occasionally, misbehaving students are sent to the Window Room as a place to complete assigned work away from their classroom.

**8. Curricular integration.** We regularly integrate character education into reading, writing, social studies, and physical education. One approach is teaching virtues through discussing stories—both fictional and those found in the daily newspaper. (Sample assignment: “Look in the paper for examples of kindness or cruelty; bring those in to share with the class.”) Picture books such as *The Empty Pot* (about a boy who had the courage to appear before the emperor with the “empty truth”) have proved to be a good source of character lessons, but so have chapter books such as *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Many teachers also have students write about the qualities they admire in famous historical and contemporary figures and then write about their own talents and character strengths. Faculty say that integrating character education has made academic subject matter more meaningful and motivating for children. Simultaneously, we have seen a slow, steady rise in students’ standardized test scores.

**9. Recognition.** Many schools rely heavily on extrinsic rewards to motivate good behavior, but we stress social recognition rather than material rewards. For ex-

# LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS

4 = Consistently; 3 = Usually; 2 = Occasionally; 1 = Rarely (Graded by trimester in boxes below.)

<p><b>RESPECT</b></p> <p>Demonstrates empathy and kindness toward others; appreciates diversity; follows classroom and school rules; takes care of classroom and school environment.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>COOPERATION</b></p> <p>Listens actively to others; contributes to the group effort; shares material and responsibilities; helps others.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>RESPONSIBILITY</b></p> <p>Demonstrates self-control and self-management, handles frustration appropriately. Takes responsibility for personal actions; acts as a responsible citizen.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>PROBLEM SOLVING/ DECISION MAKING</b></p> <p>Resolves problems in a way that shows consideration for various points of view; can disagree thoughtfully; generates alternatives to personal and interpersonal problems.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>REFLECTION/ SELF-AWARENESS</b></p> <p>Shows awareness of own thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs and expresses these in appropriate ways. Reflects on and evaluates learning and behavior for the purpose of improvements; sets goals.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>INDEPENDENT WORK HABITS</b></p> <p>Plans and organizes time and materials; locates information and materials to complete tasks; follows directions; finishes projects and assignments on time; persists when challenged. Asks for help when needed.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

ample, when a student holds a door, an adult might say, “Thank you for holding the door. That was a very thoughtful thing to do.” We constantly try to help students see how their behavior affects others. We also have Celebration Assemblies. These recognize students by giving them the opportunity to perform—to do musical recitals, skits, plays, and readings of poems and stories, many of which highlight the virtue of the month. Student performances are then repeated at community events, other schools, nursing homes, etc.

**10. Justice Committee.** Our Justice Committee, like the class meetings, teaches students democratic process. The Committee meets weekly with our principal. Representatives of grades 4-6 serve for three meetings. This approximates the experience of jury duty. The students listen to concerns that are schoolwide and make suggestions for solving these problems.

For example, one year a group of students came to the Justice Committee and said they didn’t like the bad language some kids were using on the playground. The Justice Committee invited the offending students to appear before the Committee. These boys said sometimes they used bad language just to be cool, sometimes because they were angry. The Committee asked them to write out a contract promising to improve their language on the playground and come back in four weeks to report their progress. Language did in fact improve.

**11. Nurturing transitions.** In the past two years, Hilltop has experienced a turnover in approximately half its staff, primarily due to retirements and moves. This included bringing on our new principal, Penny Smith. In order to support new staff coming on board, we have held monthly meetings to discuss specific strategies and the foundational philosophies of character education. Our new staff have told us that they feel tremendously supported as they are welcomed into the flock and that the good teamwork and cooperation that goes on among all staff is obvious and visible to their fresh eyes.

**12. Integrating character into the report card.** The Edmonds School District (population 20,000 students) has incorporated Lifelong Learning Skills into its elementary-level reporting system (see box, above).

As an “old-timer” who has been at Hilltop for 15 years, I can see the tangible results of our efforts. The climate of our school has improved so significantly that almost anyone who visits our school comments on it. Not only have we seen the steady improvement in our students’ academic achievement, but it is now “cool” to be respectful and polite. Peer pressure is on our side. Students new to our school are often “educated” by their peers as to how we treat one another at Hilltop. ■

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