



## REMINDERS THAT ENCOURAGE MORAL CHARACTER STRENGTHS

*"We need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values."*

-Pope Francis

### OVERVIEW

Students identify important character strengths for the classroom, create a classroom character strengths board, and write stories of themselves that include the character strengths the classroom has agreed are important.

### LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the start of the semester to cultivate a positive classroom climate
- Before an exam to encourage honesty
- To cultivate strong peer relationships among students
- To encourage moral character, such as generosity, kindness, forgiveness, humility, and honesty

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤1 hour

#### MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil/Pen
- Poster board
- Markers

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify moral character strengths that are important
- Consider why each strength is important to the classroom environment
- Write about a time when they demonstrated moral character

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- The ones your students identify in their stories

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Consider the following character strengths: care, compassion, fairness, generosity, humility, honesty, courage, kindness, forgiveness. Choose three and think about ways in which you have demonstrated such strengths. How does this kind of reflection make you feel?
- Which strengths would you most like students to demonstrate? Why? Would students agree with your list, or might there be cultural differences?

### INSTRUCTIONS

- Begin by asking students about the strengths they most look for in friends, family members, peers, and/or their teachers. For example, kindness, honesty, humility, generosity, or fairness. If they could choose just one strength, which would be the most important and why?
- Next, as a class, create a list of character strengths that students would like to see the classroom embody on a regular basis. Talk about why these strengths are important in the classroom, along with examples of what these strengths look like in action.
- Have students work together to create a poster that lists these strengths to display in the classroom.

- Next, ask students to write a short story about themselves that contains at least three of the character strengths that are on the poster and/or three of the strengths from the following list (if these words are not on the poster): care, compassion, fairness, generosity, humility, honesty, courage, kindness, forgiveness.
- Have some students share their stories out loud. You may even decide to post the stories underneath your class character strengths poster.

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## CLOSURE

- Ask students how this exercise made them feel. Would they change it in any way? What other ways might they suggest for encouraging the practice of character strengths in the classroom?

## SOURCE

[Karl Aquino, Ph.D.](#), University of British Columbia

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did the character strengths students valued the most compared to the strengths you value the most in students? Did anything surprise you?
- Have you noticed any positive changes in your students' behavior or relationships with each other?
- How might you help model such character strengths for your students?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), participants were either shown a list of nine words that reflected moral traits or words that denoted everyday household items. Participants in both groups were asked to write the words down four times. Afterwards, participants were asked to take a few minutes to think about the words and then write a brief story about themselves in which they use the words at least once. Upon completion, participants took part in a virtual task, choosing to make investments that benefitted either themselves or a group of which they were part. Participants who wrote about moral traits and who had a strong moral identity—or how important being a good person is to one's sense of self—were more generous towards others, even after receiving feedback about the selfishness of other participants.

In another [study](#), participants either wrote the name of ten books they had read in high school or the Ten Commandments. (The researchers made the assumption that participants, regardless of religious background or beliefs, would know that the Commandments are a set of moral rules.) Afterwards, participants engaged in a separate task in which they had to solve a series of problems and report how many they got correct. Participants were told that at the end, the experimenter would randomly choose two participants to be rewarded \$10 for each problem they solved correctly. Participants in the moral character condition—Ten Commandments—were more honest about their scores than participants in the control group.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Fostering students' moral identity not only encourages them to behave in moral ways, but also helps them to create the foundation for a flourishing life. Indeed, research has linked moral identity to greater [well-being](#), [meaning in life](#), and cooperativeness, and a sense of being part of something larger than oneself.

In addition, cultivating moral character in schools can [help create](#) more effective and welcoming learning environments. For example, when students cheat, they miss out on an opportunity to gain feedback that could help them identify what information they should focus on. Furthermore, this behavior creates an unfair environment for other students.

Reminders of moral character can help keep students accountable, encouraging them to practice and internalize character strengths of honesty, generosity, and kindness. Such strengths can help students develop strong and meaningful relationships, which are essential to well-being.

## TERMS OF USE

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