

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

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Identity and Adolescents: How Adults Can Help

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The elder of two daughters, Sarah barely talked to her family anymore. She was doing poorly in school, and her previously good friends were replaced with kids who were drinking and using drugs. When she would not return home, her parents often found her at an apartment with older kids, cutting class, and smoking marijuana. Sarah no longer did any homework and was struggling to pass the 10th grade. Regardless of house rules, she came and went as she pleased. Try as they might, this previously close family could not seem to reach its drifting member.

Dan's older brother had been in and out of rehab for most of his adolescence. Dan, however, had always been close to his parents and a compliant child, for which they were thankful. He went to church with his parents, tried hard in school, and made them feel like they had done things right with this child. Then, with no warning signs, came the call from the high school that Dan was caught selling marijuana. Further investigation revealed that Dan was also failing most of his classes. His devastated parents could not believe this was their Dan.

Molly was the "easy child." It was her dramatic little sister that kept the family going with demands, tantrums, and outrageous behavior. Molly played soccer on the team her father coached, was a member of the pom-pom team, and earned mostly A's. Then at age 15, like the beginning of a bad dream, her parents discovered that she was drinking, using drugs, having sex, skipping class, and now failing. What happened to the happy, involved daughter who was such a joy to be around?

Not uncommonly in my practice, I see previously model children who arrive at the magic age of 15 and seem to depart from their compliant, predictable

patterns to become angry, defiant strangers participating in risky, often self-destructive behaviors. Developmentally, it is at about this age that teenagers experience a more intense drive for autonomy. It becomes critical not to be an extension of their parents but a separate individual. "You can't control my life!" becomes their battle cry.

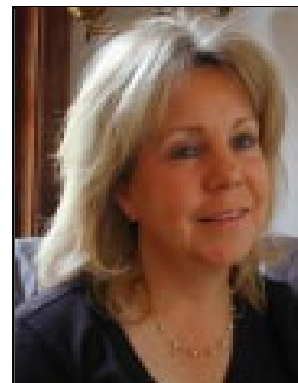
But then the question arises, "Who will?" If the sense of self, or personal identity, is not adequately developed within the adolescent by this time, the attempt to forge an identity separate from their parents can result in extreme, disruptive, and out-of-control behaviors.

The Problem of "Anti-Identity"

Some adolescents' only goal concerning their sense of self is to *not* become either of their parents. These young people, in search of who to be, adopt an "anti-identity." This amounts to anticipating what a parent wants and simply doing or saying the opposite. Often this leads to problems that warrant adult intervention.

Some teens adopt an "anti-identity."

In Molly's family, her father was clearly the head of the household. He made all of the major decisions involving their two daughters. In family sessions Molly would rage at him, "I played soccer and did good in school for *you*. You never cared about what I wanted! It was always about what you wanted me to do—and Mom, you never took my side. You always let him win. I'm not doing what you want anymore. I'm living my life



for me!” As it often happens, Molly chose the most obvious, dramatic, and easily available ways to show her father he was not in charge. Through casual sexual activity, frequent and varied substance abuse, and a disregard for all family norms and rules, she claimed her life as her own, at a tremendous cost to all.

Raising Children to Have a Sense of Self

The importance of the development of identity in children and adolescents has received inadequate attention in the information glut about child-rearing bombarding parents and educators. Young people who know what they think, feel, and want have happier, safer, and more productive lives. So the challenge becomes, how do we raise children to have a sense of self on which to build their lives?

If young people have been steadily guided from childhood in the process of self-discovery, by age 15 they will be ready to begin refining their selection of tastes, values, and directions. But if they have been simply walking in lock-step with their parents, doing what they are told, they are in no way prepared to begin taking charge of their lives. These young persons are at great risk to need to rebel in order to show their parents, “I am not you!” And they will win. This is a battle that no parent ever wants to engage in, because all it produces is casualties.

Offering Choices

The process of decision-making helps determine who each of us becomes. Beginning when a child first understands the spoken word, we can offer the opportunity to make choices. This gives children the message that they are separate persons, their opinions matter, and their voices are heard. If children grow up with the idea that they can make decisions to create a life that works for them, the critical process of identity-building is under way. But when parents continually intervene, run interference for them, and deny them the opportunity to determine personal preferences when appropriate, those children cannot grow into teenagers who are comfortable becoming separate human beings.

Some children seem to begin life already knowing who they are and what they think. For them a sense of self seems to be a given. For other children the process of uncovering a personal identity requires more directed effort. Sarah’s mother reports that Sarah, unlike her little sister, always had a difficult time knowing what she wanted. Her tendency had always been to go along with the plans of others instead of interjecting her own.

Regardless of the child’s personality predisposition, parents can help by offering areas of safe choice. Even if the child’s decision turns out to be a mistake, it becomes a learning opportunity to evaluate and make a better choice the next time. In time, looking inward and making personal choices becomes a gratifying, automatic means of directing a life enhanced by individuality.

Questions Instead of Commands

The building of identity is also strengthened by parent-child communication that takes the form of questions instead of commands. Asking something as simple as, “Do you want to wear a jacket today?” allows children to make a choice, evaluate if they are comfortable with the result of that choice, and possibly modify it the next time if it did not work out well. It is a subtle way of letting them know that ultimately, they will be in charge of determining what improves their quality of life. “Do your homework,” demands compliance. “What’s the plan for your homework?” enables a child to create and own a plan with some investment in its success.

Significant adults in a young person’s world play a critical role in the development of identity. Those adults need to be the guiding voice of wisdom and experience that helps to make sense of the world. They highlight what is important, reward what is right, and explain how things fit together in the big picture. However, a common pitfall for adults occurs when they experience resistance to or defiance of their values, rules, or expectations. They often react by bearing down harder, insisting more strongly, and turning the occasion into a win-lose situation. It is on this battleground that the development of identity can be lost. Of course, there are issues involving safety such as illegal, destructive, or hurtful behaviors that offer no option for accommodation. But the vast majority of issues allow room for a young person’s input and ownership. Identity is strengthened when young people are allowed to hold differing viewpoints that are still respected by those in charge.

Responding to "I Don't Know"

Young people sometimes adopt the habit of answering, “I don’t know,” to almost everything that is asked of them. Their “I don’t know” response can often be decoded as meaning either, “I cannot easily figure out what I think or feel,” or, “If I truthfully answer this question and it is not what you want to hear, I’ll get a lecture, so I won’t tell you.” If a safe environment is consistently provided and the “I don’t know” still persists, this can indicate the need for assistance with self-discovery.

"I don't know" should not be accepted as a customary response. People, including teens, always have some idea of what they are thinking or feeling, or can offer a guess if the answer is not totally clear. If an adolescent really struggles with clarity of personal thought, then a self-discovery process needs to be initiated. "I don't know" cannot build a life. Gently guiding the young person in developing an answer can help (e.g., "Suppose you did know What might you say?").

When adolescents are unclear about their personal identity, they experience an empty, confusing, uncomfortable feeling. In an effort to mask or escape this feeling, they may engage in substance abuse and other dramatic behaviors. Empty kids sometimes gravitate toward displaying an outrageous identity to the outside world, often in terms of tattoos, clothing, or hair that will cause others to look again. These things are a way of saying, "See me! I exist and I am different from you." To be sure, adolescence is and should be a time of trying on many different ideas, styles, and images to find the ones that truly fit. But dramatic outward manifestations of self can be an indicator of trouble within.

Helping Adolescents Define Their Lives

The development of identity requires that every young person invests in something to help define his or her life. Whether it is a talent, sport, or outside interest, every young person needs something that says, "This is mine. I go out of my way to work at this." As the invest-

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ment grows, so too does the young person's sense of self and competence. Dropping one interest and picking up another as one matures is also not uncommon. The benefit lies in claiming portions of life that express, "I fit here." If young persons exhibit no outside investment, then they need assistance in a process of discovering what in this world fits with who they are. The discovery process does not end until there is a fit. Gentle adult guidance helps this process.

The outcomes for adolescents struggling with identity issues are as varied as the individuals themselves. Sarah was never able to make the decision to engage in therapy in a meaningful way. At age 18, she continues to occasionally drink and smoke marijuana. After six

months in an intensive treatment facility, she has now moved out of her parent's home to live with friends. Sarah has begun classes at the community college and keeps her family at a distance. She still lacks direction, but her parents remain available, if ever she is willing to accept their help.

Dan agreed to stop drinking and using drugs as long as he lived in his parents' home. He was able to reach a negotiated peace with his parents and graduate from high school. Shortly after graduation he moved down south to find a job and perhaps begin community college classes. He keeps in regular contact with his family.

After two suicide attempts, Molly engaged in individual and family therapy and made significant progress. She was able to address her rage and pain and establish appropriate boundaries in her life. She returns to therapy periodically when she thinks it could be helpful, works full-time, and is in her last semester of college. Next summer she will marry a young man she has dated for three years. At 25, Molly uses no illegal substances and drinks only occasionally. She has a warm and loving relationship with her family, and can even laugh at her father's occasional intrusiveness. Molly and her family could serve as a model for addressing critical adolescent crises effectively.

The discomfort of an inadequate sense of self takes precedence over all else in the life of an adolescent. The search for self can disrupt the quest for achievement, family connection, and all previous normalcy. Before the collateral damage can be assessed, the identity issue must be confronted. While much of the healing and development can and should happen within the home, it is often helpful to do so under the guidance of an adolescent or family therapist. The process is not one of blame or brokenness but one of respect, boundaries, and discovery. Often, the most difficult part of the process is gaining the trust of adolescents, whose greatest fear is that they will be forced to become something they are not. Establishing appropriate boundaries, negotiating expectations, and helping teens find and express themselves can lead to a respectful and healing outcome for all. □

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Teaching Character Through Real Heroes

Dr. Dennis Denenberg, lecturer and author

Wonder Woman vs. Rosa Parks. Batman vs. Thomas Edison. Which side of these pairings represent the kind of character model you want for

your children? The sad reality is that many young people don't even recognize the names of genuine heroes. Instead, they are drawn to the pop-culture icons and celebrities in sports and entertainment. We need to immerse our kids in learning about *real* heroes.

50 American Heroes

How quickly can you name 50 authentic American heroes? Coming up with 50 isn't easy. That's why Lorraine Roscoe and I wrote *50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet*. Among our heroes are artists, aviators, activists, journalists, jurists, teachers, musicians, inventors, and athletes. (See box for an abridged sample.)

We can say to kids, "What do these heroes have to do with you? Everything. They might be what you want to be when you grow up. Many of our heroes were a lot like you when they were young. Many had doubts about their own abilities to make a difference in the world."

As I speak each year to thousands of teachers and parents around America, they are always touched by the stories I tell of how someone's life has been forever changed because of learning about a real hero. Says 5th-grader Robby Cox: "You can make your life so much more by simply reading about these heroes. They help

you use your mind for good things and look toward the future with your head up." □

JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE OLYMPIC CHAMPION & HUMANITARIAN

She was born when the civil rights campaign for black Americans was in full stride. She grew up in an America where ordinary citizens, black and white, were fighting racial discrimination and insisting that all people should have equal rights.

Home was a crime-infested neighborhood. "I was constantly surrounded by chances to do wrong," she said. At the age of nine, Jackie competed in her first track meet and finished last. But she didn't give up. She didn't even let asthma slow her down.* When she was 26, Jackie won two gold medals at the Olympics; four years later, she added another. Her specialty? The grueling heptathlon in which each contestant takes part in seven challenging track and field events. Many call her the world's greatest living female athlete.

One year before her victory at the 1988 Olympic Games, this dynamite athlete established the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation (www.jjkgc.org/vision.htm) to help city youth. It provides mentors, gives college scholarships, and has rebuilt the Mary E. Brown Community Center in East St. Louis, where Jackie grew up. She hopes it will bring young people and senior citizens together to make her hometown a better place to live. So check out the web site. What can you do to bring something back to your school, neighborhood, or community? Jackie said it best: "Don't follow in my footsteps. MAKE YOUR OWN!"

To learn more about Jackie Joyner-Kersey, check out Jackie Joyner-Kersey: Superwoman by Margaret Goldstein.

*Approximately 15 million Americans suffer from asthma, so chances are you know someone who has it. Jackie Joyner-Kersey has it. Find out more about it by visiting the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology at www.aaaai.org.

To order 50 American Heroes or schedule Dennis Denenberg as a speaker, visit www.heroes4us.com; E-mail: HEROES4US@aol.com.

You and Your Hero

- P Make two silhouettes out of white paper—one of yourself and one of your hero.
- P Find some old magazines or newspapers. Cut out at least ten words that describe important positive character traits of your hero. Glue them on his or her silhouette.
- P Then have a family member or special friend write at least ten positive adjectives on *your* silhouette, describing your character traits. How are you like your hero? How are you different? What did you learn about yourself?

Moral education is impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness. —Alfred North Whitehead



Helping Kids—and Adults—Take Responsibility for Their Own Character

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

To ensure continual growth in the moral life, we must first know ourselves. We gain this self-knowledge by regularly examining our behavior and reflecting on the kind of person we are and would like to be. We must also sincerely *want* to become a better person—more patient, more sensitive to the needs of others, quicker to forgive, more willing to admit when we're wrong. Finally, we must ask, are we carrying out our good intentions?

Here are four ways we can challenge students—and ourselves—to strengthen our character.

1. Keep a Character Record Book

Goal-setting and self-assessment are a necessary part of self-improvement. At Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School (Franklin, Massachusetts), every student keeps a *Character Record Book*. At the end of the day, students take out these books and write responses to three questions regarding that week's virtue. If the virtue of the week were courtesy, the questions would be:

- How have I shown courtesy today?
- How have I *not* shown courtesy today?
- How will I show courtesy tomorrow?

2. Make Goal Strips

"Goal strips" can help us set specific goals we want to accomplish within a specific period of time. Michele Borba, author of *Building Moral Intelligence*, explains:

Cut a 3" x 12" colored paper strip for each goal. Fold the strip into three even sections. On the first section, boldly print the words **I will**. In the middle section print **what** you will do, and in the final section print **when** you will do it. Now set a goal using this *will + what + when* formula. For example: "I will clean my room in 45 minutes."

Other examples: "I will get my homework done every night next week." "I will do my chores without being asked for three days in a row."

3. Do a Goal-Setting Bulletin Board

A San Diego teacher gives this assignment: "Find newspaper or magazine articles about individuals who set and pursued a goal." Students briefly share their ar-

ticles with the whole class and then post them on the bulletin board. "This activity," the teacher says, "convinces students that goal-setting helps people succeed in life." During the following week, he teaches students how to set their own goals—for his class, other subjects, extracurricular activities, and life outside school.

4. Set 100 Goals

History teacher Hal Urban, author of *Life's Greatest Lessons*, gave his high school students an assignment he called "100 Goals":

1. Write at least 100 goals, more if you wish.
2. Divide them into categories. You can choose your own categories based on your interests. Here are some you might want to consider:
 - * education
 - * career
 - * family
 - * things you'd like to own
 - * fun/adventure
 - * self-improvement
 - * major accomplishments
 - * U.S. travel
 - * foreign travel
 - * reading
 - * learning
 - * spiritual growth
 - * creating/making/building
 - * service to others
3. Select the 10 goals that are the most important to you. Then write a paragraph on your #1 goal.

Urban comments: "I've had students write to me 10 or 15 years after graduation, sending me their list of 100 goals with the ones checked off that they've already achieved. They say, 'If you didn't make us do this assignment, I never would have even dreamed of most of these goals, let alone achieved them.'"

If we want to nurture young people's growth in character, we must also see ourselves as engaged in the same humble process of trying to become a better person. New research on adult development indicates that adults' character qualities are not static. Some adults become wiser, more patient, more giving over time; others become more selfish. The challenge for all of us, at every stage of life, is to stay on the moral journey, keeping in mind the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: "Character-building begins in infancy and continues until death." □

—From Tom Lickona's new book, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (www.amazon.com).



Developing Performance Character and Moral Character in Youth

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

A person of character embodies both performance character AND moral character. **Performance character** refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dispositions needed to achieve human excellence in performance environments—in school, extracurricular activities, and work. Performance character is built on “willing values” such as perseverance, diligence, and self-discipline. **Moral character** refers to the dispositions needed for ethical functioning and includes qualities such as justice, caring, respect, and honesty. Here are 12 strategies for developing performance character *and* moral character for success in school and beyond.

1. Help students make character the core of their identity by challenging them to define who they are in a way that transcends their possessions and achievements.
2. Have students regularly grapple with existential questions such as: “What is the meaning of life?” “What is happiness?” “What gives my life a positive sense of purpose?”
3. Have students create a personal mission statement defining their life goals and the person they hope to become. Have them consider performance character, such as goals they want to achieve, and moral character, including how they will make ethical decisions and how they will treat others.
4. Help students create self-monitoring tools to gauge their progress toward their goals (e.g., keeping a record of their effort to improve in a particular skill or area). Help them analyze their progress and revise their plans as needed.
5. Take a stand for academic integrity. Help students understand how all forms of cheating and plagiarism detract from their education and the education of their peers. Give them a leadership role in creating a school culture where academic integrity is the norm.
6. Give students a sense of their school’s history and their place in it. Investigate the school’s origins and defining traditions. Help them consider “What does it

mean to be a graduate of our school?”

7. Help students develop critical viewing skills for discerning the moral messages in TV, music, and the Internet. Consider questions such as: “What is the underlying message?” and “What values are being promoted?”
8. In discussions of controversial material, ensure that all sides of the issue are investigated and adequately represented. Don’t have students merely “clarify” their values; challenge them to develop more informed and principled ways of thinking.
9. In history and literature classes, discuss moral and performance character as shown by historical or literary figures (e.g., “What made them great leaders?” “Was there a disparity between their performance character and their moral character?”). In math and science classes, study and discuss inventors and entrepreneurs, considering aspects of their performance and moral character (e.g., “What character traits helped them become great?” “What character flaws limited their contributions?”).
10. Invite people of exemplary work ethic from a variety of work settings (carpenters, factory technicians, lawyers, business people) to come in to discuss their work (for example, “What do you find satisfying?”), and their work ethic (for example, “How do you approach difficult tasks?”).
11. Cultivate in students a “conscience of craft” regarding the importance of high-quality work and what it looks like. Develop performance character values such as initiative, effort, creativity, punctuality, neatness, and thoroughness. Help students see the difference between performance (the outcome) and performance *character* (the persistent quest to do your personal best).
12. Provide students with many and varied opportunities to engage in service. Whenever possible, include academic investigation related to the service (for example, if students are working in a homeless shelter, study the political and economical dimensions of affordable housing). □

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