

**PROGRAM OVERVIEW
AND EVALUATION OF**

THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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You have just attended a professional development training session and the speaker at the meeting spoke about the importance of teaching students positive character traits. After listening to the speaker, you have now decided that you want to begin a character education program at your school. As the principal, you have the power to make the decisions necessary to start the initiative. You read some literature about beginning the process and you find that you need to develop a committee to plan the program. At the first meeting, all of the teachers you asked to join the committee are in favor of developing a character education program. However, they ask how to do this. Should they make up their own program? Should they buy an already established skeleton program like CharacterCounts!? Should the school purchase a complete program that has scientific studies to verify its value? If done well, any of the above programs would likely lead to the development of a solid character education program at the school. However, your teachers decide that they want a scientifically proven complete program like the program offered by the Child Development Project, a program that has been completely researched and its effectiveness documented as effective (Berkowitz, 2005). You do a little research on your own and find that the program is one of the most complete programs available for an elementary school.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

According to its website, the organization behind the Child Development Project (CDP) is the Developmental Studies Center (DSC), a non-profit organization committed to the education of children. For the past 23 years, the DSC has focused on helping elementary schools develop skilled and motivated readers as well as caring, principled people. In doing so, the curriculum developed by the DSC is one of the most complete in

character education today. With an extensive reading program, math program, after-school program and specific education methods, the CDP attempts to develop students that excel not only academically, but personally as well (DSC, 2005). The wealth of information the DCS has available, from exact curriculum to books designed to help guide teachers on the “how to” of the program, helps any school that has decided to use the program develop meaningful character education programs in their schools.

THE PROGRAM

The Child Development Project’s program centers around four intertwined principles. These principles are to build strong, stable relationships, develop social and ethical learning, develop an active learning mind, and create intrinsic motivation (Battistich, 2000). When done correctly, these four principles work together to effectively teach elementary school children not only academically, but also socially as well.

The first principle the CDP hopes to create is the development of strong and supportive relationships among students and adults in the elementary school. The main thrust of this principle centers on two basic components, developmental discipline and cooperative learning (Solomon, 2000). The idea of developmental discipline is a great example of the depth at which the CDP works in developing character. Developmental discipline focuses on a class meeting and works to have students and teachers work together to create solutions to problems within the classroom. By doing this, the students develop ownership within the school and the trust between teacher and students increases as both realize the importance of the other and begin to care about each other in meaningful, positive ways (Watson, 2003).

The second aspect of the relationship-building piece is the implementation of cooperative learning within the classroom. Many other studies (Battistich, 2000) have documented the evidence of the effectiveness of cooperative learning for both academic and social development, and the CDP uses that body of work to integrate cooperative learning into its program. By having students work closely together on important projects, students learn a variety of social skills and develop new and meaningful relationships within the group that they work in for the project. As the year progresses, students have an opportunity to develop working relationships with all their peers in the classroom, which then helps to create a caring atmosphere within the classroom (Solomon, 2000).

The second principle driving the curriculum of the CDP is to develop social and ethical learning within the framework of the teaching curriculum. Many teachers will accidentally teach to this component of the program. Any literature or history teacher will develop lessons that center around ethical decisions made by either the literary character or the historical figure. The CDP curriculum purposefully tries to take this teaching away from the “hidden curriculum” (Lickona, 1991) and make it purposeful and more meaningful. In addition, there is an emphasis on adult behavior and the importance of the role model for students. Theodore and Nancy Sizer (1991) wrote that students watch every move that the adults in their schools make and the CDP emphasizes the importance of this fact in creating a character education program at the elementary school level.

The development of an active learning mind is the third component of the CDP’s character education curriculum. At this point, the DSC offers a tremendous amount of

resources for the school and teacher to develop this component. In order to create active readers, the DSC offers as part of the CDP a comprehensive reading program centered on “decoding” literature and a detailed literature comprehension program. The goal of these two pieces is to make reading more satisfying and understandable for the student, which helps to create purposeful and active reading. A “MathLinks” program will help teachers using the CDP create math assignments that will achieve the same purpose as the literature program. In addition, the CDP has developed after-school curricula, or used as a summer school enrichment program, that emphasizes these same core areas (DSC, 2005). Taken as a whole, the purposeful curriculum created by the CDP attempts to take students out of the passive learning mode and make them active learners.

The final piece of the CDP puzzle is the goal of creating intrinsic learners. This piece of puzzle is an example of the intertwining of the above principles. By creating caring environments through cooperative learning and development discipline, teaching to the active mind and purposefully teaching character and ethics, the CDP claims to help students become intrinsically motivated. The use of extrinsic motivation tools (rewards and punishments) are minimized, while the other pieces of the curriculum create an environment where the students wants to learn and be apart of the school community. From this launching point, the intrinsic motivation of the student to learn and do good things leads to school wide and community programs. These programs serve to reinforce the traits learned through the CDP curriculum (Battistich, 2000).

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THE CDP IS EFFECTIVE

The amount of research available about the effectiveness of the CDP is extensive. It is one of thirty-three character education programs found to be effective by the

Character Education Partnership (2005). A look at the references in that study shows seven listings for studies done on the CDP. A CDP study published in the *Social Psychology of Education* (2000) referenced 17 different studies done on various aspects of the CDP. Even though the amount of evidence of the effectiveness of the CDP is extensive, two specific studies are worth mentioning specifically. The first study looks specifically at the implementation effectiveness in six districts across the nation (Solomon, 2000). The second study details the effectiveness of the CDP in reducing problem behaviors in the schools that implement the program (Battistich, 2000).

The results from both studies indicate the effectiveness of the CDP in those schools. Implementation of the CDP led to many positive developments in these schools. Students reported they had a greater sense of their school as a caring community, they liked school more, they were more motivated to learn both in and out of school, they had better conflict resolution skills and they felt more concern for others in their school (Solomon, 2000). In addition, research suggests that the CDP can also have a positive effect on reducing problem behaviors. Students in schools that implemented the CDP program reported less use of alcohol and marijuana (Battistich, 2000). It is also worth mentioning that the effects of the CDP extend beyond the elementary years of the students involved in the program. Recent research done by the DSC indicates that students that went to an elementary school that had an extensive CDP program retained the positive character traits through their middle school years (Battistich, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

Many character education programs are what educators call “add-ons.” A small part of the curriculum designed to compliment existing lessons. A number of these

programs center on the communications skills and social studies classes in a school (i.e. *The Giraffe Project*). Other character education programs provide a skeletal model that allows school to develop a program within these parameters, but specifically for the particular school (i.e. *CharacterCounts!*). However, the Child Development Project created by the Developmental Studies Center is a complete curriculum designed to foster the academic and social development of elementary students. An overwhelming mountain of evidence supports what the CDP claims to achieve. The centerpiece of the program is to develop strong, positive relationships among all the people at a school. Any school-wide character education initiative must address this crucial aspect of creating strong, nurturing school climates. In addition, important character and moral issues arise within the school day, every day. The CDP stresses the importance of addressing these issues on an intentional basis, which will allow for stronger development of the students involved in the process. Any educator who thinks this bad educational practice needs to find another profession. Not only does the CDP foster the development of positive traits, it helps reduce negative behaviors. As the “War on Drugs” that the United States has been fighting since the 1980s has proven ineffective, the CDP actually can help reduce drug use among students, which should be the first step in any national drug prevention program.

If that was not enough, the CDP has numerous publications that teachers and administrators can turn to when they hit the proverbial roadblock or they are just looking for new ideas. *Learning to Trust* by Marilyn Watson (2003) and *Among Friends* by Joan Dalton and Marilyn Watson (1997) are two examples of books published by the DSC in support of the CDP. Both books give actual classroom examples of the CDP in action in

classrooms around the country. In addition, these books give teachers and glimpse into what classrooms look like at the beginning of implementation and after implementation has been finished. These resources give teachers valuable information for the “how to” part of creating classrooms that meet the expectation of the CDP.

The DSC continues to work on creating programs to develop the academic and social skills of elementary students. Seeking ways to improve an already great program, the DSC launched its *Caring School Communities* program to help schools build communities within their schools. Preliminary studies indicate the program is just as effective as the CDP has been for many years (DSC, 2005). Any elementary school that implements the CDP, and does it well, should see drastic improvements in their schools, both academically and socially.

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