

How to Teach Children Right from Wrong



While Teaching Them How to Read and Write

by
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The advantages of being able to read and write can hardly be overstated. Ideas are the most powerful things in the world and the written word is their sacred repository. But, this vast repository contains both good ideas and bad ideas, and the most empowering thing in the world is to be able to distinguish one from the other. Throughout history, individuals and nations have ruined themselves for want of this ability.

So, as we teach our children how to read and write, whether at home or at school, it is incumbent upon us to help them not only learn how to distinguish one word from another, but also how to distinguish one idea from another. To help you understand how to do this, let me first introduce you to a concept I call character based learning. I think you'll find it a good idea.

Character Based Learning

Character based learning is learning in which students are improving their reasoning skills, increasing their knowledge, and enlarging their moral understanding—all at the same time. When these three processes occur together, children are not only strengthened in their resolve to live virtuous and productive lives, they are also given the tools that will enable them to do so. In other words, we are empowering them with the ability to recognize right from wrong—to distinguish good ideas from bad ideas.

In order for character based learning to take place, it is necessary for the head, the heart, and often the hand to be engaged in the learning process. Few things are better suited for this process than good literature, whether factual or fictional.

Good literature is food for the mind and food for the soul. And, when coupled with appropriate discussion and writing exercises, good literature is capable of providing children with extraordinary insights into the nature of right and wrong—of why some things are good and others bad, and why it is terribly important to be able to distinguish the one from the other.

In applying character based learning techniques to the teaching of reading and writing skills, we are pursuing three objectives at the same time.

- 1) We are teaching young people how to read and write.
- 2) We are teaching them how to distinguish between right and wrong, and
- 3) We are helping them develop their reasoning skills.

In applying character based learning techniques to teaching reading and writing, there are two important rules we need to always keep in mind.

Rule One: Only Motivated Children Learn to Read and Write

The motivation or desire to read is purely a function of interest. Interest is generated by essentially three things—curiosity (a desire to know or understand), enjoyment (the pleasure of learning or being entertained), and necessity (a recognized need to know.)

There are three people I believe every child should get to know. As young children, each of their lives were dramatically changed by learning how to read and write. In each case their motivations for learning were slightly different, but were powerful factors in helping them to overcome the enormous challenges each of them faced in learning these skills. Their stories are not only examples of the power of motivation, they are also powerful sources of motivation.

The first person is Frederick Douglass, a boy who recognized a need to know. Every young person should know the incredible story of how he learned to read and write. They should understand his motivations for wanting to learn and know something of the effort and ingenuity that were required of him to do so. It is the story of an eight year old slave boy who realized that if he ever wanted to be something other than a slave, he needed to learn how to read and write. Illiteracy creates its own form of slavery and this idea is as relevant today as it was then. Frederick's story may be found in his autobiography *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. It may also be found by clicking on the green book cover at www.choiceskills.com/7c.asp, or in *The Seven C's of Thinking Clearly, grades 5-9*.

The second person is Helen Keller. Most people are familiar with her story, but I wonder if we really comprehend the significance of what she learned that day at the well—the idea that made her little body tremble as a new revelation flooded her mind. What was this idea that empowered her with the ability to think and reason, to comprehend and understand for the first time in her life and infused her soul with a hunger to learn? Words have meaning! It 's an idea many who have never been either deaf nor dumb have failed to grasp. Few people have discovered more pleasure in learning than Helen Keller. Her story may be found in her autobiography, *Helen Keller, the Story of My Life*, and in *The Seven C's of Thinking Clearly, grades 5-9*.

The third person is Ben Carson, a boy who discovered a new interest. His story is found in a book titled *Gifted Hands*. It is an autobiography of a black neurosurgeon who, in his early years of schooling, received mostly D's and F's on his report card. The person who turned his life around was his mother. She believed he could do much better so she turned off the TV set and told him that he could only watch two TV programs a week and that he had to read at least two books a week. He was obedient, if not happy, but soon found he had an interest in science books. This interest became the basis for his rise from an F student to an A student, and eventually made it possible for him to become one of the foremost surgeon's in his field. See also *The Seven C's of Thinking Clearly, grades 2-6*.

The important lesson from the above stories is that children who are highly motivated will do what ever it takes to learn how to read and write.

In developing lesson plans or selecting reading material we need to continually strive to assure our students recognize the need to know, have an interest in, or derive pleasure from what we are asking them to read.

Rule Two: Only Motivated Children Will Learn Right From Wrong

When it comes to teaching children right from wrong, all too often we rely on creating external motivations as opposed to developing internal motivations. To this end, we create all kinds of rewards and punishment systems at home and school to influence their behaviors. Those of us who have raised children to maturity have come to realize the limited advantages of this approach.

Sooner or later, children learn they they have the ability to pretty much do what they want. This notion is generally well established by the teenage years and I do believe I have seen it in children as young as 1 and 2. We've had a couple of children I'm not sure but what they were born with it. So the question arises, how can we help them develop an internal motivation to do the right thing?

We can't simply just tell them. First of all, they are not likely to believe us. Secondly, horrible as it may be to contemplate, we may not always be right. Our goal is not to develop puppets that simply do what we tell them, but to help young people become intelligent, competent, caring people who have the ability to sort out right from wrong themselves.

Unquestionably, some of our best opportunities for helping children learn to sort out right from wrong, and to develop the internal motivation to do what is right, will come while we are teaching them how to read and write.

Where can they more easily observe in a non-threatening environment the consequences of choices people make than in good literature? Where can they find a better place to observe the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that drive the choices people make? Where can they find a better opportunity to ponder and reflect upon what they are learning? Indeed, where can they find a better source of ideas to from which to mold their character than in good literature?

But the key to this kind of learning is in selecting nourishing literature and then discussing it with your children or students.

Selecting Nourishing Literature

The most important experience children need to have in reading may best be described by the word nourishment. As we teach children to read, it is very important that we strive to nourish their hungry minds. To do this we must expose them to nourishing literature. So what is nourishing literature? Let me begin by telling you what it's not.

It is not cotton candy—literature with only entertainment value. We all enjoy a little cotton candy in life, but if all we ever ate was cotton candy, we would be sick, weak, and probably toothless. The same is true with mental food. Literature with only entertainment value does little to nourish young and growing minds.

It is not Tofu—literature with no entertainment value. Now, while Tofu is a healthy food, it is hardly an interesting one, and as a result, many refuse to eat it. If literature does not engage the mind, it will never be ingested—much less digested.

Finally, it is not chicken that's been left out all day—literature with toxic ideas or information. While the chicken may look and taste just fine, it can be fatal to those who eat it. In *The Decent of Man*, Charles Darwin wrote, "Whatever makes any bad thought familiar to the mind, renders its performance so much the easier."

Just as healthy food is necessary to a healthy body, healthy mental food is necessary to a healthy mind. So the first thing we must teach children in learning to read is to be selective in what they choose to read. The best way we can do this is by introducing them to nourishing literature while teaching them how to read and write.

Simply put, nourishing literature is literature that conveys useful information and engages the mind at the same time as teaching reading and writing skills. Nourishing literature stretches the mind and increases understanding. It enlarges vision and gives hope. It stimulates the imagination, cheers the heart, and lifts the spirit—in sum it's food the mind and food for the soul.

But, here we come to an important difference between physical and mental food. Once a choice has been made to consume healthy food for the body, physical nourishment occurs as a natural, unconscious process. Mental food, however, must be consciously digested to derive full nutritional benefit. Mere consumption is not sufficient

Therefore, in teaching children right from wrong, we must encourage them to give conscious thought to what they read and write. We can best do this by:

1. Helping them to recognize important ideas when they encounter them, and
2. Providing opportunities for them to express their thoughts about these ideas

There is a tremendous need to involve young people in conversations and about what they read so they can learn to clearly express their thoughts both orally and in writing. Learning happens best when we discuss with young people the things we have them read.

Reading and Discussing

Sir. Francis Bacon wrote, “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.” The reason is simple. We understand ideas at one level when we hear them, at another when we read them, still another when we discuss them, and yet another when we write them. Expressing an idea in writing requires a greater exactness of understanding than speaking. Similarly, speaking requires greater exactness than reading, and reading a greater exactness than hearing. Hence, the very process of communicating an idea to others helps us to examine it more closely and think about it more deeply.

So, if there is one idea I wish to implant in your minds with this report, it is this—discuss with your children and students the things they are reading. Following are three techniques I believe you will find very helpful for doing this. These techniques may be implemented both orally and in writing.

Hindsight, Insight, Foresight Questions:

HIF questions serve several purposes. 1) They help you know how much young people understand of what they are reading. 2) They require students to think about and express the ideas they are learning. 3) They provide you with an opportunity to help them recognize ideas they may not have picked up on. 4) And, most importantly, they help young people develop hindsight, insight, and foresight.

Hindsight Questions:

Hindsight questions are intended to help young people develop the ability to learn from experience, and preferably the experiences of others. Learning from the experiences of people in both fictional and factual literature is an inexpensive way to learn valuable lessons that can prove very costly if one has to learn them first hand. Hindsight questions should cause students to reflect upon what is known or obvious from the story. For example:

1. What did (any particular character in the story) want?
2. What did (any particular character in the story) do?

Insight Questions:

Insight questions are intended to help students probe more deeply into the why of things by going beyond the obvious to consider things that are not explicitly revealed in the story.

3. Why did (this character) do what he/she did?
4. Why would someone allow themselves to feel, think, act that way?
5. What could this character have done differently, better?

Foresight Questions:

Foresight questions are intended to help young people to develop the quality of foresight by helping them recognize cause and effect relationships so they can anticipate the probable consequences of choices they may make.

6. What happened as a result of what (this character) did?
7. Could (the character) have foreseen that result?

Snow White Illustration

To illustrate, let's take the story of *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* and see where a few simple questions can lead us. Since it is a story virtually everyone is familiar with, we can focus here on the questions without spending a lot of time on the story. Let's begin with a couple of hindsight questions.

1. What did the queen want?

Answer: She wanted to be the prettiest woman in all the land.

2. What did the queen do?

Answer: She turned herself into an ugly old woman and tried to kill her step-daughter.

Any five year old can tell you the queen was pursuing a bad idea.

Now, let's see how we can expand the discussion by asking a couple of insight questions.

3. How did the queen's wants affect her ability to care about Snow White?
4. Why do you suppose being more beautiful than Snow White was so important to the queen?

These questions provide insight as to how the queen's desires warped her thinking and led her to make some very poor choices. To introduce the notion of consequences, let's use some foresight questions .

5. What happened as a result of what the queen did?
6. Have you ever seen someone who wanted something so much they did something silly/dangerous/foolish/hurtful to get it? (For example cheating on a test, shoplifting, smoking so others might think they're cool, doing something risky to show off, etc.)
7. What happened to them?

What About Snow White?

We tend to think of Snow White as an innocent victim. But is this really true?

1. What did Snow White want?

Answer: She wanted the pretty lace, the beautiful comb, and the juicy red apple.

2. What did she do?

Answer: She purchased them from ugly old women.

3. What happened as a result?

Answer: Snow White nearly died when the lace was woven around her so tightly she couldn't breathe. She nearly died when she put the poison comb in her hair. And she did die when she ate the poison apple.

Snow White knew the Queen was out to get her. After the lace, and certainly after the comb, she even knew ugly old women were out to get her. Do you get the feeling that here's a girl who's having trouble learning from experience?

Actually, Snow White was afflicted by much the same condition as the queen—an inability to bridle her wants and channel them into positive pursuits. Unfortunately, this affliction is not limited to fictional characters in fairy tales.

Most of us will never know beautiful queens who turn themselves into ugly old women, yet, there are people all around us who are pursuing bad ideas to get what they want—from children throwing tantrums to executives fudging corporate books to politicians taking bribes—and everything in between.

These kinds of questions may take many different forms and may be asked and answered either orally or in writing. They may also be applied to any character in a story. The key is asking them. They can transform a simple story into a powerful and relevant learning experience.

HIF questions provide a pattern you can use to create character based learning experiences with almost any story or book in which there are characters who are making choices—whether real or fictional. And, by asking them, you will find fun and interesting ways to teach children right from wrong in a very natural and spontaneous way.

The ABC Sequence:

Let's expand the read and discuss idea now into something I call the ABC Sequence. The ABC Sequence is based on the premise that if you want to change the behavior, you have to first change the thinking.

A stands for attitudes, B stands for Behaviors and C stands for Consequences. The sequence is simple. Attitudes drive behaviors and behaviors always causes consequences. (See www.choic-eskills.com/7c.asp, click on the blue book) for a tennis ball demonstration that can be used to illustrate the ABC Sequence.) This concept can be used with any story involving characters.

The ABC Sequence is for children who are mature enough to understand the word attitude. As part of a reading assignment, either in writing or verbally, invite students to describe the attitudes of specific characters in the reading assignment. The characters may be good or bad or

even a mix of the two. Next have them explore specific behaviors produced by specific attitudes and then consider the resulting consequences.

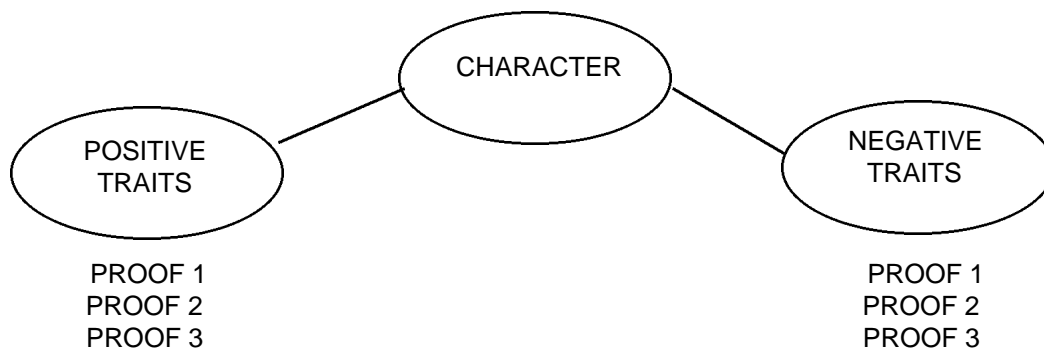
Soon, your students will begin to see certain patterns emerge. They will be able to recognize that certain attitudes lead to certain kinds of behaviors and that certain behaviors tend to produce certain consequences. Truly, one of the most effective ways to teach young people about right and wrong is to help them observe it in the consequences of choices other people make.

Traits and Proofs:

This is from Sheryl O’Sullivan at Azusa Pacific University.

Few real people, or even characters in fiction have only positive character traits or only negative character traits. A technique that is extremely helpful in identifying these different traits and examining the impact they have on a person is to list the traits and provide proofs or evidences in the story as to whether the trait was a positive one trait or a negative one.

This kind of analysis helps young people recognize that nearly everyone has good qualities worth emulating and perhaps other qualities they would be advised to avoid. It is also helpful for young people to recognize that good people can get into trouble by making bad choices and that people who have made bad choices can learn to make better choices by choosing to develop more positive character traits in their lives.



In summary, if we want children to learn right from wrong while they are learning to read and write, it is important to involve them in literature that is both interesting and nourishing. Next, we need to engage them in conversations, whether written or oral, that will help them understand why people do the things they do, and what distinguishes a good choice from a bad choice—a good idea from a bad idea.

In this manner, we can help young people come to understand the difference between right and wrong, not because we tell them, but because they have observed its operation in the lives of characters they have read and written about.

For some ideas on some good books you may wish to read and discuss with your students or children, you may wish to check out a book titled “Books That Build Character” by William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe. It should be available at most local libraries.

If you feel this information has been helpful and would like to subscribe our free monthly newsletter go to www.choiceskills.com/newsletter.asp. For more information on “The Seven C’s of Thinking Clearly” go to www.choiceskills.com/7c.asp.

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