



# What Works in Character Education?

## WHAT WORKS IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

**Effective strategies can be identified. Effective programs employ many or all of the following strategies:**

- Professional development. All effective programs build in structures for ongoing professional training.
- Peer interaction. All effective programs incorporate peer interactive strategies (e.g., peer discussion, role play, and cooperative learning).

**Most Consistently Impacted Outcomes Character education works—** if implemented well.

1. Direct teaching. Practice what you preach, but don't forget to preach what you practice.
2. Skill training. Many strategies directly teach social- emotional skills (e.g., conflict resolution).
3. Making the agenda explicit. More than half of the effective programs focus explicitly on character, morality, values, virtues, or ethics.
4. Family and community involvement. Effective programs typically involve families and community members and organizations. This includes parents as consumers (e.g., offering training to parents) and parents and community as partners (e.g., including them in the design and delivery of the character education initiative).
5. Providing models and mentors. Many programs incorporate peer and adult role models (both live and literature-based) and mentors to foster character development.
6. Integration into the academic curriculum. Most of the 33 effective programs (didn't test for academic gains, but of the eleven that did, ten found significant effects. Especially in the age of No Child Left Behind legislation, we should strive to integrate character education into the curriculum.
7. Multi-strategy approach. Effective character education programs are rarely single-strategy initiatives. The average number of strategies used by the 33 effective programs was seven.

**Recommendations for maximizing the effectiveness of character education:**

1. Choose tested and effective implementation approaches that match your goals.
2. Train the implementers. Research has shown over and over that incomplete or inaccurate implementation leads to ineffective programs.
3. Enlist leadership support. Especially when character education is school wide or districtwide, its success depends on support from the principal or superintendent.
4. Assess character education and feed the data back into program improvement. Educators should assess both the outcomes and the implementation processes and consider those data as a means for improving practice.
5. Pay attention to staff culture. Principals often report that they need to first shape the culture among adults before they can effectively tackle character education and the whole school culture.
6. Build student bonding to school. Character education depends in a large part on the degree to which students become attached to, and feel a part of, their schools.
7. Think long-term and sustain the commitment. James Comer, developer of the School Development Project, claims that it takes at least three years to begin to make a positive impact on a school wide culture, and that substantial effects are often seen only after five to seven years.
8. Bundle programs. Many effective character education initiatives combine components of different programs.
9. Include parents and other community representatives.

*Helpful resources for parent and community involvement are available at the CASEL ([www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)) and Developmental Studies Center ([www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org)) websites.*

*The full "What Works in Character Education" report can be downloaded from the Center for Character and Citizenship ([www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org)) at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.*