

# Character traits help children succeed in school and in life

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## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

Learning to read, write, and do math are critical skills that children need to succeed in school. But that's not enough, according to recent research. Children will perform better if they also develop certain character traits.

One study of traits associated with "life satisfaction" identified five traits: **hope**, **zest**, **gratitude**, **love**, and **curiosity** (Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2004). Another study found that **self-discipline** is a better predictor of academic success than IQ (Duckworth and Seligman 2005). A related study found that really outstanding achievement requires **passion** combined with **perseverance**, or "grit" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly 2007).

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### Definitions

**Autonomy**—the ability to act independently, to govern oneself, to exert some control over one's world

**Curiosity**—an interest in all ongoing experience, finding all topics fascinating, an eagerness to explore and discover

**Fearlessness**—the quality of acting on convictions even if unpopular, speaking up for what is right for oneself or others

**Gratitude**—thankfulness for the good that happens and taking time to express it

**Grit**—passion for a long-term goal combined with the perseverance to achieve it

**Hope**—an expectation for the best in the future and work to bring it about

**Love**—the basic value in close relationships with others, affectionate regard

**Passion**—the energy that comes with following one's inner purpose, doing what one deeply loves

**Perseverance**—persistence in a course of action in spite of obstacles

**Personality**—the totality of a person's attitudes and behavioral tendencies

**Resilience**—the capacity to prevent, minimize, or overcome the damaging effects of adversity

**Self-control**—self-discipline, the ability to regulate what one feels and does, delay of gratification

**Zest**—vitality, enthusiasm, energy, living life as an adventure

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These findings raise questions. To what degree are character traits inborn? Can they be developed or learned? If character traits are learned, who is best to teach them—family, school, religion, community, culture? And how and when are character traits most effectively taught?

### Which character traits are inborn?

Children are born with certain attitudes and behavioral tendencies, known as **temperament**. Infant temperament is described as one of four basic types: easy, difficult, cautious, or a combination. Easy children are generally calm, happy, and adaptable, for



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example, while difficult children are often fussy, demanding, and easily upset. These types often persist into adulthood.

Temperament types are determined by traits (Oliver 2002), which can be viewed as either positive or negative. The traits include activity, regularity, approach/withdrawal, adaptability, intensity of reactions, persistence, mood, distractibility, and susceptibility to noise and other sensory stimuli.

## FOCUS ON BOTH A CHILD'S EFFORTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS.

Persistence, identified here as an inborn trait, has been mentioned earlier as critical to academic success. Because a trait is inborn, are we to assume that we can ignore it? Many parents would say no. Whether a child is persistent or not, we want to encourage our children to develop the habit of completing tasks.

### Tips for encouraging persistence:

- Provide tasks and activities appropriate to age and abilities to prevent a child's quitting in frustration. For example, we offer Hannah a puzzle of six pieces instead of 24.
- Break up a task into small incremental parts. "Pick up all the red toys," for example. After that task is finished, we suggest picking up other toys by color.
- Acknowledge completed tasks. "You dressed yourself. Great!"
- Recognize a child's efforts, as well as achievements. "I know you really worked hard on that project."

If a child cannot seem to complete tasks despite our best efforts, perhaps we move ahead without blaming ourselves too harshly and turn our attention to encouraging the child's other strengths.

Remember that learning often involves hard work. Sometimes we adults don't finish projects and make mistakes, but ideally we keep trying.

## Curiosity: Inborn and nurtured

Curiosity is clearly an inborn trait, else how could a

baby venture out to examine a toy or poke a spoon into cereal? At the same time, we know that curiosity is fragile. Laughing at children's "Why?" questions and leaving them to sit passively in front of a TV can quash curiosity. Our job as parents is to nurture exploration and discovery.

### Tips for encouraging curiosity:

- Offer infants sensory toys such as rattles to listen to, mirrors to see themselves in, and large washable blocks to mouth and manipulate.
- Redirect undesirable activities. If Gabriela likes to chew on crayons, for example, we offer her a clean rubber toy.
- Create an environment where children are free to safely touch, take apart, and get dirty so you can avoid constantly saying "Don't."
- Pose questions and invite children to explore answers in books, on walks, and in conversations with older children and adults.
- Recognize children's unique interests and abilities. Let them change their minds.

## Love comes first

Of the character traits mentioned earlier, at least three are often classed as spiritual virtues: hope, love, and gratitude. These virtues can also be emotional states that lead to positive behavior.

It's commonly said that all religions preach love, at least in the brotherly and sisterly sense of caring for each other. While love can be defined in different ways, it's clear that children need physical and verbal expressions of love beginning in infancy if they are to thrive—and if they are to grow into loving adults.

Our love needs to be unconditional. This means showing care and affection without conditions, such as whether Elaina cleans her plate. It's letting Andrew know he is lovable as he is, shy or boisterous, not as we wish he would be.

Unconditional love does not mean allowing unacceptable behavior. Children need limits and consistent enforcement to feel secure. We can show disappointment in behavior without labeling a child as bad. "Hitting someone is not OK. We love you, Chris, and we know you can play better."

A good way to show unconditional love is to give a child your full attention and to listen without judgment. Criticizing, hurrying, or interrupting Wesley

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can make him feel inept and unloved. Letting a baby “cry it out” can create lasting feelings of fear and hopelessness. “The opposite of love is not hate,” said Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, “it’s indifference.”

Children learn to love by how they are treated. The poem “Children Learn What They Live” (Nolte 1998) expresses it well: “If children live with acceptance, they learn to love. If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.”

## Hope develops early

Children form their outlook on the world and the future beginning in the first 18 months of life. It is during this period that a child’s main developmental challenge is “basic trust vs. mistrust” (Erikson 1950).

When parents and caregivers provide food, warmth, comfort, and loving care in a consistent way, they meet a child’s basic needs. The child learns that people can be depended upon and that the world is a safe place. This produces a deep inner sense of trust, a feeling of hope that everything is all right and will continue to be.

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## ACCEPT AND EVEN APPLAUD ERRORS AND FAILURES.

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Hope can be thwarted in infancy as well as later childhood through inconsistency, broken promises, neglect, abuse, violence, loss, and other misfortunes. But we can repair or strengthen hope by demonstrating resilience.

### Tips for encouraging hope:

- Respond promptly to an infant’s cries. Is the child hungry, in need of a diaper change, in pain, or just in need of comfort?
- Make your home physically safe and have consistent routines for eating, sleeping, bathing, and reading.
- Accept and even applaud errors and failures, emphasizing what they teach us.
- When you encounter adversity (death of a loved one, job loss, severe illness or injury), express your

feelings calmly and demonstrate how to cope with its effects. After a loved one’s death, for example, we seek support from friends and family. In the case of job loss, we ask for help and keep trying to develop our skills.

- Model hope in word and gesture. Smile, laugh at yourself, and be positive.

Modeling, or demonstrating by what we say and how we act, is probably the most effective way to teach hope, as well as other character traits.

“Whatever other obligations we have to our children, a conviction that we can achieve happiness amid the losses and uncertainties that life contains is the greatest gift that can pass from one generation to the next,” says psychologist Gordon Livingston (2004). “Like all the values we wish to teach our children—honesty, commitment, empathy, respect, hard work—the supreme importance of hope is taught by example.”

## Self-discipline: A healthy sense of control

Emerging from the trust vs. mistrust stage, a child enters the “autonomy vs. shame and doubt” stage. From about 18 months to 3 years, children learn to walk, feed themselves, use the toilet, and communicate more effectively.

Recognizing and encouraging children’s efforts at self-feeding, toilet learning, and self-calming helps children feel competent: “I can do it.” We can enhance this quality by offering children safe choices: “Would you like to wear red socks or yellow ones?”

### Tips for encouraging self-control:

- Engage children in conversation to enhance self-esteem, develop thinking skills, and improve language development.
- Identify feelings by name and help children name and express their feelings in appropriate ways without fear of derision or punishment. “Joey, we all have bad feelings sometimes. It’s not the feeling but how we express it that matters.”
- Establish simple rules for everyone’s safety and respect. Enforce them consistently and follow them yourself.
- Explain rules and set consequences for breaking them, such as temporarily removing privileges. Enforce rules without belittling or shaming children.

- Encourage preschoolers to use words to solve conflicts. Demonstrate how to breathe deeply or count to 10 to become calm and think about a stressful situation.
- Begin teaching problem-solving to preschoolers. Demonstrate how to think about options and evaluate results. Avoid trying to fix everything for them.

## Passion and zest

A sense of purpose and enthusiasm may have its origins in the next stage, roughly from age 4 to 6, “initiative vs. guilt.” Children begin to show greater interest in the world and natural phenomena, evidenced by asking “Why?” They imitate adults and engage in elaborate and imaginative role playing. They are constantly active and learning to interact with other children and adults.

If supported in play and initiative, children grow more confident in themselves. If discouraged or punished for their activity and trying new things, they can develop guilt and anger and feel inhibited and isolated.

### Tips for encouraging a sense of purpose:

- Show enthusiasm for working and learning. Zest for living is contagious.
- Encourage children to get involved in setting rules and consequences for breaking them. Explain how rules enable safety and cooperation.
- Acknowledge a child’s strengths instead of harping about weaknesses. Communicate that every person is different and everyone has something to contribute.
- Introduce children to heroes in your family—how Uncle Alfredo arrived as a penniless immigrant but stayed true to his dream of building a successful business.

## Gratitude: Lay a foundation

Children will need a certain amount of emotional maturity before they can truly develop gratitude. This character trait requires having empathy for others and recognizing what’s involved in giving (time, money, effort) and receiving.

### Tips for encouraging gratitude:

- Say “Thank you” to children and others for gifts and actions. “Thank you, Kendall, for wiping up that spill.”

- Instead of nagging children to say “Thank you,” explain briefly why we need to express gratitude. “Mom worked all afternoon to make this bread. Let’s give her a hug.”
- Teach children to be keen observers, noticing common things like warmth and light, and talking about where they come from. For more information, see [http://www.childcarequarterly.com/fall06\\_story2.html](http://www.childcarequarterly.com/fall06_story2.html).

## SHOW ENTHUSIASM FOR WORKING AND LEARNING.

- Involve children in writing thank-you notes for gifts from friends and relatives.
- Use Thanksgiving and other holidays to gently remind children of ordinary things—food, shelter, family, school—that we all can be thankful for.
- If possible, contribute to a community charity, such as by donating canned goods to a food drive or volunteering to help a neighbor clean up debris left by a storm.

## Put positive qualities into practice

Certainly children must master basic academic skills if they are to succeed in later schooling and life. But recent research indicates that children’s success and well-being also depend on character traits like curiosity and self-control. As parents, we can nurture and strengthen positive qualities like hope and perseverance in our everyday dealings with children.

### For further reading

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# During pregnancy, take precautions with pets

## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

You're pregnant and thrilled! You're seeing the doctor regularly, planning the nursery, and choosing baby names.

Health experts advise that you also take precautions with Fido and Fluffy, your family pets.

- Make sure dogs and cats are up to date on vaccinations and exams.
- Because the new baby will occupy most of your time and attention, plan who will take care of any pets after you bring the baby home. If Mom has the closest relationship with Fido, for example, another family member may need to give the dog extra attention every day.
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water after handling pets, leashes, and feeding bowls.
- Appoint someone besides Mom to clean out the kitty litter box. Avoid the dirt where the cat might have left feces.
- Don't share food or personal items such as towels with your pet.



- Don't allow pets to sleep with you or lick your face and mouth.
- Keep your skin cuts and scrapes clean and bandaged. Wear protective gloves when cleaning or treating cuts and wounds on pets.

### Pets can carry disease agents

Inform your veterinarian about your pregnancy and ask about precautions with your particular pet.

PLAN WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF THE PET  
AFTER YOU  
**BRING THE BABY HOME.**

Cats can pass a parasite through their feces that causes toxoplasmosis, a disease that can cause birth defects and miscarriages. Many people who contract this illness never have any symptoms. Pregnant moms need wash their hands right away after handling cats and avoid handling kitty litter. See [www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/stayingsafe\\_pets.html](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/stayingsafe_pets.html).

Pets may test positive for a staph bacterium, *methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, that is resistant to antibiotics. Ordinarily MRSA does not cause health problems, but it can turn deadly if it enters the body through a cut or scrape on the skin or if a person's immune system is at risk. Download a brochure at [http://health.utah.gov/epi/diseases/MRSA/MRSA\\_vet.pdf](http://health.utah.gov/epi/diseases/MRSA/MRSA_vet.pdf). ■

# Healthy—and creative—super bowl snacks

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## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

While adults are watching the game, invite children to make and serve snacks. Make sure they wash their hands first, and clear off the kitchen table to give them room to work. Spread newspapers or an old shower curtain under the table to make cleanup easier.

Provide some or all the ingredients below, making sure to avoid high-fat and high-sugar foods. Provide sturdy plastic knives for cutting and spreading. Wash and dry fresh fruits and vegetables in advance.

Caution: Some food shapes (grapes, olives, cherry tomatoes) and textures (hard fresh fruits and vegetables) pose a choking hazard for toddlers. Cut foods into slices, cook and mash, or omit.

You will need three kinds of ingredients:

1. Base—whole grain crackers, toasted whole grain bread, graham crackers
2. Spread—low-fat peanut butter, thinly sliced or grated cheese

3. Toppings such as the following:

- raisins or other dried fruit such as cranberries
- green or black olives
- grated carrots
- cherry tomatoes
- green or red seedless grapes
- fresh apple or pear seeded and cut horizontally into circular slices
- banana
- bell pepper strips
- celery sliced crosswise on the stalk
- avocado slices
- shredded coconut
- chopped, sliced or ground nuts
- hard-cooked eggs
- parsley
- deli-thin ham or turkey slices

Invite children to choose a base, apply a spread, and top with one or more toppings. Let them be creative. Here are some ideas:

- Spread peanut butter on whole grain crackers, sprinkle with grated carrots, and top with a parsley leaf.
- Place cheese slice quarters on whole grain toast and top with a sliced olive, bell pepper strip, avocado slice, or hard-cooked egg slice.
- Spread peanut butter on an apple slice and sprinkle with coconut or nuts.

**Variations:** Use pretzel sticks as skewers for cheese cubes and cherry tomatoes. Mix peanut butter with a little honey and use as a dip for fruit slices. Offer low-fat yogurt as a dip. ■

