

Character Matters

Using Newspapers To Teach Character

Strategies For Teachers, Activities For Parents

USE THE NEWS



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Using Newspapers
To Teach Character

BY

Dr. Edward F. DeRoche

WITH

Dr. Betty L. Sullivan

AND

Dr. Sherrye Dee Garrett

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Product information contact:

Dr. Betty L. Sullivan & Associates

PMB #531

4104 24th Street

San Francisco, CA 94114-3615

phone: 415/641-0611

fax: 415/641-0884

e-mail: bettynie@aol.com

web site: <http://www.usethenews.com>

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BACKGROUND

About Character

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ABOUT CHARACTER

What is character?

You may recall that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to character when he said: "I have a dream, that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

We might say that each of us has a personal character and a civic character. Personal character is an accumulation of virtues that predisposes one to do that which is right, to reflect on moral matters, to be a good person, an ethical person, a person who knows right from wrong, a person who acts in a manner consistent with the Golden Rule — treat others as you want to be treated.

Civic character encompasses the personal virtues and also such values as respect for laws and authority, responsibility, fairness, justice and participation in public affairs. Voting and volunteering are also expressions of our civic character.

What is character education?

There are many definitions and many interpretations. As you use this booklet you might think of character education in this way: It is an attempt by the community, with the home and the school taking the lead, to foster in children and youth personal and civic values that create good persons and good citizens. Professor Thomas Lickona, State University of New York at Cortland, stated it this way:

Character . . . has three interrelated parts: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior. Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action.

There are two sides to character education. One is to create schools and communities that are caring, civil and challenging (both academically and behaviorally); the other is to develop young citizens who are smart, decent and responsible.

Why is character education needed today?

Any newspaper reader knows or feels that in the last three decades there has been a decline in our moral and civic values. Many people continue to be concerned about violence, teenage pregnancies, the decline of family structure, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, random acts of violence and destruction, loss of civility and manners, road rage, cynicism about government, cheating and stealing in schools and in the workplace, peer cruelty, offensive language, lack of self-control and bigotry.

Our young need character education to learn and practice those values inherent in this nation's founding documents. Schools need character education to become places where students construct their socio-moral selves; where they learn to reason critically and morally; and where they practice the habits and skills of being good people and good citizens.



ABOUT CHARACTER

What is a value?

One dictionary definition of the word “value” is that it is a worthwhile or desirable principle, standard or quality. A value can be a virtue — a desirable character trait. A value can be a standard one strives for. A value can be a principle one tries to live up to. Values are those qualities of behavior that help make up our character.

Whose values are we talking about?

In each community the stakeholders must come together to reach consensus about the values to be fostered in homes, schools and the community. Even if consensus is reached on only a few values, such as respect and responsibility, those two values should be the focal point for a school's character education program. The U.S. Department of Education suggests that the most common values are caring, civic virtues and citizenship, justice and fairness, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness. It has funded more than 30 state proposals that address these values.

The values suggested by the National School Board Association include: altruism, integrity, loyalty, compassion, courage, respect for authority, courtesy, obedience, punctuality, industriousness, responsibility, generosity, self-discipline, honesty, self-respect and tolerance.

The nation's YMCAs are infusing the values of respect, responsibility, caring and honesty into their programs.

“Project Solution,” a character education program offered by The (Nashville) Tennessean to its community, provides supplements to the daily newspaper that focus on these values: respects self, does what's right, gives service, respects others, accepts responsibility, builds community, cares, nurtures family and friends, loves learning, takes initiative, models democracy, forgives, practices honesty, perseveres, shows gratitude, shows courage, solves problems and respects work.

The Kansas City Star sponsored a program called “Raising Kansas City: Values and the Next Generation.” The values included courage, knowledge of right and wrong, compassion, awe and wonder, tenacity, boundaries, respect, justice and kindness, love of learning and tolerance.



ABOUT CHARACTER

What values are to be highlighted in this booklet?

Many schools with a character education program focus on one value each month. This method helps teachers, students and parents focus attention on a particular value for a period of time. Values overlap one another. They should be integrated and infused into the school's curriculum and programs. Values should permeate the school culture and classroom climate. Values should be learned and played out in students' lives and relationships.

This booklet will illustrate how to use newspaper content at school and at home to teach eight specific values: respect, responsibility, caring, honesty, tolerance, courage, justice and citizenship. Values can be tied to particular months when celebrations, holidays and events occur. For example, justice, courage or tolerance might be the focus value in January, when the nation celebrates Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, his life and his work. One can expect that daily newspapers will offer valuable content (feature stories, editorials, news articles) that will support lessons on these and other values.

Why use newspapers to help students learn more about values?

Newspapers describe a range of human behaviors. Newspaper pages are filled with stories about what people say and do and about how and why they act as they do. In reporting human events, newspapers provide teachers, parents and students with a cast of characters that cannot be found in textbooks.

Like children's literature, rich in characters that exhibit a range of personal and civic values, newspapers, the literature of the public, bring to classrooms and homes stories about people — their successes and failures; their right or wrong behaviors; their selfishness and selflessness; their cowardliness and courage; their honesty and dishonesty. In other words, newspaper content is value rich.

Newspapers are excellent resources that can be used in school and at home to help students learn and practice positive personal and civic values. Newspapers are an essential resource for a character education program.



A MESSAGE TO TEACHERS

How to use this booklet

As you know, teaching values cannot be done in one month; it is a process that takes time and repetition until it becomes habit.

Character education should not be considered an add-on to your already busy day and full curriculum. Teaching values (such as respect and responsibility) is easily integrated into the subjects you teach and the way you manage your classroom. Use short windows of opportunity — a few minutes before or after recess or while waiting for buses — to discuss values.

The strategies and activities in this booklet are designed to be idea-generators. You can try a strategy as proposed or modify it to meet your needs and the needs of your students. Use the strategies and activities to spark your own creative ideas for ways to help your students learn and practice values.

The newspaper strategies in this booklet can be supplemented with examples from history and age-appropriate literature. The depiction of real life in newspapers, combined with history and literature, will be a powerful learning experience for your students.

Use all the content in the newspaper to help students become aware of values, analyze them and apply them. Use newspaper advertisements, comics, news, editorials, feature stories and advice columns.

You cannot do the character education job on your own. This is why home activities for each value are included in this booklet. You can take the lead and help parents support what you are doing in your classroom.

Use the classroom strategies and home activities to get your students talking and listening to one another about things that matter — their values, behaviors, strengths and weaknesses, talents and concerns.

Keep in touch with the Newspaper in Education (NIE) coordinator at your local newspaper. He/she should know what you are doing and how the newspaper is helping you teach character. You should know what the coordinator does and the services the newspaper can bring to your classroom and your school. The coordinator can be your conduit to a variety of community resources, from speakers to additional curriculum materials.

Just a word about the format: This booklet focuses on eight values. The format includes an introduction; a definition of the value; synonyms or key words for the value word; teaching strategies and home activities; and quotes and sayings for the classroom bulletin board and the refrigerator at home.



THE TRIPLE A STRATEGY

A useful framework to help you teach using newspaper content is the Triple A Strategy: Awareness, Analysis and Application.

AWARENESS

Introduce students to the words and meanings that conceptualize a value. Value words and concepts should permeate the classroom environment and academic activities whenever possible. Students should first learn the value words and what they mean. Then they should learn how the words apply to human situations. This happens through reading stories, relating personal experiences, discussions and questioning. A few suggestions:

- Help students to know what the value words are and what they mean by referring to newspapers, literature, storytelling and real-life experiences.
- Have students define value words and find synonyms and antonyms for them.
- Have students find value words in the newspaper and describe how they are used.
- Have students ask their parents about their views of the value.
- Suggest that students find sayings, slogans, maxims and quotes about the values and display these around the classroom and at home.

ANALYSIS

Develop the skills of analysis, synthesis, comprehension and evaluation — the thinking skills — with strategies and activities that focus on a given value. A few suggestions:

- Have students find examples of the value in literature and history.
- Discuss the value with students, finding examples in the newspaper and comparing and contrasting these examples with their findings in literature and history.
- Have students write a headline and lead, or draw a comic strip about the value.
- Have students list questions about the value and find examples in their newspaper that help them answer their questions.
- Have students evaluate how and why some people demonstrate the value and some do not.
- Have students keep a scrapbook of newspaper content about the value and record their ideas and feelings about the value.

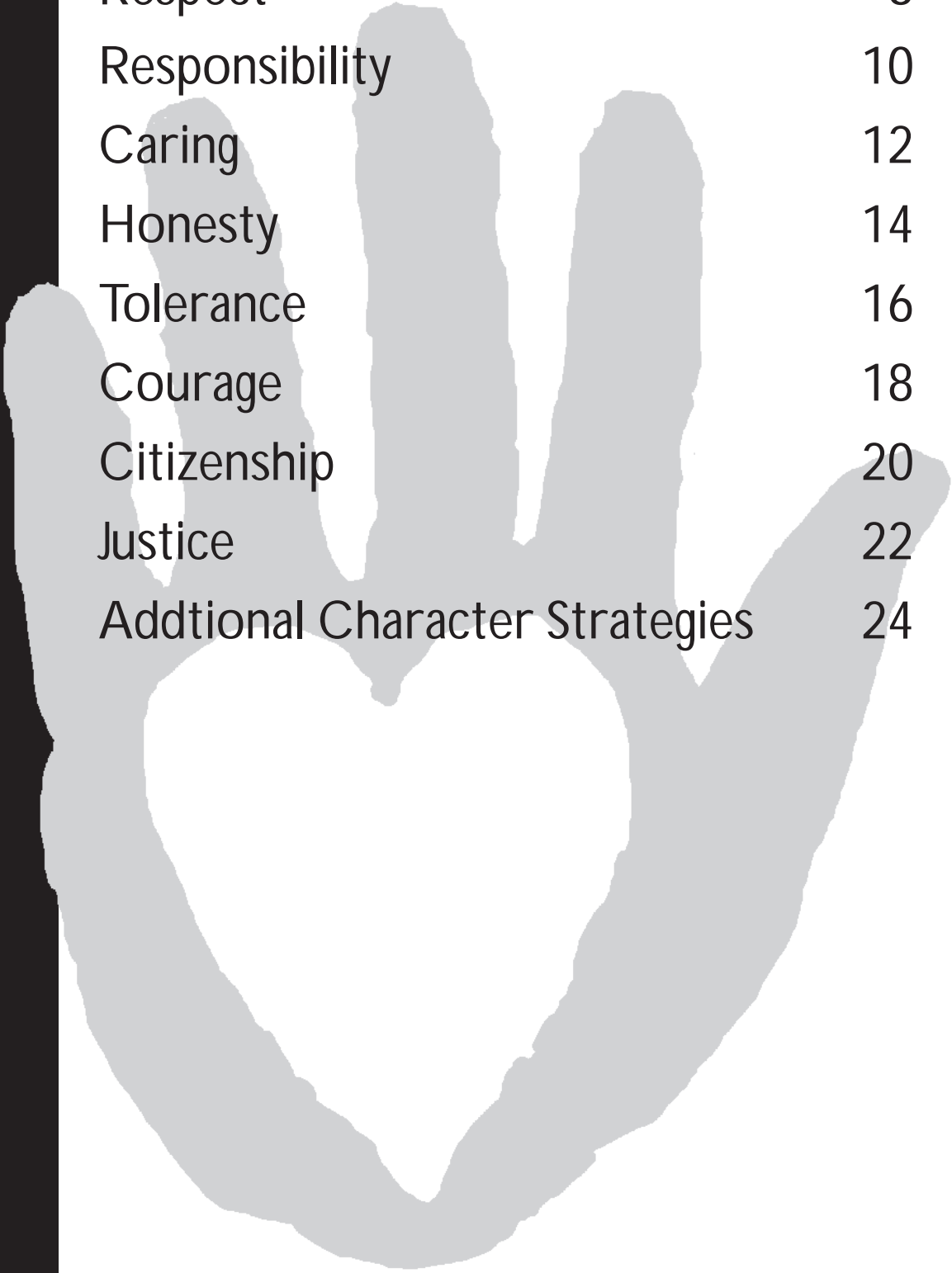
APPLICATION

No amount of study, knowledge and analysis will substitute for moral acting, action that incorporates the values in behavior. The intent here is to have the students apply the values, observe the effects of the values in their daily lives and those of others, and then apply the values to what they say and what they do. A few suggestions:

- Have students discuss how the values apply to their daily lives and how they could demonstrate use of the values.
- Role-play the values in class and have the students react to the play.
- Have students ask their parents how they see the values applied in the workplace.
- Have students keep a journal of observations of how the values are or are not applied in their peer group and on television.
- Have students write letters to the editor in response to a newspaper item about the values.

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RESPECT

DEFINITION

Respect means showing consideration for yourself and others. It means showing regard for people who are different, and for property, laws, rules, authority and the environment.

Key words: appreciation, dignity, honor, obedience, politeness, acceptance

ACTIVITIES

Classroom Strategy 1

Have teams of students take different parts of the newspaper (comics, editorials, news stories, feature stories) and circle language (words, phrases, sentences, quotes) that shows respect. Have the students draw a block around language that is disrespectful. Discuss the idea of using respectful language. Talk with students about their experiences — about rumors, about “dissing” someone.

Classroom Strategy 2

Have students (in pairs or threes) spend time over several days looking through newspapers to find examples of people who showed respect and examples of those who didn't. Have each group answer the following questions:

- What were the reasons for the person(s) to be respectful? Disrespectful?
- What happened in each case?
- How was respect shown? Acted?
- How was disrespect shown? Acted?
- What were the consequences (positive or negative) for people who showed respect and for those who didn't?

Classroom Strategy 3

With your students, select several advice columns from the newspaper and discuss why people seek such advice. Discuss the advice columnists' responses to the advice-seekers. After the discussion, have half of the students play the role of the columnist or advice-giver. Have the remaining students be people seeking advice. Have each advice-seeker write a letter relating a real or made-up story about respect or disrespect. Have each student give his/her letter to a student playing the role of advice-giver. Ask each advice-giver to respond. After the class has completed the assignment, share the results with the class, focusing on the value of respect.

Classroom Strategy 4

Find a newspaper story in which students may disagree about whether a person deserves respect or not. Have each group of students list reasons why they do or do not respect the person. Have them explain their positions. Be prepared to discuss the results with students.