

DAVID BROOKS

The Character-Building Tool Kit

Jan. 9, 2025

Listen to this article · 9:26 min [Learn more](#)

By David Brooks

Opinion Columnist

I've always liked the TV character Ted Lasso's definition of moral education. Being a soccer coach, he said, is "about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field."

A few years ago, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Angela Duckworth, got a bit more specific. She wrote that character formation means building up three types of strengths: strengths of the heart (being kind, considerate, generous), strengths of the mind (being curious, open-minded, having good judgment) and strengths of the will (self-control, determination, courage).

I'm one of those people who think character is destiny and that moral formation is at the center of any healthy society. But if you're a teacher in front of a classroom, with 25 or more distracted students in front of you, how exactly can you pull this off? Moral formation isn't just downloading content into a bunch of brains; it involves an inner transformation of the heart. It involves helping students change their motivations so that they want to lead the kind of honorable and purposeful lives that are truly worth wanting. It's more about inspiration than information.

And yet every day, there are schools that are doing it. On just about every campus I visit there are professors who teach with the idea that they can help their students become better people. It may be a literature professor teaching empathy or a physics professor who doesn't teach only physics but also the scientific way of life — how to lead a life devoted to wonder, curiosity, intellectual rigor and exploration.

This week I was at a convening on moral development hosted by the Making Caring Common project at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. The room was filled mainly with educators and as they described their work, it was like being offered a tool kit of concrete practices that together constitute an outstanding moral education. Here are some of the ideas the conversation stirred in me. I suspect that they could be helpful for parents as well as teachers or anybody who wants to build a society in which it is easier to be good:

A countercultural institutional ethos. People's characters are primarily formed when they live within coherent moral ecologies. They are formed within an institution — whether it's a school, a biker gang, a company or the Marine Corps — that has a distinct ethos, that holds up certain standards (“This is how we do things here”). In this way habits and temperament are slowly engraved upon the people in the group.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Richard Weissbourd, the faculty director of Making Caring Common, notes that over the past many years, schools and the broader culture have embraced the idea that the purpose of childhood is to prepare for individual achievement and happiness, rather than, say, caring for others or the common good.

The schools that focus on moral education stand athwart that tide. They have a sense of moral mission, that who you become is more important than what career track you pursue. They are thick institutions. They have a clear goal and

everybody knows their role in achieving it. They have rituals to mark transitions. They have retreats and group travel so that people can see one another before the makeup goes on. They provide opportunities for struggle and growth. They often have sacred symbols and initiation rituals so that everybody knows they belong. As David Yeager writes in his book “10 to 25,” when people are in their student years, their primary motivation is to experience feelings of status and respect. They will listen to and respond to challenges only if they feel respected and safe.

The moral skills. Treating people well involves practicing certain skills, which can be taught just as the skills of carpentry and tennis can be taught. First there are the skills of understanding — being good at listening and conversation, and eliciting life stories so that you can accurately see the people around you and make them feel seen.

The French writer Simone Weil wrote that attention “is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” How you see people determines how you show up in the world. If you see with eyes of judgment, you’ll find flaws, but if you see with generous eyes, you’ll see people doing the best they can.

Then there are the skills of consideration, how to treat people well in the complex circumstances of life: how to offer criticism with care; how to break up with someone without crushing the person’s heart; how to ask for and offer forgiveness; how to end a conversation or a dinner party gracefully. Many students today don’t learn these skills at school or anywhere else.

Exemplars. Admiration is one of the most powerful moral emotions. When you look at the great historical figures, there’s often some other historical figure *they* admired and lived their life toward. Nelson Mandela had Mahatma Gandhi; Abraham Lincoln had George Washington. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had each other. “Tell me who your heroes are, and I’ll tell you how you’re going to turn out,” Warren Buffett once said.

Since Plutarch, teachers have been assigning books that put examples of greatness before young people. Occasionally there will be a match, and some young person will ignite with a holy fire.

Moral traditions. It's hard to make good judgments unless you have clear moral beliefs. But unless your name is Aristotle, you probably can't come up with a whole moral philosophy on your own. Fortunately, we are the lucky inheritors of many rich and varied moral traditions: Stoicism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Rationalism, Romanticism, etc. Schools can teach these traditions and students can decide which seem true to them. People become their best selves as they begin to embody the values of a specific moral tradition.

Deep reading. Students learn about these traditions by studying the great texts of each. It's noteworthy that most great moral traditions ask people to passionately study difficult texts — whether it's the Torah, “The Odyssey,” the Quran or even “Das Kapital.” The charge is not just to read certain books, but to devour them, to enter into them and struggle within them, until the deeper meanings enter the blood. Kafka famously said that “a book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.”

You don't experience that if you're just skimming a book enough to get through class. One of the great morally formative institutions of my life was the University of Chicago. From the vantage point of my 19-year-old self, my professors' learning and wisdom was beyond immense. They burned with an enthusiasm that if we would only read the great books passionately and think about them deeply, we would know how to live. This is an infection I have never gotten over.

Self-confrontation. We're all sinners in some way and each of us has a core sin. Maybe you're a people pleaser or egotistic or judgmental. Dwight Eisenhower's core sin was his terrible temper. When he was only 10 he threw a temper tantrum and his mom sent him to his room. About an hour later she came up and recited a verse to him: “He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city.” When he was 76, Eisenhower said that was one of the most important conversations of his life, because it taught him that if he was going to do anything positive in the world, he would have to conquer his anger. For many people the struggle against their core sin is the central drama of their life. They are formed by this confrontation; schools and parents can help people honestly appraise and challenge themselves.

Paid public service. Heroism is almost always the same — some good but flawed person, struggling on behalf of some ideal. Community service, whether it's feeding the poor, sitting with the homeless or championing some cause, is not just to make society better; it is done to usher a transformation within the person doing the service. That happens when some ideal, held in the imagination, is lived through practical work performed by the body. People don't become better versions of themselves as they acquire intellectual information; they get better as they acquire emotional knowledge — the ability to be made indignant by injustice, outraged by cruelty, to know how to gracefully do things *with* people, not *for* people. That kind of knowledge comes through direct contact with the problems. Some schools have even offered to pay students to perform service, because not everyone can afford to do it otherwise.

Community service gives the server a glimpse of what the moral motivations feel like — the challenges and rewards of caring for others. Community service often expands the servers' social range, bringing them into contact with people from different classes, political groups and generations. It teaches people that noble ideas are of little use if the people holding them don't know how to cooperate.

I once visited Valparaiso University in Indiana, where the students in the honors college not only study the great books but also have to put on a musical production about one of the ideas in the books. They don't just write papers about what a healthy community looks like. They have to create one while trying to complete a demanding task.

Our founders understood that democracy imposes greater moral demands on the citizenry than any other form of government. They were intent on building morally formative institutions that would produce such citizens. We've kind of dropped the ball on this over the past few generations. But signs of hope are everywhere to be found.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, X and Threads.

David Brooks is an Opinion columnist for The Times, writing about political, social and cultural trends.
[@nytdavidbrooks](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: The Character-Building Tool Kit

Sign up for The Ethicist newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Advice on life's trickiest situations and moral dilemmas from the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. [Try it for 4 weeks.](#)