

It Can All Begin in Kindergarten

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To become productive members of society, I believe that it is important that students learn more than the basics at school. Elias et al suggest "For children to become knowledgeable, they must be ready and motivated to learn, and capable of integrating new information into their lives. For children to become responsible, they must be able to understand risks and opportunities, and be motivated to choose actions and behaviors that serve not only their own interests but those of others. For children to become caring, they must be able to see beyond themselves and appreciate the concerns of others; they must believe that to care is to be part of a community that is welcoming, nurturing, and concerned about them."

Throughout my career I tried to model appropriate behavior for my students, talking about issues as they came up. However, last year I realized that I had to do more and it was essential that I focus on Character Education in my Kindergarten program. What better place to begin than in their first year of school?

I decided to be deliberate in my approach to teaching etiquette and virtues. In my weekly schedule a manners class and a character education class were added. I found some wonderful resources that helped me on my quest to have a classroom filled with good citizens. One of the resources I have used is entitled, *Manners, Please!* Which includes topics from table manners and conversation, learning not to interrupt and the very basic please, thank you, and excuse me. A poem, coloring pages, role-plays, discussion starters, and various other activities supporting the theme were included with each topic. We studied a new poem every week and made a manners booklet for each student to take home and share with their parents.

For the Character Education class, I built my program around books I found that were filled with teaching ideas, literature links, practical activities, with real-life problems to solve that help in the moral development of the students. In September we focused on citizenship, and what it takes to be a good citizen. Citizenship has become the overall theme through the program. The virtues that help support our citizenship theme are compassion, fairness, honesty, integrity, responsibility, perseverance, respect, self-discipline, and trustworthiness. Throughout this program we have done role-plays, critical thinking scenarios, read stories, and had great discussions (most of which centered around good and bad choices) about appropriate ways to resolve conflicts without running to the teacher and tattling for every little thing.

The results thus far are very encouraging. I hear please and thank you throughout my day. If I give something to a student, I get a thank you, if I am talking to someone or working on something I hear, "Excuse me, Miss Erickson ...". And the amazing thing is that five and six year olds are actually talking to each other about their problems and how something has made them feel, before they come running to me. My class is not perfect, nor would I want them to be, but it is an enjoyable place filled with good citizens. The result for me personally is that I am becoming a more polite person as well. If I am distracted or busy and forget to say "thank you", my students will either remind me or stand and look at me until I realize I have forgotten my manners.

Resources:

- Elias, M.J., Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Frey, K.S., Greenberg, M.T., Haynes, N.M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M.E., & Shriver, T.P. (1997). *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*. Alexandria, VI: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Hall, A., Holder, B., Matthew, E., McDowell, M., Pyne, L., Walker, S., Welch, R., & White, K. (1998). *Character Education: Ideas and Activities for the Classroom Grades K-3*. Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing Company, Inc.
- Knoblock, K. (1997). *Character Education: Teaching Values For Life Grades K-2*. Grand Rapids, MI: Instructional Fair.
- Lipson, G.B. (1995). *Manners, Please! Poems and Activities That Teach Responsible Behavior K-3*. Cathage, IL: Teaching and Learning Company.