

## Virtuous Character

*As Aristotle taught, people do not naturally become morally excellent or practically wise. They become so, if at all, only as the result of lifelong personal and community effort.*  
~ Jon Moline

Our efforts to foster and develop a community of people purposefully striving toward virtuous character have been in the forefront of our mission since our inception. We continue to look for ways to grow in this worthy endeavor. As we have listened to speakers in our school Character Conferences, renewed our commitment to our philosophical roots and read the recent research on moral development we have come to some interesting conclusions.

Over the past fifty years our culture has operated more and more from a pop behaviorist world view of “the best way to get someone to do this is to give them that”. While this reinforcement view does get short term results in behavior, it can have the opposite effect in developing long term commitment to doing the right thing. This has been especially pervasive in education. While it has been well meaning and helped us to control behavior in the classroom, a number of things are moving us to look more deeply.

Michele Borba in her book *Building Moral Intelligence* says, “The deadliest scenario for moral development is one in which the child grows up believing that she should do something only if she’s given something in return...” Alfie Kohn in his book, *Punished by Rewards* sites a number of studies that show that the direct use of rewards to control behavior will make the reward important to the subject and the behavior less attractive (and less internalized) than ever. Once the rewards stop the behavior will be less likely to continue than if there had been no rewards at all. Charlotte Mason makes the point beautifully that children are already complete moral beings with a working conscience and that given adult guidance can make the right choices.

With these things in mind we have asked our teachers to downplay the use of prizes, tokens and other extrinsic rewards in the whole classroom environment. Our teachers work very hard to establish meaningful relationships with our students and it is out of this strength that we will work with them to make the right choices. We will certainly still have the occasional celebration of things going well but it will focus on finding the joy in learning rather than giving rewards for learning.

If you would like to look into this more deeply we would recommend the books mentioned in this article as well as, *When Children Love to Learn* edited by Elaine Cooper. Feel free also to contact any Educational Philosophy Director. As usual we are grateful for our partnership. We look forward to continuing to grow together on this journey toward exemplary citizens!