

CHAPTER TWO

PROMOTING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY YEARS

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Introduction

From the time immemorial, nurturing positive character development in children has been an issue of apprehension and becomes more important today because of our increasingly social media-focused world. In the African traditional society, character training of children has been seen as having a significant role to play in the socialisation of children into responsible and active citizens. Children should be trained to have a complex understanding of social relationships and of “right and wrong” from an early age. Character development in young children is critical to success in life.

All children are capable of developing foundational social-emotional skills and character traits at an early age contrary to what some parents do feel that their children do not or will not acquire honesty, generosity and compassion during their early education experience. In order to clear such ambiguity and advance literature on the subject, this paper explored the character development in early years, the reasons for character development and characters that should be developed in children are identified. Also, roles of parents and teachers as stakeholders are highlighted and strategies that both can use in promoting character development in children are discussed.

What is Character Development?

Character is an aggregate of all our traits and includes all of our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions. Character development is the development of an individual's set of

emotional, cognitive and behavioural patterns learned and accumulated over time. It is also the development of the organised patterns of behaviours and attitudes that make a person distinctive. It involves development of personal qualities a society considers desirable and acceptable. Character is simply thinking and acting by doing what is right. Children develop into moral, civic, good, mannered, well behaved, non-bullying, healthy, critical, successful and socially acceptable beings (Ackerly, 2014; Cammarata, 2014).

A person is said to have character when he or she demonstrates distinguishing moral qualities, moral virtues, and moral reasoning abilities. The terms that are related to character include morality, virtue and ethics. A moral person understands right and wrong and willfully chooses what is right; a virtuous person engages in good behaviour intentionally, predictably, and habitually; an ethical person figures out what is right or good, the good and the bad, what is morally acceptable and what it is not. Three broad goals have been identified by Omordu and Amaele (2014) for educating the children for moral and character development. These goals are to promote children's development away from egocentrism towards relations of cooperation and mutual respect; foster the growth of full moral agency, a capacity for moral judgement, feeling, and acting and develop in the classroom and in the school, community-based values of fairness, caring, and participation. Classroom and schools dedicated to these broad goals would seek to develop in children the following specific qualities:

- (a) a self-respect that derives feelings of worth not only from competence but also from pro-social behaviour towards others.
- (b) social perspective –taking (How do others think and feel? How does my behaviour affect the group?);
- (c) knowledge of culturally important values, including procedural values such as reasoned arguments, tolerance, of differences, and democratic process) and substantive values (such as honesty, compassion, and justice);
- (d) the skills of cooperating with others towards a common goal;
- (e) character traits (habitual ways of responding) such as fairness, kindness, truthfulness, and a generalised respect for others; and
- (f) an openness to the positive influence of adults as socializing agent.

Why Character Development is Important for Young Children?

Developing a respectful and responsible character is a skill every child needs in order to thrive, find fulfilment, and be an influence for good in society. Literature confirm that character development in children is not an optional neither secondary but an aspect that all children must be taken through for them to mature into young men and women of integrity (Anyur, 2011; Cammarata, 2014; Meiners, 2015). Character development in children is important because positive character traits are the foundation of success in academics, home life, and the work world (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Anyur, 2011). Children's character is moulded by the exposure to people around them, the environment cum the training given to them. A consistent and thorough teaching of acceptable

behaviour is critical to shaping children's character. Here are some reasons why character development in children is important.

Character development is the foundation for children's (survival) life skills: Character development helps children to acquire and practise life skills that will develop in them strengths that they need for survival throughout their lives. Children acquire traits like self-esteem, cooperation, tolerance, respect, courage, resilience, integrity and forgiveness which are examples of traits that can sustain children at home, at school, and in the community. Character is the bedrock that solid relationships are built on; relationship and character are intertwined. Through character building, children develop social skills that help them in their relationship with others. They learn to cooperate with others, share with them and work with team or in groups. They are able to tolerate others and get along easily in life (Taylor, 2002; Cammatata, 2014; Meiners, 2015).

Character development is the foundation for lifelong learning: Research reported increased academic performance and school attendance. Where character development and education is taught, there will be minimal disciplinary issues (Cammatata, 2014). Children will enjoy safe environment to learn and the teachers' stress in managing the pupils' behaviour decreases. The classroom teaching is easier when children are learning to exhibit habits of patience, diligence, and self-control in the classroom. Meiners (2005) pointed out that character education prepares children for learning and for life.

Character development shapes children to become good citizens: Character is a whole language we daily communicate to others in the society. Citizenship helps to develop in children the skills of enquiry and communication or developing skills of participation and community action. Children should be taught principles of character that can sustain them in their relationship with family members, peers, and teachers and make them useful members of the community. As children grow up their character affects everyone in the communities. Their comportment in the work place as employers or employee, neighbours and leaders is determined by the characters they grow up, with. Character building will help to raise children with strong character and through this incidence of delinquency; violence and many other antisocial behaviours that threaten the peace and progress of the society will be greatly reduced (Nickols & Belliston, 2001; Gearson, 2003; Cammatata, 2014).

Core Character Traits that should be promoted in Children

Respect: Respect is core to good character. Suffice to say there is no good character without respect. Respect means treating others with honour and dignity; being fair to others and it does not stop there; respect commands the attention of other virtues, including those mentioned above. Great learning and superior abilities will be of little value unless virtue, truth and integrity are added unto them. This is to say that whatever knowledge a child has gathered is a waste without the virtue of respect. Respectful children often enjoy a healthy teacher-pupil relationship. The intentional teaching of this

trait to children should begin from when they are little, with more emphasis on practical than theory (Aynur, 2011).

Courage: According to Wilce (2013), courage is acting in the face of fear. It is to overcome fear and do what is right. Every child should build up courage to challenge whatever stands in the way to achieving their goals. These children are not afraid to fall or fail. They separate from the crowd, and for this, they are seen as mavericks. They are mostly found doing tasks eschewed by other children. They are lovers of challenges. These children go through school life skilfully. Children need moral courage to shy away from whatever might distract them from studying.

Honesty: Honesty is not only telling the truth at all times, but also doing things that are morally right. It is an important trait that children should grow up with. Honest children are intelligent because lack of honesty impedes academic success. Honesty allows a smooth interpersonal relationship between learners and their teachers. It grows confidence, acquires goodwill and directs learning (Wilce, 2013).

Resilience: Resilience is never allowing your back to remain on the ground. Over the years, resilience has been known to be a requirement for learning; which means without it, learning becomes an impossible feat. Resilience helps children's logical thinking and creative ability. Resilient children are daring and able to fight depression and anxiety easily. They accept that learning is fraught with varied setbacks that are not insurmountable. These children do not give up; defeat makes them strong. More often than not, they have a positive mindset and attitude towards situations, good or bad. Mostly, these children have great tensile strength and will not accept whatever is not good enough.

Caring/Kindness: Caring is exhibited through extending a helping hand without reservations, and not expecting such gesture to be returned. It can also mean that a child is empathetic and compassionate to others. A child who possesses this trait will identify with the feelings, needs and concerns of other children. He or she will be able to keep up with the opinions, views and behavioural dispositions displayed by other children. They show a fair amount of understanding as to why another child holds an entirely different belief(s). These children grow to become adults who constantly bear in mind that their actions and inactions have both positive and negative influences on others. Thus, they are sensitive to other people's feelings by making sure that no one gets hurt because of them (US Department of Education, Office of Communication and Outreach, 2015).

Creativity: According to Street (2015), creativity is bigger than art. Any human act that results into the creation of something new is a creative art. Instilling creativity in children will be beneficial in the areas of communication, problem-solving, emotional development, and it helps them to become less dependent. Aside from the real academic work, children should participate in creative activities such as music, photography, drama/play, drawing and painting, moulding and building as well as nature work.

Self-Discipline: Every child should be taught the culture of discipline. They should be made to understand the reward of discipline and to acknowledge that it takes discipline to achieve greatness. Whosoever desires to achieve big and put mark on the sands of time should be self-disciplined. Foh (2013) stated that discipline is a choice people do not receive from birth, they develop it. Wilce (2013) opined that discipline in children clears the road to successful adulthood. It does not come as a surprise when self-disciplined children thrive better in schools, society and among friends than their counterparts without it. They are children who have mastered the control of their impulses which of course leads to sound health and mental happiness at the present time and in later life if this trait does not discontinue. When a child is self-disciplined, he takes responsibility for his every action. He is consistent in responding to situations and does the necessary things at the right time and not when it is convenient. Children should develop this trait in order to achieve success in their academic endeavour and to become responsible people later in life.

Citizenship: Citizenship is crucial for the well-being of human beings in general and for the character development of children in particular (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). As reported by Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2008), citizenship is not merely a formal status but a pre-requisite for belonging to a group and as such bears a significant impact on identity formation. Citizenship helps children's social development. It enables them to develop understanding of their communities and society, interact with others and to be actively involved in community development activities. This provides opportunities for children to become responsible and active citizens. Citizenship gets pupils working together on issues of concern. It gives them the confidence and skills they need to act with others to tackle real problems in society (Gearson, 2003; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Child Educators and Parents' Roles in Character Development of Children

Parents and teachers are the primary agents that are responsible for child upbringing as they play a vital role in helping children develop their full potential. Most people share the view that schools should be formally and strategically involved in building moral character, while some often assume that parents rather than educators are responsible for fostering values in children. While parents certainly have an immense role to play in this regard, they cannot carry this responsibility alone; they should work in concert with schools and the community. Kimberly (2008) opined that the qualities of children's character develop through interplay of family, school, church, community influences and the child's individual temperament, experiences and choice. Since parents and families play a key role in character development, it is expected that that each party invests time and effort in training children so as to prepare them for their adult lives.

Schools and Childhood Educators' Role

For decades, some philosophers like John Locke (1632-1704), John Stuart Mill (1807-1873) and John Dewey (1857-1950) have seen character development as central to the

school's mission and, of course, a primary function of educational institutions. It becomes inevitable for education to expose children to education that will not only teach Mathematics, English, and Science but also put in place a more comprehensive education that will address their emotions, personality, and character as well.

The teacher is responsible for not only impacting knowledge but also for character development of children (Day, 2002; Meiners, 2015). Aside the training given to children at home by the parents, possibly, teachers are the first role models that children encounter regularly outside of the home. Children look up to them and imitate everything they see them do. Teachers have an extra sensitive role of instilling discipline and setting good examples to develop children to become reliable and meaningful future generations (Day, 2002; Holden, 2002; Deaken, 2002; Meiners, 2015).

Children are still in their formative years which are almost sensitive as parenting. The teacher's responsibility in schools becomes intensely challenging because of the incidences of truancy, restiveness, bullying, aggressiveness, and other forms of violence schools and teachers need to buckle down to be able to face the responsibility that their role comes with. Schools and teachers need to identify strategies they can adopt in developing children's character to combat the menace of anti-social and other negative behaviours among children (Day, 2002; Deaken, 2002; Meiners, 2015).

A study by Mooij (2000) found that in relation to teaching and learning, the most important school characteristics which promote pro-social behaviours are regular strategies or procedures used by teachers and schools to get along with pupils. These include rules of conduct and didactic rules; partly individualised but socially relevant didactic learning procedures; assessment and evaluation procedures; procedures to reinforce desired pupil behaviour. A key finding was the importance of students' participation in the creation of those procedures and the extent to which students feel responsible for them.

The study by Clare et al (1996) identified the importance of classroom discourse in creating a zone of proximal development for learners in moral development, alongside their reading comprehension. Within Literature lessons, the teacher brought into focus developmentally appropriate moral dilemmas and created cognitive dissonance for her students in addressing themes within the stories that were relevant to the moral development of the students. An effective teacher should be concerned about instilling discipline to children in a constructive manner. They should be dedicated to shaping pupils character passionately, bringing out the best in their pupils without demoralising them considering the fact that they are the future leaders.

Role of Parents

Of all other people that have influence on children, parents profoundly have significant influence and role in the overall development of their children. Particularly, one of the efforts they need to take in performing their many roles is developing character in their children (Price-Mitchell, 2011). Parenting is a continuous job because children need their

parents from time to time to stay on the right track. However, it is disheartening that the reality of industrialisation makes most homes lose contact with children and parents hardly have time to provide adequate care and training for their children. Price-Mitchell (2011), writing on how families can develop character in children, identified that most parents are busy looking for how to pay bills with little or no time dedicated to the moulding of their children's character and this has resulted in the detriment of the character of their children. It is also common that the care and training of some children are left in the hands of house helps and television miscreants as the parents leave home early life and return very late at night all in the name of working to get fund to take care of the children (Cammarata, 2014). Truly, parents need to work in order to make adequate provision for children's need but that should not be done at the expense of the care and being available to provide the character training and development for their children. No aspect should be left to suffer, they are all important. The presence of parents at home does a lot in the training of children. Parents should be available to guide, set and enforce appropriate limits for the children's behaviour (Price-Mitchell, 2011).

Between the two parents, the mother is seen to be the first teacher who has powerful impact on the child, especially if she is a single parent (Price-Mitchell, 2011; Arkerly, 2014). In an ideal situation where both parents are available, they are expected to work together to develop acceptable characters in their children. Each has a role in character building of the children. Parents should endeavour to develop virtues such as respect for parents, compassion, truthfulness, humility, courage, trustworthiness, perseverance, justice to mention a few. Parents can initiate respect at home by teaching their children to listen and follow through when asked to do simple tasks. Parents can model respect by establishing themselves as the authority figures responsible for the family's welfare. Cammarata (2014); Arkerly (2014) and Allen (2016) emphasised that role modelling by the parents is also important to instil character building. It is the fundamental building blocks of society as it is believed that children learn almost everything not just what is being said but what they experience or witness.

Strategies that can Promote Character Development in Children

Learning through experiences: Character development can be promoted in children when they are given chances to learn through experiences which make them to be realistic with themselves and build some other life skills like humility, teamwork, thoughtfulness, courage and resilience in them. This is confirmed by Rick (2014) who submitted that many experiences in life are inherently character building. Parents and childhood educators should always look for opportunities that will help children expose them to life experiences, understand what they mean to them in their own terms and helping them to learn from the consequences of such incidences. Through series of experiences they have gathered, they can reflect on them whenever they want to act or make future decisions (Allen, 2016; Sean, 2018).

Modelling good character in the home: According to Grimes and Rao (2009), a major means for rapid learning in humans is imitation. To Bennett (1997), there is nothing more influential, more determinant in a child's life than the moral power of a quiet example. It is extremely required that those involved in building children's character in positive ways live it. Children are good imitators, they learn character from mirroring parents, teachers and other adults around them. It is fundamentally essential to teach children good manners in all the virtues that denote good character like respect, compassion, truthfulness, honesty, humility, courage, fairness, trustworthiness and perseverance.

Recognising character strengths in others: Guiding children to identify character traits in others will help them to emulate and develop their own character traits. This can be achieved by helping them to identify the unique character traits of different characters in movies, cartoons and books. This can inspire them to develop new character traits and pick role models who inspire them. Teachers and parents should endeavour to provide rich opportunity for children to talk and learn about character strengths.

Exposure to Literature: The research of Day (2002) provided evidence that drama can be a very useful vehicle for personal development, for social interaction and for political action and engagement. Empathy was stimulated in students by the play and this provided emotional energy, which was focused on action and was orientated towards the 'other'. Students then transferred this empathy to other 'victims' they knew in school. Parents and teachers should encourage reading to children and keeping good literature books in the home and school. Great teachers have always used stories to teach, motivate, and inspire, and reading together is an important part of passing the moral legacy of culture from one generation to another. Through exposure to literature, children are inspired and motivated (Adedigba, 2015). They can raise questions and make comments about the stories. This will offer parents important insights into their children's thoughts, beliefs, and concerns. Children are also able to learn from the characters strengths and virtues that the characters exhibit, obstacles they overcome and how their character strengths help them.

Scrutinise and supervise your children viewing: In building positive character in children, it is important that parents and teachers scrutinise and supervise what television shows, videos, and movies they are watching. There are some educative materials and other character building experiences available for children through television but the explosion of pornographic and other immoral shows should be curtailed. Parents should endeavour to teach their children responsible viewing habits and set standard to control their activities on screen.

Set clear expectations and be firm: Character is both taught (explicit) and caught (implicit) (Nickols and Belliston, 2001; Hunt, 2004). Defining reasonable limits and enforcing them appropriately establishes the parents as the moral leaders in the home and provides a sense of security to children and youth. This could build character traits such as trust and respect for systems/leadership in children as well as an understanding of consequences. Parents and teachers should make children to understand their values, tell

them their stand on important issues and explain to them. All these can help them internalise the virtues that they (parents) value (Character Education Network, 2007). Also, parents and teachers should learn to say no and mean it. Children naturally want to dare and challenge their parents' authority, whatever their reluctance and protests; parents should stand firm on the instruction and protect child's participating in a potentially hurtful activity or taking dangerous decision.

Give meaningful praise: Commending children for good behaviour they exhibit helps in their character development. Parents and adults around them should communicate appreciation for who they are, not just for what they do. Children are helped to learn that character strengths matter when they are appreciated when they do something noteworthy. When we make some statements like 'Good attempt', 'You are great', 'Good job', 'Beautiful' we should make them understand the reason behind these general statements and make our praise more specific. Praise increases their self-esteem and boosts their morale and willingness to want to do better. They learn good character from well-communicated praise. Look for opportunities to compliment the good behaviour in a child. Praise their enthusiasm, perseverance, honesty, diligence, kindness, teamwork, fairness, humility, etc.

Expose children to citizenship education: Citizenship education from early childhood enables children to become clear thinking and enlightened citizens who will participate in making meaningful decisions concerning society. According to Biesta (2007); Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, (2009), citizenship education will help children in their social practices which constitute their everyday lives as they interact with others and participate in community activities. Citizenship education should be promoted in childhood schools to develop children's character (Gearson, 2003; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Engage them in positive activities: Children are full of energy and there is need for parents and teachers to help them channel this vigour to rewarding activities that will help their character development. As a result, positive activities such as sports, gardening, hobbies, photography, music or other forms of recreational and creative activities should be encouraged in children to promote selflessness, caring and teamwork.

Engage children in benefitting conversations: Opportunities should be created to engage children in moral discussion. Parents can bring up fun and interesting discussions around character strengths. Allow children to air their opinion on such issues, correct whatever they misunderstand in the discussion and be sure the conversation is centred on helping children to understand character strengths and recognise them in others. Also, encourage them to have dialogue with adults and peers. Dialogue has an important part to play in fostering reflective thinking, understanding, tolerance and respect for others. A highly rated study by Russell (2002) into children's moral consciousness and the role of children's discussions confirmed the relevance of dialogue in children's character development. In the course of interchanging, children learn certain characters that help them to become responsible and socially acceptable persons in the society. They learn

the concepts of fairness, responsibility and choice, the value of human life, authenticity and respecting others.

Involve children in family plans: Parents should encourage children's involvement in family activities, ask for their opinion in matters that concern them and other family engagements. Involve your children in the planning of family activities. Abraham Lincoln observed that participating in national celebrations causes Americans to feel "more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country they inhabit." When children are involved in planning how family spend their holidays and celebrate family events, they have sense of belonging and it makes them feel accepted and responsible as family members, and as citizens.

Be sensitive to the child's needs and interest: Attention should be given to understanding and satisfying children's needs. This gives them assurance of parents' love and care for them. Parents should be sensitive to children's need, their interest and do things that will create an impression in them that parents care about their needs, take interest in their wellbeing and expect the best from them. When children see that their parents show interest and care about them, they get the courage and then exhibit positive behaviours.

Teach children to take responsibility for their actions: Parents should not cover children's inappropriate behaviour. They should be held accountable for their actions. When they make error, teach them to take personal responsibility. By so doing, we help them to have logical consequences of their actions and learn to observe laws and regulations that govern behaviours.

Conclusion

Early childhood experiences can strongly determine who a child becomes. It is a critical time to lay the groundwork for building character. This can be a tremendous responsibility for parents and childhood educators as we face issues of politeness, honesty, diversity, aggression, sharing and other anti-social behaviours both at home, school and the society. Children should be made to understand the important building blocks of character and apply them in situations that are meaningful to their lives. There is need for a concerted effort in character development of children. All stakeholders, particularly parents and teachers, need to model and teach children the practice of building solid character. Childhood educators and childcare providers should support parents in intentionally nurturing good character and the entire educational system needs to place more emphasis on character building because it proves more effective.

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