



JACQUES BENNINGA Q & A

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*We asked Dr. Benninga whether kids' behaviors are better or worse than before, how to overcome the challenges of implementing character education, and if adults and teachers are good role models.*

**Jacques Benninga:** One important aspect is that standards for youth behaviors are not made clear to them by adults. Teens see their role models engaging in frivolous, non-committed relationships, being arrested for careless or violent acts, and circumventing laws. This sends a message that it's okay not to adhere to societal standards.

Schools are also part of the problem. I recently looked at behavior and academic policies posted on high school websites. Most schools post policies related to dress codes, bullying, and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, but few post academic honor codes or policies that address plagiarism or academic integrity. Schools need to send out clearer messages related to moral expectations.

Parental expectations need to be changed as well. Whereas parents and schools used to be aligned regarding behavior, now if schools reprimand a class cutup, restrain a bully, or threaten a student with dismissal, they may face a lawsuit. Given these unclear or divisive messages, it's not surprising that student responses about their behaviors and self-perceptions are mixed.

**CC!:** Compared to the past, are today's kids (in terms of character and behavior) better, worse, or the same? Why?

**Benninga:** It's difficult to get an accurate read because perceptions **CHARACTER COUNTS!:** Josephson Institute's recent survey of high school students revealed an increase in cheating, lying, and stealing, yet 93 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character. What do you make of that? don't always coincide with reality. On the one hand, according to the U.S. Department of Justice,

violent crime, property crime, firearm-related crime, and juvenile crime are at or near their lowest rates since the early 1970s. We're a safer society today.

Teen social behavior is also not what we might perceive it to be. A recent study by Child Trends, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center, reports some encouraging statistics with respect to teen pregnancy, for example. I don't mean to negate or diminish the attention we should pay to juvenile crime and sexual behavior, but it doesn't appear that these behaviors are getting worse.

On the other hand, there's much evidence that today's students are more self-centered than previous generations. In her book *Generation Me*, psychologist Jean Twenge found that when mothers were asked which traits they wanted their children to have, they named obedience, loyalty to church, and good manners. By the mid-1990s, few mothers named those traits at all (preferring independence and tolerance). And while in the early 1950s, only 12 percent of teens aged 14 to 16 agreed that "I am an important person," by the late 1980s, 80 percent – almost seven times as many – said they were important. Kids now demand much more public affirmation, and adults seem very willing to oblige.

**CC!:** Character comes from a Greek word meaning "to mark or engrave." Are parents and teachers today doing enough to "engrave" ethical values in young people?

**Benninga:** If you ask most parents or teachers if they're doing enough, they reply they could do more. That would be the right answer. The hopeful answer. Adults are expected to model mature, responsible behaviors so their children, when they grow up, will discover what they've been shown is true. That's clearly not being done by our public leaders. The events of the past decade, and particularly the last six months, have ushered in a cynical perspective. We no longer trust adults in charge, from our elected representatives to our ministers and rabbis to our stockbrokers and corporate titans. The adults have let us down, and it will take time and much attention to correct this.

**CC!:** Many things have to be present for character education to work (effective implementation; exemplary parents, teachers, and coaches; involved community; caring environment; high expectations; rewards and punishments, etc.). Is the task too challenging for most communities?

**Benninga:** It's certainly not simple, but it's not rocket science either. The best schools offer a solid academic program coupled with positive social development. In our research, we've found schools that provide a strong character-education component do at least four things well:

1. They ensure a clean, attractive, and psychologically secure physical environment.
2. They promote a caring community and positive social relationships.
3. They provide opportunities for students to contribute meaningfully to their

school and community.

4. Their adults promote and model fairness, equity, caring, and respect.

**CC!:** Many successful character-education programs don't meet the research requirements of the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse and thus lose out on funding. Is the WWC strengthening or weakening education's body of research?

**Benninga:** The criticisms of the WWC (research reports are slow to emerge and political issues may become intertwined with research) have been noted in *Education Week* and other sources, but the fact remains that character education is an emerging field without a clear definition or parameters. Although most programs seek to enhance the social development of youth, many have unique conceptualizations or procedures. There are sweeping concepts of character education as well as narrow ones and a variety of definitions of what the term even means.

The WWC has a laudable goal. Some standardization should emerge so when educators talk about character education, they're in the same ballpark. We also need evidence of effectiveness. What the WWC is asking is not unlike what teachers have always done: create a new teaching concept, translate it into instructional objectives, assess whether students master the content, and evaluate the results. Effective programs should work in varying settings and generalize to other venues. To evaluate that process, we need good research.

**CC!:** Critics of character education say it's often too extrinsic, wrongfully pragmatic, and overly weighted on classroom management. But doesn't intrinsic behavior have to start with extrinsic motivations?

**Benninga:** The issue of extrinsic incentives, of giving reinforcement for good performance, is an interesting topic and often misunderstood. A generation of children has now been raised to expect affirmation for every effort. My attic is full of boxes of trophies received by my children for participating in all kinds of activities. My university students expect a round of applause whenever they make a presentation. Today's generation has been called the "Trophy Kids" because their attitude is "What are you going to give me?" They need lots of attention and guidance.

So one caution for teachers is that reinforcing high-interest activities often has counter-productive effects. That is, when children are given a reward for a performance, they may do the activity for the external reward rather than for intrinsic reasons. Many teachers are thus taught that rewards reduce motivation and performance.

But that's not the whole story. Extrinsic motivation also has a place. According to psychologist William Damon, children thrive on accomplishment. They don't become overburdened by reasonable pressures related to worthwhile activities, including even demanding homework. They're tough and resilient and are motivated to learn through

both extrinsic inducements (e.g., high expectations, rewards, pressure, encouragement, grades, etc.) and intrinsic motivations. So one key to motivation is to use extrinsic rewards thoughtfully, to enhance performance, and to acknowledge attainment of specific goals.

**CC!:** Is there a cause-and-effect link (and if so, how strong is it) between character education in children and professional ethics in adults?

**Benninga:** Children clearly learn from significant models in their lives. Professor Nel Noddings has taught us that if we want our children to be moral persons, we must demonstrate moral behavior. Most teachers are moral and come into teaching for the right reasons. But there's a difference between being a moral individual and an ethical professional. Teachers acting in a professional capacity take on the additional burden of ethical responsibility. For example, the NEA has a code of ethics that prescribes required behavior in our profession. Our research has shown that schools that exemplify both academic achievement and good character have teachers and principals who promote and model fairness, equity, caring, and respect as well as openness, confidentiality, due diligence, and avoidance of potential conflicts of interest – all characteristic behaviors of ethical professionals.

**CC!:** What is the hottest topic in character-education research right now?

**Benninga:** The continuity of character-education programs once they've been established. Since character education, like art and music, isn't mandated for testing, it often doesn't receive priority. Principals and other school leaders thus become extremely important because if they don't support character education, it won't exist in a meaningful manner.

Another challenge is that school districts tend to move school leaders around. Nationwide, the average principal has nine or fewer years' experience, and more than half have three or fewer years experience at any one school. Bad principals should be removed, but visionary principals should be allowed sufficient time and support to work their magic. If principals with excellent potential don't spend sufficient time at one school, opportunity for sustained positive change is reduced. And if they're regularly reassigned, it's difficult to re-create their signature programs at subsequent placements.

The current mantra in education is continual change. I'd like us to temper that and focus more on well-done consistency.