



CHARACTER & CARING

# THRIVING INDICATORS

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# Character and Caring

## How do youth develop the indicators of thriving that we call character and caring?

**Frame:** The Thriving Conversation Aid sequences discussions of Connection, followed by Character, and then Caring. This sequence is explicitly derived from Dr. Richard Lerner's research on the 5 C's, the proven personality characteristics that fuel the positive development of youth.

Connection to Character: Dr. Lerner's research demonstrates that in order to develop positive relationships and support the two-way nature of connections with others, youth need a "moral compass";<sup>1</sup> therefore, the Connection Conversation sets the foundation for the Character conversation.

Character to Caring: While Character and Caring are clearly interrelated, Dr. Lerner provides sound logic for helping youth see the distinction. After extensive research to identify the first four C's, he discovered that something was missing. While youth with Character are honest and have integrity, they might only think of themselves. Positive development, however, includes caring about issues and people outside of one's own orbit. "Without caring, without understanding that we have to think beyond ourselves, we have no sense of social justice. Caring reminds us of the need... to ensure that others are as well-off as we are." This concept of enhancing other people and the world - beyond oneself - is congruent with, but missing from, Character, and explicit within Caring.

*"Our character is what we do when we think no one is looking." - H. Jackson Brown Jr.*

## The Definition of Character

Character is decision-making grounded in a clear sense of right and wrong. Character is a moral compass that guides one's choices in all situations. According to Dr. Lerner, "when there's no separation between what we feel is right and what we do, we have character."<sup>2</sup> It is exemplified through alignment between one's thoughts, feeling and actions.

## Attributes of Character

Within the framework of Positive Youth Development, a person of character demonstrates three interrelated attributes:

- A clear sense of right and wrong, or "moral compass", that guides one to make choices that bring good to an individual or others
- Integrity
- Equal and fair treatment of others<sup>3</sup>

### **Attribute 1: A clear sense of right and wrong, or "moral compass", that guides one to make choices that bring good to an individual or others.**

Dr. Lerner explains that those with good character "do the right thing, and help others do the right thing." To become a person of character, one needs to rely on "moral emotions" rather than snap judgments or inflammatory emotions.<sup>4</sup> This includes being honest, and respecting laws and authority.

When resolving moral issues, an individual's ability to act with character depends on his development of the seven moral emotions identified by Dr. William Damon, developmental psychologist at Stanford University. These emotions include:

1. Empathy
2. Sympathy
3. Admiration

4. Self-esteem
5. Shame
6. Guilt
7. Outrage & Anger

Youth need myriad opportunities to make moral decisions by experiencing all seven moral emotions as part of healthy character development.

*Janet, a gregarious thirteen year old, suddenly refused to go to a family friend's house with her parents for dinner. Initially, her parents assumed she was being a selfish, oppositional, and uncommunicative teenager. Upon further discussion, they learned that the family friend made racist remarks about Janet's Asian friends, whom Janet then defended. Janet was facing a genuine moral crossroads, as she didn't want to betray a long-time family friend by telling on her, while she also didn't want to spend time with someone who was racist. She felt guilt, outrage and anger (moral emotions 6 & 7), so her parents helped her recognize her emotions and gave her the space to discuss them. They also told her that her feelings resembled those of Rosa Parks, which enabled Janet to tap into her feelings of admiration for someone who also faced moral dilemmas, as well as acknowledge her own sense of self-esteem by speaking up for her Asian friend (moral emotions 3 & 4). By allowing Janet to identify, express and experience her emotions, her parents helped her make a moral decision and develop her sense of character.<sup>5</sup>*

### Attribute 2: Integrity

Those with good character have a sense of right and wrong that is consistent and reliable. This character is developed by grappling with true feelings, thinking through decisions, and aligning beliefs and actions.<sup>6</sup> As such, youth need opportunities to monitor and assess their decisions, the process by which they reach decisions, and the resulting outcomes. When youth see how others face moral dilemmas and live out their values, they experience an effective inspiration for alignment of their own beliefs and actions.<sup>7</sup>

### Attribute 3: Equal and fair treatment of others

Dr. Lerner asserts that those with character “treat everyone with equal consideration— what’s right for one person cannot be right, unless it’s equally right for everyone else. For people with character, everyone has an equal opportunity.”<sup>8</sup> This concept is illustrated by philosopher John Rawls’ notion of the “veil of ignorance” —that one must consider every moral decision as if shrouded in this “veil” —not knowing whether someone is the victim or the perpetrator of a misdeed. “Only those beliefs that hold up in every case, for every person, are moral.”<sup>9</sup>

### Recommendations for Practice

- Increase teen awareness of alignment (or misalignment) between their beliefs and actions.
- Explore conflicts rather than jumping to conclusions, as it’s not always apparent when teens are wrestling with moral decisions.
- Explore the seven moral emotions, through role-modeling and discussions of current events and personal experience. Assist the youth to seek moral decisions and recognize the consequences.
- Expand understanding of character to help the youth stand up to peer pressure.<sup>10</sup>

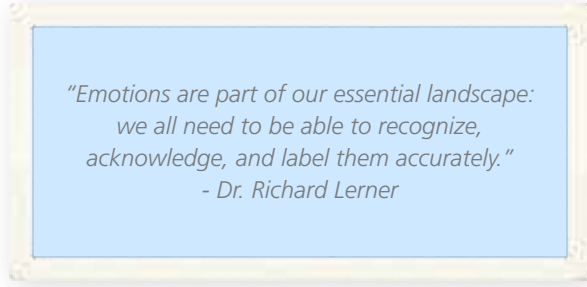
### Definition of Caring

Caring, defined by Dr. Lerner, is composed of two specific emotions:

- a. Empathy, the ability to feel another’s pain, and
- b. Sympathy, the ability to feel bad when another person is suffering.<sup>11</sup>

Empathy is a biological defense mechanism that causes one to actually feel the pain of another. It’s why a parent who sees his or her child being harmed experiences actual pain (i.e. tightness in the chest or abdominal pain), or why infants

cry if they see or hear another baby crying. Empathy must be reinforced or it may atrophy and disappear.<sup>12</sup>



Sympathy is an emotion that includes both thinking and feeling. The capacity for sympathy allows one to think beyond immediate personal needs and be concerned with the welfare of others. A caring person believes that everyone deserves a fair chance, equality and dignity, and freedom from discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

## Developing Caring

Both sympathy and empathy can be nurtured and enhanced through relationships with caring adults. In fact, caring can be contagious, and is most effectively inculcated through modeling and support by those whom work with youth.<sup>14</sup> Teens are at risk of not learning to care when no one teaches them to look beyond themselves, and they consequently become locked in self-interest. If no one fosters their empathy, they can think of no one but themselves. If no one schools them in the rudiments of self-justice, they don't think about what's fair, but only about what's coming to them. These attitudes can be prevented when caring is nurtured throughout development.<sup>15</sup>

In our culture, expectations around emotional expression may differ for girls and boys. Oftentimes, it's believed that girls express their emotions more easily than boys. Such stereotypes, however, are misguided. It's important to discuss gender stereotypes with youth, and to help both boys and girls identify and express their emotions in healthy ways in order to develop caring.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond experiencing emotions of sympathy and empathy, youth need opportunities to translate these feelings into action, which is an important component of caring. Youth should be encouraged to demonstrate caring with everyone in all situations. This includes, for example, in their relationships, by showing kindness and respect toward others; in their home, by doing chores or taking care of pets; in their neighborhood, by helping a neighbor in need or volunteering at an animal shelter; or in response to larger social issues of importance to them, by speaking out for social justice. These are just a few examples of ways in which youth can move beyond feeling and thinking in caring ways, and actually act in ways that express caring.<sup>17</sup>

## Recommendations for Practice

- Model and reinforce caring through everyday conversations about how you feel and how youth influence your feelings. Provide a space for youth to identify and express emotions.
- Model your caring actions; help youth identify opportunities to develop caring skills in their relationships and communities.<sup>18</sup>

**Footnotes**

- 1 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 136.
- 2 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 140.
- 3 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 139.
- 4 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 140.
- 5 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 142, 152.
- 6 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 140.
- 7 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 154-155.
- 8 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 139.
- 9 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 159.
- 10 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 140, 143, 150.
- 11 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 166.
- 12 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 166.
- 13 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 167.
- 14 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 171.
- 15 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 179-180.
- 16 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 172.
- 17 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 173-174.
- 18 Lerner, Richard M., (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press, LLC. p. 170, 171, 175.