

# *The Fourth and Fifth Rs*

## *Respect and Responsibility*

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### *The Content of Our Character: Ten Essential Virtues*

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In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. said he dreamed of the day when all Americans “will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

What is the content of good character? This is the first question a school must address in developing a quality character education program. How a school defines character—what it includes or omits in its target virtues—will shape the goals and activities of its character education initiative.

Broadly speaking, the content of good character is virtue. Virtues, such as justice and kindness, are *habits*, dispositions to behave in a morally good way. They are objectively good human qualities, good for us whether we know it or not. They are affirmed by societies and religions around the world. Because they are intrinsically good, virtues have a claim on our conscience.

#### *Choosing the School's Target Virtues*

What are the particular virtues a given school should focus on in its character education efforts? To answer that question, a school should ask: *What qualities do we want our graduates to possess? What moral and intellectual strengths will best equip them to lead purposeful, productive, and fulfilling lives and to build a better world?*

In small groups, staff can brainstorm and list these qualities on sheets of butcher paper and then post their lists around the room for all to view. (Nearly always, different groups list many of the same qualities.)

A next step is to compare the character qualities generated by the staff with a pre-existing conceptual scheme defining good character, such as the “ten essential vir-

ties” and their supporting qualities (see below).

When staff compare their lists with a scheme such as the ten essential virtues, they can ask: What commonalities do we see? Which virtues are the best match for our school's culture and the developmental level of our students?



Whatever the list of target virtues a staff settles on, it's important that (a) it be comprehensive, incorporating all the important virtues in one way or another, and (b) the staff own it. Simultaneously or subsequently, surveys should be distributed to parents and students so that their input can be incorporated.

#### *Ten Essential Virtues*

Which virtues are most important for strong character? Here are ten that are recognized and taught by nearly all philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions.

##### *1. Wisdom*

Wisdom is good judgment. The ancient Greeks considered wisdom to be the master virtue, the one that directs all the others. It enables us to make reasoned decisions that are both good for us and good for others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice—when to act, how to act, and how to balance different virtues when they conflict (as they do, for example, when telling the honest truth might hurt someone's feelings). Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to see what is truly important in life, and to set priorities. As the ethicist Richard Gula points out, “We cannot do right unless we first see correctly.”

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## 2. Justice

Justice means respecting the rights of all persons. The Golden Rule, which directs us to treat other persons as we wish to be treated, is a principle of justice that can be found in cultures and religions around the world. Since we ourselves are persons, justice also includes self-respect, a proper regard for our own rights and dignity. Schools, in their character education efforts, often center on justice because it includes so many of the interpersonal virtues—*civility, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance* (correctly understood not as approval of other people’s beliefs or behaviors but as respect for their freedom of conscience as long as they do not violate the rights of others). A concern for justice—and the capacity for moral indignation in the face of injustice—inspires us to work as citizens to build a more just society and world.

## 3. Fortitude

Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is often the hard one. One high school’s motto says: “Do the hard right instead of the easy wrong.” A familiar maxim says, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Fortitude, as the educator James Stenson points out, is the inner toughness that enables us to overcome or withstand hardship, defeats, inconvenience, and pain. *Courage, resilience, patience, perseverance, endurance, and a healthy self-confidence* are all aspects of fortitude. Teen suicide has tripled in the past three decades; one reason may be that many young people are unprepared to deal with life’s inevitable disappointments. We need to teach our students that we develop our character more through our sufferings than our successes, that setbacks can make us stronger if we don’t give in to feeling sorry for ourselves.

## 4. Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to *control our temper, regulate our sensual appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation*. It’s the power to resist temptation, to wait, and to delay gratification in the pursuit of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of self-control in the moral life: “Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us.” Reckless, self-destructive, and criminal behaviors flourish in the absence of self-control.

## 5. Love

Love goes beyond justice; it gives more than fairness requires. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for the

sake of another. A cluster of important human virtues—*empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism* (love of what is noble in one’s country), and *forgiveness*—make up the virtue of love. In *With Love and Prayers*, F. Washington Jarvis writes: “Love—selfless love that expects nothing back—is the most powerful force in the universe.” Love is a demanding virtue. If we really took seriously the familiar injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself,” says an essay on this virtue, would we not make every effort to avoid gossiping about others and calling attention to their faults, given how sensitive we are to such things said about us?

## 6. Positive Attitude

If you have a negative attitude in life, you’re a burden to yourself and others. If you have a positive attitude, you’re an asset to yourself and others. The character strengths of *hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor* are all part of a positive attitude. All of us, young and old, need to be reminded that our attitude is something we *choose*. “Most people,” Abraham Lincoln said, “are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” Said Martha Washington: “I have learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other with us in our minds wherever we go.” A recent book by Michael Loehrer, *How to Change a Rotten Attitude: A Manual for Building Virtue and Character in Middle and High School Students*, recognizes the great importance of attitude in educating for character.

## 7. Hard Work

There is no substitute in life for hard work. “I challenge you,” says the great basketball coach John Wooden, “to show me one single solitary individual who achieved his or her own personal greatness without lots of hard work.” Hard work includes the virtues of *initiative, diligence, goal-setting, and resourcefulness*.

## 8. Integrity

Integrity is *adhering to moral principle, being faithful to moral conscience, keeping our word, and standing up for what we believe*. To have integrity is to be “whole,” so that what we say and do in different situations is consistent rather than contradictory. Integrity is different from honesty, which tells the truth to others. Integrity is telling the truth to oneself. “The most dangerous form of deception,” says author Josh Billings, “is self-deception.” Self-deception enables us to do whatever we wish, even great evil, and find a reason to justify our actions.

## 9. Gratitude

Gratitude is often described as the secret of a happy life. It reminds us that we all drink from wells we did not dig. It moves us to count our everyday blessings. Asked what was the biggest lesson he learned from drifting twenty-one days in a life raft lost in the Pacific, the war hero Eddie Rickenbacker answered: “That if you have all the fresh water you want to drink and all the food you want to eat, you ought never to complain about anything.” The writer Anne Husted Burleigh observes, “Gratitude, like love, is not a feeling but an act of the will. We choose to be thankful, just as we choose to love.”

## 10. Humility

Humility can be considered the foundation of the whole moral life. Humility is necessary for the acquisition of the other virtues because it makes us aware of our imperfections and leads us to try to become a better person. “Humility,” writes the educator David Isaacs, “is recognizing both our inadequacies and abilities and pressing our abilities into service without attracting attention or expecting applause.” “Every virtue turns worthless,” writes the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, “if pride creeps into it—which happens whenever we glory in our goodness.” Humility enables us to take responsibility for our faults and failings (rather than blaming someone else), apologize for them, and seek to make amends. The psychiatrist Louis Tartaglia, in his book, *Flawless! The Ten Most Common Character Flaws and What You Can Do About Them*, says that in over twenty years as a therapist he has found the most common character flaw to be “addiction to being right.” (“Do you find yourself discussing disagreements,” he asks, “long after they are finished, just to prove you were right?”) The key to character growth in therapy and life, he says, is simply the humble willingness to change.

The life of virtue is obviously difficult. All of us, adults as well as children, fall short in the practice of these ten virtues. It helps to think of each of the virtues as a continuum and to focus on making progress in practicing each more consistently. We can also take heart from knowing, as the educator James Coughlin points out, that the virtues are linked. A decision to work seriously on even one virtue will be likely to pull all the other virtues up. ■

**Adapted from Tom Lickona's forthcoming, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (Simon and Schuster, Feb., 2004); available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).**

## TEN STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING THE VIRTUES

(Many may be used in combination.)

1. **A virtue a month**
2. **A virtue a week**, related to a monthly theme
3. **A 3- or 4-year cycle of virtues** (six one year, six others the next, etc.) The *Core Essentials Curriculum* ([www.coreessentials.org](http://www.coreessentials.org)) is an example of a 3-year program.
4. **A yearly theme** (e.g., “The Year of Courage,” “The Year of Peace”), often in combination with a quarterly focus (e.g., “Promoting Peace in Our Classrooms,” “Promoting Peace in Our School,” “Promoting Peace in Our Families,” “Promoting Peace in Our World”).
5. **Assigning a developmentally appropriate virtue to each grade level** for study over the entire school year (e.g., orderliness in kindergarten, effort in first grade, kindness in second grade), thereby affording the opportunity for in-depth study, repeated practice, and genuine habit formation.
6. **A common set of character expectations** that all grade levels work on year round, with individual teachers choosing which virtues to emphasize at any given time through a book, activity, or curriculum unit. Montclair Kimberley Academy ([www.montclairkimberley.org](http://www.montclairkimberley.org)), an award-winning, pre-K-12 independent school, uses this approach.
7. **A character education curriculum framework**, such as the K-6 *Core Virtues* ([www.linkinstitute.org](http://www.linkinstitute.org)), that uses grade-appropriate virtues and corresponding curricular resources from literature, history, and the fine arts.
8. **A published character education curriculum** with sequenced lesson plans. Examples: *Second Step* ([www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)), *Positive Action* ([www.posaction.com](http://www.posaction.com)), and *Life Skills* ([www.kovalik.com](http://www.kovalik.com)).
9. **A character education process model**, such as the *Caring School Community* (elementary; [www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org)), the *Responsive Classroom* (elementary; [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)), and our Center’s 12-point comprehensive approach (K-12; [www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/12pnt\\_iv.htm](http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs/12pnt_iv.htm)). Process models are based on classroom and schoolwide strategies such as developing positive relationships, character-based discipline, and integrating character and academics.
10. **A school culture approach** that emphasizes creating an ethos of moral and intellectual excellence and stresses character in all curricular and co-curricular programs but doesn’t necessarily name a target set of virtues to which the school formally commits.

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# Teaching Character Through the Classics

June Saunders, Middle School English Teacher



Middle school is a time of questioning. Moral questions present themselves with urgency: “Why is there so much injustice in the world?” “What are good and evil?” “Who am I in relation to the universe?” “How and whom will I love?” “What do I want to be like?” Great literature lends itself superbly to character education in middle school, for it raises—and sometimes answers—these very questions.

Reading great literature can engage and develop moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Often the conscious intent of the author was to stimulate moral reasoning. Literature also arouses emotion because of the reader's involvement with the characters and the vicissitudes of their lives. Finally, a good story is a vicarious experience that can influence the students' actual choices and actions in life.

In my opinion, contemporary Young Adult literature, so widely used, does not develop these dimensions of character as well as the classics do. In many Young Adult offerings, one or both of the parents are out of the picture due to dysfunction, drug abuse, divorce, or desertion. The young people in these books cope as best they can. Other “YA” books deal with drug use, gangs, violence, and sex.

Educators Suzanne Reid and Sharon Stringer raise questions about the psychological impact of YA literature: “Young people hear so much about disastrous behavior that they may begin to consider the abuse of drugs, sex, or personal boundaries as normal: ‘Everybody goes through this’ becomes the mantra. What about focusing young people’s attention on heroic ideals and the communal values of literature traditionally taught in schools? Would we be fostering a better future by encouraging a recommitment to these ideals rather than exposing children to knowledge that might lead to disillusionment or despair?”

## *Advantages of the Classics*

Of course, children in classic literature had their problems too. Huck Finn is the abused child of an alcoholic father. His mother is missing or dead. Jim Hawkins of *Treasure Island* takes off to sea after the death of his father and the terrorizing of his mother by pirates. Oliver Twist is an abandoned orphan. The difference, however, is that these characters resolve their problems through the moral choices they make. They do not merely cope; they conquer adversity through good character.

Huck Finn is a cheerful liar most of the time—except he will not lie to himself. All his self-protective fibs do not take away from the fact that on that raft Huck confronts the truth about racism, slavery, and the relationship between man and man with honesty and courage. His moral choice to work for slave Jim’s freedom is pivotal to the resolution of the story. Jim Hawkins saves the day through bravery and loyalty exceeding his years. *Oliver Twist* propels himself out of his situation through his virtues. Twist wants nothing to do with the Artful Dodger once he knows that he is a thief, and there is nothing charming about Fagin’s gang of thieves. If any readers might be considering a life of crime in answer to a difficult family situation, the literary ends of Nancy, Bill Sikes, and Fagin should give them great pause.

The key message of these books is that character is destiny, even when fate has dealt a person a bad hand. This message is well worth applying to the less desperate situations most children face, and especially to the more serious ones that they encounter.

In my experience, middle school children can respond positively to classic literature and find it relevant to their lives, especially if it is given a character education focus. I designed a classics-based, character-conscious language arts program at my school to correlate with social studies. We were to read fine literature by, or about, famous people or legends from the time periods they were studying: the Dark and Middle Ages.

Let me say that I nearly junked the whole program mid-year, full of despair. Getting children to read good books, let alone comprehend and appreciate them, is an uphill battle. Part of the appeal of the YA literature genre is that the language is very accessible. The books engage the children easily, whereas the classics do not. It takes special selection to find kid-friendly classics.

## *Beginning with "Beowulf"*

We started out with “Beowulf” and the concept of a hero, which they really enjoyed. We then progressed to King Arthur, the story of Guenevere and Lancelot, the code of chivalry, and some explorations of purity as depicted in Tennyson’s shimmering “Sir Galahad.” They

liked that less. We read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, most of which, I am sorry to say, they did not seem to understand—not even the jokes. The children acted out “Saint George and the Dragon” with their own homemade props, which they enjoyed doing, and they also designed vignettes around some cleaned-up, age-appropriate *Canterbury Tales* dealing with relationships. Tolkien's translation of *Sir Orfeo* was food for thought about loyalty, marriage, and love.

We went on to historical figures like Joan of Arc and Sir Thomas More, whose lives had moral lessons to teach and who have generated literature, plays, and movies reaching into our own time. About mid-year, though, they were beginning to complain, “Why do we have to know about all this old stuff and these old people anyway?” I opted to compromise on the historical element and move on to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The Middle Earth of Tolkien's imaginary world is full of dragons, armor, swords, shields, honor, and mythical creatures. It's beautifully written, vocabulary-rich, and chock-full of character material.

We read *Fellowship* in its entirety aloud in class. We paused on such things as Gandalf's pity and mercy speech to Frodo; they wrote reflective essays on that. Frodo cries out to the great wizard Gandalf that it is a pity his uncle didn't kill troublesome Gollum long ago. Gandalf replies: “Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and mercy, not to strike without need . . . Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.” These few lines in *Fellowship* open up profound avenues of thought that reach back deeply into the Western moral tradition.

We traced out Sam's growth from servant to bosom companion through his attitude of selfless service to Frodo. We talked about friendship. We talked about loyalty. We talked about courage in the face of overwhelming peril and perseverance in the face of despair.

Though it was a long and hard road, by the end, students were openly thankful that they had encountered the book. Here, in their words, are some of the moral lessons they had gleaned:

*“You should never judge a person by his or her looks.”*

*“I learned that to have a really good friend like Sam, you have to be loyal yourself.”*

*“This book taught me that even little people, or one person, can destroy evil.”*

They also looked at the movie, “The Lord of the Rings,” differently after having experienced the book. Some said the book made them feel as if they were *in* the adventure, much more so than the movie. They were indignant that some of the most enchanting parts of the book were left out of the movie or were, in their opinion, poorly done. They had taken a step toward media literacy—a crucial character education skill.

### *Discovering the Universals of Human Existence*

I believe that classic literature and character education go together like the proverbial horse and carriage. Literature needs the character educator to interpret, direct, and sometimes challenge its teachings. Character educators need literature to provide rich material for discussion. Teachers can help students analyze characters' lives and choices and discuss issues of consequences and meaning, yet be several steps removed from personal discussions that may embarrass the students and cause them to withdraw. Further, both classic literature and character education rest on the same premise: There are universals in human existence that are important to discover in order to live better and more meaningful lives.

*Great books show students that generations before them have grappled with good and evil.*

In the movie “Shadowlands,” C. S. Lewis's character said: “We read to know we are not alone.” Advocates of YA literature say that it helps students feel they are not alone in their struggles, not marked as different or unacceptable because of the private problems they face. I submit that great literature performs this function in a far more effective way. Great books show students that generations before them have grappled with light and darkness, despair and faith, good and evil, courage and cowardice, love and hate, and the finding of one's self on a journey toward something else. These are the great concerns of human existence.

To know that others have faced them and left some markers along the way brings children into a transcendent sense of human belonging where they truly know they are not alone. ■

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# Coach's Checklist

Dr. Matthew Davidson, Research Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

The Coach's Checklist is a short version of the 50-item **Coach's Character Development Self-Evaluation Checklist**, available for downloading at <http://www.cortland.edu/c4n5rs>.

**COACH'S CHECKLIST DIRECTIONS:** *The following checklist is designed to provide information on coaches' approach to character development. The information WILL NOT be used to evaluate coaches. Rather, it provides important information that can guide future discussions of character development in sports. The checklist begins with several open-ended questions (items 1-3); please provide as much information as possible. Then, respond to items 4 - 17 by circling the number indicating how frequently you engage in the activity. (Additional space can be provided below each of these items for persons to explain their responses.)*

*If you feel comfortable, please also provide the personal information below. It is helpful to see how perspectives differ based on coaching level and sport. It is not required, however, if you prefer to remain anonymous.*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Sport \_\_\_\_\_

Coaching Role \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_

1. As a coach, I think character development involves . . .
2. As a coach, I try to develop positive character in my players by . . .
3. As a coach, I find the most frequent character-related problems we experience are . . .

**1 = Never      2 = Rarely      3 = Sometimes      4 = Usually      5=Always**

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 4. At the beginning of the season, coaches, players, and their parents explicitly discuss the core values that will define our team.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 5. I model good character and explicitly discuss my actions with the team, including my mistakes.   | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 6. I find specific roles for each member of the team and emphasize the value and importance of each role for overall team success.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 7. We discuss ways to help each other improve and to maximize personal and team achievement.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 8. I promote an attitude in my athletes that challenges them to win and lose with integrity.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 9. Team members are given regular opportunities to set personal goals related to improving their character and their game performance.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 10. On our team, we define and discuss the hallmark qualities of leadership (e.g., honesty, responsibility, and respect).   | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 11. I spend time developing leadership skills in my athletes that extend beyond game performance so that they are prepared to be leaders in other areas of their lives.   | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 12. If problems occur on our team, we discuss them together as a team.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 13. I provide regular time to talk individually with athletes about both performance and character issues.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 14. I begin practice and games with a clear communication of the goals for the game, and end games and practices with a reflection on how well we met our established goals.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 15. I communicate the importance of good character in other areas of my athletes' lives.  | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 16. I monitor individual character development and work with athletes to make a plan for improvement.   | 1   2   3   4   5 |
| 17. I conduct exit-interviews with team members (e.g., "A character lesson I learned from being on this team is . . ."; "Something I would change to improve the character and performance of this team is . . ."). | 1   2   3   4   5 |

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