

Why Character Education Is So Critical

“An Overview Of Some Of The Issues Facing Our Young People Today”

By Cris Johnson

Introduction

Character education in schools is receiving a great deal of attention in recent years.

Parents, teachers, school administrators and health care professionals increasingly recognize the fact that a healthy self-esteem significantly impacts the social development of our youth as well their decisions pertaining to issues of bullying and drug abuse.

This report is going to take a brief look at the “hot button” topics of **self-esteem, bullying, drug abuse awareness, and reading appreciation**, offer some warning signs and risk factors to look for (bullying, self-esteem, drug abuse) and offer some ideas for solutions and even a few outside programs to consider.

Since there is a mountain of data available, this report is only intended as a quick overview intended to inspire the reader to begin looking at possible courses of action.

Self Esteem

In recent years, professionals in the education field are recognizing what a pivotal role a healthy self-esteem is in regards to proper development and social interaction. What follows are a few notes (and their sources) regarding self-esteem and it's relationship to school achievement.

Relationship of self-esteem to school achievement:

- **BROOKOVER, THOMAS, AND PATTERSON, 1985**--Found there was a significant relationship between self-concept and academic achievement.
- **COOPERSMITH, 1965**--Reported that children's self-concept predicted a child's ability to read in first grade at least as well as measures of intelligence.
- **WYLIE, 1979**--There is considerable empirical evidence that self-concept predicts and influences achievement in school, from the primary grades through undergraduate education.
- **HOLLY, 1987**--Compiled a summary of all the studies and indicated that most supported the idea that self-esteem was more likely the result than the cause of academic achievement. However, he acknowledged that a certain level of self-esteem is required in order for a student to achieve academic success and that self-esteem and achievement go hand in hand. They feed each other.
- **COVINGTON, 1989**--As the level of self-esteem increases, so do achievement scores; and as self-esteem decreases, so does achievement. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, he concluded that self-esteem can be modified through direct instruction and that such instruction can lead to achievement gains.
- **WALZ & BLEUER, 1992**--Factors which are important to school success, such as positive feelings about self, absenteeism, and school retention, are affected by successful school self-esteem programs.

- **SCHEIRER & KRANT, 1979**--Reported on several studies that have demonstrated that educational achievements are influenced by self-concept.

While many professionals are hesitant to draw any definitive conclusions, there does seem to be an overwhelming abundance of evidence that a healthy self-esteem significantly impacts how people will fare in the world.

A poor self-esteem can lead to a greater likelihood of drug abuse, bullying and more.

Bullying

This topic has gained a ton of attention in the last few years and with good cause. When considering the repercussions of bullying, both for the bullies themselves and those they torment, one wonders why this topic took so long to get the amount of attention it has now.

Bullying is most common, unfortunately, at schools than most any other location, including the bus to and from school and other locations in the community.

Bullies: The Consequences

Children who bully are much, much more susceptible to other delinquent/antisocial behaviors later in life, such as truancy, shoplifting and frequent drug use. Furthermore, this pattern often continues into young adulthood. These children are more apt to drink, smoke and usually do poorly in school.

One in four boys who bully will have a criminal record by the time they are 30.

Girls also have bullying tendencies, but some studies seem to indicate that girls bully in more subtle ways, such as ostracizing fellow students.

Forms of Bullying

Contrary to conventional beliefs, bullying can take many different forms and can generally be broken down into the three categories listed below.

Verbal Bullying – taunting, teasing and name-calling and, indirectly, spreading rumors

Physical Bullying – Hitting, shoving, kicking, theft or destruction of property and, indirectly, enlisting the aid of someone for the person.

Non-Verbal/Non-Physical Bullying – Threatening or obscene gestures and, indirectly, excluding others from a group, manipulation of friends, and threatening emails.

The Bullied: Consequences

The children who are tormented suffer from a wide array of problems, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, difficulties with school and more.

In the long term, issues of depression and self-esteem can extend well into adulthood. In fact, many individuals report feelings of isolation and torment years after school.

Warning Signs

Several similarities tend to be common in bullies. They tend to be impulsive, hotheaded and have dominant personalities. They also often have difficulties conforming to rules and view violence in a positive light.

Drug Abuse

One of the challenges of preventing drug use in our youth is identifying the most high-risk periods for drug abuse.

What are the early signs of risk that may predict later drug abuse?

Some signs of risk can be seen as early as infancy or early childhood, such as aggressive behavior, lack of self-control, or difficult temperament. As the child gets older, interactions with family, at school, and within the community can affect that child's risk for later drug abuse.

Early aggressive behavior, lack of parental supervision, drug availability and poverty seem to be the highest risk factors when determining who may be most likely to become involved in drugs.

Children's earliest interactions occur in the family. As a result, sometime family situations heighten a child's risk for later drug abuse, for example, when there is:

- a lack of attachment and nurturing by parents or caregivers
- ineffective parenting
- a caregiver who abuses drugs

What are the highest risk periods for drug abuse among youth?

Research has shown that the key risk periods for drug abuse are during major transitions in children's lives. The first big transition for children is when they leave the security of

the family and enter school. Later, when they advance from elementary school to middle school, they often experience new academic and social situations, such as learning to get along with a wider group of peers. It is at this stage—early adolescence—that children are likely to encounter drugs for the first time.

When they enter high school, adolescents face additional social, emotional, and educational challenges. At the same time, they may be exposed to greater availability of drugs, drug abusers, and social activities involving drugs. These challenges can increase the risk that they will abuse alcohol, tobacco, and other substances.

When young adults leave home for college or work and are on their own for the first time, their risk for drug and alcohol abuse is very high. Consequently, young adult interventions are needed as well.

Because risks appear at every life transition, prevention planners need to choose programs that strengthen protective factors at each stage of development.

Reading Appreciation

As many professionals are recognizing links between self-esteem and academic achievement, encouraging children to read more on their own time can only be beneficial.

Encouraging children to read on their own is something schools, districts and states have been addressing in creative ways. A few are listed below as examples.

Parents As Reading Partners

In New York State, for example, Parents As Reading Partners (P.A.R.P.) has been created to encourage parents to take an active role in helping their children to read more on their own, outside the classroom.

Parents As Reading Partners is a collaborative effort among parents, staff, and community to build a reading partnership between the home and the school. PARP programs encourage parents to read with their children each day.

In 1987 the New York State PTA assumed the helm of the Parents As Reading Partners (PARP) program begun by the late State Senator James Donovan, Chairman of the State Senate Education Committee. PARP is a program designed to foster the love of reading in children by asking parents to set aside fifteen minutes daily to read with their children.

Similar programs may be available in your state.

Book It!

Pizza Hut has a national program called “Book It!” which is designed to encourage children to read.

- The BOOK IT! Program is a free reading incentive program for grades K-6.
- The program months are October through March each year.
- Begin by setting monthly reading goals for each child in your class.
- As soon as the monthly reading goal has been met, present the child with a pizza award certificate.
- The child takes the certificate to a Pizza Hut restaurant, where he or she is congratulated by the manager or service team and given a **free, one-topping Personal Pan Pizza**. On the first visit, the child also receives a **BOOK IT! card with clip** and a **sticker** for the card. There is no purchase necessary and the pizza can be taken to go.
- On each subsequent visit, the child is again congratulated and given another Personal Pan Pizza and a sticker to recognize reading achievement.
- If the child meets the reading goals all six months of the program, he or she is rewarded at the restaurant with a **BOOK IT! All-Star Reader Award**.

The benefit of a program such as this is positive reinforcement and rewards for reading. Reading is associated with something fun to look forward to.

Regardless of the state you are in, encouraging a partnership between children, schools and parents can only result in an increased awareness of what is going on in childrens’ lives.

What Can Be Done

Education and awareness remain the most potent weapons for all of these negative issues. Keep track of bullying incidents. Train everyone at school to know the warning signs of any kind of issue related to self-esteem, bullying, drug abuse or difficulties with schoolwork. Involve parents – making them part of the team means everyone is working toward the same goals.

Peer Support Groups

Programs such as implementing peer support groups have been shown to be highly effective ways to curtail bullying, boost morale, help with self-esteem issues and encourage students to get help with any challenges they may be facing whether academic or social.

One reason programs such as this seem to be working is due to the fact that children will very often be hesitant to approach an adult until the situation has already reached a crisis level. Approaching “one of their own” often feels like a much more attractive option.

There are several resources on the web pertaining to starting peer support groups that you may want to research.

Outside Program Support

For bullying, programs such as The Olweus Bully Prevention Program also have a high degree of success.

Drug prevention programs such as DARE continue to be used effectively by schools in many areas.

For all of these issues, involve the entire school as a community. The key is to get started and let everyone (students, school faculty, parents) know that new policies are going into effect. Involving the kids and encouraging their input can be a wonderful way to get them onboard as team members.

A character education assembly program by itself isn't enough to cause lifetime change, but coupled with long-term campaigns and programs, can serve as a useful and fun “springboard” to getting things started in the school.

Conclusion

Thank you for reading this report. One of the common themes of this report, regardless of the specific topic, is partnership – involvement by teachers, getting parents directly involved in the education process and promoting a team atmosphere.

By keeping the doors of communication open, many problems with character education can be avoided or dealt with in a more effective manner.

For advice and tips on choosing and funding character education assemblies, be sure to examine the other reports that came with this package.

Sincerely,

Cris Johnson