

FOCUS

ON

Character Education

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
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School violence and child and youth behavior issues have led to educational efforts to teach self-discipline. During the past year 45 Extension Educators reached 2170 preschool children, 1016 parents and 150 teachers with an Extension program called Character Critters, which introduces the behavior concepts of respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring and citizenship. Eighty-five percent of the parents agreed to practice these behaviors themselves and help their child develop them as well.

Eighty percent of the parents reported positive changes in their child's behavior. Fifty percent noted a decrease in hitting behaviors. This program has been so popular that Extension Educators are now teaching classroom teachers in head start, childcare programs and the public schools to present the program.



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OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE

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Character Critters Taught to Inmates

Melody Durant

Extension Educator, Hughes County

The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service have partnered together to bring “Character Critters” to the forefront of inmates and their families. Sharon Bryant of Corrections Corporation, Melody Durant, Extension Educator for Hughes County and Mike Carter, Extension Educator for Seminole County have joined their efforts with the purpose of “breaking the family cycle of crime” by bringing parent education for character education into the prison system. The purpose of this partnership is to train the inmates with a character education puppet they will present to show to the visiting children of inmates during their weekend visits.

Phase One brought in Denny Holzbauer, six time World Karate Champion to demonstrate and speak with approximately 300 inmates about character. Phase Two included the training of selected inmates in the “Character Critters” curriculum and puppet stories. Carter and Durant educated the participants on the character traits of trustworthiness, responsibility, fairness, caring, respect-

fulness, and citizenship. Time was spent acting out stories and becoming familiar with the “critter” puppets plus reviewing in-house and take home activities that will be given to the children.

Character Critters enables parents and other adults to help children become self-reliant and nurturing people. This program is part of a character education framework and can be used through OSU Cooperative Extension staff by teachers, childcare workers, and others who work with young children. These character elements, or pillars of character, reflect the highest form of human behavior. It is vital that our youth have ample opportunity to learn and develop these characteristics.

Some will have trouble understanding why an inmate will be encouraged to teach character education to their own and fellow inmates children. But no matter what a parent does, the young child loves them, regardless. Perhaps they will listen to a parent, along with their school teachers when it comes to practicing character traits.



Character Education Goes to 4-H Camp

Lynn Beam

Extension Educator, Stephens County

The six pillars of character were the theme for a summer camp for 4th-12th grade youth in Stephens, Bryan, Kiowa, Greer, Beckham, and Roger Mills Counties.

We wanted to show the kids that this is what we value. The 4-H Camp theme was our way of saying, “These character traits are important. For this one week at camp we are going to practice living like this. We know we will find it is worth the extra effort.”

Each of the six cabins represented one of the six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The youth and their counselors presented skits and puppet talks about each of these aspects of character.

At the end of the camp week, the kids and the counselors voted on the 4-Her from their cabin that best exemplified the 6 pillars of character during camp. “It was rewarding to see 6 kids, who are not normally the ones to get rewards and recognition, receive the good character awards.”

Volunteer and professional staff at the 4-H camp that year felt the kids were on their very best behavior making these some of the most enjoyable camps ever.

Because of its impact, portions of the character education theme are repeated each year.

It is important to honor the things that we really value. A week at 4-H Camp can give youth a chance to see how it feels to be a person of character among a community of people of character. They can return to their homes and communities to continue to improve their character.

Coal County Youth Present Character Show

Barbara Elkins

Extension Educator, Coal County

After teaching the six lessons to the Cottonwood Head Start class in Coal County, Extension Educator, Barbara Elkins said, "It didn't feel right just to say goodbye. I had been with them for six weeks, telling the **Character Critters** stories. They had enjoyed the stories so much, I felt we needed closure.

Ms. Elkins wrote a final puppet show skit using all six characters to review and summarize the six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, Fairness, caring, and citizenship. She also made some stage props for the pup-

pet show. She asked the 4-H leader at Cottonwood, if some of her older 4-H members would like to perform the parts of the characters. She loved the idea, took a copy of the script, and the 4-Hers began practicing.

On the day of the show, Elkins invited the Kindergarten and first grade classes to watch along with the Head Start group. The students loved the show and the 4-H members really got into the character they were playing. They used the puppets themselves and added their own personality and voice

inflections to the script. Barbara Elkins felt the experience was good for some of the 4-H members who are a little shy. She decided to ask 4-H members from each school where she presents this program to help with the puppet show.

Cooperative Extension Service Educators in other states have found that involving older 4-H youth in character education for young children has many benefits. The youth learn the content better when they are teaching others. They also gain self-confidence in speaking before a group. The younger children look up to the older youth and learn to follow them as role models. This in turn encourages the youth to practice what they teach about good character.

Building Character

Elaine Wilson

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

In Oklahoma, there were 11,224 confirmed cases of child neglect cases in FY 2000. This neglect of children's needs, especially the need for character education, can be attributed to the erosion of family support systems caused by economic, mobility, isolation; television replacing family time; addiction; children guided by peers; discipline for control rather than self-discipline. Since 1950, a 14-year-old's vocabulary has declined from 23,000 to 10,000 words. School counselors find children do not understand words like respect and responsibil-

ity. This led the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service to adapt a Louisiana character education program designed for preschools.

Teachers surveyed said the program helped them to practice the six pillars themselves and to teach the concepts to the children. In children's conversations, 80% heard moderate to much use of the pillar words by the children. 95% saw positive changes in the children's behavior and 50% noted a decrease in hitting. All of the teachers reported a change in their own behavior toward being better role models of the 6 character pillars.

- A Head Start parent wrote, "These lessons have made it easier to teach character to my children because you are not just giving them a definition, but stories and activities they can understand. Too many kids are not taught any character, values, or moral these days."
- A special education teacher saw the repetitiveness of the program as an excellent way to help children living with mental retardation to become better citizens.

Meet the *Character Critters*

- **Tommy the Turtle** works every day to become *trustworthy*.
- **Rusty the Raccoon** plays with his sister and works on being *respectful*.
- **Roy the Rabbit** learns about *responsibility* by growing carrots for his family.
- **Fran the Frog** works on *fairness* at school during cleanup.
- **Carrie the Cat** buys a tree to show her grandma how much she *cares*.
- **Cindy the Crab** visits the police station and learns about *citizenship*.



ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Character Education is Life Changing for Kids and Their Parents

Nikki Coe and Elaine Wilson

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

In the past a child's character education came from the home. Children spent time with their parents, modeled their parents' behavior and learned valuable life lessons. Children today are facing more adverse situations than the children of 50 years ago. Many parents are living with addiction to drugs and alcohol, unemployment, moving from welfare to work or even being incarcerated. Thus, children now spend more time with the television or peers than with their family.



Teaching children character words.

In this new society, we must find a way to teach children the meaning of words related to character: Responsibility, Trustworthiness, Respect, Caring, Fairness, and Citizenship.

These are the six pillars of the character education program as developed by the Josephson Institute of Ethics. The OSU Cooperative Extension Service equips parents and teachers with the Character Critters stories. Critters such as Tommy the Turtle and Carrie the Cat go through life experiences in which

young children relate. These stories give children a way to understand the six concepts of character. It also helps Oklahoma's preschool children easily remember these principles.

"After Josie went through the program I would refer to some of the "critters" in various situations and I would notice that Josie would stop and seem to think back to a certain story," said a parent from Murray County. "It really seemed to alter her negative behavior." The program includes the animal stories, classroom interest center activities, parent events, a parent newsletter (W.A.R.M. - We Are Role Models), and take home activities.

Results of character education.

In FY01, approximately 1,000 parents and 2,000 children participated in the Character Critters program. Nearly 100 percent of parents felt their children gained understanding of



the six character concepts and 80 percent reported positive changes in their child with the greatest gains in caring.

The demand for this program is more than doubling. To meet the demand and increase



the impact, Extension's goal for FY02 is to partner with Head Start, Child Care, and public schools by training teachers to present the lessons. OSU provides a current research base, up to date instructional materials, and parent education. We also monitor any behavior changes.

How you can support this program?

To continue and expand this program, the support of government officials, school administrators, sports and youth programs, and churches is crucial. Specifically, our county offices need volunteers or paraprofessionals and assistants to reach new children, schools, and families throughout the county.

In today's fast paced society, the amount of time parents and their children get to spend together is dwindling. Character education means the needs of children do not get put on hold.



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