

The Child Development Project

In the early 1980s, the Child Development Project (first piloted in San Ramon, California) set out to answer this question: Does a multifaceted character development program, begun in kindergarten and sustained throughout a child's elementary school years, make a measurable and lasting difference in a child's moral thinking, attitudes, and behavior? The CDP character program has five interlocking components:

1. A language arts curriculum that uses children's literature to reflect on values
2. Cooperative learning, giving students regular practice in learning to work with others
3. Discipline that uses class meetings to involve students in sharing responsibility for creating a classroom that respects others and supports learning
4. School service programs, such as cross-age tutoring and "buddy classes" (e.g., a 5th-grade class "adopts" a 2nd-grade class), that enable older kids to help younger ones
5. Family activities that offer parents ways to develop their children's character.

An example of component 5: Every two to three weeks, CDP teachers send home "family homework." Family homework often consists of value-laden, sometimes humorous stories for families to read together and talk about. Other activities: "Discuss family chores" and "List 4 rules you must follow at home, then discuss with your parents the reason behind each rule."

Says a mother of a 3rd-grade boy in a CDP school: "Once you get into it, it turns into fun. I learn things about Joey I never would have known. Instead of the usual, 'What did you do in school today?', conversations started by family homework let me discover the inside part of him."

In a longitudinal study, students in three CDP elementary schools, compared to students in matched control schools, were found to be: (1) more considerate and cooperative in their classrooms; (2) more likely to feel accepted by peers; (3) more skilled at solving interpersonal problems; and (4) more strongly committed to democratic values such as including everyone in a decision.

In a follow-up study in eighth grade, students who had had the CDP program showed stronger conflict resolution skills, had greater self-esteem, were involved in more extracurricular activities, and were less likely to use marijuana or alcohol.

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