

Movies Teaching Character

Movies can provide a release from daily concerns; are entertaining, fun and can teach. The following is a guide for connecting the “Six Pillars of Character” (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship) with popular movies.

The following steps will help you and young people have a successful experience. “Movies Teaching Character” is designed for junior and senior high school levels.

1. Select the Movie

Make sure the movie is age appropriate and complies with any center guidelines. There is a website (www.teachwithmovies.org) that provides a list of movies (there is a character section), a brief review of the movie followed by discussion questions. This is an excellent resource. There are many movies, not on the list, that do an excellent job of teaching character. Some favorites are: Finding Forrester, Remember the Titans, The Majestic, Cool Runnings, Rudy, Hoosiers.

2. View the Movie

View the movie before showing it to the group. Make sure there are no or few scenes that would be disturbing to young people. (e.g. Showing a war movie or one where children are separated from their parents might be unsettling to some at this particular time.)

3. Notify Parents

Tell the parents about “Movies Teaching Character” and let them know the movies to be viewed.

4. Determine Discussion Points

If you are in the middle of Trustworthiness week look for scenes that emphasize honesty, loyalty, promise keeping and/or integrity.

Think about the other character traits and how they all inter-relate. You may want to ask the group to specifically look for issues of character presented in the movie.

5. Direct Discussion

Watching the movie as a group is not enough. Be sure to allow plenty of time for discussion following the movie. The movie will provide an opportunity for differing views and opinions. Open discussion of these provides the true value of “Movies Teaching Character.” Your task is to:

- ❖ Clarify and encourage young people to talk about their reasons for choices.
- ❖ Allow discussion. Early in the discussion don't step in, take over, and start lecturing and correcting. Kids need time and support to articulate their own reasoning.
- ❖ Encourage the group to listen to each other and respond. (You might try role-reversal to encourage people to talk—ask someone to discuss the question or issue from someone else's point of view.)
- ❖ Review “Leading Moral-Dilemma Discussions: The Questioning Method” (attached) for additional suggestions on conducting a meaningful discussion. NOTE: At first glance this may seem too complicated and long but give it a chance. There is evidence that this method is excellent for character development.
- ❖ Wrap it up. Help the young people end the discussion by reviewing the Six Pillars of Character, what they mean and how they relate to the movie.

Remember: In ethical decision-making—all things being equal (a decision is not illegal, hurtful or harmful to someone) the following guideline should be applied:

Select the alternative that provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

If no solution is really great but a decision must be made apply this one:

Select the alternative that will do harm to the least number of people for the shortest amount of time.

Leading Moral-Dilemma Discussions: The Questioning Method

A. Starting

1. First, get the facts straight:
Be sure the content is accurate.
Paraphrase what the issues are.
Make sure all are tuned in.
2. To start the actual discussion, use open-ended questions:
“What should Person X do? Why, or what are the main reasons? Survey the group.
If any of the reasons aren’t too clear, then ask clarifying questions. For example:
“Would you say a little more...?”
“Do you mean...?”
“let me see if I can paraphrase...?”

OR

Ask others in the group if they understand Person X’s reasons.

Goal: Make sure everyone has a chance to make an opening statement. Use “wait time” if needed in questioning.

B. Continuing the discussion

To continue the discussion and help develop a greater elaboration, the following techniques are helpful:

1. Alternative consequences: “What might happen if the person did A, B, or C?”
2. Role switch: “What would your reasons be if you were Person X, Y, or Z? Put yourself into the shoes of the other person.”
3. Feelings and emotions: “How do you suppose Person X is feeling? How might you feel in such a situation? What might be some consequences of those feelings?”
4. Personal experience: “Has anything like this ever happened to you? What were your thoughts, feelings, actions? Looking back. Is there anything you would change?”
5. Change a key element: “Let’s say the person in the situation is someone you didn’t even know, rather than someone very close to you. How might that change things?”
6. “Some people say”: “Some say there is never a good reason to break a law. How would you answer than view?”
7. Have discussants talk back and forth to each other: “Henry, how would you answer Amy?” “Jill and Troy seem to be on opposite sides...”

C. Reaching closure

1. Issue-related questions: “Now that we have viewed it from so many different positions, what are the key elements, or most persuasive issues? Is there any particular element that would cause you to switch your view?”
2. Justice-related questions: “From a justice-and-fairness-to-all perspective, what solution would be best?”

Character Development Seminars, CHARACTER COUNTS! Precourse Reading Materials; Notes on What Works: Excerpts from Writings on Moral Development: Norman Sprinthall, et al. (From the work of Marvin Berkowitz)

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