



# **Character Education Framework**

**March, 2018**

## Character Education: Building Positive Ethical Strength

Character education is the direct attempt to foster character virtues – the principles that inform decisionmaking and behavior. Virtues can be used to describe the character of people, the climate of organizations, and the culture of societies. Personal character virtues are the bridge between ability (e.g., linguistic, mathematical, artistic, social, and emotional) and conduct. Virtues, such as kindness and perseverance, motivate individuals to use their talents for positive development and good citizenship.



The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics has developed the Framework for Character Education to guide the development of the Center’s educational programs for children and youth ages 5 to 18 years. These programs are best implemented in conjunction with social and emotional learning activities in school and after-school settings and at home. Moral judgments do not always translate into moral behavior. The successful enactment of virtues depends on social and emotional skills, such as emotion regulation and social information processing. Teaching practices will vary by age and child’s readiness for learning.

### Our Character Education Programs

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics’ character education programs uses a literacy-based instructional approach. Narratives (both fiction and real-world) expose young people to character virtues in different contexts and the outcomes of ethical behavior. Through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities, children learn *about* and *through* character virtues. They learn *about* character virtues when they name and define virtues, and analyze case studies. They learn *through* character virtues when they behave in a kind and responsible manner and when adults establish caring environments that exemplify moral attitudes.



Literacy materials may include picture storybooks, novels, short stories, poems, and academic articles. The narratives may cover a continuum of content from real-life events and ethical dilemmas to folktales. These materials serve as a springboard for discussion, projects, and self-reflection. By combining character education and literacy education, character education lessons foster students’ ability to communicate about ethical issues orally and in writing. By that, character education enables young people

to engage in discourse about morality, explore worldviews, and advocate for the issues they care about.

## The Eight Themes of Character Education

The Framework defines eight themes of character development. Each theme corresponds to one or more character virtues. A character value or virtue is the attitude that represents a person's moral standards for behavior.



In teaching each of the eight themes of character education, The Markkula Center's programs aim to foster:

- The ability to name a virtue, describe the cognitions and behaviors that make up this virtue and recognize the situations in which it is needed
- The understanding that virtues and one's ability to act on them can improve over time
- The motivation to integrate virtues into problem-solving and decision-making in all aspects of one's life.
- The frequency and efficiency of expression of one's virtues
- The appreciation that the values of individuals and communities can vary by culture, religion, life experiences, and personal needs (e.g., needs for security, growth, and belonging)
- The willingness and ability to engage in civil discourse about differences of opinion about ethical issues

This Framework uses a holistic view of virtues, which sees the sum of character virtues as greater than its components. The existence of multiple virtues strengthens each one. For example, courage supports preserving one's integrity. In an ideal world, ethical behavior shows a balance among various virtues (e.g., virtues that promote a moral society and virtues that promote individual performance). However, personality differences and varied cultural values lead to moral dilemmas, in which one must choose between two courses of action, each representing a character virtue. The Framework outlines here can facilitate discussions about moral dilemmas by clarifying on the nature of the virtues regarding the attitudes and behaviors involved.



## 1. CHANGE REQUIRES EFFORT



An important 21<sup>st</sup> Century character strength is the willingness to initiate and adapt to change. To do well in school and the workplace, individuals should strive for continuous improvement, change bad habits to good habits, and persevere in the face of challenge. They need to develop a sense of agency. Rather than feeling a victim of circumstances, young people recognize that change is possible and they can steer their lives in the direction they desire. They can resist negative peer pressure, fight addiction, escape abusive relationships, and pursue personal and academic goals. Resilient individuals see life transitions, such as moving to a new city or country, as a growth opportunity. Their flexibility and openness to new experiences help them cope with stressful situations.



## 2. COURAGE REQUIRES FORTITUDE



Courage is the mental ability to do something to benefit the well-being of oneself or others, despite one's fears. While courage involves the willingness to take risks, it is considered a virtue only if the risk-taking behavior is for a reason rather than for a thrill. There are small acts of courage, such as not being afraid to ask for help or learning a new sport. There are bigger acts of courage such as standing up to popular kids who bully a lonely kid, admitting cheating on a test, and fighting for human rights in a country that does not support equality.



## 3. KINDNESS REQUIRES EMPATHY



Kindness is the desire to protect and promote the welfare of others. Kind individuals say or do things to lift others' spirits, get them out of trouble, and mend conflictual relationships. Kind behavior resides in the understanding of others' feelings. Kind people are competent observers – they take the time to listen attentively and grasp the situation. They show the commitment to treat every person with respect, dignity, and courtesy, and they are motivated to give or share something with others for the joy of giving rather than anticipated social recognition or reward.



## 4. INTEGRITY REQUIRES WHOLENESS



Integrity connects self-image to ethical behavior. The person with integrity is someone who acts in a way that is faithful to his/her values, beliefs, and principles. This person achieves a state of harmony or lack of internal conflict. Integrity depends on the accurate perception of one's strengths, limitations, life goals, and beliefs, and the willingness to work towards self-actualization within the limits of social norms and ethical standards. Integrity also requires honesty. People who consistently are dishonest with themselves or others are likely to encounter situations in which they act in a manner inconsistent with their needs or worldviews.



## 5. JUSTICE REQUIRES RESTRAINT



Justice provides a perspective on what individuals think and do in a society that protects the dignity, freedom, and welfare of all its members. Justice means treating people in a way that does not favor some over others. It depends on the understanding that all human beings should be equally entitled to a range of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Justice requires the self-regulation of one's own emotions, thoughts, and behavior to show fairness, courtesy, respect, and compassion to all individuals, regardless of economic disparity or class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, or health.



## 6. LEADERSHIP REQUIRES ENGAGEMENT



Leaders promote the welfare of others when they act as moral role models who provide support to others. They dedicate their time and talent to voice their opinions about moral issues and initiate and participate in civil discourse and projects that benefit the community. Leaders need to show a high level of engagement with their communities to deeply understand others' point of views, needs, and concerns. They demonstrate curiosity and eagerness to learn about the world. Their concern for others motivates them to go above and beyond their defined roles and duties. They can set aside their self-interest and work for the benefit of community members, the natural environment, or the greater society. Benefitting the greater good is embedded in young people's sense of purpose.



## 7. RESOURCEFULNESS REQUIRES INITIATIVE



Resourcefulness is the ability to use one's imagination, creativity, and ingenuity to solve problems.

Resourcefulness depends on one's initiative – exercising the capacity for thinking of and acting on original ideas. Resourceful individuals independently seek to expand their learning. They apply their knowledge to finding new ways to do things. They persevere and keep a focus on the problem-solving process when they struggle to find solutions. Resourceful individuals can think about new ways of helping other people and the natural environment. They use old materials to build new tools. They identify new ways to build caring social networks and new strategies for coping with stressful situations. Resourceful individuals are self-reliant, and they show agency in their entrepreneurial and forward thinking to proactively anticipate challenges and prepare for college, career, and personal relationships.



## 8. RESPONSIBILITY REQUIRES ACTION



Responsibility is the virtue that enables young people to act as autonomous, healthy, competent, and trustworthy individuals. There are two sides to

responsibility: personal and social. Personal responsibility is the capacity to carry out activities with fidelity in a timely fashion. It means keeping one's promises, fulfilling one's duties, and developing healthy life habits. Personally responsible individuals hold themselves accountable for the results of their actions. They comply with the law, social norms, safety regulations, and ethical standards. They have a "growth mindset" – they are willing to put effort into accomplishing something, work hard, and persist to achieve goals, and they do not blame others for their failures. Social responsibility means taking on roles that support the functioning of one's family, school, peer group, and the larger community. Socially responsible individuals are committed to fulfilling the duties of a citizen, including the actions and attitudes expected by democratic governance. They commit themselves to transparency – disclosing the information needed to improve group decision making and maintain high-quality performance.





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