

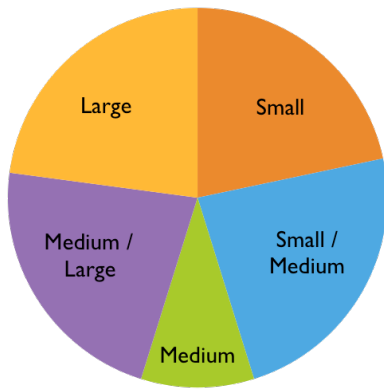


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## An Introduction to Character Education

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Character education is experiencing a global resurgence. In classrooms and other sites of learning, educational leaders are increasingly realizing that in addition to providing intellectual and technical training, they should also be contributing to young people's moral development, helping them figure out ways to navigate ethical complexities, contribute to the common good, and lead exemplary lives. Focused on shaping children's values, attitudes, and habits, character education seeks to help youth acquire those abilities that enable them to act in "ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways" (Spohrer, 2024, p. 3)—including courage, honesty, justice, compassion, integrity, and respect. Proponents of character education believe that the acquisition of these (and other) abilities is essential to individual and societal flourishing, arguing that "the more people that exhibit good character and virtues, the healthier our society" (Kristjánsson & Arthur, 2022, p. 2).

Schools are a primary site of character education, but informal learning organizations are increasingly joining these efforts. One of the most notable examples is "Fostering Character Through Children's Museums," an initiative launched in 2023 by the Lilly Endowment in partnership with ACM. The project supports a group of 23 children's museums (selected by the Endowment) interested in developing, testing, and refining experiences that help children become engaged, responsible, and caring adults. The initiative also supports caregivers in their roles as nurturers of children's character.

In the hopes of furthering these efforts, this report offers an introduction to character education. As discussed in Trends Report 7.3, children's museums are already promoting character growth. By becoming more familiar with key concepts related to this topic, they can be more systematic and deliberate in their attempts to help children develop and practice different character strengths. Toward that end, this report defines some basic character education terms, and outlines the field's overall goals. In so doing, this report provides a useful context for thinking about how character can be more explicitly built into the experiences children's museums offer.

ACM TRENDS

#9.1

## ACM Trends #9.1

### What is Character?

Character is an ancient concept tied to an age-old question: “**what kind of person do we want our children to be, and how can we raise and educate them to be that way?**” (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p. 495). Often discussed in terms of traits, habits, and dispositions, character can perhaps be more simply understood as the ethical and moral values that shape how we think, feel, and act. Put another way, character is the collection of qualities that others attribute to us on the basis of our actions—and the motivations people infer from those actions.

Character is often conceived of in terms of virtues—that is, particular qualities that can help people achieve their potentials. These virtues are generally divided into four types: (1) **intellectual virtues** that enable the pursuit of truth and knowledge (including critical thinking, curiosity, judgment, and reasoning); (2) **moral virtues** that help us effectively navigate ethical dilemmas (including compassion, courage, honesty, and justice); (3) **civic virtues** that promote responsible citizenship (including community awareness, neighborliness, service, and volunteering); (4) **performance virtues** that enable us to act in intellectual, morally, and civically virtuous ways (including confidence, motivation, resilience, and teamwork) (Kristjánsson & Arthur, 2022).

While these four categories constitute the building blocks of character, it is important to note that character is more than a checklist of desirable qualities. It cannot be

reduced to the sum of individual strengths, and leads to something larger: **practical wisdom**. Generally defined as “good sense,” practical wisdom is the capacity to assess a situation and determine the appropriate course of action—especially in cases where different virtues conflict. Operating as a kind of “**meta virtue**” (Brundson, 2023, p. 4), practical wisdom helps us make distinct judgments about what virtuous conduct looks like in specific situations.

As this suggests, a person with good character does not simply apply specific character strengths to different situations in an automatic, unthinking way. Instead, they make choices about which actions to take after reflecting on these strengths and submitting them to a process of arbitration. As one study on the subject notes, practical wisdom is what enables individuals to act “**for the right reasons and from the right motives: knowing them, taking intrinsic pleasure in them, and deciding that they are worthwhile**” (Walker et al., 2015, pp. 85-6).

### What is Character Education?

Character education is always happening—whether we wish it or not. Often, it happens in a spontaneous, unplanned manner. From a young age, children “catch” different abilities through interactions with (and observations of) caregivers, siblings, teachers, and peers. By mimicking the behaviors of others and seeing how people respond to different emotional displays, they internalize certain abilities. This type of character building often happens through osmosis—an indirect process of absorbing information from one’s social environment.

In addition to being “caught,” character strengths can be “taught.” In the latter half of the 20th century, US public schools were generally reluctant to make character education a deliberate part of their curricula. But in recent decades, the recognition that character education is inescapable—and that “**all teaching imposes values, whether implicitly or explicitly**” (Aspray, 2023, p. 57)—has contributed to the resurgence of interest in character education.

### ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

So too has the emergence of “flourishing” as a key goal of education. Defined in a 2022 UNESCO report as “**the optimal continuing development of human beings’ potential,**” flourishing is about more than just happiness or wellbeing. It has to do with participating in relationships and activities that are “**aligned with both an individual’s own values and humanistic values, in a way that is satisfying to them**” (de Ruyter et al., 2022, p. 74). Like the related concept of “thriving,” flourishing has an environmental dimension. In order to flourish, people need to live in an “**enabling environment**”—one that helps them reach their individual potentials.

Proponents of flourishing take a whole-person approach to children’s development, believing that education is about not only academic achievement, but also about helping youth “become good people and live good lives” (D’Olimpio & de Ruyter, 2025, p. 628). Toward that end, they prioritize education that:

- Helps children build competencies, relationships, and self-efficacy
- Is fun, stimulating flow and wonder
- Encourages children to pursue truth, knowledge, good judgment, and self-governance
- Takes place in cooperative, warm, and trusting learning environments

One of character education’s key proponents is the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Established in 2012 at the University of Birmingham (UK), the Centre has steadily advanced the idea that virtues are essential to human flourishing. In *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, the Centre declares that:

*Flourishing is the ultimate aim of character education. Human flourishing requires the acquisition and development of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues, excellence specific to diverse domains of practice or human endeavour, and generic virtues of self-management (known as enabling or performance virtues). All are necessary to achieve the highest potential in life. Character education teaches the acquisition and strengthening of virtues: the traits that sustain a well-rounded life and a thriving society (Kristjánsson & Arthur, p. 5).*

Importantly, character education is not about indoctrinating people. Though sometimes dismissed as a paternalistic undertaking that seeks to simply “fix the kids,” character education is incompatible with attempts to inculcate a pre-conceived list of desirable qualities in people. Instead of being conformist and dogmatic, character education’s goal is to make people autonomous and reflective—to equip them with the tools for judgment and discernment, so they know “**how to choose the right course of action in difficult situations**” (Kristjánsson & Arthur, p. 6). The aim of character education is not docile obedience to a prescribed set of values, but “**critically and self-awareness**” (Spohrer, 2024, p. 6).

Neither can it be said that character education is nostalgic or conservative. Part of character education is about drawing attention to systems that prevent optimal character growth—and identifying strategies for rectifying injustice and oppression. As currently practiced, character education locates vice not in individual failings, but in social, economic, and political structures. Instead of isolating people from these structures, it seeks their improvement through processes of democratic participation and political reform. As the Jubilee Centre’s *Framework* notes, character education’s aim “**is not only to make individuals better persons, but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish**” (Kristjánsson & Arthur, p. 6).

### Key Takeaways

Ideas about character development now dominate discussions around educational practices, policies, and curricula (Espinosa & Domingo, 2025). Seeking to place young people’s moral development on par with their academic development, the “character turn” in 21<sup>st</sup> century educational circles owes to a number of developments—including the emergence of whole-person centered approaches to education. In addition to teaching subject-specific knowledge and skills, proponents of character education argue that schools and other sites of learning should be “**helping young people to develop strong habits of heart and mind**” (Lerner, 2007, p. 146).

Children’s museums are ideal sites for fostering character. Many of the programs they are currently providing align with the building blocks of character development. Through experiences that promote critical thinking, curiosity, and problem solving, they are fostering intellectual virtues. By modeling behaviors such as respect, honesty, and compassion, they are promoting moral virtues. Much of their work also encourages civic virtues such as volunteering and neighborliness. And by building children’s resilience and confidence, they are promoting important performance virtues.

Children’s museums are also experts in creating learning environments that promote character growth. As proponents of flourishing have observed, in order to acquire the kinds of skills that help them lead exemplary lives, children need access to playful learning experiences that promote a sense of awe and wonder. Beyond that, they are best able to develop character strengths in places that are cooperative, warm, and trusting. All of these are things children’s museums excel at.

The fact that children’s museums are so well-positioned to foster character means this is already happening on a daily basis. But character education works best when offered in an intentional and systematic manner. By devoting attention to the particular strengths they would like visitors to cultivate, and designing experiences that explicitly connect learning outcomes with these strengths, children’s museums can deepen their commitment to building a world where all children flourish.

## About This Research

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