



Fostering Character: Examples and Resources

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Across the world, classrooms and other sites of learning are increasingly becoming spaces for character education. With this development, museums have begun designing exhibits and programs aimed at helping visitors develop and practice different character strengths. Collectively, the goal of these efforts is to ensure that today's youth possess the types of intellectual, moral, civic, and performance abilities needed to navigate ethical complexities, engage in prosocial behaviors, and contribute to the common good.

In 2023, the Lilly Endowment launched "Fostering Character Through Children's Museums" in partnership with ACM. Dedicated to the promotion of abilities such as honesty, courage, humility, gratitude, perseverance, and compassion, the project supports a group of 23 children's museums (selected by the Endowment) who are developing, testing, and refining experiences that help children become engaged, responsible, and caring adults. The project also supports caregivers in their role as nurturers of children's character.

This report highlights some of the work members of the *Fostering Character* cohort are engaging in, while also sharing resources for promoting character growth through exhibits, programs, and curricula. As noted in previous Trends reports, whether intentional or not, children's museums are already helping visitors develop "strong habits of heart and mind" (Lerner, 2007, p. 146). Through experiences that teach critical thinking and problem solving, model respect and compassion, encourage neighborliness and volunteering, and build resilience and confidence, they are helping children "catch" many of the abilities associated with good character.

But character education is most effective when pursued in a deliberate, explicit, systematic manner. To prompt thinking about the types of character strengths they would like to help visitors cultivate (and ways to connect program goals and outcomes with these strengths), this report offers a number of practical suggestions based on the experiences of others active in the character education space. By taking advantage of existing resources and emerging best practices, children's museums can promote a whole-person approach to learning that helps all children achieve their potentials.

ACM TRENDS

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An Overview of Character Education

One way to define character is with the model of head, heart, and hands. As the Character Lab website says:

Strengths of heart (such as gratitude and kindness) enable harmonious relationships with other people.

Strengths of mind (such as curiosity and creativity) enable independent thinking.

Strengths of will (such as grit and self-control) enable us to achieve goals.

As this suggests, character is a combination of **moral virtues** (e.g., honesty and integrity), **intellectual virtues** (e.g., critical thinking and curiosity), **civic virtues** (e.g., neighborliness and volunteering), and **performance virtues** (e.g., confidence and resilience). Working together, these virtues promote **practical wisdom**: the ability to act “**for the right reasons and from the right motives**” (Walker et al., 2015, p. 85).

Having good character is not about applying specific abilities to specific situations in an uncritical manner. It is about habitual behaviors performed for habituated reasons—reasons that align with our beliefs and values. From this, it follows that character education’s goal is not to encourage norm-following, but to equip individuals with tools for discerning right from wrong, for navigating ethical complexities, and for becoming “**responsible,**

caring, and contributing citizens” (Singh, 2019, p. 2). Instead of prescribing a set of values, character education seeks to help people become reflective, autonomous thinkers—both about their own lives and the social, economic, and political contexts we live in. In these ways, character education seeks “**not only to make individuals better persons, but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish**” (Kristjánsson & Arthur, 2022, p. 2).

Character Education in Action

Through grants from the Lilly Endowment, the 23 museums that comprise the *Fostering Character* initiative are currently in the process of embedding character strengths into the experiences they create for children—and the support they offer to parents and caregivers. In addition to incorporating these strengths into exhibits, programs, and curricula, members of the cohort are also taking a “character first” approach to their more general operations, crafting mission and vision statements, strategic plans, and organizational policies that reflect a commitment to character building in all of their work.

As part of our research, we asked members of the cohort about the specific character strengths they wanted their exhibits, programs, and curricula to revolve around. Figure 1 depicts their responses as a word cloud.

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.



Figure 1. Specific Character Strengths Members of the *Fostering Character* Cohort are Focusing On

As can be seen, museums' responses align with the four virtue categories that most often factor into character education efforts. While no one trait was mentioned by a majority of institutions, many came up repeatedly, including curiosity ($n = 15$), kindness ($n = 12$), perseverance ($n = 9$), courage ($n = 7$), teamwork ($n = 6$), respect ($n = 5$), resilience ($n = 5$), and confidence ($n = 5$).

Museums have developed a number of program plans around these character strengths. Some have created child and caregiver playgroups, focusing on ways to center character in family contexts. Others are designing exhibits around historical figures, creating immersive experiences that invite children to participate in character-building quests, or designing interactive puppet shows with mascots that embody specific character strengths. To make it clear that character growth is a desired learning outcome, museums are infusing the language of character into program titles, labels, and other communications.

We also inquired into who museums want to engage. Figure 2 depicts their responses.



Figure 2. Key Audiences for Members of the *Fostering Character Cohort*

Not surprisingly, participants consider children to be a primary audience. But as the figure demonstrates, museums are approaching their work holistically. In addition to regarding caregivers as a key audience, they are also designing their projects with an eye toward broader community use—for example, by thinking about how the resources they create can be beneficial in classroom contexts. Eight museums are planning to conduct community outreach, and some are developing resources for caregivers ($n = 10$) and educators ($n = 9$). Six have built staff development and training into their projects.

Programming Resources

As character building becomes a more prominent part of children's educational experiences, organizations specializing in this work have begun creating a variety of different practical resources on the subject. These include:

- **CharacterPlus** — An organization with a 30-year history of empowering schools with resources and training that inspire youth to “become engaged, upstanding citizens who want to make a positive impact in the world.” Recently united with Character.org, which is widely known for their *11 Principles Framework for Schools*, the organization's [website](#) includes a variety of resources and best practices for character education.
- **Character Lab** — Prior to sunsetting in 2024, this organization connected researchers with educators to create and share insights on ways to advance young people's social, emotional, academic, and physical well-being. Some of their [key resources](#) include an archive of playbooks (including curricula, videos, and books) and a collection of “Tip of the Week” videos (each of which offers 60 seconds of actionable advice from leading character researchers).
- **PBS KIDS** — Many of the games and videos created by this organization focus on character. The PBS KIDS [website](#) includes a list of downloadable character activities, along with examples of TV shows that explore different character strengths.
- **The Character Academy** — An initiative of the American Camp Association, whose [website](#) includes a collection of resources (including videos, recorded webinars, and blogs) members can freely access to better understand how educators and caregivers can effectively role model different character strengths.
- **The Jubilee Center for Character & Virtues** — Operated out of the University of Birmingham (UK), the Centre's [website](#) contains a number of practitioner-oriented resources that can be used for teaching character in educational settings, including curricula, evaluation handbooks, and methods for incorporating virtue training into different subjects such as math, science, art, and music.

Key Takeaways

When thinking about ways to foster character, the first step for children’s museums is to think about those character strengths that best align with children’s interests and needs—and that are aligned with the museum’s mission. Whether the focus is on intellectual, moral, civic, or performance virtues (or some combination of these), character education works best when it addresses real-world needs. Before anything else, the critical question to answer is this: *What character strengths would most help children in our community meet their potentials?*

Having answered this question, children’s museums can then think about types of experiences that foster these abilities. Evidence from the *Fostering Character* cohort suggests that to be effective, these experiences need to be explicit about the types of character strengths they seek to help children develop—with character-specific learning outcomes and strategies incorporated into lesson plans, titles, descriptions, and labels.

The cohort’s work also suggests that these efforts are most successful when they provide caregivers with resources for supporting their child’s character development, and for becoming partners in a museum’s character education efforts. Beyond that, by embedding character into policies and practices tied to hiring, training, community outreach, communications, and partnerships, children’s museums can discover ways to model particular character strengths in their day-to-day operations. In all of these ways, children’s museums can ensure that all those who enter their doors are given opportunity to build those habits of heart, head, and hands that help them “**know the good, love the good, and do the good**” (Kristjánsson & Arthur, 2022, p. 5).

About This Research

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