

October, 2000

Your Character Counts!

In today's climate of school shootings, teen promiscuity, and shoplifting epidemics you might ask, who is teaching our children about respect, honesty and being a person of good character? We are! Every adult, whether you have children or not, teaches today's children what ethics and character mean by the example we set. Our examples speak louder than any lecture or school project ever will. Children learn best by what they see.

Many are appalled at the media. The graphic violence and sexual situations portrayed on prime time television and in movies marketed to kids is attributed with the decline of our society's morality. And they do share the blame, but we can look closer to home!

Parents are often blamed for the decline of today's youth. Society will point their finger and say today's parents are too busy or too self-absorbed to do their job of teaching children right from wrong. And it is true that parents have the primary responsibility of guiding their children. But factors outside of the family have an influence on our children as well.

Sometimes what we fail to do is to look at our own communities for the examples we set. If young people see businesses in their community engaging in shady practices, they learn that honesty may not always be the best policy. If those in authority in our schools treat some children differently, they learn that fairness isn't always upheld. And if adults in the clubs and organizations that serve kids fight among themselves, kids learn that respect is of little value.

The truth is we all have some part in setting the moral climate that will shape our youth. Are we setting the example we want our children to follow, or do we expect them to "do as I say, not as I do?" **October 15 to 21, 2000 will be National Character Counts week.** Many communities across America will hold special activities to celebrate their commitment to building character in young people. Let's each do our part by being positive role models for good

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character.

Citizenship: Giving Back to the Community

Community leadership, quality of life for families, and economic development go together, hand in glove. Unless you have competent leadership in a community, communities will begin to decline. Communities either plan for the future, and move ahead, or they gradually fold up. Communities that work over time to cultivate leaders are most able to do what they need to do to make their communities successful. And they need volunteers who will step to the plate to help.

Several area leadership programs have been designed to enhance the social and economic well-being of communities by developing active, effective leaders. These programs include CLIMB in Warrensburg, DISCOVER in Clinton, and LEAD 2000 in Lafayette County. By participating in leadership training, citizens are better prepared to give back to their community.

Leadership programs focus on essential skills and abilities which effective community leaders must possess: **Effective community leaders:** 1.) **Are knowledgeable and informed,** and know how to access and gather key information to make

sound decisions. 2.) **Are good listeners, communicators,** and seek to understand all aspects of issues. 3) **Understand group dynamics,** seek group consensus, and build coalitions. 4) **Have the ability to change.** Will Rogers put it well when he said, "You can be on the right track and still get run over, if you just sit there." 5) **Are visionary,** or in other words, are future-oriented. They see the big picture, and are willing to think outside the box. They have the ability to empower others to create a shared vision.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world, indeed it's the only thing that every has." - Margaret Mead

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Who's Responsibility is it Anyway?

You are rushing out the door for work one morning and notice your seventh grader's report on the kitchen table. He worked hard on it for the past two days and it is due today. You:

- A. Go to work.
- B. Take it to the school.
- C. Take it to work and fax it to the school.

Your daughter is on the volleyball team and they have a tournament that keeps them out late. When she gets home at 10:45pm, she has homework. You:

- A. Know she needs her sleep so you send her to bed and do her homework for her.
- B. Make her do her homework before she goes to sleep or, send her to bed knowing she will have to get up early to do her homework.
- C. Send her to bed and tell her she won't have to go to school tomorrow because she'll be too tired and won't have her homework done.

Because responsibility is taught through actions, these scenarios help add perspective to real life situations. What messages do your children receive? I hope you answered A and B, respectively.

The Pillars of Character

Many people feel that children need to be taught to be persons of good character, but have difficulty knowing where to start. The Josephson Institute of Ethics has identified six “pillars” of good character that have been agreed upon by people of various cultures and faiths. These six pillars are identified below.

Trustworthiness. A person of good character is honest. They don’t cheat or steal. And they are reliable - they do what they say they will do. They can be trusted to do the right thing, even when it may not be easy to do so.

Respect. Showing respect to others, even those who are different, is another part of good character. To show respect is to treat others with consideration, as you yourself would like to be treated - to deal with disagreements and anger peacefully.

Responsibility. To be responsible is to be accountable for your actions and the choices you make. To follow through and do what you are supposed to do. To use self control and self discipline and to think before you act.

Fairness. A person who is fair plays by the rules, takes turns and shares. They don’t take advantage of others or try to

change the rules for their own benefit. They also are careful about blaming others and are willing to listen to both sides of a story.

Caring. A caring person is kind and shows others that they care about them. They are willing to help people in need, and take the time to say thank you when others help them. They are also willing to forgive, knowing that every person makes mistakes.

Citizenship. A good citizen does their share to make their community or school better. They cooperate with those in authority, obey the laws and rules, and respect authority. They also do what they can to stay informed and participate in decision making (i.e. vote). They do what they can to protect the environment.

What can you do to teach your child and others the importance of good character? The first and most important thing is to set the example yourself.

Talk to
your children
about your
expectations.
In an
amazing
interview
with young

people conducted by Michael Josephson, kids talk about how they would cheat or lie to get ahead. When parents viewed the tape, they were appalled. But when the parents were asked if they had ever told their children that these things were wrong, the parents could not think of a specific time when they had. Children aren't mind readers, and there are plenty of examples of bad behavior all around them. Tell your children what you believe about character and how you expect them to behave.

Use the terms identified by the pillars. When a child interrupts, explain that they are not showing respect. When they forget their homework, remind them that they need to show responsibility. Repeated use of the words reinforces the lesson that you expect children to follow these guidelines.

Is It Wrong to Cheat?

The ethical person would answer a resounding "yes." However, research by the Josephson Institute of Ethics,

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Q: I would like to find out more about character education.

Perhaps I could get my school or church involved in using the pillars of character. Where can I get more information?

A: Missouri 4-H has adopted the "Character Counts" program for their character education efforts, which they call "Show Me Character". You may want to talk to your 4-H youth specialist about this program. Or for information about the Character Counts Coalition, check out their web site at

shows that 61% of high school students say they cheated on an exam at least once while 45% said they cheated two or more times in the past twelve months. Many teens recognize that academic dishonesty is wrong, yet they speak of cheating as if it is a behavior that is out of their control. Nearly one-third (32%) of college students believe that in today's society, one has to lie or cheat at least occasionally in order to succeed. What are we teaching our children? To achieve at all costs...even to be dishonest?

Many parents reinforce dishonesty by the examples they set. According to a study of high school students, 51% of the students said parents had written a "false excuse" for them. In 1969, only 23% reported parental involvement in false excuses.

Have you ever lied about your kid's age to save a few dollars on the kiddie menu, at a movie theater or even more on an airplane? Consider the parent who, upon discovering that his son had improperly taken home school supplies said, "How could you do this?"

It's against everything I have taught you. If you needed the supplies so badly, why didn't you tell me? I would have taken them from the office." Then, deciding to reinforce the ethical lesson he added, "I'm going to call in sick tomorrow and go talk with your teacher."

Consider your actions and reactions and remember, your children are soaking in all your actions and words. Of course, it's not right to cheat...help your children learn the lesson.