

# Which character traits help children succeed?

“There are two things I want for my students,” a teacher says to a friend over coffee. “I want them to be curious and fearless.”

“Curious, I understand,” the friend replies. “But fearless—like motorcycle racing?”

“No, I don’t mean wild risk taking or poor impulse control,” the teacher says. “I’m talking about doing what you believe is right for you, moving forward without being afraid of making a mistake or looking stupid.”

“Sounds like a courageous self-confidence,” the friend suggests.

The teacher nods, adding: “They need that to succeed—in school and whatever they do with the rest of their lives.”



Which character traits do you believe children need to become competent learners and adults? And how are your beliefs reflected in practice?

In this article, we define **character traits** not as morals or ethics—that is, whether something is right or wrong. Instead, we use the term to mean personality strengths, such as kindness and optimism, that contribute to academic success and general well-being.

Character traits have received increasing attention in psychology (Seligman 2000) and education in recent years. Research has indicated that cognitive skills like reading and math may not be enough to prepare children for competency in adulthood. In the mid-1990s, for example, KIPP charter school founders David Levin and Michael Feinberg paired their focus on teaching academic skills with instilling character traits summed up in the slogan “Work hard. Be nice.” (Tough 2011). The result has been remarkable progress in academic achievement among disadvantaged children ([www.kipp.org](http://www.kipp.org)).

Much recent research has emphasized **resilience**, the capacity to face and overcome life’s adversities, such as serious illness and injury, death of loved ones, and family disintegration. Resilience has been a continuing concern for children growing up in poor families, and it has taken on added significance in light of natural disasters like fire and floods and social tragedies like war and terrorism.

Other psychological research on character traits has produced equally timely and significant results. One study of traits associated with “life satisfaction” identified 24 qualities, the strongest determinants of which were **hope, zest, gratitude, love, and curiosity** (Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2004). Another study found that **self-discipline** is a better predictor of academic success than IQ (Duckworth and Seligman 2005).

Dr. Angela Duckworth, at the University of Pennsylvania, has found that really outstanding achievement requires **passion** combined with **perseverance**, a quality she has dubbed “grit”



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(Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly 2007). She has even developed a 12-question tool for measuring grit, available at [www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/12-item%20Grit%20Scale.05312011.pdf](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/12-item%20Grit%20Scale.05312011.pdf).

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## Definitions

**Autonomy**—the ability to act independently, to govern oneself, to exert some control over one's world

**Curiosity**—an interest in all ongoing experience, finding all topics fascinating, an eagerness to explore and discover

**Fearlessness**—the quality of acting on convictions even if unpopular, speaking up for what is right for oneself or others

**Gratitude**—thankfulness for the good that happens and taking time to express it

**Grit**—passion for a long-term goal combined with the perseverance to achieve it

**Hope**—an expectation for the best in the future and work to bring it about

**Love**—the basic value in close relationships with others, affectionate regard

**Passion**—the energy that comes with following one's inner purpose, doing what one deeply loves

**Perseverance**—persistence in a course of action in spite of obstacles

**Personality**—the totality of a person's attitudes and behavioral tendencies

**Resilience**—the capacity to prevent, minimize, or overcome the damaging effects of adversity

**Self-control**—self-discipline, the ability to regulate what one feels and does, delay of gratification

**Zest**—vitality, enthusiasm, energy, living life as an adventure

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These findings, while informing us about influences on academic success, also raise questions. To what degree are character traits inborn? Can they be developed or learned? If character traits are learned, who is best to teach them—family, school, religion, community, culture? And how and when are character traits most effectively taught?

## Which character traits are inborn?

As early childhood educators, we know that children are born with certain attitudes and behavioral tendencies, known as **temperament**. Temperament refers to a child's predisposition toward interacting with people, places, and things (Oliver 2002).

Infant temperament is described as one of four basic types: easy, difficult, cautious, or a combination. Easy children are generally calm, happy, and adaptable, for example, while difficult children are often fussy, demanding, and easily upset. These types often persist into adulthood.

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## TO WHAT DEGREE ARE CHARACTER TRAITS INBORN?

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Temperament types are determined by traits, which can be viewed as either positive or negative, such as these:

- **activity**—constant movement versus a more relaxed style
- **rhythmicity**—regular versus haphazard habits of sleeping and eating
- **approach/withdrawal**—amenable to approach versus shying away from new people or things
- **adaptability**—easily adaptable versus resistant to changes
- **intensity**—strong versus weak reactions to situations
- **persistence**—sticking with a task versus giving up quickly
- **mood**—generally positive versus negative, or even-tempered
- **distractibility**—focused versus easily distracted
- **sensory threshold**—oblivious to noise, lights, and other stimuli versus bothered by them (Oliver 2002)

Persistence, identified here as an inborn behavioral tendency, has been cited earlier as critical to academic success. Because a trait is classified as inborn, are we to assume that we can ignore it? Most educators would probably say no. Whether a child is persistent or not, we want to encourage children to develop the habit of completing tasks.

### Tips for encouraging persistence:

- Provide learning activities appropriate to age and abilities to prevent a child's quitting in frustration. For example, we offer Hannah a puzzle of six pieces instead of 24.
- Break up a task into small incremental parts. "You want to draw a house? How about painting the

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roof first?" After that task is finished, we suggest drawing the walls and doors, and later the sun and grass.

- Acknowledge completed tasks. "You built that tower yourself. Wow!"
- Acknowledge a child's efforts, as well as achievements. "I know you really worked hard on that project."

If a child proves intractable to completing tasks despite our best efforts, perhaps we move ahead without blaming ourselves too harshly and turn our attention to encouraging the child's other strengths.

Remember that learning often involves hard work. Sometimes we adults don't finish projects and we make mistakes; ideally we also keep trying.

## Curiosity: Inborn and nurtured

Experienced caregivers and teachers will argue that curiosity is clearly an inborn trait, in addition to a trait essential to learning. Else how could a baby venture out to examine a toy or poke a spoon into cereal?

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### WE KNOW THAT CURIOSITY IS FRAGILE.

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At the same time, we know that curiosity is fragile. Laughing at children's "Why?" questions and leaving them to sit passively in front of a TV can quash curiosity. Our job as educators is to nurture exploration and discovery.

#### Tips for encouraging curiosity:

- Offer infants sensory toys such as rattles to listen to, mirrors to see themselves in, and large washable blocks to mouth and manipulate.
- Redirect undesirable activities. If Gabriela likes to chew on crayons, for example, we offer her a clean rubber toy.
- Create an environment where children are free to safely touch, take apart, and get dirty to avoid constantly saying "Don't."
- Pose questions and invite children to explore answers in books, science activities, field trips, and other new and hands-on experiences.

- Recognize children's unique interests and abilities. Let them change their minds.

## Love comes first

Of the character traits mentioned earlier, at least three are often classed as spiritual virtues: hope, love, and gratitude. These virtues can also be emotional states that lead to positive behavior.

It's commonly said that all religions preach love, at least in the brotherly and sisterly sense of caring for each other. While love can be defined in different ways, teachers and caregivers will agree that children need physical and verbal expressions of love beginning in infancy if they are to thrive—and if they are to grow into loving adults.

Edith Grothberg, a developmental psychologist and academic, says that children need love that is unconditional (1995). This means showing care and affection without conditions, such as whether Elaina cleans her plate or follows instructions. It's letting Andrew know he is lovable as he is, shy or boisterous, not as we wish he would be.

Unconditional love does not mean allowing unacceptable behavior. Children need limits and consistent enforcement to feel secure. We can show disappointment in behavior without labeling a child as bad. "Hitting someone is not OK. We love you, Chris, and we know you can play better."

A good way to show unconditional love is to give a child your full attention and to listen without judgment. Criticizing, hurrying, or interrupting Wesley can make him feel inept and unloved. Letting a baby "cry it out" can create lasting feelings of fear and hopelessness. "The opposite of love is not hate," said Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "it's indifference."

Children learn to love by how they are treated. The poem "Children Learn What They Live" (Nolte 1998) expresses it well: "If children live with acceptance, they learn to love. If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves."

## Hope develops early

Children form their outlook on the world and the future beginning in the first 18 months of life. It is during this period that a child's main developmental challenge is "basic trust vs. mistrust," as described by psychologist Erik Erikson (1950).

When parents and caregivers provide food,

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warmth, comfort, and loving care in a consistent way, they meet a child's basic needs. The child learns that people can be depended upon and that the world is a safe place. This produces a deep inner sense of trust, a feeling of hope that everything is all right and will continue to be.

Hope can be thwarted in infancy as well as later childhood through inconsistency, broken promises, neglect, abuse, violence, loss, and other misfortunes. But caregivers can repair or strengthen hope and optimism in several ways.

### **Tips for encouraging hope:**

- Respond promptly to an infant's cries. Is the child hungry, in need of a diaper change, in pain, or just in need of comfort?
- Provide an environment that is physically safe and has consistent routines.
- Model hope in word and gesture. Smile, laugh at yourself, and be positive.

Modeling, or demonstrating by what we say and how we act, is probably the most effective way to teach hope, as well as other character traits.

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## THE SUPREME IMPORTANCE OF HOPE IS TAUGHT BY EXAMPLE.

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"Whatever other obligations we have to our children, a conviction that we can achieve happiness amid the losses and uncertainties that life contains is the greatest gift that can pass from one generation to the next," says psychologist Gordon Livingston (2004). "Like all the values we wish to teach our children—honesty, commitment, empathy, respect, hard work—the supreme importance of hope is taught by example."

### **Self-discipline: A healthy sense of control**

Emerging from the trust vs. mistrust stage, a child enters a period that Erikson called "autonomy vs. shame and doubt." In this stage, from about 18 months to 3 years, children learn to walk, feed themselves, use the toilet, and communicate more effectively.

"This stage, therefore, becomes decisive for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression," Erikson wrote. "From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of good will and pride; from a sense of loss of self-control and of foreign overcontrol comes a lasting propensity for doubt and shame."

### **Tips for encouraging self-control:**

- Encourage and recognize children's efforts at self-feeding, toilet learning, and self-calming. "I know you can do it."
- Engage children in conversation to enhance self-esteem, develop thinking skills, and improve language development.
- Identify feelings by name and help children name and express their feelings in appropriate ways without fear of derision or punishment. "Joey, we all have bad feelings sometimes. It's not the feeling but how we express it that matters."
- Establish simple rules for everyone's safety and respect. Enforce them consistently and follow them yourself.
- Explain rules and set consequences for breaking them, such as temporarily removing privileges. Enforce rules without belittling or shaming children.
- Encourage preschoolers to use words to solve conflicts. Demonstrate how to breathe deeply or count to 10 to become calm and think about a stressful situation.
- Begin teaching problem-solving to preschoolers. Demonstrate how to think about options and evaluate results. Avoid trying to fix everything for them.

### **Passion and zest**

A child's sense of purpose and enthusiasm may have its origins in the stage that Erikson called "initiative vs. guilt." Roughly the period from age 4 to 6, children show greater interest in the world and natural phenomena, evidenced by asking "Why?" They imitate adults and engage in elaborate and imaginative role playing.

The child "is in free possession of a surplus of energy which permits him to forget failures quickly and to approach what seems desirable (even if it also seems uncertain and even dangerous) with undiminished and more accurate direction," wrote Erikson.

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Children are constantly active and learning to interact with other children and adults.

If supported in play and initiative, children grow more confident of themselves and begin to develop a sense of purpose. If discouraged or punished for their activity and trying new things, they can develop guilt and anger and feel inhibited and isolated.

### **Tips for encouraging a sense of purpose:**

- Show enthusiasm for working and learning. Zest for living is contagious.
- Encourage children to get involved in setting rules and consequences for breaking them.
- Acknowledge a child's strengths instead of harping about weaknesses. Communicate that every person is different and everyone has something to contribute.
- Accept and even applaud errors and failures, emphasizing what they teach us.
- Begin exposing children to the impact that adversity can have on one's life by reading children's books on topics such as death of grandparents. Discuss how the characters handled the situation.
- Introduce children to heroes in sports, business, public service, and other areas. Emphasize how they overcame adversity and persevered.

## **Gratitude: Lay a foundation**

Preschoolers will need a certain amount of emotional maturity before they can truly develop gratitude. This character trait requires having empathy for others, being able to put oneself in someone else's shoes, and recognizing what's involved in giving (time, money, effort) and receiving.

Even so, teachers and caregivers can lay a foundation for this character trait in early education classrooms. An art activity, for example, might be inviting children to make a collage from photos of things they are thankful for, such as parents, home, friends, and pets.

### **Tips for encouraging gratitude:**

- Model saying "Thank you" to children and others. "Thank you, Kendall, for bringing these pictures of your family to show us."
- Instead of nagging children to say "Thank you," explain briefly why we need to express gratitude. "Our cook worked all morning to make this bread. Let's give her a hand."

- Teach children to be keen observers, noticing common things like warmth and light, and talking about where they come from.
- Write class thank-you notes for gifts and special experiences, such as field trips.
- Use Thanksgiving and other holidays to gently remind children of ordinary things—food, shelter, family, school—that we all can be thankful for.
- Set up a penny collection jar that children and families can contribute to as they wish. At the end of the year, count the pennies and give them to a local food bank or other charity.

## **Put positive qualities into practice**

Certainly children must master basic academic skills if they are to succeed in later schooling and life. But recent research indicates that children's success and well-being also depend on character traits like curiosity and self-control.

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## MODEL SAYING THANK YOU TO CHILDREN AND OTHERS.

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As teachers and caregivers, we recognize that children are born with certain behavioral tendencies and that home and family life can exert a lasting effect upon children's personalities. At the same time, we know that we can nurture and strengthen positive qualities like hope and perseverance in our everyday practices with children.

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