

Character Education vs. Social Skills Training: Comparing Constructs vs. Behavior

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In 2002, Laura Bush invited about 150 educators, mental health practitioners, and community advocates to the White House to attend a conference on “Character and Community.” Before listening to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Education Rod Paige, and eventually the President of the United States, Mrs. Bush asked us to disseminate the message that “Education can no longer just be about the 3 R’s; it must be about the 4 R’s—Reading, Writing, ‘Rithmetic, and Responsibility.” Indeed, much of the conference highlighted research and examples of how children and adolescents in this country are learning to be more responsible and to act “with character.”

The “character education” movement has existed, formally and informally, in the United States for centuries. Starting, perhaps, in colonial America with the precepts of religious tolerance and extending, during the past quarter century, through movements inspired by individuals like Carl Rogers, Rudolph Dreikurs, and others advocating “value clarification” curricula, educators in the 21st Century now need to differentiate between character education and Character Education. That is, we need to recognize that the published Character Education programs and curricula that have flooded the educational marketplace may not result in the skills and behaviors that are expected when we say character education, the movement

focused on teaching children social responsibility. And with the White House touting its benefits, a new wave of Federal grant money available, and many school districts and states following suit to require character education instruction in their schools, the need to differentiate character education and Character Education is even more pronounced.

As noted by Mrs. Bush, schools need to teach students to act in socially responsible ways. This means that children and youth who are acting “responsibly” should possess and behaviorally demonstrate the interpersonal, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and coping skills that help them to get along with others and handle socially challenging situations. While it is nice that students can tell us what they need to do to act responsibly, it is more important that they actually behave in responsible ways. In a phrase, “Talk is cheap; behavior is golden.”

And yet, many of the Character Education programs on the market do not teach behavior as an inherent and explicit goal and outcome of their curricula. Indeed, many of these Character Education programs teach constructs of behavior and then simply have students talk about these constructs. Some of these constructs, for example, include such topics as “honesty,” “cooperation,” “friendship,” “tolerance,” “justice,” “compassion,” “empathy,” “fairness,” and “equality.” While these are important constructs, they must be introduced into a classroom in developmentally appropriate ways to be successful, and the behaviors underlying

these constructs (i.e., honest behavior; cooperative behavior; tolerant behavior; empathetic behavior) must be taught in order for the curriculum to be deemed successful. Critically, some Character Education programs begin to teach some of the constructs above during students' early elementary school years—at times when they do not have the cognitive ability to understand them. By way of analogy, this is like teaching kindergarten students beginning mathematics by teaching them the constructs of negative, positive, and absolute Base 10 number system. Clearly, from a developmental perspective, behavioral outcomes with younger students will occur more readily if we teach them responsible behaviors and eventually, when they are cognitively ready, teach them the constructs that are defined by their behavior.

In reviewing some of the Character Education programs being used in schools around the country which we are expecting to be “behavioral change” programs, a number of conclusions can be drawn:

1. Many of them talk about emotions and emotional control, rather than about behaviors and self-control;
2. Many of them do not use behaviorally-sound teaching approaches, focusing on concept rather than skills;
3. Many of them do not use developmentally-sensitive or cognitively-sound teaching approaches, focusing instead on adult-desired rather than child-appropriate outcomes;

4. Many of them are not evidence-based, meaning that they have not demonstrated behavioral outcomes with diverse groups of students, across meaningful periods of time, when compared with demographically-matched students, and controlling for students' prior knowledge or skill; and
5. Many of them do not meet the behavioral goal of “generalization” in that they can not be flexibly adapted to students from different cultures, settings, situations, backgrounds, or life circumstances.

My point here is not to disparage Character Education programs. In fact, I love them—when they are implemented at the appropriate age levels and with appropriate goals and expectations. Indeed, if implemented, for example, as part of a social studies curriculum at the late elementary and middle/high school levels, when students are using their newly-developed higher ordered thinking skills to weigh issues of values and ethics, they can help students to understand the history and importance of tolerance and schools to create positive, caring, and inclusive environments. Moreover, when integrated with a social skills training program that begins in kindergarten (or before), and that teaches interpersonal, problem-solving, and conflict resolution behaviors and skills, you have the “responsibility package” that, I believe, the President and Mrs. Bush are envisioning.

Thus, my real point is to suggest that the crucial goals of the character education movement are better served through social skills training programs, and to demonstrate this by providing a “consumer’s guide” of twelve criteria that most effective, evidence-based social skills programs possess. Critically, the ultimate goal of social skills training is to teach students, at their different levels of maturation and development, to manage their own behavior—to demonstrate the social responsibility desired by character education advocates. Comparable to teaching students, academically, to be independent learners, behavioral self-management means that students are able to demonstrate self-control, to self-select responsible choices and to demonstrate appropriate behavior, to self-monitor and self-evaluate their behavioral practice, and to reinforce themselves once successful.

To accomplish this, the evidence-based characteristics of an effective social skills program, and thus, the criteria that can be used to evaluate and choose a particular social skills program for school-wide implementation include the following:

1. The social skills program must systematically use a social learning theory approach that includes teaching, modeling, role-playing, and providing performance feedback as a primary part of the instructional process. That is, students need to behaviorally practice the social responsibility skills being taught so that teachers can see, correct, reinforce, and validate students’ actual skill proficiency. The program then must overtly plan and implement the transfer

(generalization) of social skills use in different settings, with different people, at different times, and across different situations and circumstances.

2. The social skills program must connect the training process to a building- or grade-level positive discipline and behavior management system that holds students accountable for their behavior and provides for implementation integrity. Thus, beyond skill instruction, incentives for “good choices” and consequences for “bad choices” must be present in order to motivate students’ use of their skills.

3. The social skills program must focus on both grade-level and whole-building implementation. Each grade level must teach the same social skill with the same teaching steps at the same time if at all possible to build teaching and implementation consistency across both students and staff. In the absence of consistency, students learn to distrust, ignore, or resist existing incentives and consequences, resulting in social skills that are not used.

4. The social skills program must use a universal or common language that is easy for students to learn, facilitates cognitive scripting and mediation, and facilitates the conditioning or reconditioning of prosocial behaviors and choices leading to more and more automatic behavior. As most emotionally-linked behavior is conditioned (like Pavlov’s dogs—think about your immediate emotional and behavioral reaction to one of your spouse’s “looks”), new behaviors are learned through a systematic conditioning process, and old, “inappropriate” behaviors are altered through an “unlearning” and reconditioning process. In order

to do this, cognitive-behavioral research suggests that the behavioral practice of a new or reconditioned skill must be linked with internal, language-based mediational scripts that sequentially guides the practice (think about how you learned to drive a “stick shift” car). Over time, and with repeated practice of the “skill and script”, the new behavior eventually becomes “memorized” while later it becomes automatic.

5. The social skills program must teach specific behaviorally-oriented skills (not constructs of behavior) in explicit and developmentally appropriate ways, yet the curriculum must be able to adapt to students’ individual language levels, cultures, maturational levels, and needs. For example, while many programs teach the skill of “listening,” the behavioral expectations for listening and the teaching script underlying the behavior differ from preschool to elementary to middle to high school.

6. The social skills program must provide a defined, progressive, yet flexible, sequence of social skills that recognizes that some prerequisite skills must be mastered before other, more complex skills are taught. For example, in order to learn “accepting consequences,” most children and adolescents need to first learn the “how to apologize” skill that is often embedded in the process. Beyond this, the social skill program also must reflect the reality that social skills practice and reinforcement never ends, and that social skills training occurs year-round.

7. The social skills program must employ an evidence-based pedagogical approach to instruction that integrates behavioral teaching, continued practice and application under increasingly realistic—yet controlled— conditions, and skill-specific reinforcement during actual, real-life "teachable" moments. Critically, the program should acknowledge that there is no pedagogical difference between teaching a social skill and teaching an academic skill.

8. The social skills program must demonstrate its effectiveness over time in controlled and independent studies in real schools and applied school situations.

9. The social skills program must be designed for implementation by regular classroom teachers who should be the primary instructors. This reflects the fact that (a) all students need to learn and practice social skills, even if only to apply them to school and classroom situations; (b) all regular classroom teachers need to have their own classroom-based discipline and behavior management system, and the social skills become a behavioral anchor to that system; (c) all students need to behaviorally respond primarily to their regular classroom teachers, not to some “specialist” who comes into the classroom to teach behavioral responsibility; and ultimately (d) prosocial skills typically increase students’ academic engaged time which, in turn, increases academic achievement.

10. The social skills program must teach sensible and pragmatic skills that are needed by today's students and that can be applied, on a daily basis, by preschool through high school students. For preschool students, these skills form

the foundation of self-control and self-management; for high school students, these skills reinforce the importance of interpersonal skills, tolerance, and conflict resolution.

11. The social skills program must be able to address behavior or disciplinary problems or situations, as identified by both adults and students, that occur in classrooms or in common areas of the school on an almost every day basis.

12. The social skills program must include evaluation components that assess treatment and implementation integrity, student and adult satisfaction, and student outcomes, especially those behavioral outcomes for when students are interacting with adults or with peers.

While they may overtly resist, most students want their classrooms and schools to be structured and predictable, they expect the rules and expectations for their behavior to be dependable and fair, and they trust that teachers will interact with them with fairness and consistency. At the same time, however, if students are not directly taught the interpersonal, coping, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills that they need to demonstrate responsible behavior, no rules or expectations, no incentives or consequences, and no amount of fairness and consistency will matter. In the end, the character education movement is looking for tangible,

observable outcomes. While character constructs are important, social skill behavior is essential.