

## **Hey Beav, Whatever Happened to All That Character?**

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The 1950s, "Leave it to Beaver" notion of character, even if it were true back then, is certainly not true today. Children are changing, schools are changing, and education is changing. The shifting mores of American children and schools make character education especially crucial in today's classrooms.

### **That Was Then, This is Now**

My enthusiasm for character education began my first year of teaching. It was during this first year that I quickly became aware of the diverse needs of my students. I was frustrated with the lack of respect that students showed to their elders and fellow classmates. I was also frustrated because a significant part of my day was spent dealing with playground arguments, students tattling, and inappropriate behavior. As a beginning teacher, I knew that I could and wanted to make a difference. When I first heard about character education, I thought it made sense. Even if the "Clever way" may not be a reality anymore, I could certainly strive to be proactive and teach a comprehensive approach to good character. However, it wasn't until last year that I actually saw the impact that teaching character can have on a classroom environment.

The more I learned about the ailing condition of character, the more determined I became to use character education in my classroom. Statistics published by the Boston Globe in 1994 showed that a student drops out of public school every five seconds of the school day, a child is arrested for a violent crime every five minutes, and 1,234 children run away from home everyday (Lickona, 1999). These three statistics are only a sampling of the many facts proving that children today are living in an "at-risk" society. I could see evidence of moral decline in students' behavior and performance in my own school, and I wanted to do something about it. One way I can make a difference is to make a conscientious, whole-hearted effort to teach values and help my students develop strong habits that make for good character.

Thomas Lickona, the character education guru, defined character to include thinking, feeling, and behaving. Character education can be viewed as a pillar of core values, including the main pillars: respect, care, honesty, responsibility, and fairness. As people or students grow in these core values, they develop a deeper sense of them, a desire to grow in the meaning of them, and a stronger tendency to behave in accordance with those values (Lickona, 99). The task of character education is to help students know the good, value it, and act upon it.

### **Getting Started**

My work with character education began with a character self-assessment survey to my second grade students. I posed a series of questions, such as: I treat everything I use with care, I believe I am important, I treat others the way I would like to be treated, and I do what is right. The students were asked to honestly evaluate themselves by answering with a response of always, usually, sometimes, or never.

My initial evaluation showed that about one-fourth of my class felt that they almost always tried to do what is right. Just less than half of my class felt that they always treated everything they used with care, and about 62 percent of my students reported that they always or usually treated

others how they would like to be treated. This baseline of research provided a starting point for classroom implementation, using strategies based on Lickona's eleven principles of effective character education.

One of the most meaningful ways to implement character education into a classroom is to begin by building a caring community with your students. A caring community is an environment in which your students feel connected, trusted, respected, and responsible for the actions of themselves and their classmates. Building a caring community will not only foster the desire to learn, but the desire to be a better person. An environment that can foster a child's need to belong, participate, and respect each others differences is one that will meet the needs of your students intellectually, socially, and ethically. Children with a high sense of classroom community feel personally known and respected. They believe that they have a significant say in class planning, decision-making, and problem solving. These students believe that their fellow classmates care about them and care about learning (Schaps, Lewis, & Watson, 96). According to the Child Development Project (<http://www.cdp.auburn.edu/>), when kids care about one another and are motivated by important, challenging work-they're more apt to care about learning.

### **Opportunities to Develop Character**

Students need a variety of opportunities to develop and apply the core values of character education. As a teacher, part of my job is providing those opportunities. These can spring from something as simple as a single word. Every month, in my classroom, we introduce a new ethical word. In December, our ethical word for the month was "care." Within the month we discuss, role-play, read literature, and do hands-on activities around the ethic. For "care," we read the story, *The Best Night Out With Dad*, from the series, **Chicken Soup for the Little Souls**. This story is about a father and son who are in line to buy circus tickets, but instead purchase tickets for some friends in line who could not afford them. Reading this story with my class created a basis for a dialogue on care.

The next logical step was to put our words into action. That month we made a care journal, which became a wonderful way to show students that they were demonstrating caring behavior with each other. Each day during our morning meeting I would read entries that the students had written about each other. There were usually around ten entries to read every morning, with several students reporting that they observed caring behaviors toward students in our classroom. By reading these entries, it confirmed to my students that there is value in showing that we care, and there is a reward that comes from showing others that we care. This journal was a great testimony to the efforts that my students were making that month.

### **Character Across Curriculum**

Not only should character education be taught as a specific curriculum, it is also important to embed effective character traits into the academic curriculum. A great way to make this come alive is through teaching social studies.

In second grade, we have a unit called the Giraffe Club (<http://www.giraffe.org/>), in which we study five important men and women in history who have "stuck their necks out to help others." A Giraffe Club member is someone who sees a problem, has a good idea, makes things better, and is not afraid to take action. Giraffe Club members depict and exemplify many of the core values that are woven into character education today. For example, Harriet Tubman, conductor of the Underground Railroad and advocate for abolition, is a wonderful model of respect, loyalty,

responsibility, and care. To conclude our Giraffe Club unit, the students are given the opportunity to become Giraffe Club members, themselves. The second grade classes visited an assisted care facility for the elderly, and the students prepared songs and special crafts to share. As Giraffe Club members, we were applying the characteristics of a leader that we learned throughout our unit and helping to make a real difference in the lives of others.

Throughout these activities and different approaches to incorporating character education, it's important to stay positive. Intrinsic motivation should be fostered as much as possible. Teachers should try to minimize the reliance on extrinsic or negative punishment that distract the student's real reasons and desires to behave responsibly. Instead of saying to a child, "Stop talking right now," I would encourage you to say, "If you are a second grader who is ready to listen, you look like Jack." Instead of saying, "Sit up straight and look at me when I talk to you," you could say, "I can tell that Josh is ready to learn, he is sitting up nice and tall, he's not talking, and his eyes are on me." By repeating these characteristics to a child, you're creating visible models of good behavior in your own classroom.

### **Seeing the Difference**

As the year came to a close I reevaluated my students by giving them the same character self-assessment that I had given at the beginning of the year. The results were affirming. In my baseline, 70 percent of my students reported that they always or usually treat everything that they use with care. After five months of implementation, the percentage increased to 90 percent. The same data held true for the other questions. Sixty-eight percent of students reported on the baseline that they try to do what is right, compared with 95 percent after implementation. Second graders reported that 62 percent of them believed that they treat others, as they would like to be treated. After five months, 83 percent of the students report that always or usually they treat others as they would want to be treated. In conjunction with the final assessment, I asked my students to tell me why they think good character is important. Their responses were so genuine: "Good character is good because you meet more people and make more friends." "I think character is very important because if nobody has character it would be hard to be respectful." "Good character is important because it means that you are nice and you can make good choices."

These testimonials may seem like minor victories, but if you had known my students prior to the emphasis on character education, you would be able to say, "I can see a difference." I know I'm not saving the world, and we certainly don't need a new generation of Beaver Cleavers. My goal is to make a difference. If making a difference by teaching character education can help my students to have better attitudes about school, greater concern for others, stronger feelings of social competence, and a general feeling of high self-esteem, then I am committed to make that difference.