

## Families and professional carers are central to a child's character development

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Youngsters learn strategic negotiating skills from one another and their carers as they acquire a sense of moral awareness, a key University of Birmingham and Canterbury Christ Church University study into child development has found.

Early childhood years lay the groundwork for character development, as families, early educational professionals and peers play a vital role in shaping children's moral awareness, said Professor James Arthur, of the University of Birmingham's School of Education.

The findings, detailed in *Foundations of Character*, researched and co-authored by Dr Sacha Powell and Dr Hsing Chiung Lin of Canterbury Christ Church University, are being unveiled in the House of Lords on Friday, May 21, by Lord Watson of Richmond, chairman of Learning for Life.

It is the fifth study carried out by Professor Arthur and his research team that investigate the values and character development of children and young people.

*Foundations of Character* explores development in early childhood. It focuses on children, who were all aged between 36 and 48 months old when the study began in June 2008, as well as their parents, carers, professional carers and teachers.

Professor Arthur, Professor of Education and Civic Engagement, said it was clear that the way children negotiate with one another reveals that they are aware of moral complexities and have a sense of one another as well as of themselves.

"Character is about who we are and who we become. It is an interlocked set of personal values and virtues which normally guide conduct and includes the virtues of responsibility, honesty, self-reliance, reliability, generosity, self-discipline, and a sense of identity and purpose," he said.

The team carried out a total of 86 days' worth of observations with the youngsters, all of whom were from rural Kent and London, and found that through the children's varied and complex interactions, they demonstrated that they:

- were kind and considerate.
- were capable of taking control, or trying to dominate when co-operating.
- usually manifested honesty and fairness in the way they treated others.
- frequently used humour in ways which transformed situations.
- used several approaches when wanting to control things and get their own way, including hurtful words, strategic deception and, on occasion, manipulation.

From the parents' and professionals' points of view, researchers found that:

- Parents and practitioners agreed that a good person is respectful, kind, honest and caring.
- Commenting on their child's characteristics, parents most commonly said that their children were happy, caring, curious, kind, funny, helpful, and polite.
- Practitioners agreed with parents' comments on children's characteristics but were more likely also to say the children were responsible.
- Parents were less confident about their child's sharing behaviour, though few said they were selfish.
- Parents wanted their children as adults to be happy, caring, honest, kind, respectful, responsible, confident, well-educated and hard-working.
- Most agreed that a child's character changed over time and is largely influenced by parents but also by the experience of school.

"The evidence suggests that exploration and testing are elements in their moral maturation," says Professor Arthur.

"The theme of 'sharing' holds together many of the observed behaviours because it points to ways in which children are trying to come to terms with themselves and their needs in relation to others.

"Parents and carers have much to work with, as by example and through questioning, they assist the children in their care to give voice to their values.

"It is interesting that practitioners thought the main purpose of early childhood education was 'to allow children to meet other children' and 'to help children to become more independent.' Both parents and carers agreed that the primary influence on a child's values came from parents and siblings."

Lord Watson, who will launch the report, said: "It is commonly assumed that the influences on the early years of a child's life are determinative for the future individual: the evidence in this report suggests that the situation is more complex.

"It is true that the home and the professional environment are of the utmost importance, but children themselves take initiatives and explore their own experience through story and play which inform their growing self-awareness, knowledge of other people and sense of responsibility.

"As with other areas of education, early intervention and positive example seem to be crucial ingredients in developing a child's values. Nothing is more important for the future well-being of our society than this dimension of education."

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Editor notes

Learning for Life is a major research project, largely funded by the John Templeton

Foundation and Porticus UK.

There are five separate studies: (a) a character perspective in the early years; (b) consistency in values in the transition from primary to secondary school; (c) the values and character dispositions of 14-16 year olds; (d) the formation of virtues and dispositions in the 16-19 age range; and (e) values in higher education and employment.

Each project has had a dedicated full-time research fellow working over a two to three year period.

