

Character Education is a Cornerstone of Positive Youth Development

Last month I wrote on the subject of bullying. I addressed what parents can do within their home to help connect with their kids to know what's happening with them and be able to offer advice. But what about the bullies? What can be done to reduce the amount of bullying that is occurring throughout the country?

The best way to connect with kids and diminish the prevalence of bullying and other socially unacceptable behavior among young people is with effective character education in the home and in schools. In his paper entitled "The Relationships Between Character Education and the Prevention of Problem Behaviors: A Position Statement," the late Dr. Victor Battistich of the University of Missouri stated that "high quality character education" is not only effective at promoting the development of good character, but is a promising approach to the prevention of a wide range of contemporary problems. These include aggressive and antisocial behaviors, drug use, precocious sexual activity, criminal activities, academic under-achievement, and school failure.

"Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike." - President Theodore Roosevelt

I have long been an advocate of character development becoming an integral part of school curriculum. Last year, the non-profit organization that my husband and I founded in 1989, Learning Forum International, launched a character program for schools called Communities of Excellence (CoE). CoE uses the 8 Keys of Excellence, which I developed nearly 30 years ago and which are a core component of our SuperCamp summer enrichment programs for middle school and high school students, as the foundation of its character education.

Countless teachers have used the 8 Keys of Excellence in their classrooms for years. They report that students find the 8 Keys meaningful and memorable while living and talking about them in their lives. The students habituate them to the point where it's been said "they cannot live without them". The Keys define who they are.

That's the point of any character development effort - to make such an impression on the students that they embody these positive character traits in their everyday life.

Building a Mindset of Excellence

While character education can be effective at preventing social problems among teens and pre-teens, I prefer to approach it from a more positive position, which is to build a mindset of excellence in our youth. I envision a growing number of youth embodying excellence and having it manifest in academic excellence, emotional excellence, physical excellence, work excellence, service excellence and moral excellence.

Excellence is defined as greatness, value, worth, good qualities in high degree.

Excellence is ongoing; it's an essence, a mindset, a foundation. It *becomes* you.

Excellence is a place to come from. It's a process, a journey. By contrast, success is more often defined as a favorable outcome, an achievement. I developed the 8 Keys of Excellence by studying people who had achieved great success while maintaining personal excellence.

This positive approach, this focus on being your best self, is by far the most effective way to introduce the concept of character education to kids. For example, the 8 Keys are woven into everything we do at SuperCamp and they are modeled throughout each program by our staff. Students tell us months, sometimes years, after attending that they experienced a meaningful *shift* in their lives by adopting the 8 Keys.

We share information on the 8 Keys with parents of our SuperCamp students so they can integrate these excellence traits within their household. Parents whose children haven't attended SuperCamp can learn about the 8 Keys of Excellence at our SuperCamp website.

Of course, as the saying goes, *actions speak louder than words.* Our term for it at SuperCamp is *everything speaks.* That's why all of our staff are excellent models of the 8 Keys. And it's why we remind SuperCamp parents that the more they can model these character traits at home, the more likely their kids will follow suit.

While I've written about the 8 Keys of Excellence before, I thought it would be useful to provide a brief summary of each Key here:

1. Live in **INTEGRITY**

Define your values and make behavior choices that are in line with your values. When your actions are authentic and sincere and reflect what you believe in, that's integrity.

2. **FAILURE LEADS TO SUCCESS**

The only real failure is not learning from your mistakes. Ask yourself: What have I learned from this experience? What value can I find in it? What will I do differently next time?

3. **SPEAK WITH GOOD PURPOSE**

Communicate in a positive, honest and direct way . it's the cornerstone of healthy relationships.

4. **THIS IS IT!**

Live in the now. Make the most of every moment. By making something else IT, you miss what's going on around you in the moment. Each moment, each task, counts.

5. Affirm your **COMMITMENT**

Define your goal and commit to it! Do whatever it takes to make it happen.

6. Take **OWNERSHIP**

Be someone who can be counted on. Take responsibility for the choices you make.

7. Stay **FLEXIBLE**

Be willing to change what you are doing to get the outcome you desire. If something's not working, try something new.

8. Keep your **BALANCE**

Balance is our personal 'bank account' of meaning and fulfillment within our life. To stay in balance we must make the choices that give the greatest meaning to us.

I hope you find these Keys helpful as a character education tool within your family.