

## Little characters:

### *How teaching positive character helps children deal with life's ups and downs*

Every day, we're called upon as members of society to "do the right thing." But how do young children learn what "the right thing" is, especially when life's difficulties will inevitably test even the most idealistic of people? Despite their tender ages, young children are not immune to often complicated tests of character, such as disagreements with classmates, challenging transitions at school or at home, or bullying.

To help children peacefully and positively deal with what life throws at them, many teachers incorporate character lessons into the everyday classroom routine. From pre-school on, children learn positive ways of handling emotions brought on by typical — but sometimes troubling — tests of resolve.

Coupled with the character lessons children learn at home from their families, these positive lessons will help children build the social and emotional skills that will move them to make good personal choices for the rest of their lives.

### Basic Character Principles

From play dates to pre-school, children have the opportunity to learn a number of basic character principles through their daily routines:

**Compassion.** Children learn to be kind, express gratitude, and help others in need without ulterior motive.

**Trustworthiness.** Children learn to follow through and honor their commitments. They learn about honesty, and to never lie, cheat or steal. They learn to stand by their family and friends.

**Respect.** Children learn the importance of treating others fairly and being tolerant of differences. Exhibiting respect means using good manners, never using bad language, being considerate of others' feelings, and never using violence or threats to settle disputes.

**Fairness.** Children learn to follow the rules, take turns, share, and be open-minded. Taking advantage of others or blaming others for one's own mistakes is frowned upon.

**Responsibility.** Children learn to be disciplined, both academically and emotionally. They learn to think before they act, and to be accountable for their actions.

**Citizenship.** Even young children can learn to honor their communities by being good neighbors and obeying laws and rules.

## How you can help build your child's character

From the time they are born, children are setting the foundation of their character. Through guidance and positive reinforcement, parents can help their children learn to handle life's difficult situations, such as resolving conflicts or dealing with confusing emotions. Families can help children expand their understanding of character and values in many ways. Here are some suggestions:

**Help your child understand emotions.** A child begins to make connections about feelings from birth. They feel safe when snuggling in a parent's arms, perhaps a little scared by the sound of the vacuum, or full of happiness at the sight of their favorite cookie. By the time they are two years old, children's moods can reflect those of their loved ones. Pay close attention the next time you become angry or frazzled around your child — chances are your child might become irritable, too.

As you go about daily activities, help your children identify their emotions and deal with those emotions constructively. For example, if your child comes to you in protest when friends or siblings won't share their toys, you can say, "It makes you angry when your brother won't share the blocks, doesn't it?" Or, if your child

smiles with delight when the family dog walks up, point out, “Doesn’t it make you feel happy when you pet the doggie?”

**Encourage your child to deal with feelings in healthy ways.** Since children lack emotional maturity, they may act out in negative ways, such as hitting, punching, or screaming. Try to help your child channel his emotions in a productive manner. Asking him to tell you how he feels is the first step. If your child is especially upset, give him a piece of paper and crayons and ask him to draw you a picture to represent how he’s feeling. The negative energy is re-directed and your child gets the chance to blow off a little steam in a creative way.

You could also try telling your child to stop and count to 10 the next time she gets upset, or even let her run around the yard a few times to help her clear her mind and calm down. Then, ask her to sit quietly with you and talk about how she felt. This is your chance to teach your child new ways to identify more complex emotions, such as embarrassment or frustration.

**Teach cooperation.** Engage your child in fun activities, such as baking cookies together, playing a board game, or joining in a round of hide-and-seek. Activities like these provide opportunities to teach children about differences of opinion, taking turns, respect for rules and playing fair. Very quickly, your child will see differences in how he is treated when he cooperates with others and follows the rules versus when he chooses to “do his own thing.”

**Have a little faith.** Positive reinforcement goes a long way when teaching children character values. Even though children will inevitably slip up, you can use those times as opportunities to find the positive side of their otherwise negative behavior. Sometimes, all children have to hear is something like, “I know you won’t lie to me next time, because I know that you know it’s wrong.” By showing your child you have faith she will do the right thing, your child will be more likely to follow suit.

**Foster independence.** Even though you may be able to complete some everyday tasks more quickly on your own, allow a little extra time for your children to practice tying their shoes, zipping their coats or picking out their outfits for the day. These small but important tasks go a long way toward fostering a sense of personal responsibility and initiative in your children. Very soon, they will understand these are tasks they should do on their own, without having to rely on you.

**Teach household responsibility.** Help your children become active, contributing members of the family by assigning them age-appropriate tasks around the house. By entrusting them with such chores as putting away their toys or putting dirty clothes in the hamper, they learn about the importance of honoring commitments and being self-reliant. Even though those first attempts at setting the table or folding the laundry may look less than perfect, keep in mind that your children are learning to do chores without having to be asked, as well as to be confident in their abilities to contribute.

**Do good works.** Throughout your community, there are opportunities for you to join your children in acts of compassion that will help your children build empathy for others, particularly those who are less fortunate than your family. Simple activities, such as picking a few toys to donate to charity each holiday season, shoveling an elderly neighbor’s walkway, or volunteering to serve meals at a local soup kitchen are all wonderful ways children can experience the sense of fulfillment that comes from helping others. [For more ideas and resources, see the back page of this newsletter.]

## Teaching character through volunteering

It’s true that day care, play groups and pre-school will be great training grounds for your child to learn and develop her individual character. Still, your child’s best and most important teacher is – and always will be – you. And one of the single best ways to help your child build her character is to lead by example.

Volunteering as a family is a wonderful way to spend quality time together while teaching your child cooperation and empathy, as well as what it means to be an active citizen in your community. You can commit as much time as you like, and there’s never a shortage of activities to try!

## **Here are some ways you and your child can volunteer:**

- Cook meals together, such as casseroles, or desserts, such as cookies, then let your child help pack up the food to bring to a local homeless shelter.
- Coordinate a neighborhood food drive, then walk around the neighborhood with your child collecting canned goods to give to the needy.
- Ask your neighbors for their cans and bottles, then go to your local grocer with your child to claim the deposits on the recyclables. Then, donate the proceeds to a charity that you and your child choose together.
- Help your child set up a lemonade stand or other type of “business” in your neighborhood and let your child choose what charity he’ll donate his “earnings” to.
- If your child is a budding performer, call your local nursing home or the pediatric ward at your area hospital to see if your child can treat the patients to her “act.”

## **Log on to these websites for more volunteering ideas and resources:**

Family volunteering Ideas: <http://www.thevolunteerfamily.org/Volunteers/Step3.aspx>

Locate a food bank by zip code: <http://feedingamerica.org/foodbank-results.aspx>

Find a way to volunteer that fits your family’s interests and skills: <http://www.volunteermatch.org>