

The Fourth and Fifth Rs Respect and Responsibility

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The Choices We Get To Make

Hal Urban, High School Teacher

In my high school classes, I frequently hear questions that begin, “*Do we have to . . .*” “*Do we have to know this?*” “*Do we have to read that?*”

My answer is always the same: “**No, you get to.** You don’t have to do anything in life, but you *get* to do a lot of things.” It’s really a much healthier way of looking at life. It reminds us that we have choices.

True, it wasn’t our choice to be born into the world. And it’s not our choice that someday we’re going to die. However, the period in between, the one we call life, presents us with countless choices. They’re the choices that determine the quality of our lives.

We’re free to choose our character—the type of persons we become. We can become less than we’re capable of, or we can become all that we’re capable of.

We’re free to choose our values. We can let the media tell us what’s important, or we can decide for ourselves. We can base our standards on what others are doing, or we can base them on what we know is right and good.

We’re free to choose how to treat other people. We can put them down, or we can lift them up. We can be self-centered and inconsiderate, or we can be respectful, kind and helpful.

We’re free to choose how to handle adversity. We can allow ourselves to be crushed, to give up, and to feel sorry for ourselves. Or we can choose to look for a source of strength within us, to persevere, and to make the most out of what life hands us.

We’re free to choose how much we’ll learn. We can look upon learning as an unpleasant duty or as a great opportunity for bettering ourselves.

We’re free to choose what we’ll accomplish in life. We can allow our circumstances or other people to determine what we make of ourselves, or we can choose our own direction and goals. We can be undisciplined and lazy, or we can be self-disciplined and hardworking.

We’re free to choose our belief system. We can ignore our spiritual nature or we can accept it as a basic dimension of life. We can worship pleasure and the world’s material things, or we can look for something that’s ultimately more important.

We’re free to choose our purpose. We can wander aimlessly, or we can search for meaning in life and then live according to it. We can live to please ourselves, or we can find a cause that’s greater—one that helps us to understand and appreciate life more fully.

We’re free to choose our attitude, regardless of circumstances. This is the most important choice we’ll ever make because it affects everything we do. ■

*Dr. Hal Urban teaches American History and Psychology at Woodside High School, California. The article above is excerpted from his popular book, **Life’s Greatest Lessons**, available from the author: 790 Barbour Drive, Redwood City, CA 94062-3014; Tel. (650) 366-2882; e-mail halurban@flash.net.*

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Maintaining Momentum in a Character Education Program

by Bob Storrier, Principal



Enders Road Elementary is currently in the fifth year of implementing its character education program.

Initially, we set a modest goal of improving behavior in the cafeteria and hallways. Over time this has developed into a focus on children making character choices in their daily lives.

Each summer our Steering Committee (two parent volunteers, the school principal, and a group of 10 to 12 teachers) meets for about 15 hours. It assesses our character education program by asking four questions: *What do we keep? What do we delete? What do we add? What do we change?* At the opening staff meeting in September all ideas are shared.

Throughout the school year, the committee holds monthly meetings—open to all staff members—to keep the program moving in a positive direction. Even the most worthwhile program can run the risk of being "put on the shelf" if everyone involved is not in agreement and working toward the same goal. This process has enabled us to identify the cornerstones of a successful project from year to year. So far those cornerstones are:

The Enders Road Pledge. This is a simple five-liner (see right) that everyone recites daily after the Pledge of Allegiance. Every transgression that a child might commit is covered under this umbrella. Our school pledge has become a daily reminder as well as a teaching tool that can be used any time children have problems.

Our five core attributes. Our character attributes are *respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, and honesty*. These receive verbal and visual emphasis throughout the day. One program that fosters these qualities is "the buddy program," which pairs an upper-grade class with a lower-grade. The older students read with their younger buddies. They may also sit together during assemblies and sometimes help on the bus or the playground. This system gives the older children a sense of responsibility and the younger ones a sense of security.

Service to others. A volunteer parent coordinates our "Enders Road Kids Care Club." This is a volunteer organization that meets after school; its membership changes for each project. The club organizes five events—such as the canned food drive and spring clean-up day—each year. For each activity the parent coordinator selects a different group of volunteer students and two parent helpers.

Weekly Class Meetings. Class meetings offer homerooms opportunities to emphasize the core attributes. Playground, lunchroom and bus ride issues are also addressed at this time.

Everyone is involved. In addition to faculty, staff and student involvement, we also have the bus drivers fill out a questionnaire on student behavior related to the core attributes. Parents are kept informed through letters and involvement in school-home projects like our "TV Turn-Off Week." ■



ENDERS ROAD SCHOOL PLEDGE

*To be a good citizen of the
Enders Road Community, I will...*

**be kind to myself and others,
be fair to myself and others,
take care of my property and the
property of others, and
follow all school rules.**

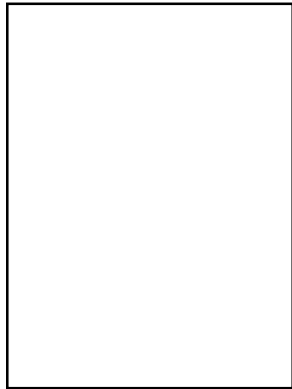
Student's Signature _____

Teacher's Signature _____

**Enders Road Elementary School, 4725 Enders Road,
Manlius, NY 13104; Tel. (315) 682-1310.**

Virtue of the Week at Buck Lodge

Vermelle Greene, Former Vice-Principal



Buck Lodge Middle School in Adelphi, Maryland was recently one of 10 schools nationwide recognized for excellence in character education by *Business*

Week magazine and the Character Education Partnership. It has a highly diverse student body, with 35 languages represented.

Buck Lodge's character-building program features a Virtue of the Week. Every morning, in a 30-minute homeroom period called Primetime, the Virtue of the Week is highlighted on the school's closed-circuit TV news show. After the broadcast, the homeroom teacher takes over instruction in the virtue, with a different approach each day.

Primetime Monday: The virtue is introduced through a definition, lists of synonyms and antonyms, reasons why it is important, and its use in a sentence.

Primetime Tuesday: The class shares life experiences related to the virtue, sometimes role-plays one of these experiences, and creates an action plan for acquiring and practicing the virtue.

Primetime Wednesday: A guest from the community explains why the virtue is important to him or her or the teacher presents a story which exemplifies the virtue.

Primetime Thursday: "Quotes and Heroes" takes a look at people in history—their understanding of the virtue and how it applies in everyday life.

Primetime Friday: Students present creative projects—using poems, stories, raps, songs, and sayings—that demonstrate their understanding of the virtue.

As an aid to the Primetime teachers, Buck Lodge purchased the biography-based curriculum, *Wisekills*. (See box at right.)

Lorie Friedman, health teacher and chairman of Buck Lodge's Character Education Committee, plays "Dr. Character" on the daily Primetime broadcast. Dr. Character wears a doctor's coat and treats the problems of puppets who lack the virtue of the week. Students can often see themselves reflected in the portrayals. Through the school day, teachers in the various classes try to men-

tion and build on Dr. Character's puppet skit.

For information, contact Lorie Friedman, Buck Lodge Middle School, 2611 Buck Lodge Road, Adelphi, Maryland 20783; Tel. (301) 431-6290; Fax (301) 445-8404. ■

Vermelle Greene helped to launch Buck Lodge's character education effort and is currently Vice-Principal at High Point High School, 3601 Powder Mill Rd., Beltsville, MD 20725; Tel. (301) 572-6400.

Character Building with Wisekills

Wisekills is a published character-building curriculum for Grades K-8. It combines short lessons in virtues ("Wisekills") with exposure to community members and participation in service projects. The goal is to "develop self-esteem and character skills in students while providing consistent career education and community service opportunities."

The Classroom Component

For grades 6-8, the classroom component is called *Wiselives*. This teaches and exemplifies character skills through the words and life stories of many historical figures. For example, students learn something about self-respect from Eleanor Roosevelt, who said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your permission."

Eight monthly character themes are each divided into four character skills, one for each week. For example, the character theme of Positive Attitude includes *keeping a positive attitude, positive speech, positive thoughts, and thankfulness*.

Under the character theme of Responsibility, one skill is perseverance: "Students will understand the importance of perseverance and working hard when they feel like giving up." From Joseph Billings: "Think about the postage stamp; it sticks to one thing until it gets there." Ideas for curriculum integration are suggested. Students can write their responses to questions such as "What is one time that you showed perseverance?"

The Community Component

Parent volunteers set up regular guest visits from community members who serve as positive role-models for students. Parents also help organize service projects for one classroom or a small group of classrooms. Parents take a workshop and receive a kit with sample letters to help them contact community resources for speakers and service projects.

Wisekills, P.O. Box 491, Santa Cruz, CA 95061; Tel. (888) 947-3754; web site: www.wisekills.com.

Learning and Living the Character Message

Deb Austin Brown, Kindergarten Teacher

In a small-town elementary school in the mountains of West Virginia, a kindergarten teacher meets her new class of students. Ninety percent are from broken homes, 40% have never met their birth father, 60% live with their mother and a current boyfriend, and 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

I am that kindergarten teacher. And fortunately for me, and for those students, I am also a character teacher. Last fall was the most difficult of my 21-year career. Behavior problems were many. I knew that before I could begin teaching academics to my students, I had to give them a foundation for all learning: "the character message."

I thought back to my own childhood to find what this class needed. Many of the great lessons I've learned about character came at the knee of a caring adult. My great-grandmother was a wonderful storyteller who ended every story with a memorable moral lesson. In my class, I try to replicate those lessons, challenging my students to get the character message from every story. I teach them that each one of us is responsible for carving out our own character by the decisions we make and by the habits we develop. As we say in kindergarten, "Get the character habit!"

An important part of my character teaching comes from the many teachable moments that occur throughout the day. But intentional lessons are also taught through the use of stories, fables, fairy tales, proverbs, and real-life stories from the lives of my students. From these stories, I distill moral wisdom such as:

Actions speak louder than words. Honesty is the best policy. The best way to have a friend is to be a friend. Be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing.

We repeat these "wise sayings" when we're lining up for recess, when we're washing our hands for lunch, and when we're packing our

bookbags at the end of the school day. We talk about how these sayings can help us to stop and think before making decisions. We read such stories as *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Little Red Hen*, and *The Little Engine that Could*, all of which teach the importance of confidence, determination, and perseverance. "I'll try!" becomes the class motto.

By February of this school year I knew that my students had not only learned the character message but also chosen to live it. I had been up most of one night working on a project, and slept through the alarm. When I woke up, I called my principal for coverage until I arrived at school. I was twenty minutes late. I arrived in my classroom to find my students alone, with no adult supervision. But all of them were at their tables, busy at work. "What are you doing?" I asked. "We're doing our work," was the answer. "Why are you so surprised? You know we have good work ethic!"

My favorite story of the year comes from a student I'll call Cody. Cody's dad is in prison for murder. He and his friends tried to steal some stereo equipment. Cody's dad didn't mean to kill anyone, but it happened. Cody talked for months about the time when he would be able to visit his dad and have a "touching visit" where he could sit on his dad's lap, rather than talk through the glass. After Cody's visit, he said to me, "You know, Mrs. Brown, on the way home in the car I kept thinking about my dad. I just know that if my dad had been in your class, he wouldn't have had to go to prison. He would have made better decisions in his life."

Everyday in my classroom, I see the power and the promise of educating for character. One year with a caring adult—one who teaches character—can set into motion a positive change in the life of any child. ■

Deb Brown is the author of *Lessons From the Rocking Chair: Timeless Stories for Teaching Character*. She is also a character education trainer. For information on her book and workshops, contact *Proverbial Ink*, 9 River Park Circle, St. Albans, WV 25177; Tel. (304) 727-7899.



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Ten Tips for Raising Children of Character

Kevin Ryan, Professor of Education

It is one of those essential facts of life that raising good children—children of character—demands time and attention. While having children may be “doing what comes naturally,” being a good parent is much more complicated. Here are ten tips to help your children build sturdy characters:

1. Put parenting first. This is hard to do in a world with so many competing demands. Good parents consciously plan and devote time to parenting. They make developing their children's character their top priority.

2. Review how you spend the hours and days of your week. Think about the amount of time your children spend with you. Plan how you can weave your children into your social life and knit yourself into their lives.

3. Be a good example. Face it: human beings learn primarily through modeling. In fact, you can't avoid being an example to your children, whether good or bad. Being a good example, then, is probably your most important job.

4. Develop an ear and an eye for what your children are absorbing. Children are like sponges. Much of what they take in has to do with moral values and character. Books, songs, TV, the Internet, and films are continually delivering messages—moral and immoral—to our children. As parents we must control the flow of ideas and images which are influencing our children.

5. Use the language of character. Children cannot develop a moral compass unless people around them use the clear, sharp language of right and wrong.

6. Punish with a loving heart. Today, punishment has a bad reputation. The results are guilt-ridden parents and self-indulgent, out-of-control children. Children need limits. They will ignore these limits on occasion. Reasonable punishment is one of the ways human beings have always learned. Children must understand what punishment is for and know that its source is parental love.

7. Learn to listen to your children. It is easy to tune out the talk of our children. One of the greatest things we

can do for them is to take them seriously and set aside time to listen.

8. Get deeply involved in your child's school life.

School is the main event in the lives of our children. Their experience there is a mixed bag of triumphs and disappointments. How they deal with them will influence the course of their lives. Helping our children become good students is another name for helping them acquire strong character.

9. Make a big deal of the family meal. One of the most dangerous trends in America is the dying of the family meal. The dinner table is not only a place of sustenance and family business but also a place for the teaching and passing on of our values. Manners and rules are subtly absorbed over the table. Family mealtime should communicate and sustain ideals which children will draw on throughout their lives.

10. Do not reduce character education to words alone. We gain virtue through practice. Parents should help children by promoting moral action through self-discipline, good work habits, kind and considerate behavior to others, and community service. The bottom line in character development is behavior—their behavior.

As parents, we want our children to be the architects of their own character crafting, while we accept the responsibility to be architects of the environment—physical and moral. We need to create an environment in which our children can develop habits of honesty, generosity, and a sense of justice. For most of us, the greatest opportunity we personally have to deepen our own character is through the daily blood, sweat and tears of struggling to be good parents. ■

Kevin Ryan is Director of Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215; Tel. (617) 353-3262; E-mail: kryan@bu.edu. Adapted with permission of the Massachusetts Family Institute.



Teaching My Younger Sister About Sex and Love: Countering "Going To Do It Anyway"

by Jessica Burberry, Teacher

I recently completed a graduate course in character education in which we were required to carry out an “action project.” For my project I chose to use character-based sex education to try to instill in my younger sister and her friend the self-respect, self-control, and courage needed to lead moral, fulfilling, and healthy lives.

I wanted to inform my 14-year-old sister Kathy about something that I unfortunately just began to take seriously: abstinence. Sure, I have always known what the word meant, but I had never considered it an option for me, until recently. I felt that it was my responsibility to pass the philosophy of abstinence on to my sister because I know that she will not get it in the “going to do it anyway” program that is used at her high school. Also, she is a virgin (her friend is, too), so I wanted to show her how important it is to hold onto that purity.

I started these discussions when I accidentally overheard my sister Kathy, and her friend, Michelle, talking about a “slut” that one of their friends was dating. I asked them why they considered her a slut, and Michelle responded: “She has slept with at least eight guys already, and she is easy.” I asked them to think about why this girl is so promiscuous. Kathy said, “She’s trying to keep a boyfriend.” They assumed that having sex was a way of holding onto a boyfriend and showing love for one another. They also assumed that condoms would protect them from disease and pregnancy and that having sex had no implications for their future adult lives. My goal was to dispel all these myths.

We first tackled the issue of sex as “showing love” or “keeping a boyfriend.” I used the girl they were talking about as an example of how boyfriends come and go whether girls have intercourse with them or not. We also talked about girls’ feelings when they are rejected after giving part of themselves to another person. I then told them about my having pre-marital sex, and how I wished these relationships had never occurred and that the only true way to find out if a guy loves you is to make him wait until marriage.

The True Meaning of Love

We talked about the self-respect and courage involved in leading sexually abstinent lives until marriage. These two young girls developed a new awareness of how truly loving relationships and commitments develop and are sustained. Their awareness was evident in their response to my disclosing that I recently told my boyfriend that I wanted to abstain from sex from now on and he said he could not do this. I asked Kathy and Michelle if they thought the relationship was worth continuing, and they both said, “No, he does not love you if he won’t wait for you.” I was proud of their answer.

I also wanted to make these girls aware of the physical dangers of pre-marital sex. I gave real-life examples of teens who became pregnant or who contracted STDs even with the use of condoms; one of those persons was a close friend of mine. They were shocked to find out that this friend contracted herpes from sexual intercourse while using a condom. We considered the possible implications of such diseases: the inability to conceive a baby, passing on a sexual disease to your spouse, and transmitting a disease to your baby in the womb or during delivery.

Besides being more confident in their virginity, Kathy and Michelle have now set the personal goal of saving sex for marriage. They also no longer pick apart boys or girls who are sexually active by calling them “sluts” or “pimps” but instead focus on the deeper consequences of such behaviors and on what promiscuous girls and boys must be lacking in their lives.

My sister and Michelle have recently asked two of their friends to join us in our discussions. I’ve also shared my project with the parents of these girls. These parents are beginning to realize that abstinence-based sex education is more beneficial than the model now used at their daughters’ high school. ■

Jessica Burberry (a pseudonym) is a first-year elementary school teacher and a graduate student in education at SUNY Cortland.

