

Good Things to Do

**Expert Suggestions for Fostering Goodness
in Kids**

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Teaching in Your PRIME The Fab Five of Educating for Learning and Character by Marvin W. Berkowitz

As I work with thousands of educators, trying to help them improve their practice toward both academic achievement and the positive psychological development of their students, I frequently think about my son. I dreaded the day, especially in elementary school, when he would be assigned to a teacher who I felt simply did not “get it.” Fortunately, he went to an excellent school (Lake Bluff Elementary School in Shorewood, Wisconsin) and my nightmare never became a reality. But in ruminating about this I had to consider what my criteria were for a good teacher and a bad teacher. I probably would not have had a good answer back then, but now, after a decade of pre-service and in-service teacher training and mentoring hundreds of principals, I think I have a better handle on what makes a truly great teacher.

Coupling my experience with both the research literature on teacher effectiveness (admittedly skewed toward academic success and rarely considering the development of the whole child) and asking many educators what they consider characteristic of an exemplary teacher, I have zeroed in on five broad characteristics. So, I want to offer what they are. If you are a teacher, they are what you want to do and be, and if you are a parent, they are what you want to see in your child’s teacher. I call this five-part model PRIME teaching, for it entails:

- Putting academics in perspective
- Relationship building
- Intrinsic motivation
- Modeling goodness
- Empowering students

Putting academics in perspective

There are two related parts to this, both of which are at times seen as sacrilegious by some educators. The first part concerns the true purposes of education. Academic learning was never intended to be the sole or even the prime purpose of public education. Education was foremost intended to prepare students to be democratic citizens, which includes the formation of virtuous character. Certainly literal literacy and cultural literacy (along with other academic skills) are part of civic competence, but it is the civic and moral socialization that truly justifies education. After World War II in the US, we lost our way concerning the purpose of education. Particularly when the Soviet Union successfully sent up the Sputnik rocket, we, as a nation, panicked and focused public education monomaniacally on the task of catching up to the Soviets in scientific technological capacity. We have still not returned to the full understanding that the moral character of our youth is everyone's responsibility. This particularly applies to those institutions with the greatest impact on youth development: the family, the school, and now the media. Teachers, in particular, and the nation in general, cannot afford to pass the buck and claim that fostering the development of positive character in youth is not their job. Not only is it the job of educators to foster the development of positive character in students, it is arguably the most important aspect of their job.

The second part of this issue is even more controversial.

Teachers, quite understandably, lose perspective about the concrete knowledge that they purvey. The factoids of the curriculum tend to get over-emphasized by teachers because so much of their energy is necessarily spent on writing lesson plans about them, attempting to pass them on to students, and assessing them. Teachers spend countless hours trying to figure out the best way to get students to understand how magnets work or what a preposition is or how to carry over remainders in long division. Once again this job of knowledge transfer needs to be kept in perspective. I would argue that much of the specific content we teach students in not of intrinsic value. We could easily teach about a different battle or a different artist or a different genre of poetry and serve the same ends. Knowing where Appomattox is and why it is important has had little impact on my life and likely on yours (if you even remember learning about it at all). Certainly learning to read, write, and engage in basic math skills are critical life skills. Being culturally literate is too. My point is not that we should

stop teaching facts, but that we need to keep them in proper perspective. Most of what we teach in the K-12 years is really about teaching students how to learn and fostering a thirst for learning; it is not about what they specifically learn. Master teachers like

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Ron Berger (author of *An Ethic of Excellence*) argue that spending long periods of time on complex projects is much better education than jumping from factoid to factoid as the current mania over standardized state testing seems to demand. So the first lesson is to keep it all in perspective. Teaching is more about fostering student development and fostering a capacity and thirst for learning than it is about the content of the curriculum. Teachers who say they don't have time for character education simply don't get it. Teachers who spend the first week or more of the school year building relationships, creating classroom community, collaborating on developing class norms, learning about each other, and developing classroom procedures and routines, are teachers who have their priorities straight.

Relationship building

There is a popular saying in education that "students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." The missing two words at the end of that sentence are "about them." I frequently ask teachers to describe their favorite teacher. The most common characteristics they list are about interpersonal relationships: took a personal interest in me; reached out to me when I was in crisis; took the time to get to know me as a person; went beyond the normal school boundaries to develop a personal relationship with me; etc. I often tell educators that the molecules on which effective character education is built are relationships. Educators often gravitate first to exhortation (lecturing, reading pithy quotes, putting up inspiring posters, etc.), recognition (listing students of character on the wall or naming them at assemblies or in school announcements), and reward (giving students tangible rewards or privileges for good behavior). These however are not what really impacts a student's character. What really impacts student character is rather how the child is treated by others. Character education is fundamentally a matter of promoting healthy pro-social relationships in the school: teacher-student, student-student,

teacher-parent, teacher-support staff, student-support staff, and so on. Peer mentoring, cross-age buddying, and professional learning communities are deliberate means for such relationship building. Teachers need to focus on this building, most centrally how they can build a strong relationship with each child, how they can engineer a healthy peer culture among students, and how they can teach students the social-emotional skills they need to build, sustain and repair such relationships.

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Intrinsic motivation

As noted above, teachers seem to be almost genetically disposed to dispense extrinsic rewards and motivators (including punishments) to students. However, as psychological research has taught us, this is not a very effective method of motivating students (or others). Yet teachers rely on this as a major means of allegedly fostering student development, seemingly not realizing that punishment is a very ineffective (even counter-productive) means of behavior management and rewards have some serious negative side effects. Teachers frequently get indignant at the mere suggestion that they stop relying on extrinsic motivators. Sometimes they simply get confused as they cannot imagine how not to do so. The reward distracts students from the real message; i.e., what you just did is good and should be done even more in the future. It also teaches students to go wherever the rewards are, and this is easily generalized to inappropriate or even immoral or illegal behavior which has a personal pay-off. Rather, teachers need to learn to promote intrinsic motivation in students by simply, quietly, and privately praising them (with a clear explanation of what was desirable about their behavior), by modeling the behavior they want in students (more on this below), and by discussing and studying values, virtues, and desirable behavior (both in the academic curriculum and in the general life of the school). If students authentically care about your school and classroom and feel reciprocally cared about, they will want to adopt the values that you profess and, more importantly, manifest. In this way, students will truly internalize the values and apply them fully in their lives.

Model good character

It is utter hypocrisy to ask students to have good character but not hold oneself to the same standard. As I frequently challenge educators, “how dare you ask a child to be responsible or respectful or caring or honest if you can’t act that way yourself?” It is quite a sobering challenge for even the best of us. We know that one powerful way to impact students’ character is to leverage the positive relationship we have hopefully built and model good character. If they care about you and know you care about them, they will want to become like you. Gandhi challenged us to be the change we want to see in the world; I challenge you to be the character you want to see in your students. And there is no opting out of this one either. It is not a personal choice whether you are a role model; it is up to those who look at, and look up to, you. Every teacher is a role model, whether s/he intends it, wants it, or not. And every teacher impacts students’ character through her or his own character every single day. As Tom Lickona has said “the single most powerful tool you have to impact a student’s character is your own character.” This one is clear to parents; they look for what kind of person their child’s teacher is. It is much less clear to teachers who are daunted and cowed by the prospect of having their character judged, and therefore discount the power of their character on their students’ development.

Empower students

American education is a decidedly hierarchical and authoritarian institution. And students are at the bottom of the food chain. It is not that educators are predators, but rather that the entire system disempowers students, albeit with benevolent but misguided intentions. Unfortunately this paternalistic/maternalistic system does not prepare students for life, either in general or as members of a self-governing society. Teachers simply do not know how to empower students. They make all the decisions, solve all the problems, make all the plans, and generally rule by fiat. They are the czars and czarnas of their

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classrooms. Exemplary educators however have discovered the pedagogy of empowerment. They pass (appropriate) problems, plans and decisions back to students for resolution. They use pedagogical methods like cooperative learning and class meetings. And they authentically value students' minds and voices. Such teachers humbly realize that students will often outthink them, even kindergarten students. They recognize that students are a valuable resource in building effective schools and classrooms. But most importantly, they respect students and understand that this respect and the pedagogy of empowerment will promote more learning, more love for learning, and stronger character in their students. Teachers need to truly value students and empower them in all appropriate ways.

My advice to teachers is to stay in your PRIME. My advice for parents is to look for teachers who are in their PRIME. Focus on these five broad strategies and, in the words of Dr. Seuss, "oh the places you will go."

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Eight Tips to Developing Caring Kids by Nancy Eisenberg

There is a word we researchers use to refer to voluntary behavior that aims to help another, like sharing, or providing comfort: "prosocial." Although most parents and teachers would say they value prosocial behavior in children and want to encourage it, it is important to note that not all prosocial behaviors are equal. They can be performed for a variety of reasons, ranging from the self-oriented desires (e.g., to get approval from peers, or to get something in return) to more altruistic reasons (e.g., because of concern for another person or the desire to act on one's personal values). Most adults would prefer to help children develop behaviors that are performed for the latter reasons rather than for selfish reasons. Unfortunately, it often is impossible to know children's motives for assisting another, but there are things we can do to promote other-oriented or value-based (altruistic) behaviors.

What not to do: rewards

First, one thing that is not advised is encouraging prosocial actions by giving children concrete rewards such as candy or money for their behavior. Providing rewards appears to encourage prosocial behavior primarily when it has a benefit for the child. Providing praise or approval for helping behavior probably does not undermine children's prosocial development, although it is not clear that approval, by itself, is very effective at promoting children's concern for others and their welfare.

Be aware of children's capacity for empathy and sympathy

An important tool for fostering children's prosocial behavior is their capacity for empathy and sympathy. Empathy involves feeling another's emotion, or feeling an emotion consistent with what another person would be expected to feel in a given situation. For example, if a girl views a boy who is sad and she feels sad as a consequence, that is empathy. Or if a boy