

# Character Building with the Six Pillars of Character



*This article was originally published in the February 2023 edition of **Story Monsters**.®*

For over 30 years, CHARACTER COUNTS! has worked with parents, educators, and coaches around the world to help them instill the Six Pillars of Character—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—in their students. These values serve as the foundation for our work, whether in kindergarten classrooms, middle schools, high school sports, or in the home.

CHARACTER COUNTS! is a values-based program because values guide our decisions, and at its core, character education is about helping kids make good decisions. Without intentional values, human beings tend to make decisions based on what is easiest or most emotionally satisfying. In fact, one could

argue that we make decisions that way because we value what is convenient and feels good. However, this isn't a good decision-making framework. If we don't want to default to impulsive values, then we must have intentional values to guide our decisions. In CHARACTER COUNTS!, we want our decisions to be trustworthy, respectful, responsible, fair, caring, and demonstrate good citizenship.

The Six Pillars of Character are not exclusive. It's OK to have other values. Nor are the Six Pillars inherently better than other values. The Six Pillars are useful because they are universal, an important factor when working with diverse stakeholders. Regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic factor, there are few if any people who hope their child is irresponsible.

There aren't many teachers or parents who wish they trusted their kids less. When we can align diverse stakeholders around a set of core values, then we can align our decision-making as individuals and as a collective. In other words, we can analyze whether our individual decisions and our group or organizational decisions reflect the Six Pillars.

Once the Six Pillars of Character have been identified as your values, the next step is to turn values into behaviors. Values can be vague. What is perfectly respectful to me, you might find abhorrent. We have to define what the Six Pillars actually look like for us in our specific circumstances. In some schools, responsibility might look like wearing your school uniform each day, while other schools don't have a school uniform at all. Sometimes definitions change based on age. In little league sports, fair could mean everyone plays the same amount of time. In middle school, fairness could mean everyone gets to play, but not necessarily the same amount. In high school, fairness could mean those who deserve to play the most get to play the most. The point is, values must be defined so that we can turn stated values into operational values—what we do each day.

Many of the books featured in Story Monsters Ink provide exceptional opportunities to teach students how to use the Six Pillars to make decisions, but also define what each pillar looks like in action. For example, if a character in a book is asked to help a friend cheat on a test, how could the Six Pillars help the character determine what decision to make? Or, if a character in a story stands up for their friends, you can ask students which pillar the character is demonstrating. The same type of exercise can be done with any value you privilege in your family, school, or team.

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# What is the Content of Your Character?





*This article was originally published in the January 2023 edition of **Story Monsters**.®*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. may have stated it best when he wrote, “Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.” That’s what we’re chasing as educators, as parents, and as a society—intelligence plus character. We want our kids to be smart and good. We want our students to maximize their intelligence and academic competencies, and we want them to be good people. Though schools and governments are always focused on intelligence and academic proficiencies, the focus on character education rises and wanes. And yet, we continue to return to this simple truth—to do our best work and be our best self requires good character.

Character isn’t simply what one does when no one is looking, as the oft-repeated saying goes. It’s also what one does when everyone is looking. In fact, our character is revealed in every action and decision. It’s what powers our performance, any performance, from practicing a sport or musical instrument to completing a group assignment or learning a new language.

After all, one is far more likely to succeed at any of those tasks if they demonstrate work ethic, discipline, a growth mindset, and other character traits.

Character also powers our relationships. Our relationships are far stronger when we are trustworthy, respectful, caring, empathetic, generous, and so on. At CHARACTER COUNTS! we work with teachers, staff, administrators, coaches, and other educators to help them teach, enforce, advocate, and model key character competencies so that their students can maximize their potential. Built on the Six Pillars of Character—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—CHARACTER COUNTS! helps schools and organizations create, sustain, and enhance a Six Pillar culture that shapes the character of the individuals in that culture.

Thankfully, character skills aren't fixed. No one is eternally blessed or condemned with good or bad character skills. Like dribbling a basketball, writing an essay, or solving math problems, character skills can be taught, practiced, and improved, and CHARACTER COUNTS! provides resources and professional development to aid teachers in their work to develop students' intelligence and character.

For example, pick any book for any grade level. As your student engages with the book, ask them to consider:

- What traits are the characters demonstrating, and how do those traits impact the action in the book?
- Whether the decisions the characters make are trustworthy, respectful, responsible, fair, caring, and a demonstration of good citizenship.
- If they would make a different decision than the characters. Why they would make that decision?

No one has perfect character; we're all works in progress, but

the more we examine our character, reflect on our decisions, and practice putting good character traits into action, the more opportunities for success and positive relationships are presented. Intelligence plus character—that is and should always be our goal.

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*Learn more about **Story Monsters**.*

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## **Giving Compliments (Grades K-5)**



# Free Lesson for Grades K-5



## Overview:

Compliments are most meaningful when they are heartfelt and specific. In this activity, students practice giving compliments that are specific and kind. Students will also explore the right way to respond to compliments.

## Character Education Objectives:

Students will:

- brainstorm specific and meaningful compliments for their classmates,
- reflect on the impact of hearing positive things about yourself, and
- discuss how to respond to compliments.

## Materials:

- A sheet of paper with a star (approximately 8 inches) on it for each person
- Markers or pencils

## Directions:

- Break students into small groups. Each group should stand in a circle.

- Provide each student with a paper star and ask them to write their name at the top of the star.  
Students should pass their star to the person on their right.
- Ask students, “Think about the classmate whose name is on top of the star. What is their ‘star quality? What’s one of the best things about them?”
- Each student should write a compliment on their classmate’s star.
- Encourage them to be honest and specific. Explain that the best compliments are the true ones! If needed, give suggestions as to the types of positive things they could say.
- Students can continue giving compliments as they pass their stars around the circle. Ask them not to repeat anything someone else has written. Remind them that they’re looking for everyone’s star qualities, not to decide who is the “star of the team.” Once they have complimented everyone in their group, everyone has their own star back.
- **Note:** If your participants are young, you may need to talk first about how we each dream of being a “star of the show” and that our everyday qualities bring star qualities to our group.

### Discussion Prompts:

- Why do we all need to hear positive things about ourselves?
  - Why it is sometimes hard to accept a compliment?
  - What should we say when someone compliments us? (“Thank you”)
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# Following Directions and Playing by the Rules (Grades K-5)



## Objective:

Playing by the rules is an important part of fairness. Students will learn that in order to play by the rules, we need to listen carefully and follow directions. We can only play fair when we understand the rules.

## Character Education Objectives:

Students will:

- explore how rules or directions could be interpreted in diverse ways.
- reflect on how unclear rules or directions can lead to unfair situations.
- discuss ways you can ask questions when you are unsure.
- discuss why playing by the rules is an important part of fairness.

## Materials:

- A piece of paper (the same size) for each person

- Blindfolds if desired

### Directions:

1. Tell students that you are going to play the Snowflake Game. The students who follow the game's directions win.
2. Ask the students to either close their eyes or put on blindfolds.
3. Tell them you will be giving instructions and they are not allowed to ask any questions.
4. Give each student a piece of paper.
5. Give the following directions, but do not answer any of their questions.
  - Fold the paper in half.
  - Tear off the bottom right-hand corner.
  - Fold the paper in half again.
  - Tear off the upper right-hand corner.
  - Fold the paper in half again.
  - Tear off the lower right-hand corner.
6. Have participants open their eyes and unfold their papers.

### Discussion:

- As they hold up their papers, ask the students what they see (the differences in each other's papers even though they all had the same directions).
- We all had the same directions, but our snowflakes look different. Why do they look different?
- No one did it wrong, but there weren't clear directions on how to do it. To be fair, we need to follow the rules and directions. So, it's important we give clear directions and make sure everyone understands the rules for a fair game.
- Ask students:
  - How could the directions be changed to make the snowflake game fairer?
  - What questions could they have asked to better understand the rules of the game?

- Can they think of a time when they needed to ask questions to make sure they understood the rules?
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# Social-Emotional Learning Funded by ESSER



Social-Emotional Learning and Character Education can be funded by ESSER! An intentional focus on social-emotional learning and character skills has never been more important. Fortunately, the **Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund (I and II)** provides funding for COVID-19 relief projects. This can include professional development, curricular resources, assessment, and support services for students' social-emotional needs.

## Professional Development

Our professional development workshops:

- teach strategies on creating a positive school culture,
- provide best practices on how to teach, enforce, advocate, and model social-emotional skills,
- and help educators create a plan to provide sustainable SEL services.

## Curricular Resources

We have a variety of curricular resources to help you intentionally and consistently focus on character and SEL skills. Additionally, you can buy many of our digital materials as a perpetual license. Your school can use ESSER money on a one-time purchase that you can utilize long after ESSER funding runs out.

## Assessments

Schools use culture and climate assessments to identify parts of their culture that may need attention. When taken annually, these surveys can illustrate how your social-emotional interventions are positively impacting school culture. Importantly, since you can use ESSER funds through September 2023, schools can gather two years of valuable data.

## Get Started

We're dedicated to helping educators intentionally and consistently teach these important skills. For more information on using ESSER funds for CHARACTER COUNTS!, please contact Jason Lamping at [Jason.lamping@drake.edu](mailto:Jason.lamping@drake.edu).

*More information about ESSER:*

- U.S. Department of Education Makes Available \$36 Billion



in American Rescue Plan Funds to Support Students and Institutions

*Support for afterschool and summer programs:*

- Afterschool Alliance: COVID-19

*Funding by state:*

- Department of Education Announces American Rescue Plan Funds

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# Our Differences Make Us Stronger (Grades K-5)



**Overview:** Our differences are our greatest strengths. Learning

about what we have in common gives us a sense of belonging, but embracing and respecting our differences makes us a stronger community.

### **Objectives:**

Students will:

- explore the similarities and differences of their classmates.
- discuss what it means to recognize and respect each other's differences.
- reflect on how it feels to be excluded for your differences.

### **Materials needed:**

- Large sheets of paper—write 1, 2, 3, or 4 on each
- Marker
- One die with the 6 and 5 covered up
- List of questions (*see below*)

### **Directions:**

1. Place one numbered sheet of paper in each corner of the room.
2. Gather the group in the middle of the room and point out the four corners.
3. Read a set of choices (use suggestions listed below or create your own) and ask students to go to the corner that best represents them. For example: "Which drink do you like the best? Go to corner 1 if you like soda the best, corner 2 for juice, corner 3 for milk, or corner 4 for water."
4. Once the students move to the corner that represents them, ask each corner to briefly discuss why they selected their answer.
5. Ask a few students from different corners to share with the large group.



6. After a brief discussion, roll the dice. The number it lands on is the “unlucky number.” Eliminate the students in that corner. If you need to move the game more quickly, use the dice to choose the “lucky number” and that corner stays.
7. Keep playing until only a few participants are left. Play through at least two times.
8. Following the activity, ask:
  - How did it feel to be with others who are just like you?
  - How does it feel when you are different than everyone else?
  - What can we do to show respect to those who are different than us?
  - How could our differences make us a stronger group?
  - What did it feel like when you were eliminated from the game because of your differences?

***Question Suggestions:***

- Which music do you like best...rock, rap, country, or classical?
- Which do you wear most often...tennis shoes, sandals, bare feet, or boots?
- Which drink do you like the best...soda, juice, milk, or water?
- Are you most like a...square, triangle, circle, or oval?
- What type of movie do you like best...action, romance, comedy, or science fiction?
- Where would you most like to go on vacation...the beach, mountains, an amusement park, or camping?
- What color do you like best...green, purple, pink, or blue?

*Adapted from Team-Building Activities for Every Group*

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# Trustworthy Friends (Grades K-5)



**Overview:** This activity will demonstrate ways that reliable and trustworthy friends can help you achieve things that feel impossible. Knowing how to identify traits of a trustworthy friend and the benefits of being one will help students as they develop their character skills.

## Character Education Objectives:

Students will:

- engage in an activity that will require that they trust and rely on their partner.
- share the elements of a trustworthy friendship.
- reflect on their own friendships and consider how trust is vital to relationships.

### Directions:

- Divide students into pairs.
- Partners sit facing each other with the soles of their shoes pressed against the other player's shoes.
- Ask students to reach out and grab their partner's hands.
- Next, ask students to pull their partner's hands. As they pull at the same time, they should try to pull each other into a standing position
- Have participants try this activity with a new partner (start with similar size partners and then try varied size partners).

### Discussion:

- When do we have to rely on each other? How does that make you feel?
- Share about times when others have gone beyond the usual to show that they care for you. Ask students to share their experiences.
- What happens in a friendship when you cannot rely on the other person?
- Why is it important to have trustworthy friends?

Trustworthiness is one of the Six Pillars of Character. [Click here to learn more about the Six Pillars!](#)

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## Finding Common Ground (Grades K-5)



**Overview:** Students will explore the benefits of finding common ground with others in their community. This lesson promotes good citizenship.

### **Character Education Objectives:**

Students will:

- experience finding common ground with others.
- discuss how collaboration and community are impacted by citizens finding things in common.
- journal about how they can connect with others in their communities.

### **Directions:**

- Identify an area to play this game. Specify where “out” will be (to keep group together even though they are out).
- On a signal, have everyone walk around and mingle saying, “mingle, mingle, mingle”—until the leader shouts a number.

- When the number is announced, everyone must get into a group of people of that number. For example, if the leader says “3” then students should be getting in groups of 3.
- Anyone not in a group is “out”. All members of any group having more or less than the specified number are “out”.
- After playing one round, the leader will call out a new number and add the following characteristics as the number is called:
  - People:
    - of the same age
    - in the same grade
    - who live in the same city
    - with the same shoe size
    - with the same eye color
    - who love to eat the same food
    - who like the same kind of ice cream
- Keep playing until you get down to one or two people and then discuss.

### Discussion Prompts:

- Ask students:
  - Was harder to find a group after you started grouping by things in addition to than numbers.
  - Did you learn things you have in common?
  - Did you feel more like you belonged when you learned about what you have in common with other students?
  - How did it feel when you couldn't find something in common and were out of the game?
  - Do you think it is possible to have nothing in common with someone?
  - When working in a group, is it easier when you have something in common?

### Journal:

- Encourage students to journal about how they can find common ground with others. Ask students to think how they can find things in common with others in their school, home, teams, clubs, neighborhoods, etc. Ask students to think about questions they could ask if they are having a hard time finding something in common.

Citizenship is one of the Six Pillars of Character. [Click here](#) to learn about the Six Pillars of Character.

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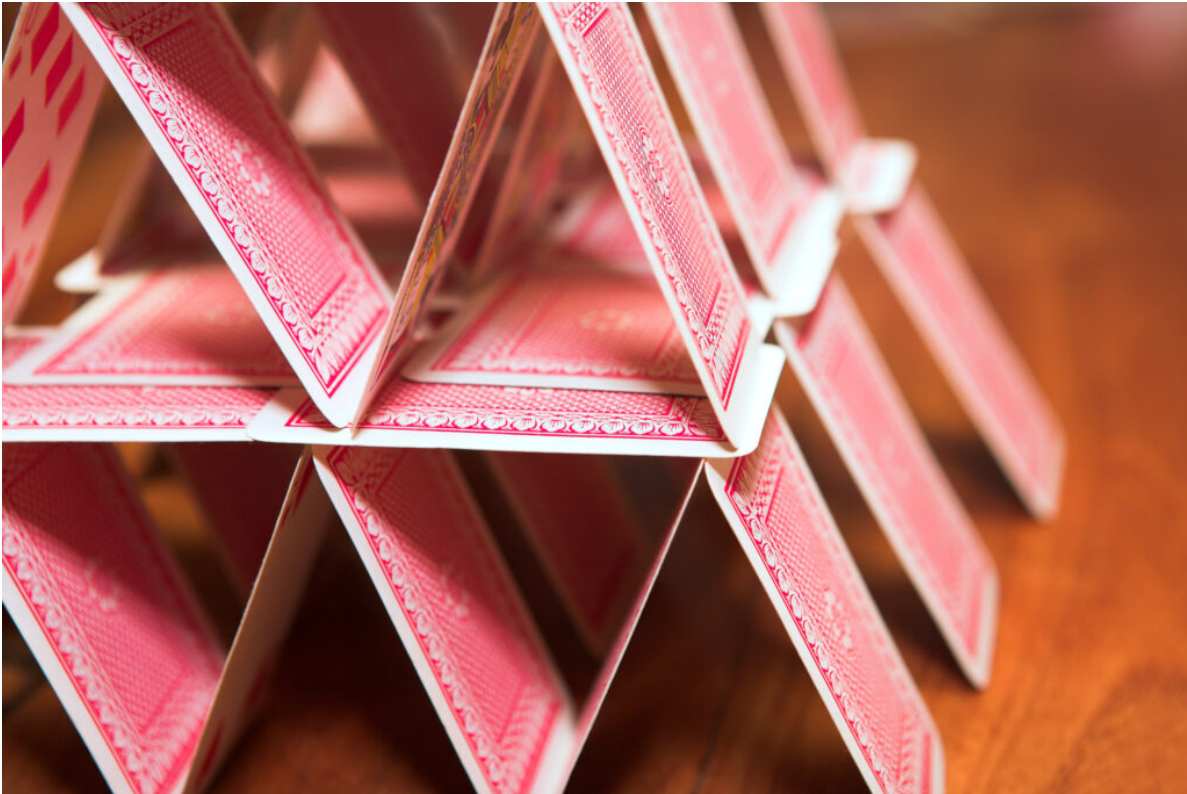
## **Fairness (Grades K-5)**

This lesson explores how an unfair situation can lead to frustration or anger and how to resolve it. It also allows students to demonstrate their understanding of fairness by recreating the rules to make a game fair for all participants.

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## **Working with a Team (Grades K-5)**





**Overview:** This lesson highlights the importance of bringing our best selves when working with a team.

### **Character Education Objectives:**

Students will:

- determine roles for each team member
- practice bringing their best self to a group task through their defined role
- reflect on the effects of roles and responsibilities in a group

### **Materials needed:**

- A deck of cards for each group

### **Directions:**

1. Put students in groups of 2-4. Each group needs to have at least one builder and one supervisor. If you have more than two students in the group, allow the students to decide how many builders and supervisors they want within their group, as long as there is one of each.

2. Give each group a deck of cards.
3. Instruct the group that their task is to build the highest tower of cards they can.
4. Only builders may touch the cards, but cannot talk. Only supervisors may talk, but cannot touch the cards.
5. The team must start over each time the tower falls.
6. Set a time limit. At the end of the time limit, allow students to negotiate more time. For example, let students continue if they can negotiate a trade (if don't use their dominant hand, don't talk etc., then they get one more minute to work).
7. At the end of the time limit, see who has the tallest tower—then let them blow it down!

### **Discussion Prompts:**

- It is possible that they won't be very successful at this activity. If they aren't, ask them what they could have done better or differently.
- Was it hard to only be a builder or only be a supervisor? Why?
- Why does bringing your best self and all of your talents important when you are on a team?