

Character Development in Children, Ages 18 Months to Three Years

by Linda Ladd, Ph.D.

Character development in children, ages 18 months through three years . . . is that possible?

Very young children are so busy learning new skills, where does character development play a role? As children learn new behaviors, they are learning character at the same time! Adults don't say to the very young child, "This is responsible or respectful behavior" because those are concepts, and toddlers must learn categories before they learn concepts (Crain, 1980).

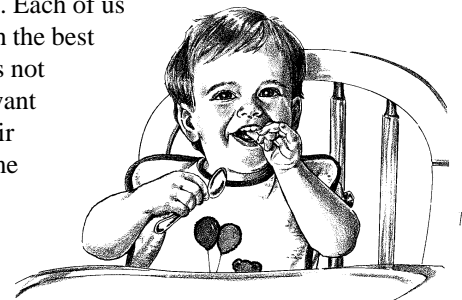
The Adult Role in Modeling Character

Every day, very young children soak up character from the adults who care for them:

- The adult's facial expression that greets the young child every morning . . .
- The tone of voice when an adult says good-bye to the child in the afternoon . . .
- The sounds of irritation or pleasure when adults watch children behave . . .
- How adults touch or don't touch the small child . . .
- The way adults act when they are tired or happy . . .
- The words adults use to shape a child's behavior or praise his actions . . .



Does this mean that adults must behave with good character every moment of the day? That is a wonderful goal but not possible to achieve. Each of us is trying to behave with the best character possible! It is not surprising that adults want children to achieve their fullest potential, become healthy people, and build strong, caring relationships. The words healthy, strong, and caring are all words that this author associates with a person who has good character. Why don't you ask other providers what are some examples of character that need to be modeled and reinforced at your center? This could start a very positive discussion of what kinds of behaviors are important to your co-workers.



Adults can plan age-appropriate activities to build opportunities for young children to learn character virtues.

- What is a behavior that you would like to see the children in your class or center do that would reinforce a particular character virtue? For example, saying "thank you" shows respect.
- What kind of activity or craft could you use to reinforce the behavior that the children could then take home to share with their parent(s)?

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Cognitive Development in Children, 18 Months to Three Years

Can an egocentric two year old learn to share? Yes, but *the child care provider must set expectations that fit the individual temperament and developmental age of the child*. In general, sharing is a behavior that children must learn one step at a time. As individuals, each two year old will be different in their attitude about a specific toy or their ability to share a toy, a cookie, or a favorite teacher. Child care providers model patience and creativity as they select activities that help young children learn this challenging behavior—one step at a time.

Let's think about the tasks that the 18 month to three-year-old child is learning: cooperative play, new boundaries for their capabilities, and self control over their own behavior. Each of these behaviors is new to the young child, and the character virtues they are learning are new as well. Cooperative play leads to cooperation over time. Setting new boundaries for his space versus your space leads to responsibility for his actions. Self control can be tied to respect and citizenship as the child matures. Each of these behaviors has numerous components that must be learned and then refined until the child "owns" the character virtue and the behavior (Fulton, 2000).

Psychosocial Development in Children 18 Months to Three Years

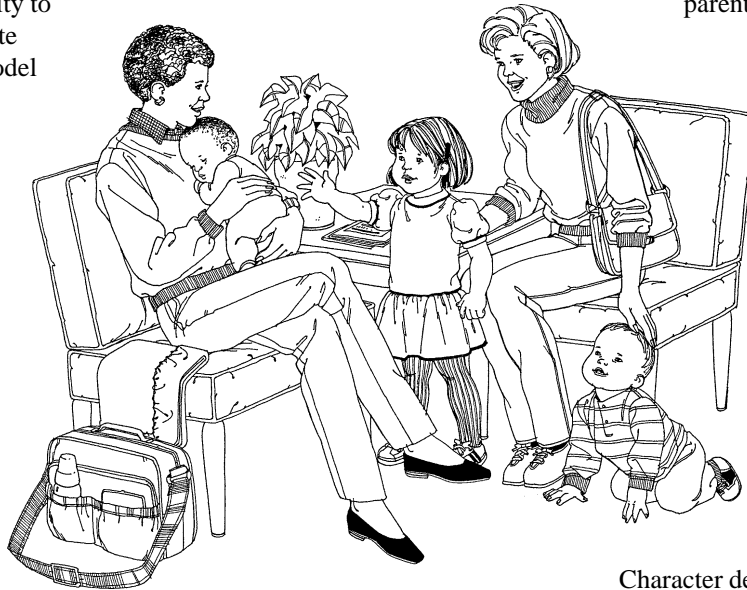
No one knows better than a child care provider that *a roomful of children between the ages of 18 months and three years are learning to be autonomous and work independently* (Crain, 1980). Adults who are eager for the very young child to behave with character must consider that the child has specific tasks to master that will seem to interfere with learning character. The two year old who is learning to master skills of independence, such as buttoning his shirt or feeding himself, is beginning to learn responsibility for himself. The adult who encourages the two year old to hurry up with getting dressed or to be more careful with his food must remember that small motor skills are being developed slowly but surely.

We all know that *trust is the first building block of a child's psychosocial development* (Crain, 1980). The child's level of trust in herself and in her care providers will influence her ability to learn new skills and behaviors, not to mention learning good character. Each child care center or day home provider works hard to keep the children in their care safe and secure. Providers

model caring and responsibility when they identify events or behaviors that cause a young child to feel less secure and reach out to help the child work through that feeling. What a wonderful way to teach a young child about character!

Family Cultural Differences

Every child lives in a family that behaves in unique ways, which may challenge the smooth operation of a day home or child care center. By starting a character education program that involves parents and older siblings, the child care center or day home may influence unwanted behaviors of their young children and even impact the parents. Your center might consider inviting parents to share behaviors or celebrations that mark a particular character virtue. How might the parents in your center model citizenship for the young children in your care? By sharing about their beliefs, parents will learn about each other and their children.



Character defines each of us. Very young children are just starting their journey toward strong and healthy character. Each adult who interacts with young children has a responsibility to model the best character possible for these very young people—best wishes!

References

- Crain, W.C. (1980). *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*. NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Fulton, A. (2000). *Ages and Stages: Toddlers*. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, www.fcs.okstat.edu/children/ages-stages/toddlers.htm .

Dr. Linda Ladd is an Associate Professor and Family Development Specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. Dr. Ladd's specialties are in children's mental health, families at risk, child care, and character education.

Web Sites for More Ideas

University of Delaware Cooperative Extension Service: <http://ag.udel.edu/fam/resources/>. This site includes a broad range of information concerning ages and stages, programs, curriculum, and on-line directories.

National Child Care Information Center: <http://nccic.org>. This federally funded site offers national resources, such as a national directory of state child care licensing agencies.

National Network for Child Care: www.nncc.org. This site includes past and current issues of the *Connections* newsletters, child development articles, and other information of interest.

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@agctr.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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