

Character:

Use It or Lose It

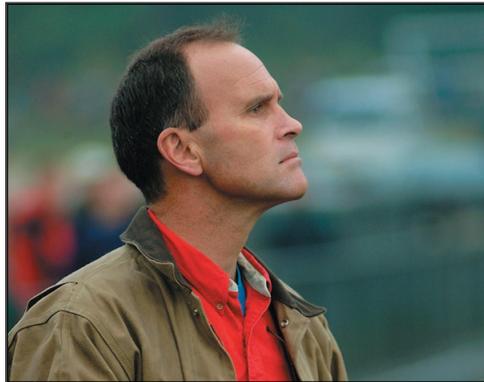
Malcolm Gauld, President, Hyde Schools

I have spent most of the last twenty-five years working with teenagers and their families at the Hyde Schools, a network of character-based schools and programs. Early in my career, Hyde's focus on character was unique. In recent years, the notion of character development has become very popular in our schools. One might even say it is currently in vogue. Today nearly all parents and educators would profess to agree that character development is important, that qualities like honesty, persistence, and compassion are prerequisites to adult lives of purpose and meaning. Although I cannot recall anyone disputing such a claim, in today's results-driven culture, the element of character is overlooked more than many people would either realize or care to admit.

I frequently ask high school students if they know any students at their schools who do next to no academic work and yet consistently make the honor roll. Most casually acknowledge this as common with a shrug: "Sure, some kids just have it and school rewards them." Many point admiringly to the student who is able to get the "A" with next to no effort. Furthermore, many of the students who are making the honor roll don't necessarily believe that their distinction is due to their efforts. They know that cheating is common, if not rampant, even among the top students. They know that many college-bound students—often on the advice of parents and teachers—will avoid taking a particularly challenging advanced course for fear that the low grade they might receive would hurt their chances for admission to an elite college. It would be difficult to argue that students who cheat or drop difficult courses are doing so in response to adults who seek to help them develop their character. It's time to face up to a simple truth: We care more about their aptitude than their attitude.... and they know it.

My twenty-five years as an educator have taught me an essential lesson: never kid a kid. Despite the fact that they might fail to grasp the most basic math formula, they will never misread our true expectations of them. They

know we have created an educational system that values their aptitude more than their attitude, their ability more than their effort, and their talent more than their character. Surrounded by signs that tell them that what they can do is more important than who they are, a growing number have come to a simple realization: If I cannot be good at being good, I might as well be good at being bad. They'd rather be bad than average.



Malcolm Gauld

In response, many families and schools have become locked in the debilitating grip of the "Cult of Self-esteem," a prevalent mindset in our homes and schools that says, "If we make kids feel good about themselves, they will do great things." In our experience, the opposite is true: If kids do great things, they will feel good about themselves. As adults, we should know that the journey to gain genuine self-esteem requires our kids to endure difficulties and overcome obstacles. They will likely feel a dearth of self-esteem before that journey is over. Self-esteem cannot be bestowed for the asking, but once earned, it can never be taken away. The Cult of Self-esteem has contributed directly to problems like truancy, cheating, drug usage, violence. These behaviors have become the substitutes for the effort, sacrifice, and hardship necessary for the cultivation of authentic self-esteem.

Two Things I Have Observed About Character

1. Character is inspired, not imparted

So, what can we do? First, we must

recognize that character is inspired, not imparted. We cannot and will not pour it into our families. Rather, we can help each other draw it out of ourselves and each other. Character is like a muscle that must be exercised and maintained with values-forming exercises and challenges. Furthermore, we cannot expect to inspire our children with a "do as I say not as I do" approach. We parents must develop and maintain our own character "muscles" if we expect our children to develop theirs. In other words, "use it or lose it."

2. Site vs. Context: Influence the influencers
When I began teaching fresh out of college, I was flush with the confidence that I possessed enough charisma, commitment, and capability to make a difference in the life of any teenage boy or girl. I quickly discovered that I often needed to make a difference in their parents' lives if I was going to have any lasting effective influence. Sometimes it seemed as though my best teaching would consistently lose out to their worst parenting. I learned that good teaching cannot overcompensate for bad parenting, regardless of how either is defined. Thus, I had to try to find a way to influence the context of my students' lives. By context, I refer to those influences that exist beyond the walls of my classroom.

The notion of site vs. context can be demonstrated in our use at Hyde of a high ropes course, an effective and powerful character development site. The high ropes course fosters courage, risk-taking, and trust. A sixteen-year old girl named Debbie has climbed the rope ladder to accept the challenges offered by the course. The course asks her to face the risks expected by these challenges. It also demands that she place her trust in a peer who stands on the ground 30 feet below holding her safety belay line. Thus, her life is literally held in the hands of her partner.

Now, what happens after Debbie descends from the ropes course, unfastens her harness, unstraps her helmet, and debriefs the experience with her peers? Let's assume she goes home to a dysfunctional family. Debbie cannot possibly reap the maximum benefit of the ropes course if she spends most of her time living in a context that does not reinforce its lessons. If her parents do not value courage, risk-taking, and trust, then the value of the ropes course will vanish.

As teachers or parents, we are being arrogant or foolish or both if we believe that the power of our character sites will overpower the dynamic of the daily context

of the lives of our students. Thus, we must nurture that context with the same vigor that we currently apply to developing our learning sites. Think of the benefit to Debbie if her parents were to experience the ropes course with her. Then both site and context would be working in concert for Debbie's benefit.

Both of these points, the power of inspiration and the idea of site vs. context, add up to the same conclusion: Parents need to be critical players in the development of their children's character. Although this idea does not break new ground, it does call upon parents to test themselves in ways they might not expect. For the past few years, my wife Laura and I have been helping parents work on these concepts in a workshop format. Our book, *The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have* (Scribner) was published in March of 2002. The backbone of the book and workshops consists of 10 Priorities intended to provide parents with a map and compass as they embark on the journey of character development for the whole family. A brief outline of the 10 Priorities follows.

The 10 Priorities

#1 TRUTH OVER HARMONY

We all want family members to be honest with one another. We also want everyone to get along with one another? This priority calls upon parents to put the weight of their feet on the side of truth.

#2 PRINCIPLES OVER RULES

It is so easy to focus on rules, especially when things are starting to spin out of control. (e.g., "There is no eating in THAT room, either!") Although important, rules must be guided by deep principles.

#3 ATTITUDE OVER APTITUDE

Schools and families, not to mention society in general, would be much healthier if we valued attitude over aptitude, effort over ability, and character over talent. More than we realize, parents often send the message that successful outcomes are more important than honest efforts.

#4 SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS and LET GO OF THE OUTCOMES

Discipline alone will not properly raise our children. We need to aim high with our expectations. Many parents manipulate outcomes by "lowering the bar" when they sense that their children are having difficulty achieving success.

Letting go of our vision for the outcome allows our children to take responsibility for their actions.

#5 VALUE SUCCESS AND FAILURE

As a society, we do not place much value on failure. Consequently, today's parents often have a hard time letting our kids fail. Success is important, and failure may not only teach some powerful lessons, but it usually can often lead to profound personal growth.

#6 ALLOWING OBSTACLES TO BECOME OPPORTUNITIES

We can get caught up in trying to "fix problems" (e.g., learning disabilities) instead of seeing the potential for something positive to happen. The attitude we take with obstacles will have a powerful effect on our children.

#7 TAKING HOLD AND LETTING GO

It can be difficult for us to watch our children struggle with life's challenges. When should we step in and help? When should we close our mouths and step away? This is one of the toughest parenting dilemmas.

#8 CREATE A CHARACTER CULTURE

This priority offers some specific actions that can help create an atmosphere of character in the home that will help our children withstand daily pressures outside our homes. It presents a 3-point plan: a daily job, a weekly family meeting, and a concept called "mandatory fun."

#9 HUMILITY TO ASK FOR AND RECEIVE HELP

This is a challenge for all of us. As parents tend to focus on trying to help their kids, many avoid the notion of asking others for help. Consequently, they raise children who do not ask for help.

#10 INSPIRATION: JOB #1

Regardless of what they might say or do, most teenagers share a deep yearning to be inspired by their parents. We will not inspire them with our achievements. Inspiration occurs when we share our struggles, reach for our best, and model daily character.

Consider this exchange that once took place between a reporter and the great cellist Pablo Casals when the latter was 95 years old:

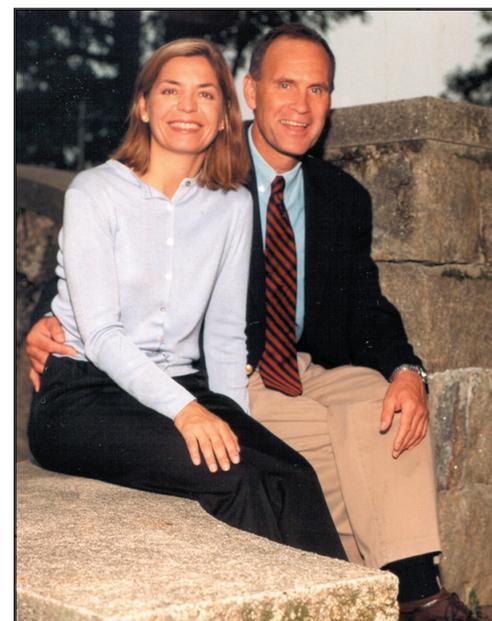
Reporter: "Mr. Casals, you're 95 and the greatest cellist that ever lived.

Why do you practice six hours a day?"

Casals: "Because I think I'm making progress."

The healthiest schools and families are ones who view family building and character development the same way that Pablo Casals viewed playing the cello. Character development is a lifelong process. We cannot expect our students to address their character if we are unwilling to examine our own.

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Laura and Malcolm Gauld

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