

Moral Adults: Moral Children¹

ACS(Independent) warmly welcomes Mr Winston Hodge, the new Principal of the school. With 30 years of extensive experience in the education and teaching fields, Mr Hodge holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English Language from the National University of Singapore, a Diploma in Education Administration from the National Institute of Education, Singapore, and Master degree in Education from Harvard University, USA.

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Few people will disagree that one of the vital goals of education is to develop young people of robust character, whose lives are anchored in a core of sound moral values. Moral values are at the heart of everyday life. How we make decisions, relate to and regard others and fulfil our roles in our family, community and nation are influenced by our moral values - throughout our lifetime.

Some people assume that the key to instilling moral values in our young is to enhance their *moral literacy* – their knowledge of right and wrong. This is a useful first step – but is insufficient on its own. From my experience in various schools over the years – and being a Dad, I know that when a young person makes a hurtful comment or acts in a disrespectful way, it is rarely because of a lack of moral literacy. The point is that knowing right from wrong alone does not make a person *act* morally. Young people are more likely to have the commitment and courage to act morally when the core of sound values has become part of their own *moral identity*, not their parents' or teachers'. Our challenge as parents and teachers thus is to build on the *moral literacy* of our young to develop their *moral identity*.

The question that both parents and teachers ask is how best do we scaffold the development of a young person's *moral identity*?

Richard Weissbourd says in *The Parents We Mean to Be*,² “At the crux of children’s moral development is not ... teaching values. It’s the moral and mentoring capacities of both teachers and parents.” Simply put, it is moral adults that will nurture moral children. The impact that the *significant adults* – parents, grand-parents, teachers, coaches, Sunday school teachers - have on the lives of our young cannot be underestimated. Significant adults can purposefully influence and nurture the moral development of the young in two key ways.

Firstly, significant adults model the way for the young. Whether we like it or not, the young people within our sphere of influence are keenly observing and critically assessing our actions and relationships, our speech and our attitudes – and picking up from us. Weissbourd points out that teachers, for instance, “are inevitably and always influencing children’s moral attitudes and capacities, for better or worse, by what they choose to praise or punish, how fairly they balance different students’ needs, what they value, how they define students’ obligations to each other.” One could infer that parents, by virtue of their close emotional ties and proximity with their children, would have an even stronger impact as moral models on their children’s development.

Secondly, the significant adults in the lives of our young must engage them in *moral mentoring*. In moral mentoring, significant adults enter a child’s world to provide valuable learning opportunities to sharpen his or her moral reasoning and appreciation. They do so by drawing out and providing a platform for discussion and reflection on moral questions or dilemmas that affect the child. These may include whether to report on a bully in class and risk being labelled a snitch by your classmates or whether it is fine to tell a white lie if it gets you off the hook. Moral mentoring requires patience, understanding - and time - for a child to come to a moral position, all the while being guided by a trusted and respected significant adult such as a parent, teacher or coach.

¹ Title is taken off Chapter 5 of Richard Weissbourd’s *The Parents We Mean to Be* (2009)

²*The Parents We Mean to Be* by Richard Weissbourd (2009). (Marnier Books). I highly recommend the book – I found it helpful to myself as a father.

As I assume my new appointment as Principal of ACS (Independent), I feel blessed that there is strong conviction and support for the moral development of our students among our teachers, parents and alumni. Like them, I am acutely conscious that there are no short cuts to developing moral identity in our young. With sustained effort and skill building, a stubborn commitment to stay focussed on the cause and an enduring partnership with parents and the community, I am confident that we will continue to play a significant and meaningful role in nurturing students of character, endowed with a strong moral identity.

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