

“Character is the intentional effort of living out one’s core values and working on continuous growth through ethical and compassionate decision-making. Core values are an individual or group’s most significant, deeply held beliefs that serve as a guide for how we think, feel and what we do” (Character.org, 2021). It is important to instill a set of good values in youth. To improve young adult behavior, it is crucial to teach the value of character. “Character development skills help students identify, define, and live according to core values. Quality character education creates an integrated culture of character that supports and challenges students and adults to strive for excellence” (Character Exchange, 2021).

DEFINING CHARACTER AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

“Character education is the shared responsibility of parents, teachers, and members of the community, who come together to support positive character development. In school, character education is a learning process that enables students and adults to understand, care about, and act on

core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). To maximize impact on the development of youth’s character traits, those creating character development programs typically implement one of two contrasting approaches:

(1) *The Deficit approach* concentrates on addressing risk factors that detract from the ability to acquire character, such as teen pregnancy and criminal activities. The successful implementation of a program using this approach occurs with the reduction of those risky behaviors, such as fewer children dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, or abusing substances. Some national and local statistics for commonly used indicators of character deficits in young people are provided in Tables 1 & 2. The data further demonstrates the need for character education. While this approach focuses on correcting symptoms, it potentially neglects the underlying causes of the issues (Nols, Haudenhuyse, & Theeboom, 2017).

TABLE 1. RISKY BEHAVIOR INDICATORS IN 2018/19	U.S.	TX
<i>High School Students unable to graduate on time (2018)</i>	15%	10%
<i>Teens not in school and not working (2019)</i>	6%	8%
<i>Teen Births (Number of live births for females 15-19 years of age and rate per 1,000) (2018)</i>	179,871	25,089
	17	25
<i>Teen Deaths (Number of deaths by homicide, suicide, and accident ages 15-19 and rate per 100,000) (2018)</i>	7,707	739
	37	36
<i>(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021)</i>		

TABLE 2. JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN 2019	TX	BEXAR	BANDERA	COMAL	KENDALL
Total number of juvenile referrals	54,137	4,273	29	282	48
Number of referrals in secure detention	2,159	104	4	6	1
Youth residing in juvenile detention, correctional and/or residential facilities	30,615	1,779	7	92	4
Juvenile Violent Felony	6,503	577	4	25	5
(Texas Juvenile Justice Department, 2020)					

(2) *The Positive Youth Development approach* focuses on contributors to healthy youth development. It emphasizes a holistic approach which includes a safe physical environment, collaboration and contribution by youth, supportive relationships, activities that keep youth engaged and learning, and mechanisms which will help youth become young adults (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Instead of deficits, positive actions such as volunteering are often used as indicators to demonstrate effectiveness of this development approach. For example, the Corporation for National and Community Service (n.d.) reported that 30.3% of Americans volunteered at least to some extent in 2017.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

“Innovation in methodology and practice continues to characterize character programming efforts on behalf of educational administrators attempting to do the supposedly impossible – balancing the demands of producing both smart and good students who will be the ethical and productive citizens of tomorrow” (Tatman, Edmonson, and Slate, 2009).

As a response, after school programs, arts programs, and summer recreational activities programs have been developed to fill youth’s discretionary time with “character” centered curricula.

Unfortunately, many of these programs have not been available for the last year due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements, school closures, etc.

The scope of character development programs ranges from national initiatives to small, local

community groups. Several of the more wide-reaching national programs are described below.

America’s Promise Alliance is a 501(c) (3) organization founded in 1997 following the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future. This initiative is the nation’s largest cross-sector alliance for young people, with over 450 national partners and over 17,000 individuals committed to the cause. Alliance partners launch new youth programs, expand existing ones, and lead community and statewide collaborations for youth. America’s Promise Alliance provides technical assistance, training, and innovative tools that accelerate the delivery of more resources to as many young people as possible at the community level. A few of the nonprofit members of the alliance include: Big Brother Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts, Communities in Schools, Girl Scouts, City Year, the United Way of America, and the YMCA (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.; America’s Promise Alliance, 2021b).

This organization builds the character and competence of the nation’s youth by developing programs that fulfill the Five Promises:

- Caring adults – ongoing relationships with parents, mentors, tutors, or coaches
- Safe places with structured activities during non-school hours
- Healthy start – adequate nutrition, exercise, health care, and stress reduction
- Effective education and marketable skills
- Opportunities to help others through community service

(America’s Promise Alliance, 2021a)

The **CHARACTER COUNTS!** coalition, developed by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, is a diverse partnership of schools, communities, education and human-service organizations committed to using the Six Pillars of Character in their individual and joint programs. In the San Antonio area, Northside Independent School District, Harlandale ISD, Ft. Sam Houston ISD, and Boerne ISD are members of the coalition (Character Counts, n.d.a.).

CHARACTER COUNTS! utilizes the “Six Pillars of Character” as its framework for character education programs.

- Trustworthiness (honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty)
- Respect (civility, courtesy, and decency, dignity and autonomy, and tolerance and acceptance)
- Responsibility (accountability, the pursuit of excellence, and self-restraint)
- Fairness (fair process in solving disputes, equity, and impartiality)
- Caring (empathy and benevolence)
- Citizenship (community consciousness) (Character Counts, n.d.b.)

40 Developmental Assets is the character development framework produced by the Search Institute, an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. Schools, family programs and youth programs (such as the YMCA) have incorporated the 40 assets into their programs (Search Institute, 2021).

The 40 assets, when possessed by youth, encourage the development of strong character and decreased incidence of negative behaviors. The assets are categorized as 20 external assets and 20 internal assets. The 40 developmental assets have been tailored for four distinct age groups: early childhood (ages 3 to 5), K-3 (ages 5-9), middle childhood (8-12), and adolescents (12-18).

- External assets include support networks, a sense of empowerment, clear boundaries

and expectations, and constructive use of time

- Internal assets include commitment to education, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Search Institute, 2021)

According to the Search Institute (2021), the more assets children possess, the less likely they are to engage in negative behaviors, display poor academic achievement, and use drugs. Instead, programs focused on these 40 assets lead children to display positive behavioral traits regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographic location.

BENEFITS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

“Researchers and practitioners began to report that young people who possess a diverse set of protective factors can, in fact, experience more positive outcomes. These findings encouraged the development of interventions and programs that reduce risks and strengthen protective factors” (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Lack of character development has an adverse effect, not only on the youth, but also on taxpayers and society. In 2019, there were over 42 million youths (aged 10-19), which constituted 13% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In Texas alone, there were 30,615 youth in juvenile detention in 2019 (Texas Juvenile Justice Department, 2020). Costs of detainment in juvenile correction centers in Texas was \$175,039 per child annually (Justice Policy Institute, 2020). Helping one at-risk young person develop character can result in both better lives for the individual and less dollars spent by taxpayers.

COVID-19 Considerations

COVID-19 has had a direct impact on organizations’ ability to provide in-person character development programs to the youth in our community. State and Nationally mandated restrictions on social distance, school closings, and shutdowns have kept at-risk children from accessing critical character development programs. Unfortunately, it is too early to determine the impact the shut

down has had on our children's growth and development (Araujo, Veloso, Souza, Azevedo, & Tarro, 2020).

Local organizations have created online programs to provide resources for children such as virtual mentorship, and character development classes. Communities in Schools of South-Central Texas continues to provide students with one-on-one mentorship and also has several events planned for 2021 (Communities in Schools of South-Central Texas, Inc. 2021).

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