

Raising Children of Character: 10 Principles

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

Raising a civilized child takes 20 years of constant teaching and another 10 of review.

—Judith Martin (Miss Manners)

Parenting is arguably the hardest job there is and the one for which we get no training. Here are ten principles of parenting that can guide us in the demanding work of raising children of character.

1. Make Character Development a High Priority

One of my college students, reflecting on her character development, wrote: “I was an only child, and my parents let me have my own way most of the time. I know they wanted to show how much they loved me, but I have struggled with selfishness my whole life.”

We need to view our children as adults-in-the-making. What kind of character do we want them to possess as grown men and women? Will they be generous and responsible adults? Will they make loving husbands and wives, and capable mothers and fathers? How is our approach to parenting likely to affect these outcomes?

2. Be an Authoritative Parent

Parents must have a strong sense of their moral authority—their right to be respected and obeyed. Psychologist Diana Baumrind's research has identified three styles of parenting: *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive*. Authoritarian parents use a lot of commands and threats but little reasoning. Permissive parents are high on affection but low on authority. By contrast, authoritative parents are high on authority, reasoning, fairness, and love. The authoritative parent *“explains reasons behind demands, encourages give and take, and sets standards and enforces them firmly but does not regard self as infallible.”* Baumrind finds that at all age levels, the most self-confident and socially responsible children have authoritative parents.

To establish an authoritative parenting style, we should have a zero tolerance policy for disrespectful speech and behavior. When kids engage in disrespectful back-talk, they need immediate corrective feedback (“What is your tone of voice?”, “You are not allowed to speak to me in that way, even if you’re upset.”). Allowing our children to speak to us disrespectfully will quickly erode their respect for our moral authority, our rules, our example, and our teaching.



3. Love Children

When kids feel loved, they become attached to us. That attachment makes them receptive to our guidance.

One-on-one time. We need emotionally intimate time to keep any relationship strong and growing. To protect one-on-one time with our children, we should plan it. I know a school superintendent, a father of four, who can show you in his appointment book which child he’ll be spending the coming Saturday afternoon with. “If I didn’t schedule that time,” he says, “it wouldn’t happen.”

Love as communication. Good communication doesn’t happen automatically. We often need to do something deliberate to bring about a meaningful exchange of thoughts and experiences. When our older son Mark was 13, I became frustrated with the fact that our exchanges typically consisted of my asking questions and his giving monosyllabic answers. (“How was school?” “Fine.” “How’d the game go?” “Great.”) One day, in exasperation, I said: “It would be great if you asked *me* a question.”

He said, “Okay, Dad, how are your courses going this semester?” It was the first time I ever talked to him about

my teaching. After that, even if we had only five minutes in the car, we'd do "back-and-forth questions": I'd ask him one (e.g., "What was the best part and the worst part of your day?"), he'd ask me one (often the same question), and so on. It became a family tradition.

Love as sacrifice. About a million children see their parents divorce each year. Marriages fail for many reasons, including violence, alcoholism, and infidelity. Researcher Judith Wallerstein's book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (2000), documents the often lasting repercussions of family breakdown for both kids and adults. Given such evidence, both secular and religious marriage counselors are now urging married couples having problems to do everything possible to try to save their marriage.

4. Teach by Example

Teaching by example goes beyond treating our children with love and respect. It has to do with how we treat each other as spouses and how we treat and talk about others outside the family—relatives, friends, neighbors, and teachers.

These days, the most important example we set may be the stands we take—especially stands that are unpopular with our children or at odds with what other parents are permitting. What do we prohibit? Violent video games? TV shows and movies that contain sex, violence, or foul language? All forms of pornography? Immodest dress? Parties where there's drinking? Do our kids know where we stand on the great moral issues of the day—respect for life, war and peace, threats to the environment, the plight of the poor? Stands like these define our values.

5. Manage the Moral Environment

How should we regulate kids' use of media—TV, movies, music, video games, and the Internet? The basic rule: The use of media in the home is a privilege, not a right. Exercise of that privilege requires parental permission *and* presence. We should also thoughtfully explain our moral objections to something rather than simply forbidding it.

Today's moral environment also requires more vigilant supervision of our children. The research report *Building a Better Teenager* (www.childtrends.org) finds that "hands-on" parents—those who know about their children's activities, friends, and behaviors and monitor them in age-appropriate ways—have teens with lower rates of sexual activity and drug and alcohol use.

We should also expose our children to what is noble and heroic. Somewhere in the evening paper there's at least one example of integrity, courage, or compassion. The website www.teachwithmovies.com is a source of films that

offer positive role models and matter for moral discussion. *Books That Build Character* by William Kilpatrick provides an excellent annotated bibliography of more than 300 books appropriate for different age levels.

6. Use Direct Teaching to Form Habits and Conscience

We need to practice what we preach, but we also need to preach what we practice. Direct moral teaching helps to develop a child's habits and conscience. "Pick up your toys." "Say please and thank you." "Don't interrupt." "Look at a person who's speaking to you." Hundreds of teachings like these communicate to children, "This is how we behave," "This is how we live."

Direct teaching includes explaining why some things are right and others wrong. Why is it wrong to lie? Because lying destroys trust. Why is it wrong to cheat? Because cheating is a lie—it deceives another person. This kind of moral reasoning helps children develop a conscience that will guide them when we're not around. Developing our kids' decision-making skills also means teaching them certain "ethical tests" they can use to evaluate any given behavior. (See box below.)

Finally, direct teaching can also take the form of guiding our children to a good book, article, or pamphlet. A Canadian mother told me she was at a loss for words when her 16-year-old daughter Lisa disclosed that she and her boyfriend were thinking of having sex. When the mother said, "But sex is meant for love," Lisa replied, "But we do love each other, and this is how we want to express it." To help a teenager reflect on the meaning of love, a parent could offer a pamphlet such as *Love Waits*. It reads, in part:

7 ETHICAL TESTS

1. **The Golden Rule (reversibility) test:** Would I want people to do this to me?
2. **The what-if-everybody-did-this test:** Would I like it if everyone else acted this way?
3. **The parents test:** How would my parents feel if they found out I did this?
4. **The religion test:** Does this go against what my religious faith teaches?
5. **The conscience test:** Will I feel guilty afterwards?
6. **The consequences test:** Might this have bad consequences, now or in the future?
7. **The front-page test:** How would I feel if my action were reported on the front page of my hometown paper?

Love is patient; love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices, choices that could change your lives forever. Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

7. Discipline Wisely

Disciplining wisely means setting expectations, holding kids accountable to them, and responding to their lapses in a way that both teaches what's right and motivates the child to do what's right. This means discipline should be clear and firm but not harsh.

Sometimes a disciplinary consequence is needed to help kids realize the seriousness of what they've done and motivate them not to do it again. In imposing consequences, however, many parents come down too hard in a moment of anger (“You're grounded for a week!”) and end up going back on what they said. A better approach is to ask a child, “What do *you* think is a fair consequence for what you did?” Together the parent and child can then agree on a consequence that will help change behavior.

Restitution is also important: When you do something wrong, you should do something right to make up for it. Restitution is restorative. We should teach our kids to ask: “What can I do to make up for what I did?”

8. Solve Conflicts Fairly

Conflicts provide important opportunities to foster character development. A fairness approach can be used to solve a wide range of family conflicts. It has three parts: (1) achieving mutual understanding; (2) arriving at a fair, agreed-upon solution to the problem; and (3) holding a follow-up meeting to evaluate how the solution is working.

One mom used the fairness approach with her sons Phillip (7) and Ben (5) to address the problem of the kids acting badly when she was on the phone. “The more we talked,” the mother says, “the more I understood their feelings of rejection when I'm on the phone for a long time. I explained that with working and going to school, this is often my only way of keeping in touch with friends.” Once they understood each other's feelings, the mother, Phillip, and Ben were able to brainstorm solutions. They worked out a Fairness Agreement (see box above), which they all

FAIRNESS AGREEMENT

- 1. If Mom has promised to do something with us, she will tell the person she is busy and will call back later.**
- 2. We will make a list of things to do while Mom is on the phone.**
- 3. Mom will try to make her calls shorter.**
- 4. If Mom has to be on the phone for a longer time, she will tell us, and we will behave.**

Mom, Phillip, & Ben

signed and posted. Two days later, Mom and the boys held a follow-up meeting. The mother reports: “We agreed we had stuck to our plan. The kids played together or did things independently when I was on the phone. I made calls shorter. There has been much less hassling about this problem.”

9. Provide Opportunities to Practice the Virtues

Virtues develop through practice. We don't develop character in kids simply by talking about it; they need real responsibilities in family life. A mother of three sons (ages 2, 4, and 6) says: “The rule in our house is that you get a chore for each year of your age. Our boys are all very proud of what they do.” Children should not be paid for these chores; such jobs are the way they contribute to the family.

10. Foster Spiritual Development

“Religious Involvement and Children's Well-Being” (www.childtrends.org) reports that young people who frequently attend religious services and say their faith is important to them exhibit higher levels of altruism and lower levels of drug and alcohol use and sexual activity. It is certainly possible to be an ethical person without being religious, and having religious faith by no means guarantees that a person will be good. But for many persons, religion gives life a higher meaning and an ultimate reason for leading a moral life. If we are not ourselves religious, we must nevertheless help our children to develop a spiritual vision that address life's largest questions: What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of *my* life? What leads to authentic happiness?

Kids will make mistakes growing up, just as we did. That said, it's our job as parents to make the most of the many opportunities we have to help our children become persons of character. ■

Tom Lickona's books include Raising Good Children (1983), Educating for Character (1991), and Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues (2004). This article is adapted from Character Matters.



From Chaos to Character: Walnut Middle School's Story

Mary Ann Richards (right, in photo) & Vikki Deuel (left)

In 2003, Walnut Middle School (780 students in Grand Island, Nebraska; 60% eligible for free or reduced lunch) transformed itself from a place all too familiar to local police to a winner of a National School of Character award—the only middle school recipient in the nation that year. In 2005, Walnut was recognized as an Operation Respect National Model School, one of five schools chosen from across the U.S. and Canada.

When our building transitioned from a junior high to a middle school eight years ago, it had a reputation as the toughest school in our town of 50,000. Our police department was used to answering calls to take an assault report after the latest fight at Walnut.

As we moved toward the more student-centered atmosphere of a middle school, our student services team committed to make our building a safer and more nurturing place where students would *want* to treat each other with respect. Here are seven steps we have taken on our journey from chaos to character.

1. PRIME Time: Our Daily Advisory Program

Our daily advisory groups are the backbone of our program. We call it PRIME (People Relating in Middle Education) Time. About 15 students "belong to" one adult who commits to relating to these students and advocating for them. These small groups meet for 20 minutes Monday through Friday and participate in planned activities aimed at fostering mutual respect and responsible behavior in both our school and the larger community. Our Prime Time facilitators (teachers and other staff) can choose from hundreds of activities that our planning committee has prepared around such character education themes as diversity and tolerance, cooperation and self-control, and caring and sharing.

Advisories are the backbone of our program.

This year, for example, students learned about American soldiers recovering in Walter Reed Hospital from wounds

received in Iraq or Afghanistan. Each student created a thank-you card for a wounded soldier, and PRIME Time raised money to send 100 T-shirts for the soldiers to wear in rehab. The shirts were decorated with a red heart surrounded by our Walnut logo and the words, "Thanks From the Heart of America."

2. Purple Hands Project

Purple Hands—Hands and Words Are Not For Hurting (www.handsproject.org) is a national project developed to decrease the incidence of school violence and increase healthy relationships based on respect and equality among students. The Pledge encourages dialogue about all forms of abuse and violence—including name-calling, belittling, put downs, and negative self talk that can escalate to suicide and/or murder. The Pledge encourages "appropriate social language," which we define as being free from obscenity and harassing or sexually demeaning comments.

We had a huge Purple Hands Pep Rally in our building to introduce the program to our school and to the larger community. Dignitaries from local government and law enforcement joined high school athletes, local pastors, and district leaders to get Purple Hands off to a rousing start. Everyone was invited to make the Purple Hands Pledge: "I will not use my hands or my words for hurting myself or others." All students and adults making this Pledge traced their hand on purple paper, cut out the hand print, and signed their name on it for display in our building.



Over the intercom at the beginning of every school day, students lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance followed by the Purple Hands Pledge. Students know that taking the Pledge each morning is a promise to take responsibility for their words and actions during the day. The other middle schools in our district have joined with us as Purple Hands partners. Local media coverage of the Pledge has helped our students feel tremendous self-respect as community leaders.

3. Family Character College

Each spring, Walnut families are invited to spend a Sat-

urday enjoying a day of activities that foster family bonding and communication. In the morning, parents attend courses on topics such as communicating with their child or preventing bullying (students teach the parents about our Bully B'ware program), while kids enjoy craft projects and group activities aimed at character-building. In the afternoon, families play group-oriented games that build cooperation. Each family leaves at the end of the day with a Character College Diploma and their own family portrait.

4. C.O.P.S. Programs

With our middle school transition under way for a year and PRIME Time groups functioning cohesively, we investigated the **School Resource Officer** programs used by the two largest school districts in Nebraska. We then pursued the idea with our own city police department, resulting in our city's receiving a C.O.P.S. grant and Officer Rick Ressel moving his beat to Walnut Middle School. A full-time member of our staff, Officer Rick now leads the following programs:

Students know that sexual harassment is not tolerated.

◆ **G.R.E.A.T.** All Walnut 7th-graders see Officer Rick in their classrooms presenting the eight 45-minute lessons that make up the **Gang Resistance Education And Training** curriculum. Designed by the Phoenix Police Department, the program helps students set goals for themselves, resist pressures, learn how to resolve conflicts, and clearly understand how gangs impact their quality of life. Gang involvement had been increasing in our community since the 1990s. This situation was brought home to Walnut when two young men with siblings in our building were killed in gang-related incidents. Since we began our G.R.E.A.T. program, gang incidents in our building are almost non-existent, although gang activity in the wider community remains a challenge.

◆ **Summer youth program.** With funding from a G.R.E.A.T. grant, Officer Rick and his fellow SROs provide a two-week session of summer fun and learning for 6th- and 7th-graders and another two-week session later in the summer for 4th- and 5th-graders. At-risk students receive special invitations and spend the two weeks receiving classroom instruction on G.R.E.A.T. topics such as goal-setting and conflict resolution. The kids enjoy guest speakers, working on crafts, acting in skits, and fun physical activities and field trips. The school provides a hot lunch at no cost. Students come away with new respect for law enforcement officers as human beings who care about and encourage kids. They also develop

increased respect for themselves and their peers.

5. Anti-Bullying Initiatives

The entire Walnut staff attended the 1998 National Middle School Conference where we heard a presentation on the **Bully B'ware** program (www.bullybeware.com). Using materials from this program, we surveyed our students to determine the scope of bullying in our building. We then were able to build our own strategies. These included:

◆ **Bully prevention classes.** Facilitated by our counselors and Officer Rick, these classes are presented in the early fall to 6th-graders, with 7th- and 8th-graders receiving "refresher courses." Students learn about the roles of bully, target, and bystander and about four different types of bullying: physical, verbal, relational, and reactive. They also learn how to take the power *away* from the bully and how to "bully-proof" our school. Role-play skits help students build their skills and also teach them how to report dangerous behavior when they witness it.

◆ **"Stop Sexual Harassment!" classes.** As students have come to believe that there is zero tolerance for bullying at Walnut Middle School, they have become more open in conversations with adults. As a result, staff became aware of sexual harassment within our building. Each year, Officer Rick and a male counselor address this issue with 7th- and 8th-grade boys. A female counselor and a nurse talk with 7th- and 8th-grade girls. Two class sessions address student fears and concerns and raise their awareness of the right to be treated with respect in all situations, especially those with the potential to turn into sexual harassment. Students come away knowing that sexual harassment is *not*

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OK and will *not* be tolerated at Walnut.

◆ **Anger Management Group.** Most kids identified as bullies by their peers have a serious anger control problem. Surprisingly, many kids identified as targets report having an equally difficult time managing their anger. The school resource officer and a counselor initiated Anger Group, serving 8-10 students each semester. The group meets for ten weeks, 45 minutes per session. Students are referred by teacher, administrators, or parents. Anger Group participants explore how anger works, build new skills to deal with trigger situations, and practice strategies for backing off before their behavior results in serious consequences.

6. Character Education Goes Extracurricular

Walnut coaches stress character in all they do with students. During every athletic contest, our players and coaches watch for an opponent who shows positive character traits. At the end of play, we present that player with a Walnut Character Award medallion.

As a way of relating to students outside the classroom, every Walnut teacher agrees to sponsor an extracurricular club or activity. These clubs may meet weekly or may center on events that happen during one season of the year. For example, the Walnut Fishing Club kids, many of whom are physically or educationally handicapped, love their fishing and camping experiences each spring. As they spend time enjoying the outdoors, they build positive relationships and experience a real sense of independence and accomplishment.

7. Evaluation: Does It Work?

There is an old saying: "In God we trust—all others bring data." Evaluation is an essential part of our character education effort. A review of the data from our character assessments reinforces our belief that when educators teach subjects and facts along with behaviors and beliefs focusing on

| FREQUENCY OF BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| PROBLEM | 98/99 | 99/00 | 00/01 | 01/02 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 05/06 |
| Failure to Follow Instructions/School Rules | 304 | 226 | 126 | 128 | 106 | 98 | 93 |
| Disruptive Aggressive Behavior | 146 | 61 | 51 | 48 | 26 | 21 | 14 |
| Sexually Harassing Lang./Behavior | 60 | 90 | 29 | 20 | 20 | 17 | 14 |
| Police Reports Personal Injury Assaults | 48 | 36 | 26 | 15 | 11 | 12 | 8 |

desired character traits, they can make a positive difference in student behavior and student learning.

Behavioral problems have gone down and test scores up.

Decreased behavioral problems. Our students have learned to follow school rules and avoid displaying disruptive, aggressive behaviors. We have seen a significant decrease in police reports filed for personal injury assaults. The box at the bottom left compares the frequency of four categories of behavioral problems from the 98/99 school year when school enrollment was 687 students, through the 05/06 school year when enrollment reached 808 students. All four behavioral categories showed major declines.

Increased academic achievement. We're always asked about the effect of character education on academic achievement. The box below shows the rising percentage of Walnut students who scored at the proficient level on Nebraska's state tests in reading, writing, and math during the period 2003-2006. These numbers are used to determine Walnut's Annual Yearly Progress as it pertains to No Child Left Behind.

| PERCENT OF WALNUT STUDENTS SCORING AT THE PROFICIENT LEVEL | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
| Math | 61% | 72% | 75% |
| Reading | 56% | 59% | 63% |
| Writing | 47% | 73% | 67% |

During this same period of time, Walnut's special needs index also increased from 116 to 127. This index is based on the percentage of students who need special education support, are English Language Learners, live in poverty, and/or are minority students.

As educators, we are in the business of changing lives. Martin Buber said, "Education worthy of the name is education of character." If we want to change lives, we have to change character—the character of our kids and the character of the school culture. That has been our experience at Walnut. Putting character education at the center of our daily work has made us a different school. ■

For a copy of the new Life Skills Rubric that Walnut is using to assess study skills, work completion, classroom behaviors, and initiative and effort, contact counselor Mary Ann Richards (mrichard@gips.org) or principal Vikki Deuel (vdeuel@gips.org).