

NURTURING CHILDREN'S CHARACTER STRENGTHS

The more character strengths a child develops, the more resilient, happy and healthy he or she is likely to be, and the more they will become like Jesus.

There are 24 main character strengths that are valued in almost every culture. Here are some fun and creative ways to help children develop some of those important character strengths.

APPRECIATING BEAUTY AND EXPERIENCING WONDER enriches children's lives and helps them to notice the amazing things that God has created. Psalm 104. David.

- Look at a sunset, a shell, a flower, a picture in a book and ask children what they think is the most beautiful part of it.
- Tell each other the most beautiful thing you saw today.
- Visit art galleries or go for walks in nature, and encourage children to slow down and notice beautiful things. Take a simple camera so they can photograph the things they discover.
- Send them on a wonder hunt to find three amazing and natural things in the garden, the forest, or the park, etc.

CAUTION helps children to be safe, and protects them from saying and doing things they'll regret later. Ephesians 5:15-17. Many of the prophets cautioned the people of God.

- Teach children important safety skills, and how to look out for dangers when they're climbing, flying kites, playing near water, etc.
- Help children to think about different ways of responding to a situation. Encourage them to wonder about the different effects of what they might say and do on others, themselves, and the things around them.
- Use stories to help children think about the positive and negative effects of different characters' actions, and what the characters could have done differently if they had been more cautious and thoughtful

COURAGE is facing up to difficult, challenging or frightening situations instead of avoiding them. Joshua 1:9, Proverbs 3:5-6. Daniel, Elijah, Esther, David, Joshua.

- If children are fearful or shy, help them to think about the different things that make them feel afraid, to prepare for fearful experiences, and to find useful ways to manage their fears.
- Be there, with plenty of reassurance and support, when they're performing on the stage, at the dentist, or facing an exam, etc.
- Help children to remember their brave times. Make a simple bravery award and write their brave moments on it, to encourage their courage in the future.

CREATIVITY isn't just about being artistic. Creativity is having an open mind about how things can be made and used, having a vision for an end product, and the determination to overcome the challenges of making it. Ecclesiastes 9:10. Creating the tabernacle, Mary using a manger for Jesus' bed.

- Choose an everyday object, such as a shoe, an empty jar, or a lonely sock, and think of at least ten interesting and practical ways it can be used.
- Let each child choose three fruity ingredients to invent a new kind of smoothie, or try out different toppings on their pizza.
- Give each child a large cardboard box, some scissors and a set of chunky felt pens. Help them make their box into a spaceship, a house, or whatever their imagination suggests.

ENTHUSIASM is doing things with energy and excitement rather than complaining. Colossians 3:23. Rebekah watering the camels. The disciple Peter is also very enthusiastic.

- Be as enthusiastic as you can be – your enthusiasm is infectious!
- Create an enthusiastic greeting together – your own version of a ‘high-five’ – and use it to inspire enthusiasm when a child is reluctant to get going.
- Say: ‘If we work together and tidy up this room within five minutes we can all sit down together and have a special treat.’ This encourages children to help each other get ready quickly, and adds a sense of excitement.

FAIRNESS is treating all people equally regardless of their differences. James 2:1-5. Jesus, Peter and his dream of the animals being lowered in a sheet.

- Teach children how to share generously and equally with others, and how to include new and lonely people in their playground games.
- Encourage children to have friends with different abilities and cultural backgrounds.
- Show respect and thoughtfulness to everyone you meet.

FORGIVENESS is being able to forgive those who hurt you, and knowing how to let go of your hurt and resentment. Ephesians 4:32. Joseph son of Jacob.

- Help children to understand forgiveness by finding symbolic acts to illustrate forgiveness, like washing dirt off a stone, or writing letters and tearing them up.
- Teach children that resentment fills them with sadness and pain, and that letting go of resentments gives them extra space to feel happy again.
- Help children to make amends by doing something kind for those they have hurt and those who have hurt them.

GRATITUDE is being thankful for gifts and blessings. 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Psalm 136:1. Paul is thankful in his letters, the leper who said thank you, Mary the mother of Jesus when she sings after the angel has told her she will have the Messiah.

- Say thank you prayers before meals.
- Give children diaries with a small space for each day. Ask children to think of three things they’re thankful for each day and to write them in the diary.
- Help children to make attractive thank-you cards. Encourage them to send thank you cards for the smallest gift or kindness.

HONESTY is telling the truth in love, even when it’s hard, and being genuine and authentic. Ephesians 4:15. Elijah, Prophet Nathan and King David.

- Respond warmly and lovingly when children are honest about the mistakes they have made – don’t punish them for being truthful.
- Teach them how to tell the truth with love, sandwiching a sentence of thoughtful and considerate honesty between kind and encouraging words.

- Live honestly and transparently yourselves, without cheating or deceiving, so that you set a good example.

HOPEFULNESS is believing that the best things happen when you trust in God and when you work to achieve your goals. Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 8:28. Abraham.

- Help your children to set goals for their day, week, month and year, depending on their age. Show them how to break goals into smaller steps so they can measure their progress.
- Make a paper star or candle shape and fill it with inspiring messages and Bible verses to nurture their hope.

HUMOUR is best when people laugh with each other and not at each other. Proverbs 17:22.

- Enjoy having fun with children.
- Tell each other the funniest thing you saw, heard or did during the day.
- Go to a zoo and watch the funny antics of the animals.
- Look for the funny side of the things that happen.
- Do unusual, surprising and funny things. Wear your clothes backwards for an hour; serve breakfast in the bath; arrange slices of fruit to make a funny face; and hide funny things in their bed or lunchbox. These little things make special memories that will bring a smile to their face.

KINDNESS is being thoughtful about what another person needs, and then putting their needs before your own. Luke 6:35, Ephesians 4:32. Ruth, Abigail, Rebekah.

- Involve children in acts of kindness – bake a cake for someone, fill a basket with goodies for a sick person, pack a shoebox of essentials for an overseas child... Let them have fun choosing the gifts and experiencing the joy of giving.
- Make a kindness kit for children to take to school. Include a packet of fun tissues, plasters with smiley faces, a tasty cereal bar, a tiny fun toy, etc. Encourage them to share these with children who are hurt, sad, or hungry.
- Encourage children to notice others are tired, ill or sad, and to find ways to be kind to their family, teachers and friends.

LOVE is many of the other character strengths experienced within a caring relationship. Romans 12:9-21, 1 Corinthians 13, Jesus, The Good Samaritan, Ruth.

- Ask each person to draw a big heart and write inside it 10 things other people do that help them to feel especially loved. Look at what each person has written so you can find out more about how they like to be loved.
- Decorate hearts with Bible verses about love. Do loving things for each other in secret. Leave a heart-verse close to the loving action to let the person know they have been loved.
- When you hear about the challenges in people's lives, ask yourselves how you could show them God's love, and then do it together.
- Imagine God's love is like a refreshing shower of water. Show children that our hurtful and unloving actions can be like an umbrella, preventing people from experiencing God's love. Show them a funnel and how it can collect lots of water and focus it into a bottle or glass. God wants us to be funnels, catching as much of his love as possible and pouring it into people's lives.

SELF-CONTROL is being able to wait for what you want and to limit what you take and eat, etc. Galatians 5:22-23. John the Baptist.

- Offer children the choice of a small treat now, or a bigger treat later. Help them to think about the benefits of waiting for something better.
- Encourage children to take the smallest piece, and to offer treats to others first, before taking for themselves.
- Don't always buy what children want straight away. Encourage them to wait a month to check if it's still what they really want.

SOCIABILITY/SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE is being aware of other people's feelings, as well as your own, and meeting other people's needs for comfort, encouragement, appreciation, help, respect, etc. Romans 12:9-21. Martha, Abigail.

- Sociability is being able to share in each other's feelings. Encourage children to be sad with those who are sad, and to be happy with those who are happy!
- When you read stories, talk about what they think the characters are feeling and needing, and what children could do to be thoughtful and kind to them.

SPIRITUALITY is about believing that life has value, meaning and purpose. It includes helping children to learn about God and how to develop a positive relationship with Him. Micah 6:8. Many Bible characters.

- Read biographies of people who were motivated to do great things because of their faith in God.
- Use creative ways to help children pray.
- Tell children that they are a gift from God to the world, that He loves them, and that He has a special, exciting and happy plan for their life.

TEAM-WORK is being able to cooperate with other people in happy and supportive ways. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Psalm 133:1 Noah and his family building the ark.

- Choose projects where children need to work together for the best results, such as putting up a tent, making a birthday party, flying a kite, sailing a boat, etc.
- Model team-work by working alongside children on challenging projects like tidying their bedroom.
- Give children plenty of opportunities to take part in team sports, music bands and group performances, etc., depending on their interests.

WISDOM helps children to make good choices. James 1:5; James 3:17; Ephesians 5:15-16. Solomon.

- Write out some wise Proverbs on plain cards. Take it in turns to choose a card and explain what it means.
- When you read stories, talk about the wisest people in the story and what they did and said that was so wise. Think about the foolish people too, and learn from their silly mistakes!

PRACTICAL STEPS TO BUILD CHARACTER

It's one of the greatest privileges to watch children develop resilient character strengths that will help them to flourish and be happy followers of Jesus.

- Know the different character strengths.
- Cut a heart out of thin card and let your child write each of the character strengths on it. Add more character strengths if you like, as there are many more than the ones listed here. Also ask them which character strengths they think they showed during the day.
- Notice when a child exhibits one of the strengths.
- Name the strength they are using and let them know they have made a good choice.
- Help them to choose which character strength they would like to work on.
- Make a list of ways that they could practice the strength in their everyday lives.
- At bedtime, ask them what character strengths they worked on during the day. Tell them at least one other strength that you noticed that they may not have noticed. This is so affirming and powerful for your child.
- When you are busy – even noticing one character strength a week will usually be very encouraging for a child.
- Work on the strengths together as a family. Have a “kindness week”, etc.
- Use the list of strengths to inspire your family worship – focus on Bible characters who used that strength, explore what might have helped them to develop that strength, learn Bible verses about the strength, etc.
- Help children to notice when other people show character strengths. Look for people using character strengths in their books, and in the movies/programmes that they watch. Ask who was the kindest, bravest, wisest, person, etc. and talk about what they did, and what a difference it made to other people.
- For older children and teens, look for people today who are using different character strengths. Send them to research a person who is brave, or creative, or kind, etc. Or to find news stories about people using their character strengths.

RESOURCES

www.letitripple.org – Jewish website filled with character building ideas, including films, and materials to be used during Character Week

“Celebrating Strengths”- Book by Jennifer Fox Eades

www.viacharacter.org – online quiz to identify your character strengths.

<http://www.momentsaday.com/100-kids-activities-to-build-character/>

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