



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
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Insight Series

Parents and Character in the Early
Years of Education: Parents as First
Educators

Professor James Arthur

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Parents and Character in the Early Years of Education: Parents as First Educators

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The character formation of a child begins when their first cry is answered. He begins to learn about the world around him even before he can properly hear and see. He seeks to find out something about himself, he is communicating and being answered. His mind is being formed and he is being taught to love, fear and be happy. This teaching by mothers and fathers goes on at a very deep level – at the very core of our being. It is teaching that impacts on the child's future flourishing in ways that we do not fully understand.

All through a child's early life parents continue to form their character and they do this whether they want to or not. It is simply impossible to have children and not teach them, whether you love or hate them, ignore or worry about them, you are still teaching them something. The influences that create the most lasting impressions on us are received from within our own families. So when parents deliberately set out to teach their children the impression's formed are deeper and more formative. It is why parents need to be clear about their own values and especially clear about what they teach. Does your child know what you stand for and why? Do they know what is important to you? Do they understand why you sometimes go counter to the prevailing views of their friends and their parents? Parents need to model the virtues that help form character so that their child can flourish. These virtues are the building blocks of all social graces and help develop a good and just society. How do I learn to disagree with you without being disagreeable? With any child there will be times for letting them make their own decisions, a time to compromise, but there are times when a firm 'no' is required. The question that parents should ask is what do they want their child to look like and act like when they leave the family home?

The research literature clearly shows that what happens in the first three years of a child's life is of the utmost importance for their character and life chances.

In Loco Parentis

The school is another influence on the child, but the most profound influence remains with the family, particularly parents. The school teacher used to be seen as 'in loco parentis' – that is, 'in place of the parent' which means the duty of the teacher to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent. Unfortunately, teachers are now largely civil servants; they are professionals who implement what the State directs. They still have important duties in teaching the virtues that are essential to the survival of society, but they are not the first educators. They ought to complement the values and virtues learnt in the family. Character education should be viewed as a joint responsibility for it is more effective when teachers and parents are in discussion with each other. Teachers and parents must talk the language of virtue together to help shape the character of the young.

Nevertheless, some teachers are teaching children how to brush their teeth, to wash and dress, and how to organise their personal lives. Parents are of course best placed to do these things and can do them more effectively than teachers. However, there are homes with little sense of order and responsibility – we need to acknowledge that there are inadequate parent educators. In these circumstances the school takes on a more crucial role in teaching the intellectual, moral, and civic

virtues. The school must build the character of their students in more formative ways if there are shortfalls that are not addressed in the home.

A balanced approach is needed between parents who need additional support and those parents who do not require such support. We know there is a positive effect in the direct relationship between teenage mums and paediatric nurses on child development. But this intervention on behalf of the State should not be extended further without the agreement of parents – otherwise it encourages an intervention culture by the State. In a report called ‘Parenting Matters’ (2011) by Centre Forum in the UK, the following advice was given to parents of what they could do every day:

1. Read to your child for 15 minutes.
2. Play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes.
3. Talk with your child for 20 minutes with the television off.
4. Adopt positive attitudes toward your child and praise them frequently.
5. Give your child a nutritious diet.

The fact that such basic advice is necessary indicates that there is a problem with parenting.

We know from the research literature that parental involvement in their child’s education has a significant effect on educational achievement, but also on the building of character. We know that fathers play a critical role and that when parents talk more with their children about the things that worry them then the child is more likely to develop a good character. We know that aspirational parents are more involved with their children’s education and we know that parental involvement varies by class, religion, marital and economic status.

Research Insights

I would like to share some of the research insights from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham which provides some idea of the real connections between character education and parents:

Our research with over 4,000 young people (15 year olds) in the UK looking at the virtues of honesty, courage and self-discipline by using a series of moral dilemmas found that students who have both parents at home understand these virtues more than students who live in single parent families. Students who are in regular touch with their grandparents are also more likely to understand and practice the virtues of care, compassion and empathy.

We recognise that being poor does not preclude excellent parenting for character. But low income and the problems often associated with it, for example, living in crowded conditions, having less ability to plan ahead, having a noisy and even violent neighbourhood, make parenting harder. A key difference is that children who grow up with fewer material resources may require additional support from voluntary organisations and government and this ought to be welcomed so long as such support does not overwhelm the proper role of parents.

We found that 70% of teachers in our sample stated that they could rely on parents to develop the good character of their students at home. However, some primary school teachers felt that it was more of a challenge for young and inexperienced mothers. This means that almost one in three parents, according to teachers, cannot be relied upon to teach the basic virtues to their children.

We confirm that parents who regularly talk to their children make a difference to their character development.

We found that 87% of parents believe that schools should focus on character development. The 13% who did not thought this was entirely a role for parents themselves. In other words, they still thought character development was vital.

When parents and schools work together there is a greater chance of good character being formed in the child/student. When there is a common purpose and genuine partnership between teachers and parents character education is more positive.

Teaching the virtues is best done in an embedded context – within the family with exemplary role models.

Fostering Goodness and Flourishing

Much of these findings complement the work of Thomas Lickona who reminds us that love is also essential. He says that morality builds on love, because love builds a bond between the child and parent. Love creates a secure environment for the child and helps build a healthy self-esteem. Parents should not rely on schools to teach character no matter how busy they are. They must teach their children directly, explaining when necessary and they must give their children responsibility to operationalize the virtues that are taught.

Parents clearly awaken the qualities of character that exist in potential in their children. They ought therefore to foster goodness in their children and the best advice is provided by Aristotle who emphasised the importance of children learning and forming good habits at an early age. The outcomes of parenting for character are clearly less of a gamble if parents are both serious and committed to teaching these good habits early. Parents and teachers need to remember that human flourishing is the aim of virtues education which in turn forms good character.



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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | Birmingham | B15 2TT
www.jubileecentre.ac.uk