



# Tips for Parents: Character Education

***The growing consensus among educators is that specific, universal standards of conduct exist and that these standards ought to apply to everyone, regardless of ethnic background or religion.***

## **Life should make sense**

Faced with the problems of our troubled era, many young people drop out of school and drift aimlessly into lives of violence, drug abuse, homelessness, and joblessness.

Character education is the term used by a growing, broadly based group of educators who feel that there is an important need for teachers to put some weight behind the moral messages they impart to their students.

The character education movement believes that the basic standards of respect, trustworthiness, caring, justice, fairness, civic virtue, and citizenship need to receive greater emphasis.

Character education is advocated in contrast to a system of “values clarification” that promotes open-ended attitudes and perhaps leaves students with the impression that there are no rigid moral ground rules in life.

## **Core Values—Consider the source**

The electronic media has been extremely influential in creating the moral and personal values of our society. In teaching ethics, educators and parents should keep in mind the idea that morality, myth, religion, and story are bound together.

Advocates of character education attribute the decline of moral attitudes of our young people to the lack of literature in their lives. Instead of reading legitimate works of literature, young people turn to the entertainment industry for their role models.

## **Morality is not just a matter of rules**

Morality never works for long when it is just a matter of following the rules. Values, from which the rules are derived, must be instilled as well. Many educators who support the teaching of ethics insist that there is a common core of values in a democratic and pluralistic society.

The basic values identified by educators include the following: compassion, courtesy, critical inquiry, due process, equality of opportunity, freedom of thought and action, honesty, human worth and dignity, integrity, justice, knowledge, loyalty, objectivity, order, patriotism, rational consent, reasoned argument, respect for others’ rights, responsible citizenship, rule of law, self-respect, tolerance, and truth.

### **The school and the community should try to find a common value system**

Developing a school/community based consensus about values is imperative if character-education is to have long term effects. If you are interested in knowing what your neighborhood school values, you simply need to observe how the school recognizes and rewards students.

When values are defined in terms of concrete behaviors—“honesty”—for example, then the school has a better chance of being on more compatible terms with the ethics standards valued by the broader community.

### **Parental support is important**

Parental participation in moral education programs can help promote appropriate values and behavior. Constructive activities include holding family film nights where parents and children watch a movie that has a particular moral message and talk about it afterward.

In today’s world, where many parents cannot rely on the support of an extended family or supportive community, parental support groups can afford parents a forum for discovering their shared values. These groups can be invaluable for parents who may be uncertain about what rules are suitable for their children and who may feel insecure about exercising their authority.

By attending school sponsored workshops on parenting techniques, parents learn how to hold family meetings which encourage communication and responsibility in their children.

### **What schools can do**

The key to a successful ethics program is the constant reinforcement of good values. Helpful strategies include having “message” posters throughout the school and in school buses, and by talking about good conduct in class and at school assemblies.

Educators should also never forget that they need to model the behavior they seek from students.

### **For more information:**

Kunzman, Robert. “Grappling With the Good: Talking About Religion and Morality in Public Schools” S U N Y Series in Philosophy of Education. State University of New York Press, 2006.

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