



KIDS TODAY

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Character Education Program Receives High Marks

By Trisha Gedon

An educational program sponsored by the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension is getting rave reviews around the state.

Character Critters is a program designed to enable parents and other adults help children learn about positive character development, including lessons on trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Character Critters is part of the CHARACTER COUNTS!sm program. These character traits also are known as the six pillars of character.

Oklahoma reported 11,224 confirmed cases of child neglect in the fiscal year 2000. This neglect of children's needs, especially the need for character education, can be attributed to the breakdown of family support systems. This can be caused by economics, mobility, isolation, television replacing family time, substance addiction and inappropriate role models.

In the Character Critters program, the aspects of character are taught through animal stories, learning experiences in classroom interest centers, parent events and take home activities.

"County Extension educators have been teaching the program throughout various parts of the state during the past year," said Elaine Wilson, OSU Cooperative Extension parenting specialist. "However, the program has been so successful, the Extension educators will be holding in-service training sessions so teachers will be able to present the program themselves."

There are currently 14 counties across the state that are active in presenting the Character Critters program. Approximately 4,000 children and 2,000 parents have been involved in the program so far.

After participating in the program, parents have been reported as giving very high marks to the program. They said they would practice the six pillars of character themselves, talk to and spend time with their child and choose activities that would help the child's development in these six areas.

Teachers said the program helped them to practice the six pillars themselves and to teach the concepts to children. Many of the teachers who have used the program in the classroom reported a notable increase in the use of the pillar words by the children. Positive changes in the children's behavior and a marked decrease in hitting also were noted by teachers.

"The program was taught to a kindergarten class and the puppets were a major part of the appeal to the children," said one teacher who was involved in the program. "After the character lessons were taught, my students were much more aware of these character traits and they recognized the good behavior."

Another teacher reported using positive comments about her students' behavior and helping the children know what the character words mean.

"When this program was first initiated in Oklahoma we wanted to increase parent, family, school and community involvement in character education," Wilson said. "I think that following the first year of implementation, we're definitely headed in the right direction."

More information about the Character Critters program is available at the local county Extension office or online at <http://fcs.okstate.edu/parenting>. Click on the Building Character link.

Teaching Kids to Manage Money

Teaching kids about money is more than allowances and part time jobs. As with almost all aspects of parenting, your children follow your example. Teaching by example means being calm and rational about how you earn, spend, save, and invest your money.

An emotional approach to money, such as going on a spending spree when you are angry at your spouse or giving lavish gifts because you feel guilty about not being able to spend time with someone, may confuse and frighten children. Children hear news reports and people talking about economic problems. Calmly show your children how you pay bills, follow a budget, and save for small and large purchases. Your children will feel more secure. Help them follow the same steps in managing their allowances, gifts, and earnings.

1. **Money Diary.** Show them how to keep a record of the money they receive and how it is spent, saved, or invested. They may use a notebook, calendar, computer program, or an accounting booklet. Use an envelope or file system to save receipts. Every once in a while, openly conduct an audit of their accounting in much the same way that you check homework. Downplay the mistakes and praise accomplishments such as being current in their record keeping or having receipts for each expense. Encourage your child to write in some personal reminders such as, "better price and guarantee at Wal-Mart" for future reference.

2. **A Chance to Budget.** Give your child a chance to budget for special events such as a birthday party, trip, or shopping trip. Indicate how much money is available and provide a list of the items and services needed. Let the child work out the budget for your approval. Congratulate the children when the event comes in at or under budget. You might introduce this concept in action while grocery shopping or taking the family out to dinner. This gets children to compare prices on the grocery shelf and the menu, something they might not have noticed.
3. While the child is still in elementary school, open a savings account. Take the child to several savings institutions and compare the interest rates, minimum balances required, and other account features. Make the decision together. Show your child how to sign the signature card, access the account on line, fill out a deposit slip, and make a deposit.
4. When your child is in junior high or high school, study several investments together. You might take your child with you to an investment club meeting or to visit a financial adviser, or work together when researching investments on line. Compare several Certificates of Deposit, bonds, mutual funds, and stocks. Make your selections and purchases. Teach your child how to track the investments on line, from mailed statements, or in the newspaper.

Helping Your Child to be Successful at School

Your school age children often spend more time with their teachers than they do with you. It is important that you, your children, and their teachers have a good working relationship. A good relationship will help your child do better in school as well as reduce stress in your life.

Here are some ideas for building a relationship of trust with your child's teachers:

- Be aware of difficulties. If you learn about a problem, investigate as soon as possible. Listen to both sides. (Many parents believe that the teacher is always right, and many parents believe that the child is always right.) Keep an open mind.
- Talk to your child about daily events at school.
- Be involved in homework. Find out if your child's teacher regularly assigns homework.
- Make sure your child has a quiet place to work. After dinner, the kitchen table can be a good place to study.
- Establish a routine at home. Set up regular times to do homework, play, and go to bed.

If your child brings home a disappointing report card:

- Sit down with your child and look over the report card.
- Praise your child. Find at least one good thing on the report card: attendance, no tardies.
- Be calm! Let your child tell you about his or her poor grades.
- Ask how you can help your child do better.
- Ask what your child can do to make better grades.
- Make a plan with your child's teacher and your child to do better.

"You Can Help Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect"

The physical and emotional abuse of children yields harmful consequences for society. Evidence links child abuse and neglect with drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, youth violence and chronic health problems. It can rob children of their childhood, their sense of security and well-being, as well as their future.

Effective prevention efforts need to address child abuse and neglect before it starts, especially community efforts to support parents and children. Here are some ways to help:

Reach out to kids and parents in your community. Anything to support kids and parents in your family and extended community helps reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Be a good neighbor. Offer a helping hand so the parent(s) can rest or spend time together. Be kind and supportive, particularly to new parents and children.

Be a nurturing parent. Children need to know they are special, loved, and capable. Fine toys and clothing are not required. Take the time to learn about a child's development and reasonable expectations. Spend time playing with and reading to children. Quality time is all important.

Help yourself. When the big and little problems of your everyday life pile up to the point you feel overwhelmed and out of control, take time out. If you feel overwhelmed or out of control, take a break. Know where you can turn for help and ask for it when you need it. Don't take it out on the child, as that will only make a bad situation worse.

Call the Oklahoma Parenting Helpline 1-877-446-6865.

If a baby cries, realize that this is frustrating, especially when nothing you do seems to work. Recognize when you are getting frustrated. Try different ways to soothe the child, but never shake a baby or child for any reason. Shaking a child may result in severe injury or death.

Get involved. Ask your community leaders, clergy, library and schools to develop services to meet the needs of healthy children and families. Help develop parenting resources and presentations at your local library and school teaching children, parents and teachers prevention strategies. Raise the issue with your candidates and elected officials. Volunteer with local programs serving overburdened families and children.

Recognize risk factors. Child abuse and neglect occur in all segments of our society, but the risk is greater in families where parents abuse alcohol or drugs, are isolated from their families or communities, have difficulty controlling their anger or stress, appear uninterested in the care, nourishment or safety of their

children, seem to be having serious economic, housing or personal problems. Educate yourself on how to recognize warning signs of child abuse and neglect.

Report suspected child abuse or neglect. Keeping children from harm is the responsibility of every adult in our community. If you have reason to believe a child has been or may be harmed, call the state child abuse reporting hotline at 1-800-522-3511 or your local police department.

For more information on Cooperative Extension programs and educational resources to prevent child abuse and support families, contact your local county extension office or visit the web site www.fcs.okstate.edu.

Twelve Alternatives to Lashing Out at Your Child

The next time everyday pressures build up to the point where you feel like lashing out – STOP!

Try any of these simple alternatives. You'll feel better..... and so will your child.

- Take a deep breath... and another. Then remember you are the adult.
- Close your eyes and imagine you're hearing what your child is about to hear.
- Press your lips together and count to 10... or better yet 20.
- Put *your child* in a time-out chair (remember this rule: one time-out minute for each year of age.)
- Put *yourself* in a time-out chair. Think about why you are angry: is it your child, or is your child simply a convenient target for your anger?
- Phone a friend.
- If someone can watch the children, go outside and take a walk.
- Take a hot bath or splash cold water on your face.
- Hug a pillow.
- Turn on some Music. Maybe even sing along.
- Pick up a pencil and write down as many helpful words as you can think of. Save the list.
- Call the Oklahoma Parenting Helpline. 1-877-446-6865

Youth Crime At Its Lowest in Three Decades

By Trisha Gedon

When people turn on the evening news, there almost always is a story or two featuring some sort of crime. In some cases, the crimes are committed by a youth offender.

Crimes committed by youth often are sensationalized on the news, making people believe that most juveniles are involved in criminal activities, said Elaine Wilson, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service parenting specialist.

"When a crime occurs, especially one that grabs national attention, news programs give a lot of attention to the biography of the youth committing the crime," Wilson said. "When a crime is repeatedly shown on the evening news or written about in newspapers, the crime is sometimes followed by copy cat behavior in another part of the country. But what is important for people to realize is that youth crime is at its lowest rate in nearly 30 years."

Many people tend to blame the media for providing such extensive coverage of such events. Some people blame the school and other experts who discourage corporal punishment. And some people blame the parents for not doing their job of raising responsible children.

According to the Justice Policy Institute, "American's kids are acting more responsibly and committing fewer crimes than they have in the last three decades."

Although most people believe youth crimes are on the rise, today's youth are considerably less criminally inclined than kids were 25 or 30 years ago.

"Although some acts of violence do occur in the school system, most of America's schools and child care programs are safe places for children to be," Wilson said. "Many children who are abused and neglected at home consider their school, child care centers and the adults who work there to be a source of care and inspiration."

It is important to keep in mind that, unfortunately, there will always be crime of some sort committed by youth offenders, as well as those who are older. But, despite the bad rap today's youth are getting, it is good news that the crime rate for this age group is in a downward spin.

Elaine Wilson Debbie Richardson

Prepared by Dr. Elaine Wilson, Parenting Specialist and Debbie Richardson, Assistant Child Development Specialist. Please contact us if you need larger print or other accommodations. Dr. Elaine Wilson, 405-744-7186, emwilso@okstate.edu; Debbie Richardson, 405-744-6231, dlricha@okstate.edu

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139 Ag Hall
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078