

# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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For many years, character (or moral) development has been cited as one of the many benefits of an effective physical education (PE) programme. Essentially, character development is about helping students to become better human beings, as it emphasises moral traits such as kindness, respect and fairness [1, 2]. Physical education has been recognised as “probably the most significant physical activity context for developing moral character” [3]. Thus, as physical educators, we have a huge opportunity to support the development of the whole-student – physically, intellectually, socially, affectively and, possibly, even spiritually. This is where terms such as ‘sportspersonship’ and ‘fair play’ come into use, as many physical education teachers and sports coaches around the world urge students to model the behaviour expected of participants in sport and physical activity [4].

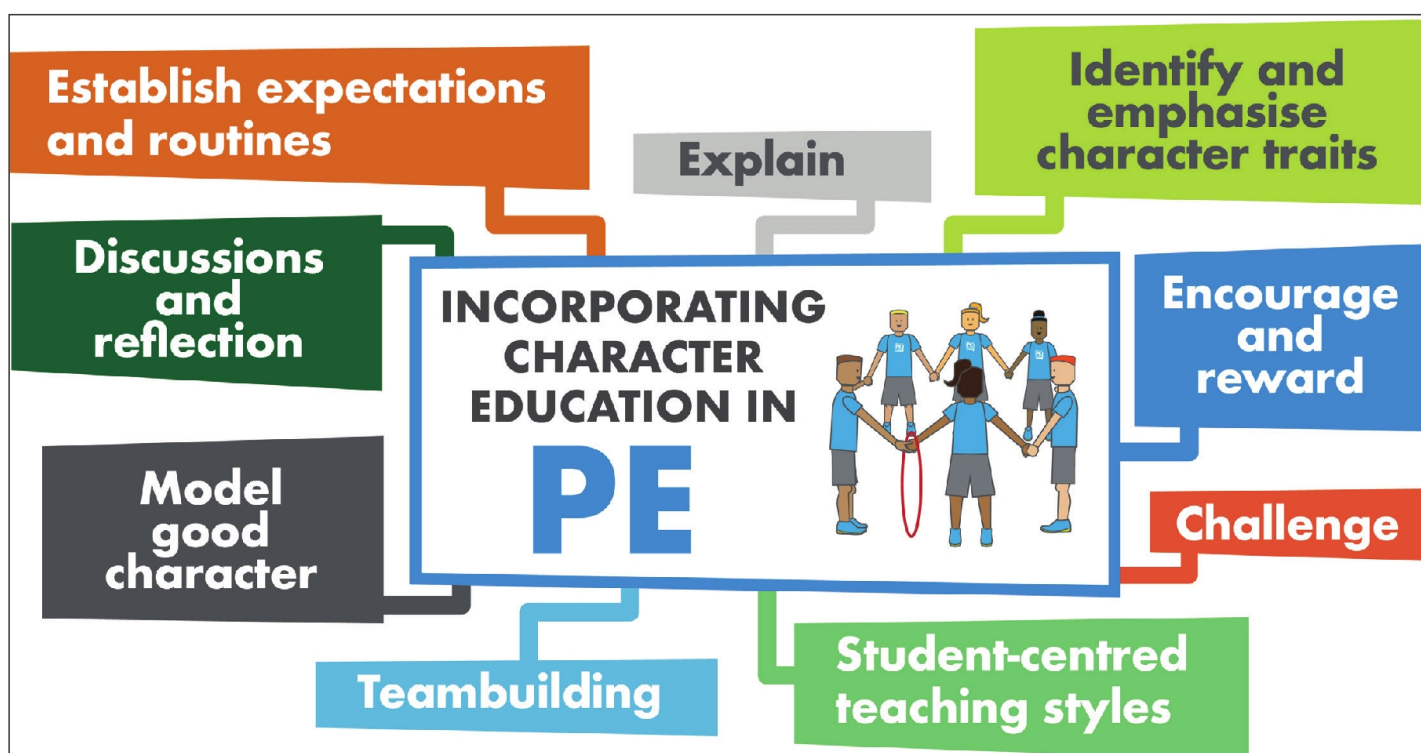
By promoting desirable moral traits there are numerous researched benefits for pupils, such as lower stress levels, increased resilience and self-awareness, decreased alcohol and drug related problems, and improved academic achievement, to name just a few [5]. But at its most primitive level, promoting good character is simply the right thing to do. Good character is good for its own sake. It’s not about being righteous or about being perfect. It’s about helping each other to develop good habits in order to bring out the best in each other, both inside and outside of sport and physical activity.

To effectively incorporate character education in your physical education lessons, there are several considerations.

- **Establish expectations and routines** – The first step for implementing a character education programme is to

create a positive and respectful learning environment. This can come in the form of listed expectations, codes of conduct or behavioural contracts, which can be devised collaboratively with students. These expectations should run in alignment with those of the school and society. Additionally, having routines such as shaking hands with opponents, taking a knee when a player is injured, and celebrating others’ success will help to create a moral classroom environment [2, 6, 7].

- **Identify and emphasise character traits** – John Wooden said “what we emphasise gets improved upon” [8]. As physical educators we need to intentionally identify and emphasise the values and moral behaviour that we aspire to see in our students. This can be as simple as having a character focal point for each month, week or even lesson, such as





“In today’s lesson, we will be exploring respect”. Or by taking the initiative and leading an assembly on the qualities of sportspersonship. From there we need to continually emphasise those traits in our lessons [9].

- **Model good character** – If you want to help develop character in your students, you need to demonstrate good character yourself. This doesn’t mean you need to be perfect; we are all imperfect beings that make mistakes. Rather, it is about trying our best to model respect for others, being responsible and organised, being gracious in victory and defeat, showing patience and kindness, admitting and apologising for our mistakes, and making amends. We are all works in progress and sharing our journey will inspire others. Furthermore, you could create learning displays with professional athletes who are role models [2].
- **Encourage and reward** – It is important to recognise, encourage and reward students when they demonstrate good character as it will motivate others and reinforce the development of those desired traits. Moreover, it is also beneficial for students to recognise positive character traits in others and will help to hammer home the message. One simple idea may be to have a compliment slip, where students can

note someone who exemplified a moral trait during the lesson [2, 6, 7].

- **Challenge** – This one is simple but important. Teachers must have the courage to challenge students, even their star athletes, when they conduct themselves inappropriately. This doesn’t mean you need to shout at them or publicly humiliate them. We’re not paid to shout at students. Rather, having an individual conversation with them, asking them why you’ve called them over, and discussing how their decisions affect others. From there remind them of the expectations, request an apology, thank them for acknowledging their mistake and move on [9].
- **Team-building** – Before teams can experience success, they must first learn how to be good team-mates. They must learn how to support each other, praise and encourage one another, and overcome problems and challenges together. This requires purposeful practice through team-building activities which should be incorporated at the start of each school year and revisited periodically to refresh their cooperative skills [2, 6, 7].
- **Discussions and reflection** – Create opportunities for students to discuss moral issues in your lessons. This doesn’t need to be a long, arduous

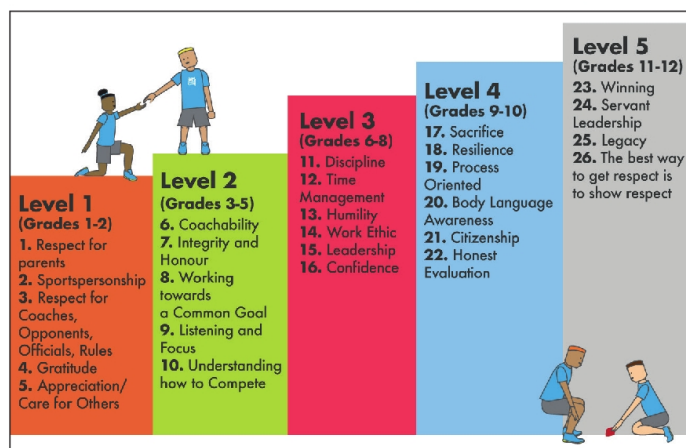
process. Rather, create a three-minute window in your lesson for students to talk with a partner or small group about a character trait or how to handle a particular scenario. This will help students to think about broader issues, for example the need for rules or the qualities of a good team-mate. With regards to reflection, have students compare their actions with desired outcomes, skills or behaviours. This will help to reinforce positive behaviours and is crucial for instilling a growth mind-set and emotional intelligence [5, 6, 7].

- **Student-centred teaching styles** – To provide ample opportunities to practise moral behaviour, students will benefit from taking on a range of different challenges and roles. Thus, try to build students’ independence by incorporating student-centred teaching styles [6].
- **Explain** – Last, but by no means least, explain to students about the desired character traits. During childhood, students learn moral values more through observation and imitation. When they enter their teenage years their reasoning abilities develop and they want to know why certain character traits are important. This is when a teacher can provide opportunities to explain and justify moral behaviours and encourage group discussion, further questions and reflection.

**Table 1:** Fundamental Moral Values for Physical Education (adapted from Martens, 2012).

| Moral Values          | ACTIONS IN LIFE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | ACTIONS IN PE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Respect</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We treat people in a way in which we expect to be treated</li> <li>We work nicely with others and communicate positively</li> <li>We look after other people's property</li> <li>We take care of the environment</li> <li>We take care of ourselves</li> </ul> <p><b>"Respect is treating others in a way that we would like to be treated."</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We treat teammates, opponents, coaches and officials in a way that shows we value them.</li> <li>We are able to play games nicely with everyone</li> <li>We make sure everyone is involved</li> <li>We always say positive things</li> <li>We look after our sports facilities and equipment</li> <li>When travelling to and from P.E. we are mindful of others and respect our surroundings</li> </ul> |
| <b>Responsible</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We fulfill our obligations</li> <li>We are dependable</li> <li>We are in control of ourselves</li> <li>We are persistent</li> </ul> <p><b>"Responsibility is acting in a way that meets expectations, looking out for ourselves and others, and fulfilling our obligations."</b></p>                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We prepare ourselves to do our best</li> <li>We are punctual for lessons</li> <li>We are self-disciplined</li> <li>We cooperate with our teammates</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Resilience</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When things are difficult we keep going</li> <li>We know that failure is important for learning</li> <li>We stay calm and focused on overcoming our challenges</li> </ul> <p><b>"Resilience is never giving up"</b></p>                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We always try our best no matter how difficult the challenge</li> <li>We try and push through even when we feel physically or mentally exhausted</li> <li>We relish a challenge and enjoy playing against stronger opponents</li> <li>We know that losing isn't failure, giving up is.</li> </ul>                                                                                                       |
| <b>Caring</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are compassionate and have empathy</li> <li>We are forgiving</li> <li>We are generous and kind</li> <li>We are not selfish or mean</li> </ul> <p><b>"To be caring is to display kindness and concern for others"</b></p>                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We help our teammates play better</li> <li>We are supportive to teammates</li> <li>We are generous with praise, stingy with criticism</li> <li>We play for the team, not ourselves</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Honesty</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are truthful and forthright</li> <li>We act with integrity</li> <li>We are trustworthy</li> <li>We are courageous to do the right thing</li> </ul> <p><b>"Honesty is being truthful and sincere."</b></p>                                                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We play by the spirit of the rules</li> <li>We are loyal to the team</li> <li>We admit our mistakes</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Cooperation</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We work nicely with others and communicate positively</li> <li>We help out others to help them achieve their own goals</li> <li>We are willing to do whatever is needed from us</li> <li>We enjoy working together and know that two heads are better than one</li> </ul> <p><b>"Cooperation is working together"</b></p>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We always work well in small groups and teams</li> <li>We help keep the team together and make sure we all contribute and play our part</li> <li>We constantly communicate clearly with our team mates and encourage them</li> <li>We are willing to play any position or role in order to help the team</li> </ul>                                                                                     |
| <b>Fairness</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We follow the Golden Rule</li> <li>We are tolerant of others</li> <li>We are willing to share</li> <li>We avoid taking advantage of others</li> </ul> <p><b>"Fairness is being free from favoritism or self-interest or bias or deception. It means abiding by the rules."</b></p>                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We treat other competitors as we wish to be treated</li> <li>We are fair to all players, including those who are different</li> <li>We give others an equal opportunity</li> <li>We play to win within the rules</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Thoughtfulness</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We look out for each other and always willing to help out</li> <li>We show empathy to others by understanding and sharing their feelings</li> <li>We recognise other's needs by supporting and encouraging them</li> </ul> <p><b>"Thoughtfulness is showing you are being kind and helping others"</b></p>                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We make sure that everyone is involved and never left out</li> <li>We understand that we all have different abilities and skill levels</li> <li>We keep an eye out for others, and are quick to help when people need it</li> <li>We put others needs before our own</li> </ul>                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Citizenship</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obey the laws and rules</li> <li>Be educated and stay informed</li> <li>Contribute to the community</li> <li>Protect others</li> </ul> <p><b>"Citizenship is being a good community member who respects and looks out for the best interest of others and the society in which they live."</b></p>                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be a good role model</li> <li>Strive for excellence</li> <li>Give back to the sport</li> <li>Encourage teammates to be good citizens</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

**Table 2:** Levels for Character Values (Paciorek, 2017).



When deciding on which character traits to emphasise, it is important to carefully consider which are appropriate for their age. Also, it is important to consider cultural implications as the concept of morality can be different based on your geographic location. However, in order to provide a guideline, table 1 provides nine fundamental moral values that you can build upon and adapt.

For a more detailed outline of an age-appropriate character development programme, Pete Paciorek's (2017) book *Character Loves Company: Defining the Teachable Moments in Sports* provides five levels for character values (see Table 2).

## CONCLUSION

As physical education teachers we have a great opportunity to promote, teach and provide opportunities for students to become better people. This is not about making everyone the same – our personality makes us individuals – but our character makes us better human beings and helps to build a stronger community. ■

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