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The Roots of Character and the Role of Community

William Damon

Stanford University

How do young people acquire good character? What can we, as adults, do to promote their character development? Because of recent advances in research on character development, we now can provide some solid answers to these questions. My purpose today is to summarize what today's research tells us about character development, and about the role of community in educating young people for character.

The first message is that every child begins life with the building blocks of character already present in rudimentary forms. Of course there still is much learning that needs to take place for these building blocks to become mature character, but the basic elements are present from the start. This means that a basic moral sense does not need to be forced down a child's throat like unpleasant medicine - it is part of the human system. To be sustained and expanded, the child's moral sense requires lots of nurturing by parents, schools, and communities, but not force-feeding.

What are these early building blocks of character? Four that scientific studies have identified are: *empathy*, *fairness*, *self-control*, and *self-awareness*. *Empathy* is the capacity to experience another person's pleasure or pain, and it provides the emotional root of caring about other people, the heart of compassion. Newborns cry when they hear sounds of crying and show signs of pleasure at happy sounds such as cooing and laughter; and by the second year of life it is

common for children to comfort a peer or a parent in distress. An awareness of *fairness* begins as soon as children begin playing with friends. When a playmate hogs a plate of cookies or refuses to relinquish a swing set, the protest "That's not fair!" is a highly predictable response, because even young children understand that they have an obligation to share with others. The child's interest in *self-control* can be seen in an eagerness, as early as infancy, to regularize behavior through repetition, rituals, and rules. *Self-awareness* begins as soon as infants notice that their experience is distinctly their own and not the same as that of their caregivers - usually in the first months of life.

For these early moral capacities to become fully formed character, empathy must grow into sustained *concern for the well-being of others*; fairness must grow into a real *commitment to justice*; self-control must grow into a strong *sense of personal responsibility*; and self-awareness must grow into a *determination to be a good and honorable person, free from subjugation, and dedicated to noble purposes beyond the self*. This is precisely the kind of character development necessary for sustaining a democracy, because it leads directly to a love of liberty balanced by a commitment to the well-being and rights of others in the broader community.

None of these developments can happen by itself. Children need certain kinds of support and guidance from adults in their lives if they are to turn their early positive inclinations into the mature virtues that constitute character. Adults can influence children in a number of ways and places: first and foremost in the family, but also importantly in schools, in community settings such as sports leagues, libraries, and religious institutions, and in the mass media.

Based upon everything we have learned from research, there are three things that I can say about adult influence on children's character. Adults promote good character in young

people under the following conditions:

1) When adults communicate high expectations and standards to children, urging children to fully maximize the tremendous potentials that *all* children are born with.

2) When adults from all spheres of a child's life - family, school, community - are "on the same page" with one another regarding the core moral values that they profess to the child.

3) When adults encourage young people to develop strong moral identities of their own by setting good examples in behavior, by acquainting young people with admirable examples from history and public life, and by introducing children to noble purposes that inspire them.

Unfortunately these conditions are not always met in today's society. Adults sometimes have low standards for children and do not hold them to their responsibilities, out of the mistaken assumption that expecting too much of a child can wound a child's self-esteem. Yet research indicates just the opposite: a youngster builds self-confidence by accepting responsibility, even when it is difficult to do so. Adults sometimes present conflicting values to children - such as when a teacher says don't cheat but the sports coach says that breaking a rule is OK if you can get away with it; or when a T.V. show glamorizes behavior that any parent would disapprove of. Yet research shows that children take values seriously only when they perceive at least a rough consensus on them among the adults whom they respect. Adults do not always make the effort to present admirable examples to the young; nor do they regularly discuss with young people the deep questions of meaning, purpose, and what really matters in life. Yet research shows that youngsters learn moral truths by seeing them enacted in the real lives of flesh-and-blood exemplars, and by reflecting on how this informs their own search for personal direction, not through abstract injunctions about right and wrong.

These conclusions lead directly to some guidelines for character education in our schools and communities. In a recent book that I edited for Hoover Institution Press, *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education,* I (and other people who are here today) have presented a set of suggestions for an informed, effective approach to character education. Briefly, they include:

1) In order to present children with coherent messages from all the important people and settings in their lives, character education must be a community-wide endeavor. Of course it is essential that these messages promote core elements of moral character, such as caring, fairness, self-control, and a respect for rights and liberty. Schools should join with all other institutions - family, civic, recreational, religious, media - to create a community where young people can find these consistent standards, high expectations, social support, and opportunities for learning and growth wherever they go. Research has shown that young people do far better in communities characterized by shared moral values than in communities where the young receive conflicting messages - and this is true whether communities are rural or urban, wealthy or modest in means.

2) Character education must consist of more than skin-deep programs that ask students to merely recite virtuous words such as honesty, tolerance, respect, courage, and so on: such words do little more than pass in one ear and out the other. Character education needs to have a real-life side that engages students in activities, either within the school or in the broader community, that help them acquire regular habits of virtuous behavior. Active engagement not only ensures that young people will invest themselves in the program; it also nurtures the capacity to make moral choices freely, and the love of liberty, one of the defining virtues of citizenship in a democracy.

3) Character education, in addition to teaching children what *not* to do (don't lie, don't cheat, don't act disrespectfully, and so on) also must have a positive side, inspiring young people

to dedicate themselves to higher purposes. In the long run, it is a sense of positive inspiration that sustains good character. A young person who is committed to truly noble purposes does not need external injunctions to walk the straight and narrow path: as they say in sports, a good offense is the best defense.

Charitable work is one way to introduce students to a larger purpose. Research has found that community service programs, especially when combined with reflection about the moral and personal significance of serving others, are powerful inducers of character development. The sort of community service programs that are promoted by the Freedom Corps are excellent examples of this, and the inspirational nature of this initiative sends exactly the right kind of message to young Americans.

Work as a sense of *calling*, a means of contributing to the betterment of the world by using one's personal skills and talents, is another character-inducing source of purpose for a youngster; as is the wish to establish and nurture a thriving family. Faith and spirituality, too, offers young people positive experiences with transcendent purposes. Another transcendent purpose is love of country and a selfless dedication to it. In the case of a country that stands as a beacon of democracy and freedom for the world, this is a noble sentiment. The age-old term for this spirit of dedication is *patriotism*, a term that in recent years has not always been promoted in our educational settings; yet now, when our society has been called upon to combat the evils of international terror, patriotism has assumed its rightful place as a source of inspiration for the young.

In order to fulfill their character education missions, our schools and communities must make special efforts to provide young citizens with all these sources of inspiration and more,

becoming places where all young people can discover their own callings and noble purposes.