

From Violence to Virtues: Awakening the Best in our Children and Ourselves

At the end of August David Andrews and Ros Macdonald, certified Virtues Project International Facilitators, will bring the Virtues Project training to teaching and office staff at Huntley Centennial Elementary School in Carp. The objective is for staff to be ready to implement these powerful strategies at the beginning of the school year.

Recently David presented the framework of The Virtues Project program at the May 11-12 Conference on Character Education hosted by the Ottawa District School Board. This conference was much appreciated by educators and school staff and was the first of its kind in the Ottawa area. Character Education has increasingly become an educational priority here in Canada and in the USA.

This Virtues Project is endorsed by the United Nations as a model global program for families of all cultures. Since the mid-90's it has been used to awaken inner strengths of character in families and individuals in Canada and around the world. The Project has fostered a culture of character, healing, and community development, in prisons, schools, indigenous communities, corporations and diverse faith communities. . It provides a non-sectarian framework for moral education for cultures around the world. The Virtues Project is not affiliated with any government, educational, or religious organization. It is based on the simple wisdom of the world's sacred traditions. Its strategies help us to remember who we really are, and to bring forward the virtues that already exist within us.

The Virtues Project teaches a language that nurtures assertiveness, compassion, and integrity. It builds trust and well-being in relationships, families, workplaces and communities. It empowers parents to raise morally conscious youth, and it supports educators to bring out the best in students and minimize behaviour problems.

The concepts of the Project have been used by educators in primary and secondary schools in the Ottawa/ Gatineau areas and by parents with their children. The Vancouver School Board has adopted it. It is endorsed and applied in many other schools throughout the world. The entire state of Western Australia has endorsed The Virtues Project for their schools.

Participants in Virtues Project workshops in the Ottawa area have made the following comments after their training: *"Now I cannot imagine life without the skills, strategies and positive points of the Virtues Project."*(elementary teacher); *"I have deepened my emotional connection with my husband. I am so happy that all my relationships are now blossoming."* *"The virtues of self-discipline, integrity and consideration are now part of my conversations with students in conflict with a teacher."*(high school vice-principal)

Introducing the five key Strategies of the Virtues project:

1. Speak the Language of the Virtues

Language shapes the character and self-esteem of our children. It is the main ingredient in creating a culture of character. We use language to acknowledge, guide and correct, and to build conscience. Shaming or blaming language is replaced instead by language that names and calls forth our innate virtues. When we name strengths and talents in others, they are encouraged and empowered. It engages the co-operation of our children and students and it inspires confidence that we can effect positive change.

2. Recognize Teachable Moments

This principle helps us to see challenges and obstacles in our lives as opportunities to learn and develop our strengths of character. These moments occur in the classroom, lunchroom, playground and beyond, when young people are helped to understand the meaning of what they are doing and how they are interacting with each other. Virtues are key to developing social skills, since they embody positive relations with others: kindness, caring, friendship, respect and so on. Virtues are named, rather than negative labels. For example, instead of being labeled “shy”, the introverted child can be acknowledged for obedience or peacefulness, but at the same time be encouraged in assertiveness and courage. Stumbling blocks are turned into stepping-stones.

3. Set Clear Boundaries

This offers a positive approach to discipline, where clear boundaries based on respect, peace, justice and other virtues are like a fence of safety within which lies freedom. The virtues are like the guideposts of this fence, while consequences are like the wire. One who breaks the boundary meets the consequences and is then invited back into the safety of the enclosure, a safe haven where youth feel free to learn, teachers to teach, and mothers and fathers to parent. A Virtues Project school offers positive guidance, not shaming labels; mentorship, not censorship [authoritarianism]; reflection, not rejection; and restitution, not retribution. Consequences of misbehaviour are specific, relevant and educative, and children understand the reason. As we set limits and boundaries that are more respectful of ourselves and others, we find a better life balance and greater compassion.

4. Honour the Spirit

This important principle helps us to address the spiritual dimension in a way that respects our diversity. **“Spiritual”, in the context of education, pertains to a sense of purpose, beliefs and values, and the mastery of the virtues within.** Honouring the spirit allows better relationships with people from cultures and religions different from our own, and it helps us to cultivate our own reverence for life. It fosters cooperation, collaboration and trust within families and communities.

5. Offer the Art of Spiritual Companionship

Spiritual Companionship is a highly effective tool for counselling, conflict resolution and dealing with disciplinary situations. This compassionate and detached listening approach allows healing, encourages moral choices and promotes the safe expression of feelings.

Uniting Our World Family: A Bridge Between Communities and Cultures

The Virtues Project began in the mid-1990's on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. The founders were Linda Popov, a mental health therapist and former hospice director, and her husband Dan Popov, a child psychologist. They were concerned with the enormous number of children throughout the world who were physically and morally at risk. In seeking to address this problem, they realized they could do something to help parents, educators and caregivers. The powerful resource for change they created has blossomed into The Virtues Project International.

The Virtues Project offers a timely and much-needed bridge between different faith communities and cultures around the world. The Popovs researched the ethical and moral teachings of the world's great spiritual traditions and discovered that the virtues ran through this literature like a silver thread. They identified virtues that are universally valued by diverse cultures as the content of a good character, the essential qualities of the human spirit. For more information visit www.virtuesproject.com

Resources

The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves. Within two months of its writing, this book was being used in more than 20 countries. The Popovs received requests for workshops and presentations from around the world, including an appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Later, they developed a set of Virtues Cards - Reminders of the Gifts Within, which have been adapted for use in schools. These sets of cards are also available in French and other languages. In 2000, The Virtues Project Educators' Guide: Simple Ways to Create a Culture of Character was published. This book is full of activities and lesson ideas on how to encourage respect, responsibility and other basic virtues in schools and homes. Also available for homes and classrooms are Virtues posters and a CD of Virtues songs.

Linda Popov has also published A Pace of Grace, based upon a serious health crisis in her own life, which offers an invaluable guide to the rediscovery of balance, health, grace and joy in our lives.

The Virtues Project Mission Statement

To provide empowering strategies that inspire the practice of virtues in everyday life. The project offers personal and professional development programs, trainings, community development, healing and materials which are helping people around the world to create a culture of character and remember who we really are.

For further information, or to register for Ros and David's workshops, school trainings or FREE get-togethers for graduates and guests, call Ros Macdonald at (613) 744-4768. You may also visit their Website:

www.charactereducationottawa.ca