

Character Development in Children Ages Three and Four

by Linda Ladd, Ph.D.

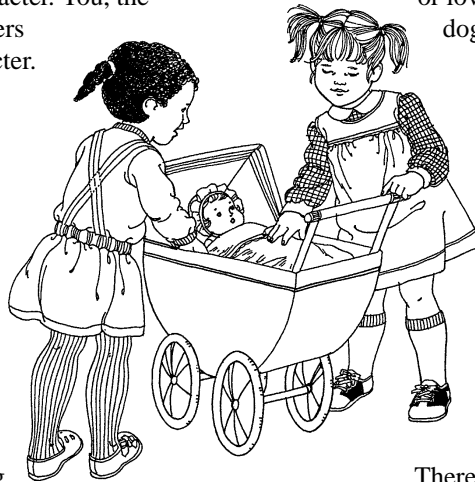
Parents and child care providers have the greatest influence over the character development of their young children. Child care providers, parents, and other adults are interested in reinforcing good character in young children, ages three and four. We all want children to achieve their fullest potential, become a healthy person, and build strong, caring relationships. The words fullest, healthy, strong, and caring are all words that this author associates with a person who has good character. You, the reader, may want to talk with your co-workers about how they would describe good character.

The topic of character development can be sensitive and must reflect respect for the culture and experience of the children, adults, and families we work with daily. We can define good character in general, but it is difficult to describe specific behaviors that reflect good character. For example, a provider who highly values “independence” might tend to praise children who play alone. Another provider may value less independence and more interdependence and praise children playing together. Both behaviors are part of the healthy development of children. Those of us who care for children must be sure that we balance our values about behavior with a sound knowledge of what is healthy development.

Cognitive Development of Three and Four Year Olds

After two years old, children experience a major *qualitative* change in their cognitive development. While young children

continue to understand their world through their senses and by acting upon their environment, older two year olds and three year olds now add a new component—symbols—to their thinking. Piaget tells us that very young children enter the stage of preoperational thought with unsystematic and illogical thinking, but they grow into systematic and logical thinking by age seven (Crain, 1980). One early example of this level of thinking is make-believe play in which the very young child uses one item or behavior to represent another. Rocking a baby doll shows caring or loving. The young child makes the sound of a dog or cat and believes herself to be that animal.



Three and four year olds use cognitive symbols to begin to interpret and add order to their world. Very young children interpret their world according to single, cognitive concepts. For example, a two-plus year old may think that all gray-haired women are grandmothers. To the young child, big dogs are either friendly or scary. The enormous amount of information that young children absorb every day overwhelms the strategies they have to organize that data.

There are many other tasks that young children are working on, but two pieces of developmental information are important here. First, *young children are egocentric and must view their world only from their own perspective.* Most adults laugh when they describe sharing an ice cream cone with the young child: he took his bite, he took my bite, and then he took his bite again. The egocentric child is unable to “see” that another

(continued on page 2)



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(continued from page 1)

person might have a different perspective than he does. The young child wants the bite of food, so you, the adult, must want him to have it, too!

The second piece of information centers around how young children view adults and older youth. *Adults remain all powerful to children.* A child may scream “no” at being removed by an adult from a swing set because she wants to continue swinging. One of the reasons she is screaming is because she knows the adult CAN stop her swinging. According to Piaget, the rules that adults and older youth set are seen as fixed and unchangeable by young children (Crain, 1980). A child who constantly asks “why” may appear to be challenging the rule, but more likely, the child is trying to *understand* the rule.

Learning Character When You are Three and Four Years Old!

Since children think qualitatively different from adults, it is hard for adults to think like children! It is not possible for children to think like adults! Fortunately, adults have many skills that they bring to a relationship with a child that helps bridge the gap in cognitive ability. Children can be very loving and caring individuals. The child who is especially loving and caring may become the child who touches too often and begins to annoy other children and adults. Learning to set boundaries around a desired behavior is a difficult task for a young child who is thinking that their perspective is also the only perspective.

Adults must identify positive ways to help the child whose good behavior is “too much.” Often, adults use the concept of good touch/bad touch to teach a child not to hurt another child. This can be very effective. Teaching a child to touch less is a challenge because “less” is not a clear concept. Child care providers may find it easier to teach children to touch once or twice to show caring.

To help a child learn a character virtue, the child care provider and parent need to *consider the developmental level of the child.* If “sharing” is selected as a character virtue, then the adults need to be extremely flexible about what kind of sharing a young child will do. The egocentric child may share the adult’s belongings but probably not her own. She may share her own doll for two minutes but not a moment longer. Sharing may mean that the child lets another child touch or hold a toy for 10 seconds. Children will show individual differences about sharing, but the general notion is that young children do not share their belongings or toys that they particularly like.

Child care providers know that they must set rules about toys with an *understanding of the ability of the children to follow the rules.* Perhaps the center decides to teach citizenship the week of July 4th. So, U.S. flags are set out for this holiday as a special event,

and the children are asked to be careful and respectful of the flag. Describing “being careful” and “respectful” to a young child must be done in very simple terms. The young three year old is working on his gross motor skills and may not be able to handle the flag “carefully.” A child who does not have control of her gross motor muscles may drop the flag or swing it close to another child’s head. An adult might label this behavior as being “disrespectful of the flag.” This experience may be more successful if very small flags are given to the children and a larger flag kept out of reach.

Individual/ Family Differences

One of the greatest challenges to providing child care is the gathering of so many individual and family differences in one small area! It is not possible for a provider to be fair and caring at all times. It is possible, however, to learn what kinds of behaviors are our greatest challenges and how to plan around those behaviors. In a center, providers can ask another adult for support and take a personal time out. In the family day home, a single provider will need to be creative in dealing with her reaction to unwanted or unskilled behavior of the child. Since adults have the ability to project into the future, some child behaviors may have to be endured until they have been outgrown or refined.

Adult Modeling

Adults who work with children are constantly “on” as role models. None of us can be perfect, so being a perfect child care provider or parent is out of the question. Still, we can all learn from our mistakes or the mistakes of others. We can anticipate our strengths and weaknesses and attempt to limit or work around them. These coping strategies are good models for children to see and experience. Young children cannot understand the complex thinking of an adult, but they can catch pieces of what we do and say, and these pieces can become the single concept that helps a child learn.

Teaching character to a child who is just learning to use symbols and single concepts is a challenge for child care providers and parents. Concepts such as sharing, caring, loving, and respect are taught through concrete experiences such as touching, holding, and listening. Adults are encouraged to set broad and flexible expectations for behaviors that are just emerging in the child’s work, such as sharing. The most important thing that an adult can do for a child is to love him!

References

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 Fulton, A. (2000). *Ages and Stages: Preschool*. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, www.fcs.okstat.edu/children/ages-stages/toddlers.htm .

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Having Fun While Teaching Valuable Character Lessons: An Introduction to the Character Critters Program

by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

As a child care provider, you are asked to fulfill many different roles. One of the most challenging, yet rewarding roles that you will occupy is that of educator. The regular contact that you have with young children provides you with numerous opportunities to teach children valuable life lessons. Researchers have discovered that the early years of a child's life are a critical time for laying a foundation for future development. As children develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally, they also develop character traits that define who they are as individuals.

One of the most important factors influencing character development is the time children spend with their primary caregivers. This means that you have a great opportunity to teach children character traits that will help them become healthy, productive, and good citizens. You may be wondering how to go about such a great task. Whether you realize it or not, you already teach character lessons to the children in your care by the example you set before them. Children are keen observers of human behavior. They listen to what you say, and they often imitate the behavior you model for them. So, knowingly or unknowingly, you are already a character educator. But you may want to make a more formal effort to teach character lessons in your child care facility. If so, there is a fun and exciting way to do this that will capture the attention of the children in your care.

The Character Critters program is a character education curriculum developed by the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center—Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service specifically for child care providers and early childhood educators. The program is designed to increase children's and parents' understanding of character issues through age-appropriate stories, take-home sheets, an educational presentation for meeting with small groups of parents, and an evaluation. Program content is based on the following "pillars of character," which are outlined in the CHARACTER COUNTS! program: responsibility, caring, trustworthiness, fairness, and citizenship.

Children are easily intrigued by the Character Critters program because of the cast of characters associated with the character lessons. Roy the Responsible Rabbit, Fran the Fair Frog, Carrie the Caring Cat, Cindy the Citizen Crab, Tommy the Trustworthy Turtle, and Rusty the Respectful Raccoon guide children through a series of school or home situations that focus on the character traits identified above. Each story is accompanied by illustrated poster boards that help facilitate the telling of the story. After reading the story, the child care provider talks to the children about character and leads them in a brief activity that illustrates the character trait under consideration.

Due to the fact that children learn so much at home, it is very important to involve parents in the character education process. The authors of the Character Critter program took this into consideration and thus developed a number of activities that seek to reinforce the lessons learned in child care by involving parents in a wide array of activities. Children in your care can be sent home with "take-home" sheets designed to be fun, short activities that parents and children can complete together. One idea suggested by the authors of the curriculum is to have parents send the completed sheets back with the child to be displayed by the child care provider.

Other activities that facilitate parental involvement include take-home letters and parent meetings. Like the take-home sheets discussed above, these activities are designed to reinforce the character traits taught in the child care environment. In addition, these activities also provide parents with a better understanding of what their children are learning at the center or home day care facility.

For those of you who are interested in assessing the outcomes of the program, an evaluation component is provided. This tool allows you to measure improvements in character development over time through teacher/caregiver and parent reports.

If you are interested in Character Critters and would like to use it in your child care program, a Character Critters resource kit is available for purchase from the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. The kit sells for \$25.00 and contains a comprehensive program implementation guide and 30 full-color posters to illustrate the stories. To purchase the kit, please make your check payable to the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, and send your order to: Rebecca E. White, Extension Associate; Family and Consumer Sciences; 284 Knapp Hall; LSU Ag Center; P.O. Box 25100; Baton Rouge, LA 70894-5100.

If you have further questions regarding the Character Critters program, please contact Rebecca White at (225) 388-3921 or bwhite@gctr.lsu.edu.

This quality program makes teaching character fun and exciting for children and adults. Take advantage of the opportunities that you have with young children by teaching them character lessons that will pay dividends for a life time!

Dr. Stephen Green is an Assistant Professor and Child Development Specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. His areas of speciality include child development, child care, and father-child relationships.

Penn State Cooperative Extension's Better Kid Care Program

<http://betterkidcare.psu.edu/>

Since 1991, the Better Kid Care educational training program from Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences has had the goal of improving the availability, accessibility, and quality of child care in Pennsylvania and across the nation. Under the leadership of James Van Horn, Ph.D. and Lyn Horning, M.S., the Better Kid Care project supports child care providers through satellite workshops, learn-at-home web-based programs, topical articles, and public service announcements. In 1999, the Better Kid Care TV series won *Outstanding Educational Program* from the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC).

Satellite Workshops for Child Care Providers, Parents, and Employers

Eight two-hour satellite workshops are presented each year from September through June. In Pennsylvania, the workshops and materials are free of charge. All other locations pay a small fee for the materials needed for the satellite workshop. Over 100,000 child care providers and others participate in each satellite broadcast. If desired, a video of the completed satellite workshop can be purchased. The 2000–2001 topics are as follows:

- *Working with Wood—Kids Can Do It* (September 2000),
- *Eating Times—the Ups and Downs* (October 2000),
- *Hot Topics for Center Directors—Personnel Issues* (November 2000),
- *Biting and Sharing* (December 2000),
- *Pets in Child Care?* (March 2001),
- *New Ways to Plan Activities* (April 2001),
- *Let's Celebrate* (May 2001), and
- *Exciting Backyard Science Activities* (June 2001).

A list of workshops dating back to 1995 are available on the Better Kid Care web site.

Learn-At-Home Units

The Penn State Better Kid Care program has expanded to include one and two hour web-based learning programs. Providers in Pennsylvania can complete these units at no charge and receive .2 CEUs for the two-hour lessons and .1 CEUs for the one-hour lessons. Outside of Pennsylvania, providers can pay a small fee to take the web-based classes but will have to check with their licensing agency to obtain CEUs or clock hour credits for the classes. Providers can also check with their local county Extension agent to see if they can work together to get CEUs. Some of the topics included in the one and two hour learn-at-home units are: "Family Day Care . . . It's a Business," "How Safe is Your Family Day Care Home?" "Kids in the Outdoors," "I'll Be the Mommy and You Be the Dog . . ." (dramatic play), and "Emergent Literacy Begins at Birth." Check the Penn State Better Kid Care web site for more information.

Better Kid Care Articles and Public Service Announcements

Do you produce a newsletter for parents or child care providers? If so, you are always looking for research-based information to share with your readers. Since 1997, the Better Kid Care web site has posted newsletter-length articles that can be downloaded for your readers. In 2001, the articles include: "Keep Kids Active in Winter," "Language and Reading Skills Lead to Success," "Hand Washing Helps—Keeps Germs Out!" and "Playing to Learn." Naturally, newsletter editors will want to give proper credit to the authors of these articles, whose names are posted at the end of each piece. Public service announcements are also available on the Better Kid Care web site and include such topics as helping children adjust to child care, outdoor play, field trips, summer child care, and finding the right child care.

An important part of the Better Kid Care Program is the toll-free 800 telephone lines available to providers. One 800 number is the 24 hour help line—over 150 calls are received each month from providers on a variety of topics. About 80 percent of the callers receive follow-up materials appropriate to their question or concern. The help line is available to all who participate in the satellite workshops, including those providers who live outside of Pennsylvania. The other 800 number is the statewide enrollment line that providers can call to request educational materials, video-learn-at-homes, or enroll in the program specifically designed for home-based providers.

In addition, child care providers, parents, and employers can find ideas for activities, snacks, and other topical information, plus links to other web sites, such as www.nncc.org, on the Better Kid Care web site.

Source: James Van Horn, Ph.D., CFLE, Director of the Better Kid Care Project. In 1986, Jim Van Horn launched his first child care training, which then led to today's BKC project and provides 200,000 hours of training for child care providers per year. Visit the web site or contact James Van Horn at (814) 863-8646 or jev@psu.edu.

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