

The Definition of Character Education

Character education involves teaching children about basic human values including honesty, kindness, generosity, courage, freedom, equality, and respect.

The goal is to raise children to become morally responsible, self-disciplined citizens. Problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution are important parts of developing moral character. Through role playing and discussions, students can see that their decisions affect other people and things.

Source: From *The Language of Learning: A Guide to Education Terms*, by J. L. McBrien & R. S. Brandt, pp. 17-18, 1997, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

What is character education?

Thomas Lickona: Character education is the deliberate, proactive effort to develop good character in kids—or, more simply, to teach children right from wrong. It assumes that right and wrong do exist, that there are objective moral standards that transcend individual choice—standards like respect, responsibility, honesty, and fairness—and that we should teach these directly to young people.

What is the history of character education?

Thomas Lickona: Historically, there have been three great formative institutions that have shaped the character of children and have had the responsibility to pass on a legacy of values, and those are the family, religion, and the school. Historically, they have worked together to accomplish that task.

In our own century, we've seen many families break down, we've seen the schools back away from their role, and we've seen many many children not have the benefits of religious formation. That's created a kind of values vacuum into which the wrong influences have rushed: television and advertising—the worst of the peer culture.

So, the school is really part of a new collaborative effort, a common cause, to return adults to what historically has been one of their primary responsibilities, and that is to teach their children right from wrong, [teach them] a core set of values that will guide their lives and build a decent society.

Who needs character education?

Thomas Lickona: Kids need character building, regardless of where they live—inner city, suburbs, rural settings—the problems really exist everywhere. Rising youth violence, increasing disrespect for authority, increasing dishonesty, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, illiteracy, lack of knowledge of things as basic as the golden rule—these problems really cut across all segments of society. The development of good character is really part of every child's birthright. Parents and schools and communities have an obligation to meet that need of children.

Do teachers have time to teach character education?

Thomas Lickona: When I've done talk shows, for example, people often call in, and they say, "Aren't schools already struggling to teach reading and writing and arithmetic? Why should they add character education when they're already failing at what they're supposed to do?" And the response to that is that character education, first of all, creates the environment for teaching and learning. Schools are much better places for academic learning when they are civil and caring communities.

A second response is that the same quality of self-discipline that enables a child not to haul off and wallop another kid when he gets called a name enables that youngster to apply himself to a task, to do his homework, to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, to pursue a distant goal. So that qualities of character really underlie personal achievement as well as personal relationships. They're fundamental to everything that human beings aspire to do.

Shouldn't parents be solely responsible for teaching their children values?

Teacher: There are a lot of children who really aren't reared in environments where certain virtues are stressed. There are some children, for example, who don't even believe that honesty really is important; in other words, they think that if they steal something, or whatever, that it really isn't such an issue. So I

believe, yes, that teachers and administrators and parents are all in this together, and we all need to stress these virtues.

What kind of resources does a school need to teach character education?

Principal: When schools decide to do something about character education, they often look everywhere for solutions. They buy special materials, they put up signs and they're missing what is really the great treasure here—the mine of our moral heritage, and that's our great stories, our human history, the personalities of our leaders, the men and women who have made a contribution to the society. [It's] also exploring the lives of people who have let us down—the Benedict Arnolds, the Aldrich Amesese. These people and these stories really carry what we think is the right way to behave. And what schools should do is start using this not just to develop children's intellect, but also to develop their moral sensibilities, their moral understandings.