



CENTER FOR
SCHOLARS &
STORYTELLERS

UCLA

The Power of Storytelling: Media and Positive Character Development



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The Power of Storytelling

Supporting children's positive character development is one of the most important jobs for any adult who cares about kids. Research shows a strong link between character strengths and social emotional skills, such as perseverance, self-control, empathy, and communication, and outcomes, such as academic, professional, and emotional success. Parents have traditionally relied on family, religion, and schools to impart character lessons but, as media increasingly permeates the fabric of social life, it becomes another powerful tool for promoting positive character development.

An initiative launched by the non-profit *Common Sense Media*, and funded by the *Bezos Family Foundation* and the *John Templeton Foundation*, was designed to help parents and educators harness the power of media to support their efforts in developing positive character strengths. Supplementing their existing ratings platform, *Common Sense Media* developed and implemented a tagging system that identifies and indexes movies and TV programs that promote core character strengths and life skills. They also developed character-based discussion questions to help families talk about these important topics.

In partnership with *Common Sense Media*, Yalda T. Uhls, Ph.D. and colleagues studied the impact of this initiative in a series of focus group studies with parents, a pre- and post-exposure survey of parents, and a comparison of a guided discussion with children, ages 6 to 9, using questions meant to facilitate rich conversation with an open-ended discussion format.

This report details the results of this research.



Major Findings

***Rather than assuming a reactive role as a media gatekeeper, parents felt empowered to take a more proactive role in helping their children learn from high-quality content.**

- Parents expressed a strong desire to learn more about media that supports character development, relative to other media-related topics (such as preventing cyber-bullying, staying safe online, or setting technology rules).
- Parents reported that media helps to spark discussions about difficult and complex topics such as racism, sexism, and bullying.

What does this mean?

Parents want media with positive character messages, and resources to help them proactively use media to support their children's character development.



"I learned I should be choosing quality media focusing on character-building ideas and talking about the message. I can't just restrict my kids' media use." –Mother of three, ages 13, 15, 18



**Method found on Page #9 - Bullet Point 2*



Major Findings

***Parents and children recognized that media with positive character content can be useful AND engaging.**

- After exposure to *Common Sense Media's* character tools, parents rated media as 10% more influential in teaching character strengths than previously reported.
- More importantly, children were 11% more likely to choose media tagged for positive character messages.

What does this mean?

When parents help their children understand the value of the content, children learn to choose media that reinforces positive character messages.

"I love watching those shows with my child because it gives me the perfect opportunity to sit there and say, "Would you do that?" and "Do you see how this is?" –and she absorbs it, I think better in that context rather than when she does something I'm not overly pleased with, like "Blah, blah,blah." I think that works—historically, that's worked better for us."

–Mother of three, ages 10, 21 and 23

***Method found on Page #9 - Bullet Point 1**


Major Findings

***Guided conversations about TV shows were longer and more in-depth than open-ended discussions.**


- When conversations were guided by the set of character-focused discussion questions, children produced more than double the amount of character strength-related words during group discussions about media content.
- Guided discussions between children and adults were 1.5 times longer, as well as both richer and deeper, than the open-ended discussions.
- Guided discussions were also focused more on thematic meaning that related to the children's own lives. In the Open Discussion group, when the show was scary, children brought up fear based sub-plots more frequently.

What does this mean?

The impact of high quality content is enhanced when families have tools to unleash its power.



"I learned that after a movie I should talk to my kids about it; give them positive examples and emphasize events that I want them to learn." –
Mother of two, ages 7 & 8



**Method found on Page #9 - Bullet Point 3*

Character Learning: Ages and Stages

Ages 2-5

- Adult co-viewing can help children actively engage with storytelling and support learning, as well as substantially affect the ways in which children attend to media and make meaning of it [1-2].
- For narratives with several storylines, children may forget the main character’s central goal. Focusing on one main narrative, which is supported by the action, will be most effective [3].
- Understanding moral lessons is even more difficult if stories are folk tales or fables, rather than realistic stories [4-5].
- Preschoolers tend to let physical characteristics dominate — if someone “looks” nice, they must be nice [6].
- For kindergartners to comprehend moral lessons from television, it's not recommended to “muddy the message” by combining pro-social and antisocial models — simplicity is essential [2].
- For children to reproduce a protagonist’s pro-social behaviors, they must “see themselves” in that protagonist, either by shared demographic characteristics or similar lived experience [8].

Character Learning: Ages and Stages

Ages 6-10

- When the main storyline is interrupted by secondary content (that is, content that does not relate to the main storyline), children have difficulty following the plot. For children to understand how motives inspire action and how actions lead to consequences, these elements must be lined up side-by-side. [9].
- Children struggle with extracting moral lessons from fables until about 9 years old; younger children tend to retell specific parts of the story instead of deriving a more general principle [10-11].

Ages 11+

- Major changes occur in children's socio-cognitive and information-processing capabilities. Their improved ability to take others' perspectives and reason abstractly improves. Subplots and content with nuance can be introduced [12].
- The ability to fully summarize a story's main theme does not often develop until age 14. The intended moral takeaway may not be absorbed by younger adolescent viewers [13].
- Tween and teen viewers often reject moralistic messages in order to protect their sense of freedom and/or reassert their independence.
- The most effective educational media should come in narrative rather than didactic formats. When older children interpret texts as "agenda-less," absorbing and relevant, they are most likely to internalize the moral lessons they model [14].



Method

Phase 1: Identifying Key Character Strengths

To develop *Common Sense Media's* character tagging system, researchers compiled a comprehensive list of core character strengths designed to meet the following criteria:

1. Could be learned through consumption of media content.
2. Could more easily be taught to children under the age of 18.
3. Resonated with the values and language of users.

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Communication

Compassion

Courage

Curiosity

Empathy

Gratitude

Humility

Integrity

Perseverance

Self-control

Teamwork

For more information on Phase 1 of the research, where we detail how the character strengths and life skills were chosen, please click [HERE](#).



Method

Phase 2: Gauging Attitudes Toward and Effectiveness of Media as Character Educator

To gain insights into parents' perception of the role of media as a tool for character education, and to gauge the effectiveness of *Common Sense Media's* character-tagging system and discussion questions, the following research was undertaken:

- 1. Parent Focus Groups:** A series of parent focus groups were conducted (with 24 parents of children ages 4-16 in 3 cities [LA, NYC & Oakland]) to discuss their views on media's role in character education, share their methods for media selection, watch a movie tagged for a character strength, and provide feedback on *Common Sense Media's* character content. Focus groups were conducted in both Spanish and English.
- 2. Pre- & Post-exposure surveys:** Parents took an at-home online survey gauging their initial attitudes toward media's role in character education. They were next asked to complete a brief self-directed tutorial introducing them to *Common Sense Media's* character content. These parents then completed a post-exposure survey to assess changes in parental attitudes and family media use.
- 3. Parent & Child Intervention:** A small intervention study was conducted with 9 groups of parents AND children (ages 6-9) in which they watched an age-appropriate TV show selected for its positive character messages, and discussed the content using either a guided discussion format focused on character content, or an open discussion format with no guidance. We then compared both the quality and quantity of character strength discussions between groups.



Further Resources

Below are resources that *Common Sense Media* editors recommend for parents, educators and content creators interested in learning more about character strengths and life skills.

Common Sense Media: Best Movies and TV for Character Development

commonsensemedia.org/best-for-character-development-lists

Character Lab: Tools and Positive Posters for Teachers

characterlab.org

Greater Good Science Center: Tools for Mindful Living

greatergood.berkeley.edu

Mind in the Making: Bezos Family Foundation Program to Support Life Skills

mindinthemaking.org/7-essential-skills

Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

ei.yale.edu

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: Support for Educators Teaching Character

casel.org

Making Caring Common: Harvard Graduate School of Education Project to Develop Caring, Ethical Kids

mcc.gse.harvard.edu/parenting-resources-raising-caring-ethical-children

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4. *Larsen, Lee, & Ganea (2017)*
5. *Richert, Shawber, Hoffman, & Taylor (2009)*
6. *Fisch, McCann Brown, & Cohen (2001)*
7. *Mares & Acosta (2008)*
8. *Calvert, Stong, Jacobs, & Conger (2007)*
9. *Jordan (2008)*
10. *Goldman & Varnhagen (1986)*
11. *Lynch, van den Broek, Kremer, Kendeou, White, & Lorch (2008)*
12. *Singer & Singer (2012)*
13. *van den Broek, Lynch, Naslund, levers-Landis, & Verduin (2003)*
14. *Moyer-Gusé (2008)*

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